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Stevensian *Dao*, or the Possibilities of Change*

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Abstract

The metaphysical lure of Wallace Stevens's poetry has tantalized readers for decades yet refuses to be pinned down, evading categories like idealism, realism, and anti-realism. Throughout his entire career from *Harmonium* (1923) to *The Rock* (1954), Stevens was haunted by the "one" and the possibilities of change. Does change contradict oneness? Can change only occur within oneness? What is to be ultimately transformed through poetry? This essay cuts into the mystical dimensions of Stevens's work by reading his "great image" that has no shape—his presentation of the cosmological spirit-principle that exceeds the Western philosophical and religious traditions. Stevens's mystical-ontological insight is frequently accompanied by decisive transformations of conception into perception and, further, a supersensible feeling that reconfigures the self-world continuum. Stevens's exploration of the senses of order during times of war opens up new modes of mind-reality and self-world correlations that could, in modern democratic countries, precondition the conditions of political and social change.

Keywords

Wallace Stevens, Daoism, *śūnyatā*, oneness, the mind, cosmology, mysticism

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To attempt a florid redescription of Wallace Stevens's poetry would be too Stevensian a thing, yet directly returning to "a plain sense of things" (Stevens, *The Collected Poems* 502)[1] devoid of imaginative flourishes, as Stevens sometimes in his later poetry encourages us to do, would likely miss all the dialectical tensions his poems typically endure. From *Harmonium* (1923) to *The Rock* (1954), a key question persists: what exactly is the "metaphysical efficacy" (Kotin 93) of Stevens's poetry? His metaphysical lure, like that of Stéphane Mallarmé, has tantalized readers for decades yet refuses to be finally pinned down into categories like idealism, realism, or what Sebastian Gardner calls "anti-realism," which fails to address Stevens's metaphysical need because it precludes the possibility for reality to include value (332, 334). It would be equally hard to follow Simon Critchley, who sees Stevens as "torn" between the claims of idealism and realism, imagination and reality (85). He concludes that "Stevens's poetry fails" because, like all post-Romantic poetry, it cannot not live up to its own philosophical insights (Critchley's word is "hubris"); such a failure echoes Samuel Beckett's "try again, fail again, fail better" (87, 88). A failed epistemology, particularly one in the Kantian tradition, only partially describes Stevens's kaleidoscopic efforts to construct a theory of being and life. More recently, Cary Wolfe transposes Stevens's poetics from "being" to "doing," arguing that he "*reproduces* rather than *represents* the complex logic of physical (and, specifically, biological) systems in ongoing acts of meaning-making that are, at the same time, processes of individuation" (xiii). I will return to Wolfe's book later, but here I only underscore the difficulty Stevens's readers have at reaching a consensus, even if all agree that he has refreshed our ways of conceiving and engaging the world.

To sketch out Stevens's metaphysical concerns, we need only look at his "one." When he writes, for example, "A man and a woman / Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / are one," "The blue guitar / And I are one," "the sailor and the sea are one," and "His self and the sun were one" (*CP* 93, 171, 392, 532), he is not merely asserting a naive fusion of subject and object or self and world, because if these terms are directly one—whether that oneness means mystical fusion, enlightenment, attaining of the ultimate truth, or *nirvāṇa*—any knowing will be impossible because there will be no independent agent to perceive change, and change itself will be impossible. "It Must Change," Stevens insists (*CP* 389). Does change contradict oneness? Can change only occur within oneness? What is to be ultimately transformed through poetry? It is not hard here to discern a kind of Daoism or Buddhism operating in Stevens's imagination, directing the ever-shifting particulars in his poetry toward a "central mind," a "never-ending meditation" (*CP* 298, 465), or

[1] Hereafter *CP*.

the "*inhuman* imagination" suggested by B. J. Leggett (63), which echoes Stevens's own phrase, "inhuman meditation," from the late poem "The World as Meditation" (*CP* 521).

Stevens's interest in Eastern art and philosophy partly explains his centering meditativeness—his sense of the one. Critics have documented his fondness for Chinese and Japanese art and the influence of Daoism and Buddhism on his poetics. William Bevis, for instance, has amply speculated on his absorption of the Eastern meditative traditions, arguing that "he is a poet not of imagination and reality, but of imagination and meditation in relation to reality" and characterizing him as "a master of meditative detachment" (*Mind* 9). Bevis believes that by employing meditative perception, Stevens is able to reach *śūnyatā*, the suchness or voidness of things, something undervalued in Western epistemology. Drawing on psychological and phenomenological insights, he investigates the parallels between Stevens's poetry and various forms of Eastern mysticism while remaining keenly aware that meditation as exemplified by Stevens's work is not exclusively Eastern (12). Bevis also proposes a Buddhist notion of the mind to understand Stevens's "oddly serene embrace of radical disjunction, indeterminacy, and improvisation" ("Stevens" 163). More broadly, in *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art*, Zhaoming Qian portrays Stevens, among others, as an avid collector of "oriental" objects such as tea, boxes, wooden figures, Buddha statues, and prints, a hobby that Stevens himself, in a 1922 letter to Harriet Monroe, calls a "second-hand contact with China" (*Letters* 229). Regarding the effect these Eastern influences had on his poetry, Qian says that "From *Harmonium* to *The Rock*, much of Stevens's lyricism manifests a preoccupation with blending meditative detachment into simplified spatial arrangements" (*The Modernist* 166). Building on the readings of Bevis and Robert Tompkins (26-39), Qian also considers the "double representation" or "sudden swerve from meditation to imagination" in Stevens's last poem, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," as indicative of an appreciation of Zen ("Late Stevens" 170).

