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Evening of desire

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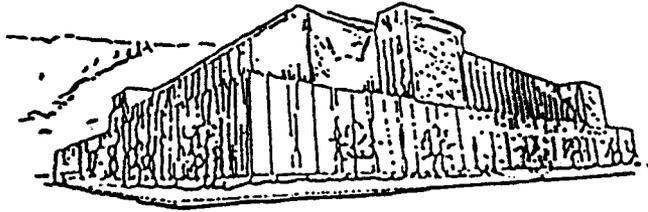
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EVENING OF DESIRE

by

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for the degree of

Master of Arts

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INTRODUCTION

According to Helen Vendler "the human illusions engendered by desire are (Stevens') great subject" (HV 31). In his seminal work "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens writes:

The priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.

To have what is not is its ancient cycle.

(Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction, "It Must Be Abstract," II)

Stevens' poetic treatment of the notion of desire reflects in all its simplicity the complicated and dense theories concerning desire as postulated by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Examining how Lacan's theories pertaining to desire, the speaking subject, and language relate to a particular work of Stevens is the principle aim of this essay. I also endeavor to discuss other themes as they relate to desire that concern both Lacan and Stevens such as the notions of wholeness, meaning, unity, and closure.

My examination of the notion of desire is not limited to the poems in which Stevens addresses it. According to Lacan the very nature of desire and its relationship to the subject manifests itself in the structure of language. Accordingly, I endeavor to show that the particular style and overall project of Stevens' oeuvre, the philosophical and

thematic topics encountered and enacted in his poems, reflects the principle theories of Lacan that relate to language, the speaking subject and desire.

In order to accomplish this goal I've elected to not expand upon Stevens' work as a whole, nor explicate any of his longer or more highly criticized works. My purpose at this time is not to refute other scholarly works, but to offer a new approach for Stevens criticism, a different perspective in which to experience the transformative power of Stevens' poetry. Hence, in this study I've chosen to examine Stevens' critically under-evaluated lyric "Evening Without Angels," which enacts, reflects, and touches upon many of Lacan's major theories concerning language, the subject, and desire. The word "without" in the title refers directly to the idea of "lack" that is central to Lacan's theories about the structure of desire.

Within the parameters of this lyric, I will locate Lacan's three registers, the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, that constitute the subject, and show how these relate to the notion of desire. Also, I will discuss Lacan's theories on language, his reworking of the Saussurian algorithm Signifier / signified, as well as his rendering of the operations of metonymy and metaphor. In the process, I will examine other topics of Lacanian theory such as the unconscious, the Mirror Stage, the Oedipal Complex, and concepts such as closure, unity, and identity that are of principle concern to Stevens' poetics.

It is my principle aim to demonstrate how Lacan's theories interact with the poem itself. I will engage in a close reading of "Evening Without Angels" as it is my desire to foreground the entire poem as much as possible, to examine the words, nuances, and

images that Stevens chose to constitute the poem. Simultaneously, I will demonstrate how resistant the poem is to any particular interpretation when, according to Lacan, interpretation "is directed not so much at meaning as toward reducing the non-meaning of the signifiers" (Feminine, 211). As a matter of course, I will discuss the dialectical themes that permeate Stevens' work, examining how his terms and style resist and conflate such critiques. Ultimately, it is my endeavor to show how Stevens uses language in a response to desire, and how in the attempt to fulfill this desire with language he ends up producing more desire.

In Canto III of "an Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens alludes to this, what Lacan terms the "metonymy of desire," to the dialectic an ever (re-)emerging desire, to the relationship (or "gap") between the vision of the thing and the thing itself (Lacan defines this "gap" as the field of desire) quite succinctly when he writes:

The point of vision and desire are the same.

It is to the hero of midnight that we pray

On a hill of stones to make beau mont thereof.

If it is misery that infuriates our love,

If the black of night stands glistening on beau mont,

Then, ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth,

Say next to holiness is the will thereto,
And next to love is the desire for love,
The desire for its celestial ease in the heart,

Which nothing can frustrate, that more secure,
Unlike love in possession of that which was
To be possessed and is. But this cannot

Possess. It is desire, set deep in the eyes,
Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene,
In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall,

Always in emptiness that would be filled,
In denial that cannot contain its blood,
A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof.

1. LACAN'S NOTION OF DESIRE

The notion of desire cannot be grasped or discussed without an understanding of the relationship between desire and the unconscious. For Lacan the idea of the "myth" of a cohesive self was subverted by Freud's discovery of the unconscious. The existence of the unconscious as it relates to desire divides the subject into two fields of operation. There is the speaking subject of desire or "subject of enunciation" Lacan refers to as the "je" which can only be understood in terms of the subject's "symbolic narrative."¹ And then there is "the imaginary subject," the "moi," which constructs an identity the subject actually lacks but which forever informs the conscious discourse of the speaking subject. This proposition redefines the concept of subjectivity as a fiction (Feminine, 30-31).