In the present essay, I will similarly consider the roles of *dao* and *śūnyatā* in Stevens's oeuvre, but I will diverge from the methodologies above. Instead of conducting a one- or two-way Oriental "influence study" (investigating how the Orient finds its way into Stevens's poetry or how the latter shapes American poets' perceptions of the Orient and thus in a sense produces it), I will endeavor to tell what Stevens's metaphysics looks like in light of Eastern philosophy (mainly Daoism), while at the same time remaining aware of his deep roots in Romanticism and

American Transcendentalism.[2] My purpose is to highlight the Stevensian thematic of oneness and change based on a Daoist understanding of nature, and I will also consider the possibilities of change proffered by his poems with a view to think the alterability of Stevensian oneness. Buddhist readings of Stevens often evade the question of why his poetry still adheres to forms of delusion after Zen or Awakening. I suggest that the Buddhist worldview only partly satisfies Stevens, who remained skeptical of religious doctrines. Moreover, Stevensian meditation as an imaginative and poetic exercise differs from Yogic/Daoist meditation, which aims to tame the mind and enhance bodily energy. Thus, although Stevens was attracted to Asian cultures and religions—"Consider how the speechless, invisible gods / Ruled us before, from over Asia, by / Our merest apprehension of their will" (*CP* 262)—he is wary of subsuming the poetic process under any single approach. I hope to reveal that Stevens's mental and poetic exercises can no longer be considered Buddhist or Daoist precisely because he has both in view, while his *dao*, his metaphysical outlook, is something entirely *singular*. Tapping into dimensions of *dao* and *śūnyatā*, Stevens's "exercise in viewing the world" (*CP* 233) nevertheless remains his own. In other words, the result of this mental exercise is a Stevensian *dao*, not a more or less stereotypical or fantastical refashioning of Eastern (or Western) traditions.

Conceptions of the One

To reopen the question of metaphysical or mystical oneness in Stevens, we may begin with "The Snow Man" (1921), his first phenomenological exercise.[3] To feel the coldness, the "basics" of winter, Stevens suggests that "One must have a mind of winter" (*CP* 10), that is, one must imagine how winter perceives and describes itself. With this wintry mentality, the viewer (the snow man) is able to take in the whole scenery without inducing any value judgment: "and not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind." Such a hypothetical feeling from an empty mind is an oxymoron: a numbing of feeling that is simultaneously a sharpening of perception; a supersensible feeling (an affective intuition of the supersensible whole/one); a radical transformation of feeling toward its opposite as that which it feels. Nevertheless, it is still a personal feeling, "a living consciousness" (Doggett 129) rather than "an

[2] Thus, I am not examining Orientalism in Stevens's work, if that means investigating the Orient as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). Instead, I will use Eastern philosophy (Daoism, Buddhism) as a hermeneutic path leading to Stevens's metaphysical outlook. For studies on Orientalism in modern American poetry, see Qian, *Orientalism* and *The Modernist Response*; and Kern.

[3] For a full phenomenological reading of Stevens, see Hines.

impersonal necessity" (Vendler, "Stevens" 140), since the "listener" later in the poem could well be any living person who beholds and enjoys the wintry scene. Starting from the snow man's imputed personhood, Stevens infers that winter will cease to be a common reality that conglomerates diverse phenomena, instead bifurcating into "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Avoiding sentimentality, the poem achieves a unique vision of nature that reveals intra-mundane relations as ontologically rather than scientifically constructed. A whole Heideggerian analysis of the poem is possible, just as a whole Orientalist analysis is possible: the poem echoes the Buddhist notion that nothingness itself is devoid of essence—that's perhaps why the nothing is "not there," as *śūnyatā* permeates everything. It also evokes the Daoist insight that this nothing corresponds to the invisible, productive *dao*, the "valley spirit," which gives birth to myriad things while remaining "perennial Absence" (*wu-ming*, Laozi 40, 35).

But this reading too easily returns us to what we already know, whereas Stevens's continuous poetic effort consists in turning us toward what we do not know or have not yet felt to be known. Intriguingly, even though Stevensian meditation gives tremendous pleasure to the senses (in "The Snow Man" it both chills and sharpens them), it often employs the merely notional, the hypothetical, in conceiving of the changeability of the self-world continuum. Stevens endeavors to satisfy the demands of the imagination as the consummation of the mental faculties, since for him nothing satisfies imagination but greater imagination, abstract or sensual. Things as they are must change in imagination, as the transformation of the mind accompanies the world's self-transformation. Crucially, both subject and object, self and world, being relational, have to be imagined and reimagined because *they are never given as such*: "Poetry constantly requires a new relation" (Stevens, *Opus* 202). His larger-than-life meditation thus opens up new grounds for the poet and readers to project, impute, or compose a self to meet others—as Penelope in "The World as Meditation" (1954), awaiting Ulysses, "has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him, / Companion to his self for her, which she imagined." To compose a self here means to attune one's desire to the "inhuman meditation" that has miraculously "mended" the trees and "washed away" the winter (*CP* 521), to gesture toward this cosmic process that has deflected and pacified desire until, like Penelope, instead of having what we desire, we might be satisfied with a conjectural waiting for the desired. The poetic composition of the self, Stevens suggests, consists not in diminishing but in situating and centering while expanding our mental faculties to conceive alternative self-other, self-world continuities.

From *Harmonium* onward, it becomes a habit, almost an obsession, with Stevens to elaborate on the theme that "man is the intelligence of his soil" (*CP* 27) by examining all kinds of local and exotic, fictional, self-world oneness. Crispin the self-explorer, lonely scholars, pensive metaphysicians, the woman from Lhasa, the woman enjoying her newly-gained freedom in "Sunday Morning," musicians of various sorts, singers, bird-watchers, botanists, soldiers, hunters, the man "on the dump"—each has and is one's own world. These early studies of "climates" certainly mark Stevens's relativism, but the characters in the poems are also increasingly caught in a centralizing meditation that sees them as part of something grander. Beginning with *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), there is a transition from "florid," lively descriptions to a "floribund," pensive, and discursive late style. Increasingly, he resorts to some "final solutions," "a law of inherent opposites," the "myth before the myth began," a "vis," principle, or *dao* (*CP* 177, 215, 383, 442) to reconfigure the self-reinforcing and—especially in the 1930s and 1940s—worsening bipolarity of mind and reality.[4] Dissatisfied with preconfigured or politically prearranged modes of change that would, he believed, lead to war, Stevens desires spontaneity, "the origin of change": the sparrow impossibly, lamentably crying to the leaf, "And you, and you, bethou me as you blow, / When in my coppice you behold me be" (*CP* 392, 393).

Hence, we can detect an increasing urge to be released from a particular set of mind-body, mind-reality relations. Poetry cannot merely describe or respond; it must be a force, a fundamental *dao*, since "The world is a force, not a presence" (*Opus* 198). In "Variations on a Summer Day" from *Parts of a World* (1942), Stevens separates the senses from the body in order to feel beings diversely and induce a fundamental transformation of self-world relations:

> To change nature, not merely to change ideas,
> To escape from the body, so to feel
> Those feelings that the body balks,
> The feelings of the natures round us here:
> As a boat feels when it cuts blue water. (*CP* 234)

From an ecocritical perspective, these lines present a chance for nonhuman contact, but the human/nonhuman distinction is only conventional: "A man and a woman and a blackbird / are one," we are told. Just as perception often goes beyond the physical

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[4] See Filreis's account of how Stevens's poetry was shaped by the "extrinsic forces" of leftist politics in the 1930s (37-47).

body (I see what I cannot touch), to feel beyond the senses does not mean to feel like a nonhuman thing, for we are capable of apprehending things and situations without being sensually aroused. This supersensible feeling, which "the body balks" at but the mind welcomes, is evocative of Graham Harman's real, as opposed to sensual, object: the latter exists in experience while the former "withdraw[s] from all experience" (49). To feel the real qualities of this blue water, we must go beyond the body by taking on the boat's easy floating-ness without actually becoming the boat—this is how we might expand the apprehensibility of things in us and thus "change nature," not merely our ideas of nature.

In the late poem "Human Arrangement" from *Transport to Summer* (1947), Stevens returns to this enriched sense of personhood by placing a lonely chair in monotonous evening rain ("Rain without change within or from / Without") and mystically talks about "transformation's self" rather than self-transformation:

> Forced up from nothing, evening's chair,
> Blue-strutted curule, true—unreal,
>
> The centre of transformations that
> Transform for transformation's self (*CP* 363)

Momentarily, the poet-viewer has reached a deep understanding of the *dao* and *śūnyatā* that operate in all beings but particularly get concentrated here, in this very chair, in this rain, on this very evening. The chair, "Forced up from nothing," becomes, like the famous jar in Tennessee and the snow man, the center of artistic transformation. Standing still, it organizes, like a sentient being, changing perspectives around itself. Transformation now possesses a volitional self: "In a glitter that is a life, a gold / That is a being, a will, a fate." What gets ultimately transformed is our awareness of the subsistence of things, that things are changing all the time around their own invisible center, their "selves," following their own laws of origination and dissolution and related to a "fate" that is not ours but a fate nonetheless. This transition from "the" to "a," from one centered consciousness-world configuration to other ones, marks the metaphysical openness and "sovereign sight" (*Letters* 349) that Stevens's poetry can offer.

To initiate transformations of being and world, Stevens has to go beyond the Romantic notion of imagination—the "great instrument of moral good," in the words of Percy Shelley (432)—that sets out to correct the world before engaging its ontological basis. In "Imagination as Value" (1949), Stevens faults the Romantics

for failing to live up to imagination as *a type of metaphysics*, a way of penetrating into the very substantiality of reality: "The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling" (*The Necessary Angel* 138-39). Feeling, not emotion, would be on par with the generative *dao*. For Stevens, the Romantic identification of imagination with moral sensibility has deprived the mind of opportunities to engage in thought experiments, aberrational elaborations, and ontological debates, which are crucial in exercising the mental faculties. "To regard the imagination as metaphysics is to think of it as part of life, and to think of it as part of life is to realize the extent of artifice," Stevens writes, and by locating "the extent of artifice" within subjectivity, the imagination gains the power to "penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world" (*The Necessary Angel* 140, 145).

Stevens's self-proclaimed "fundamental poetry" should not be reduced to the sole question of thought and being, or of thought and nonbeing, which are constantly reconfigured by the generative *dao*—Stevens's own term is "Supreme Fiction." The poem must change because nature changes all the time, and despite history's claims for an enduring legacy, the actual world's configuration changes all the time. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), Stevens finds himself mentally in France and laments the statue of General Dupuy: "Nothing had happened because nothing had changed. / Yet the General was rubbish in the end" (*CP* 392). Dupuy has become utterly irrelevant in the present, reduced to a "strongly-heightened effigy" visited by lawyers "in their promenades" and doctors who had "bathed / Themselves with care" (*CP* 391). A statue represents the human effort to counteract the slow and often imperceptible erosion of time, the workings of *dao* and *śūnyatā*. Unknowingly and ironically showing the passage of time and mores in its very immobility, a statue belongs, he concludes, to "our vestigial states of mind"—a monument to impermanence. The mind and its products are inevitably caught between cosmic forces that wear them down. James Baird captures this dialectic: "There is an end of all statues. But there is also a sadness of exhaustion and impotence in men too long tyrannized by ideas, a graying of energy, a loss of individual force" (262). For Stevens, the statue's safeguarding against transformation is premised on its initial loss of the "individual force." Dupuy "[c]hanged his true flesh to an inhuman bronze" and became "the nerveless frame / Of a suspension, a permanence," "a setting"

among many (*CP* 391). This is a case where a piece of being has ossified into a fixed historical meaning and lost its possibilities.

In light of the Daoist thought that precludes any self-enclosed, named oneness, it becomes possible to transpose Stevens's "philosophical project" outside the Euro-American tradition. From Platonism to Romanticism to American Pragmatism, Stevens's mentors are many: "Because of the richness of his engagement with philosophical problems and ideas, Stevens's work lends itself to different lenses of critical inquiry and makes possible filiation with different philosophers and ideas" (Ziarek 229). Yet he may not have been a serious reader of philosophy at all, or at least he distanced himself from any specific philosopher to pursue poetic authenticity. In "A Collect of Philosophy" (1951), he confesses that he reads philosophy largely in terms of poetic conception, emphasizing that "the concepts of philosophy are poetic" as they deal with "a whole for which, for the most part, we have as yet no language" (*Opus* 271). In a 1949 letter, he admits that "I have never studied systematic philosophy and should be bored to death at the mere thought of doing so. . . . I could never possibly have any serious contact with philosophy because I have not the memory" (*Letters* 636). Bart Eeckhout takes this dismissive tone as "a testimony to his anxiety of influence and his deep-rooted desire for originality" (137). For Stevens, poetry rather than philosophy embraces all kinds of mental activities, paradoxically thinking that which evades the mind. As Gül Bilge Han notes, Stevens's later poetry transposes "the unintelligible and the inexpressible (or the unnameable) into its conception of reason" (144). His is a sort of non-Kantian reason that spawns fantastic speculations and fictions. Frank Doggett sees Stevens's "poetry of thought" as bearing resemblance to concepts developed by Bergson, William James, and Santayana, but "even then they are not developed as arguments but are given unsupported as though they existed in simple immediacy without need of dialectic" (200). Doggett concludes that his poems employ philosophical insights "as an intrinsic part of its own freshness and permanence and abundance," and that he mainly, and unsurprisingly, "reflects the changes of the flux of experience" (200, 201).

More than any other modern American poet, Stevens strongly felt the need to rescue poetry from the incursion of philosophy. Viewing the flux of the world afresh each time, he prefers to proceed without a worldview. Changing perspectives, he tries to see the essence of change, but change itself may not possess an essence, only possibilities for *further change* that are not mere repetitions of previous ones. Hence the restlessness of his quest for a rest, for the tranquil center that ensouls his body and world. "A Way [*dao*] called *Way* isn't the perennial Way," says Laozi (35). The

Way in Daoist thinking eludes object-referring language, including the very word "way"; *dao* thus exceeds first principles as it encompasses being, nonbeing, nothing/void, *and* the mind. It is the obscure parent of all contrarieties and polarities: "We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous," Stevens says belatedly (*CP* 524). The *dao* simply brings everything together, arranging the rendezvous, and it is *not* equivalent to the mind or consciousness in Buddhism. As the fundamental natural law and the quintessential life-force, *dao* is the self-generating, self-maintaining substratum of the living cosmos, whereas Buddhism seeks to obliterate such a spontaneous substance—and any substance whatsoever.[5]

In his collection of aphorisms, "Adagia" (1940), as if taking up an antagonistic gesture toward philosophy Western or Eastern, Stevens claims to "live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it": "Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential" (*Opus* 190). Presentations of nature are not to be circumscribed by concepts; rather, conceptions need to be transformed into perceptions to be more convincing to the mind: "poetry is to a large extent an art of perception" (273). But perceptions must be further transformed into supersensible or supernatural feelings to satisfy the cosmic meditation, the "inhuman author" (*CP* 377). "It is the huge, high harmony that sounds / A little and a little, suddenly, / By means of a separate sense. It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is" (*CP* 440), Stevens reasons in "A Primitive Like an Orb" (1948). Attuned to the "separate sense" as the organ of a higher (or lower) harmony, Stevens's poems can "escape destruction at the hands of the logical positivists" (*The Necessary Angel* 139), who reduce Being to tangible, explainable facts, thereby depriving it of mystical revelations.

Grasping for the hidden hinge of things, Stevens wants nothing less than "The essential poem at the centre of things" (*CP* 440), and all his rhetorical flourishes from *Harmonium* onward are, in a sense, self-defensive distractions from this proliferating center.[6] To signify a dynamically transformative view of nature at its metaphysical foundation, he reaches for atomic percepts in mystical visions, achieving what he calls in "A Primitive Like an Orb," using mock-Kantian language, the "difficult

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[5] This is not to make of *dao* a sufficient reason, as in Leibniz's philosophy. *Dao* is simply a provisional name that embraces the interactions of *yin* and *yang*, which cannot be exhausted by scientific studies (genetics, biology, cosmology) or speculative inquiry (reasoning about metaphysical necessity). We do not know what makes a rose bloom like a rose, so we call it the Way (*dao*). Instead of being a cause, *dao* is rather the inherent nature of things, and that's why it is originally called the Nameless.

[6] Steen similarly describes Stevens's anxious holding of his center or interiority (19-63).

apperception" by hearing the "arias that spiritual fiddlings make," which "have gorged the cast-iron of our lives with good / And the cast-iron of our works" (*CP* 440). In the dimension of *dao*, categories like self, subject, object, and world are all dissolved, "gorged," since these concepts are mere suppositions to achieve conventional truths, not the ultimate truth. Indeed, "the human" was conceived in Daoism as one's relationship with heaven and earth, two ontological-generative principles.[7] In Stevens's poem, the reality of "our lives" and "our works," supposedly referring to postwar American life, corresponds to a relativized version of the *dao* as what has comprised all previous conditions leading up to the "cast-iron" situation, an allusion to the Iron Curtain. The *dao*, or why the world is fundamentally as such—why it is so harsh and bare, why our ideas, "these ghostly sequences / Of the mind," have led to disaster (*CP* 326)—remains impenetrable to common sense but can be intuited by the sage-poet, a posture Stevens comes to adopt beginning with "The Snow Man."

Distressed by world wars, Stevens had good reasons to anticipate the dissolution of the "cast-iron of our works" by some major spiritual force emanating from on high: "A vis, a principle or, it may be, / The meditation of a principle, / Or else an inherent order active to be / Itself" (*CP* 442). He thus envisions the inherent self-restoring tendency of the world operating independently of human will—reality is governed by a higher authority than warlords and politicians. Amidst chaotic times, he wanted to add himself to the healing *dao*, the One, within which, as within a powerful medium, "we forget each other and ourselves" (*CP* 524). In "A Primitive Like an Orb," this "vis" or principle is personified as a giant "on the horizon, glistening" (*CP* 442). This giant is surely another version of Crispin, the "central man" or "major man" (recalling the "authentic man" in Daoism)—a theoretical abstraction, an ontological-generative principle informing heaven and earth, an incorporeal "giant of the weather" (*CP* 385). But in this poem, the giant has "[a] massive body and long

[7] One easily notices Stevens's relatedness to these Daoist concepts, for he similarly conceives of change as based upon arche-binaries: "Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another, as a man depends / On a woman, day on night, the imagined / On the real. This is the origin of change" (*CP* 392). Change therefore means transition toward the opposite, from *yin* to *yang* and vice versa; change is purely cyclical, automatic, complementary, interdependent, and immanent. In *I Ching: The Book of Change*, the first two hexagrams lay down such a pattern: "The Way of heaven is all change and transformation at the hinge of things, where the unfurling nature of each thing itself is perfected. It nurtures vast harmony in wholeness, and remains inexhaustible in bringing forth wild bounty. . . . How perfect and wondrous the earth of origins! The ten thousand things are all born from it. Yielding and devoted as a river, it supports the sky. It carries things along in its generosity, joins them boundlessly in its heart-sight clarity, opens them away all vast radiance in its embrace" (2-4).

legs, stretched out," finding himself "At the centre on the horizon, concentrum, grave / And prodigious person, patron of origins" (*CP* 443). "A Primitive Like an Orb" concludes with the insight that this originating giant incarnates the phantasmal object of desire, and like Proteus, he is "the giant of nothingness, each one / And the giant ever changing, living in change" (*CP* 443). That this insight about reality (the non-differentiation between subject and object) was achieved by a "primitive" rather than civilized man bespeaks Stevens's purposeful dismantling of the consciousness-apparatus typical of Western modernity.[8]

Toward an Ecstatic Outside: Stevens's Mystical Visions

I would like to venture the view that the metaphysical efficacy of Stevens's poetry, particularly his later work, consists in perceiving the contours of the one/whole, which encompasses the infinite mutual-referring series of mind and object: a self-altering, self-fulfilling, and open-ended continuum. Earlier Stevens critics, such as J. Hillis Miller, Thomas Hines, Richard Blessing, and Alan Perlis, have elaborated on change, flux, and transformations in his poetry. The poetic process is deemed a product of the "universal power" of Being (Miller 209), an aesthetic exercise in phenomenological reduction (Hines 28), a symbol of organic life in nature (Blessing 5), and a meeting ground between mind and nature (Perlis 21). These studies reflect a common tendency to read Stevens's poetry as the imagination's indefatigable mediation of the mind-reality problem, and transformation is thus seen as the mind's constant shaping of the recalcitrant world into poetry. In Perlis's words, poetry "whips the world into shape" (150).

Stevensian oneness, being *a poetic event*, indeed relates to mind and nature—but it is capable of being released from both because changes happen in and out of any particular configuration of mind and objectivity ("I was of three minds / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds" [*CP* 92]). In this way, Stevens can relativize

[8] In a commentary on Richard Wilhelm's translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Carl Jung writes about the Daoist practice of detaching the consciousness from the world: "The magical claim of things has ceased because the original interweaving of consciousness with the world has come to an end. The unconscious is no longer projected, and so the primal *participation mystique* with things is abolished" (*The Secret* 123). Jung disagrees with anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's view that *participation mystique* is a "hallmark of primitive mentality" since the civilized mind is similarly possessed by "nerve remedies, neuroses, 'progress,' the cult of the will, and so forth" (124). This is pertinent to Stevens's presentation of *participation mystique* in "A Primitive Like an Orb," which imagines "primitive" consciousness: "as if summer was a spouse, / Espoused each morning, each long afternoon, / And the mate of summer: her mirror and her look, / Her only place and person, a self of her / That speaks, denouncing separate selves, both one" (*CP* 441).

both in ways similar to the *dao*'s incessant proliferation of perspectives and scales. His oneness avoids monism because it is mythically a non-unity, gesturing toward that which lies beyond itself: although the sea near Key West "became the self / That was her song," we, the audience, "Knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made" (*CP* 128, 130). The oneness of mind and reality is but a provisional truth leading up to the "not-one." In times of war, for example, "The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind" (*CP* 215); knowledge cannot contain facts without them spilling over. Stevensian unity also goes beyond theological oneness: "We cannot go back to that," the time "when bishops' books / Resolved the world" (*CP* 215), since opposites are never truly resolved by a one or any (messianic) one.[9] Instead, one must achieve a higher view that sees in the union of self and world fresh possibilities for that continuum to evolve new equilibriums, a breathing whole: "Breathe, breathe upon the centre of / The breath life's latest, thousand senses. / But let this one sense be the single main" (*CP* 264). Anything that is not capable of further change (growth, decay, alteration) is literally (and literarily) dead. To recognize oneness is not to classify it as a type of Vitalism, Gnosticism, Transcendentalism, or Holism (though Stevens might embrace all); instead, it is the instrument, the path, toward *the outside of this unity*.

This is perhaps where Stevensian *dao* differs from, for example, Poundian or Eliotian *dao*: Stevens's poems are written with prophetic, supernatural words that, answering to the productive Way, overflow and drown the senses.[10] The "arias that spiritual fiddlings make," for example, are barely audible, but we feel that something like wine is "down-pouring, up-springing and inevitable," overflowing the poem-object, and we experience a powerful presence engulfing the form: "A larger poem for a larger audience . . . / A mythological form, a festival sphere" (*CP* 465-66). If "the great image has no shape" (Laozi 81), then Stevensian *dao* can be taken as the path leading to what precedes all shapes—the undifferentiated or the ultimate-less. The vast presence in his mythopoetic and autopoietic pieces preclude analytical procedures because it is prior to one and many, form and matter. In other words, we are dealing with the vast reservoir of possibilities for change, modification, and

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[9] Bates provides a Hegelian reading of Stevens's "Of Mere Being," interpreting Hegelian and Stevensian spirit as an "unending movement of immediacy, alienation, and synthesis" rather than a unification of opposites (163).

[10] His poetic language recalls Zhuangzi's "goblet words": "With these goblet words (*zhiyan*) that come forth day after day, I harmonize all things in the Heavenly Equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out my years." Watson glosses "goblet words" as "words that are like a goblet that tips when full and rights itself when empty, that is, that adapt to and follow along with the fluctuating nature of the world and thus achieve a state of harmony" (234).

transmutation, "the virtual" in the Deleuzian sense. If the world is governed by repetition and difference operating on the same ground of Being, "a single clamor of Being for all beings" rather than an extraction of "little differences, variations and modifications" (Deleuze xix), how is real change, rather than a mere change of the mind, supposed to happen?[11]

Cary Wolfe's *Ecological Poetics; or, Wallace Stevens's Birds*, in treating the systematic and ecological aspects of Stevens's poetry, opens up a new direction in thinking change and oneness. Commenting on the ever-changing giant as a symbol of the world in "A Primitive Like an Orb," Wolfe writes, "the radical contingency of self-referential and 'blind' observation is a reservoir of complexity for what we call 'world,' for that contingency means that the world could always be otherwise, indeed *will* always be otherwise" (127). Stevens's perception of necessity and contingency and his desire for the "outside," as Wolfe points out by drawing on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, correspond to the Daoist incompletion of intra-mundane references or the de-absolutized state of knowledge. What matters in systems, as in Stevens's poems, is their infinite capacity for self-attunement: they "become *more* attuned and *more* linked, through this recursive closure, to the environments in which they find themselves and with which they work to find resonance" (130). Relying on Stevens's self-referential ecology, which encompasses micro-systems on multiple autopoietic levels, Wolfe is able to bring out the full complexity of a poetic environment that seeks out, in its incessant self-adjustments and uncanny ongoing-ness, "the possibility of an inhuman or ahuman form of meaning that, nonetheless, does not exclude or prevent human ways of meaning" (128).

We may observe that such a coexistence of cosmic-humanistic meanings, or self-attunement of systems, appears throughout Stevens's poetry. However, systems theory elucidates how complexity arises by way of observation—to use Luhmann's words, "reducing complexity [by deploying observations] is the means to generate complexity" (qtd. in Wolfe 45)—but they leave out altogether the arche-invisibility that is *dao* and *śūnyatā*, both of which let complexity arise and remain radically irreducible to observation and the process of socialization (for Stevens, observations

[11] For Deleuze, the ground or sufficient reason is at the same time a groundlessness because every determination of thought leaves out the indeterminate: "*sufficient reason or the ground is strangely bent*: on the one hand, it leans towards what it grounds, towards the forms of representation; on the other hand, it turns and plunges into a groundlessness beyond the ground which resists all forms and cannot be represented. . . . Representation, especially when it becomes infinite, is imbued with a presentiment of groundlessness" (274-76). This "presentiment of groundlessness" in saturated/infinite representations readily describes Daoism's and Stevens's metaphysical stance.

are directed at both processes and nothingness). According to Luhmann's theory, the function of a poem, like that of other art, is to make a world emerge within the world, and in order to do that, the poem must force something else to withdraw from view. A poem resembles a system that steadily exchanges its codes with its unobservable environment, its "outside," blindly exuding its own conditions of being, just as Stevens's jar organizes "the slovenly wilderness" around itself without paying any attention to that wilderness (*CP* 76). Wolfe locates Stevens's poetry within this Luhmannian observable-unobservable paradox: it exemplifies "the crucial, mutual overdeterminations between the question of form and the paradoxical relations of the visible and invisible, the observable and unobservable" (46). Wolfe's innovative reading renders visible the process of automaticity and contingency in Stevens's poems, prompting a deeper insight into the hidden oneness of change and constancy. My "mystical" mapping of Stevens's poetry, which indicates an ecstatic arche-outside, does not contradict but supplements Wolfe.

Critics have noticed that Stevens's later poetry becomes increasingly visionary, and ominously so. The problem is that when all change has come to an end, it means either that the whole has, via systematic adjustment, reached an optimal constancy (the heavenly center that transcends all cyclic changes) or, as James Longenbach (288-89) and Malcolm Woodland (134-66) consider in their respective readings, that the world is going to end, that the apocalypse is near. Apocalypse, after the nuclear bombings of World War II, was a compelling vision shared by many postwar American poets, yet seen in light of Daoism and Buddhism, the doomsday scenario is only an aberrant mode of constancy, not its end. In other words, Stevens's sense of the End is subject to further change and transformation.

In "Credences of Summer" (1946), Stevens claims to have ecstatically witnessed the "essential barrenness" but also the "eternal foliage," the "Axis of everything, green's apogee," and "the final mountain" (*CP* 373). This is the moment when "the secondary senses of the ear / Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs, / Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds" (*CP* 374). The secondary senses of the ear, physiologically, are not for hearing but for keeping the body's equilibrium; they non-visually perceive and vitally maintain the cosmic order. These "last choirs, last sounds" and the "Pure rhetoric of a language without words" do evoke a feeling of the end, but they are soon followed by the joyful prospect that "The utmost must be good and is / And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees / And mingling of colors at a festival" (*CP* 374). On the whole, "Credences of Summer" presents a felicitous sequence where lastness connotes the arrival of the constant ("right ignorance of change"), completion in incompletion ("what is possible / Replaces what is not"), the

peak of consciousness (the mind is "aware of division, aware / Of its cry as clarion"), and a return to spontaneity, "youthful happiness" (*CP* 373-78). The poem achieves both the *dao* and *śūnyatā* as that which, by exerting counter-influences on the mind-world continuum, bring things to a greater equilibrium. For George S. Lensing, the poem is Stevens's "happiest poem and represents his attempt to make that happiness socially credible and accessible"; significantly, it represents his "version of a secular or profane mysticism" in response to "the 'annihilations' of religious decreation" (273, 276).

The ecstatic, mystical moment that defies apocalyptic "decreation" continues in canto IV of "The Auroras of Autumn" (1948), where Stevens similarly dwells on hearing, imagining a father, perhaps his own dead father, as "the lowest ear, the deep ear that discerns, / At evening, things that attend it until it hears / The supernatural preludes of its own" (*CP* 414). It takes a Rilkean "deep ear" to discern this supernatural music in the night sky, confirming the Daoist insights that the greatest note of nature is rarified in sound and that the underlying principle of the world often goes unperceived. Stevens's sensual language, however, "provides a hope of knowing what is unknowable" (Goldfarb 12) by mobilizing the initiatory function of the senses. The mystical dimension unfolds in Daoism and Buddhism by turning the senses inward to "the vision of the heart" or "inner vision" so as to achieve "circulation of the light" (*The Secret* 34, 30), while Stevens dramatizes this inward turning and sets it in violent motion, and in this he seems to follow Arthur Rimbaud, for whom poetry is "a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement of *all the senses*" (371). In fantastic scenes that confuse the sensual faculties ("In flights of eye and ear"), Stevens imagines the father to be a cosmic agent who "measures the velocities of change. / He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly / Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames" (*CP* 414). These lines foresee some major events ("bad angels") drastically changing the world's outlook, but they could also mean that the poet is no longer an observer of mundane processes when elevated to a higher dimension to behold the birth and death of worlds. The father, the "crown," the "king" of "the naked wind" (*CP* 415) resembles the demigods in *Zhuangzi* who have legendarily "mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths, and thus wandered through the boundless" (Watson 3). He moves with the auroras in the night sky, entering the poles of change.[12]

[12] Cook explains: "The northern lights are unpredictable in time and duration and movement. Movements of argument, rhetoric, and images in the poem both describe and resemble the aurora's incessantly flickering light, irregular leaping and collapsing, and differing velocity" (237-38).

The cloudy heaven and flaming hell, as displayed by the ever-changing auroras, are two poles demarcating the full domain of "primal spirit"[13] incarnated in the father-king, through whom Stevens measures the "velocities of change" at the cost of Christian theology. The mood seems darkly comical rather than blandly theological. In canto VI, the scene changes and "the scholar of one candle" enters and, after viewing the world process in the theater of his mind, opens the door of his house to behold "An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is. And he feels afraid" (*CP* 417). Unlike the primal father, the poor scholar (with all his knowledge reduced to the power of one candle) is terrified by the auroras that reveal the possible dissolution of his entire world. In canto VII, we further learn that although the northern light "leaps through us," "[e]xtinguishing our planets," there is a law in making and unmaking as "it dare not leap by chance in its own dark." Stevens tentatively calls this indestructible "residue" the "crown and mystical cabala" (*CP* 417), suggesting Jewish mysticism as a key to the mystery of creation. Making visible the energy of the generative poles, he nevertheless indicates that earthly transformations may be understood, to use Andrew Plaks's comment on the productive dualities in Chinese philosophy, as "a process of *ceaseless alteration*, with the implication of presence within absence of the hypothetical poles" (169; emphasis added).

Having offered an other-than-apocalyptic reading of some major episodes in "The Auroras of Autumn," we may now confidently approach Stevens's grand Daoist vision in the first canto, where the poet has lifted nature onto the breath-route and achieved the "free and easy wandering" much admired by Zhuangzi. (We are reading backward to the "ever-brightening origin," the great image that has no shape.) Again, to read the canto apocalyptically is to set it up in face of annihilation, to make a theological lesson out of what otherwise would seem entirely natural or cyclical. The poem is more Daoist than Buddhist, since it's more focused on the primal spirit (*yuanshen*), which arises "without consciousness and knowledge," transcending "the cycle of heaven and earth and the fate of the eons," yet is able to regulate "the formative processes of the body" (*The Secret* 28). Stevens employs rarified imagery to simulate this spirit-principle:

> This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
> His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
> Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.

[13] "That which exists through itself is called the Way (Tao). Tao has neither name nor shape. It is the one essence, the one primal spirit" (*The Secret* 21).

> Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,
> Another image at the end of the cave,.0
> Another bodiless for the body's slough?
>
> This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
> These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,
> And the pines above and along and beside the sea. (*CP* 411)

The serpent-aurora, the "Arctic effulgence" frightening the "scholar of one candle," here appears rather non-threatening. It doesn't look like Satan bringing warfare into paradise. Instead, the serpent's lack of a body, like the giant's incorporeality, indicates its astral dimension. The serpent-aurora is a case of "vast presence," which portends in *I Ching* (*Yi Jing*) that it "occupies a potent and venerable place, a vast and abiding center where lofty and lowly move always in concurrence": "Fire blazing above heaven: that is Vast Presence" (28, 29). What is naturally vast—a volcano, the sea, aurora borealis, and what is vastly and naturally changing—cannot be evil since it is merely a matter of scales. This is discussed in the opening chapter of *Zhuangzi* where a cicada and a little dove laugh at the mythical bird Peng, who is vast as the sky, for flying ninety thousand miles to the Lake of Heaven (Watson 1-2). "Except for us, Vesuvius might consume / In solid fire the utmost earth and know / No pain," Stevens says stoically in "Esthétique du Mal" (1944), suggesting that "pain is human": "except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed" (*CP* 314). Vesuvius's fiery movements are indeed beyond our sympathy, and so is cosmic change: "The concept of change is not an external, normative principle that imprints itself upon phenomena; it is an inner tendency according to which development takes place naturally and spontaneously" (Wilhelm 19). The aesthetics of evil, such as appears during times of war, is an overestimation or "enlargement" (*CP* 298) of the self in the face of heroism, injury, and annihilation. For Stevens, evil is only in the mind, "in the self" (*CP* 316). Wars and blood pacify nothing but the ancient desires of evil: "The armies kill themselves," he laments, "And in their blood an ancient evil dies— / The action of incorrigible tragedy" (*CP* 292). As is typical of late Stevens, he concludes the long, pensive poem with the prospect that some "metaphysical changes" *might* occur in the swarming "mid-day air" right "where we live" (*CP* 326).

The vast, mythical serpent-aurora, whose "head is air," similarly belongs to Stevens's *as-if* philosophy. It evokes an aerial, objectless presence (an image of *dao*)

rather than a sublime object—its contour is still vague, with its essence undefined, being felt in all "fields," "hills," "pines," and "distances." We note here that this lack of objectivity contrasts with the notion of the hyperobject in recent ecocritical discussions. The hyperobject, being entirely physical (Morton 2), is still an object, retaining all the oppositeness of objects, whereas *dao* is non-object/non-mind, the underlying formative principle of being and life that is also the potential dissolution of the human-world correlation—for instance, by dissolving imaginary sociopolitical ties and authoritative commandments. Neither entirely natural nor artificial, the serpent-aurora can be taken as the embodiment, or rather the figuration, of a certain kind of metaphysics: Stevens's large image of the world without shape. Elsewhere, he would speak of "The sense of the serpent in you, Ananke" (*CP* 152).

Even the Platonic cave, or more accurately, the end of the cave, paves the way for the serpent's repeated births and deaths. The constant shedding of sloughs suggests *saṃsāra*, the world's self-rejuvenation and self-dissolution—"the serpent of Time shedding its skin over and over" (Mariani 313).[14] The serpent's metaphysical/ontological status is made rather explicit in its omnipresence, transparence, and generative essence:

> This is form gulping after formlessness,
> Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances
> And the serpent body flashing without the skin. (*CP* 411)

Magnificently flashing in disappearing, informing while deforming the formless, the serpent's vast presence, to apply Stevens's musing from "Credences of Summer," is "Not to be realized because not to / Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because / Not to be realized" (*CP* 385). Thomas B. Byers comments, "Realization is a distinctly human power, a matter of our seeing. However, for Stevens, unlike Whitman, the world need not be realized in order to be; day may dawn without ever dawning on me" (53). Helen Vendler, however, sees a partial realization in the serpent. While marveling at the serpent's changefulness, regarding it as "the true genius of the poem," she calls our attention to its "flecked" bestiality: "his head is wholly zoological—flecked, black-beaded, visible. The serpent's pure bestiality makes us disbelieve in his possible transcendence; we are sure of his naturalness as he moves to make sure of sun" (*On Extended Wings* 249). As in the case of Zhuangzi's vast bird Peng, "with a back like Mount Tai and wings like clouds filling the sky" (Watson 2), the serpent's

[14] Following Longenbach and Woodland, Mariani likewise reads the beginning canto of "The Auroras of Autumn" as a nuclear doomsday scenario (312-14).

animality does not discredit its ontological status. Toward the end of the canto, Stevens reports that the serpent is "Relentlessly in possession of happiness"; "[h]is meditations in the ferns" make us "no less as sure" when he "make[s] sure of sun." To further evoke the serpent's founding Voidness, he writes, "We saw in his head, / Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal, / The moving grass, the Indian in his glade" (*CP* 411-12). The serpent-aurora, being too happy for itself, wonderfully slides like a transcendental signifier, standing for what Stevens in canto VIII calls "a time of innocence" (*CP* 418). Its image contains not only the possibilities for seasonal or natural changes but metaphysical change: the serpent-cum-aurora offers a new human-world relation embodied in the Indian inside the serpent's head, a new image of the regenerative core of the cosmos that neutralizes all upper and lower forces.

Curing the Ground

One wonders if this is *the* picture of Stevens's philosophy or just another picture in addition to his Platonic, Nietzschean, Pragmatic, and Buddhist pictures. Is change the final word, or is nothing final? Was he writing a theodicy without God? How do we account for social change from a Stevensian point of view? These questions, pressing as they are, can only be indirectly answered. Although few readers expect poetry, this "finikin thing of air" (*CP* 155), to effect much change in the world, its metaphysical possibility, its capacity to direct the mind to what is out there on the periphery or in the invisible center (resonances between inner and outer selves), cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it preconditions the conditions of change. Stevens would say that it is precisely poetry, or something just as fundamental, that sustains one's life and spirit through "dark times" until the time itself changes, for better or worse. "It is difficult to read. The page is dark. / Yet he knows what it is that he expects" (*CP* 267). Poetry differs from politics in that the poet "absorbs the general life" while the politician "is absorbed by it" (*Opus* 311).

As Stevens conceived of it even during times of war, poetry releases both the poet and readers from ideological loyalties and total absorption because the poet is "the appreciatory creator of values and beliefs" instead of a follower or defender of existing ones (*Opus* 311). In modern democratic countries, social change becomes possible when the majority of people begin to envision a different picture of life and world after recognizing the limitations and injustices of present life as something obstructing the Way: "Everyone takes sides in social change if it is profound enough," Stevens ponders in "Adagia" (*Opus* 198). In the jacket statement for *Ideas of Order* (1936), he asks readers to participate in the "ideas of order of a different nature, as,

for example, the dependence of the individual, confronting the elimination of established ideas, on the general sense of order" (*Opus* 222). Stevens's sense of order does not produce a utopia where the maximum good can be realized; it is rather this cosmic feeling that everything is already settling in, interconnecting, and mutual-referring, "passing through sudden rightnesses" (*CP* 240). It's a sense of the change *that is already taking place*.

Fundamentally, Stevens advanced a philosophical view for the postwar world where the old harmony/order was lost while the new one was still on the horizon or to be composed, where a "plastic" mind rather than a saving deity was needed. He was perhaps the first modern poet (if Rilke agrees at all) to set the task for Western civilization to renew its mindset in order to receive a new sense of order (and avoid another war) in which existing knowledge and self-knowledge, including the power struggles that defined much of prewar politics, would be suspended and transfigured in a mystical empathy for the whole. "If indeed metaphysics—that is the search for certainty and for the ultimate ground—is the expression of the experience of human fragility" (Kołakowski 15), then Stevens cannot avoid metaphysics exactly because he cannot avoid expressing human infirmity and the precarity of all individual and collective destinies caught in the world's generative substratum. This is precisely what in-forms the poet's vision of the inexhaustible source of self-fashioning.

The Stevensian *dao*—at times mystical, hypothetical, generative, and systematic, as we have seen—pertains to but eventually transcends all "ones" as actualized configurations of the self-world relationship. It invites us to "compose" ourselves in an incredibly enriched sense of the word, in the way "[v]ariations in the tones of a single sound" (*CP* 316) are composed, as if any single "one" is plainly capable of playing out such ceaseless varieties and alternations. Instead of reducing his poetry to an endless mind-reality mediation, a tug between idealism and realism, my reading sees it as comprised of proliferating, blooming self-world continuums, and this reveals his particular strategy of dissolving any philosophically absolutized, religiously hallowed, or politically entrenched version of Being. His poetry discerns not change but possibilities of change as the "abyssal" ground of life and being. The spontaneity of change manifests the formless, imageless, creative, "giant" spirit-principle. To change the world thus means to alter the "basic images" of the world (*The Necessary Angel* 145), to find "a cure of the ground," which is, without surprise, "a cure of ourselves" (*CP* 526).

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