In his essay, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," Lacan describes the formation of the subject as a process of identification and division. Lacan hypothesizes that the process of identification probably starts for the infant in the womb, but he formulates his theories from when the child is around six months and older. Accordingly, identification is defined in the "the mirror stage" which is structured around the "specular image." This "imago" develops as the child perceives his body as a unified and whole entity, as a Gestalt. However, the subject's experience of jubilation as it "anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the analysand's symbolic narrative as well as the notions of full and empty speech see Jonathan S. Lee's "Empty Speech and Full Speech," pp. 38-53, in Jacques Lacan.

power" (Ecrits, 2) is accompanied by contrasting internal experiences associated with "the turbulent movements the subject feels are animating him" (Ecrits, 2). The child's identity, then, becomes an alienating dialectic between the external image it has of itself, and the anxiety it experiences in its "lack of co-ordination and the fragmentation of its drives" (Feminine, 30). Also, this process only has "meaning in relation to the presence and look of the mother who guarantees (the imago's) reality for the child" (Feminine, 30). This configuration permanently situates "the human subject in a line of fiction and alienation" (Sullivan, 17). This process is not limited by the visual but "also what is heard, touched and willed by the child" (Feminine, 30).

Along with this division, the subject experiences a loss at the institution of the Symbolic Order. This loss is translated as the fundamental "lack" that defines the subject. The subject, however, attempts to repress this loss in his unconscious. Unconscious desire confirms the presence of this lack by the subject's perpetual attempts to fill it. On the conscious level, the subject seeks through demand and request to fulfill his needs. For Lacan, in every demand there lies an implicit "excess" which can never be satisfied. When a child cries for food, the need for nourishment that appears to prompt the call is saddled with a demand also for recognition that can never be completely satisfied. The difference between the demand and need is an excess Lacan defines as desire. For Lacan, "the subject can only operate within language by constantly repeating the moment of fundamental and irreducible division" (Feminine, 31).

2. EVENING OF DESIRE

For Lacan and Stevens the notion of desire appears as a inescapable condition. For Lacan it is this very condition that makes not only language possible but absolutely necessary for the subject. Without language to cover up the gap that defines us as subjects, we would not be able to function socially. Lacanian theory, then, "is engaged in the central lack in which the subject experiences himself as desire" (FC, 265).

For Stevens desire is a condition which is enacted in his poetry as well as spoken of directly. The principle subject of poetry, for Stevens, is the poem, the process and philosophy that generates, that creates the poem. The poem as creation of desire, although formally placed like a body, as an apparent whole, is actually a fragmented association, or composite of relations, that resists closure as much as question the whole idea of unity and closure.

Stevens addresses the desire and lack suggested by the title "Evening Without Angels" through an assortment of techniques and arguments. Many critics have categorized Stevens' arguments as dialectical. However, Stevens' use of a polyphonic narrator, and his poem's resistance to closure, prohibit any sort of Hegelian synthesis, resolution or totalization. His poems reflect relations rather than conclusions or resolution.

For Lacan, a synthesis in regards to a subject is an impossibility for two reasons: (1) because the knowledge produced by such an endeavor would lie in the realm of the subject's Other; (2) the presence of the subject's "moi" resists or frustrates any attempt toward denying its already complete totality (Sullivan, 66). (Actually, the image adopted

by the moi in the Imaginary is a really a false synthesis.) Therefore, we can investigate the "dialectics" that evolve from our reading of the poem as long as we refrain from proclaiming or trying to produce a definitive, totalizing reading (Kronick, 3-5).

For Lacan, the constitution of the subject can be traced by its adjustment to the three registers of the subject he labeled as the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The logical movement of thought of Stevens' poetry can be viewed in relation to these registers.

In the Imaginary register the speaking subject has yet to appear, to speak. He (there is nothing "male" inherent in the speaker / narrator) is still a developing ego, moi, and as such his primary connection and response to the world is through his perception. It is a perception in which he views himself as the center of the universe because he does not recognize anything around him as being separate from him. As the child matures, he comes to view his mother as the pivot of his desire. Through the acquisition of language and the Oedipal Complex (psychic castration) the child learns to find appropriate or adequate substitutes for this desire realized in this initial dyad between himself and his mother. The subject's accession to language becomes for the subject an accession to desire.

As concerns the poem "Evening Without Angels," the title reflects a desire that appears simple though it is not necessarily transparent. Does the title reflect an atheist's desire for an absence of Christianity or religiosity from his life / world, an eviction of "angels" from his "evening?" Or is it the lament of a devout person who perceives his world as already absent, of lacking in religious beliefs, hopes and symbols? Or is it the

cry of a minimalist, an aesthete? What is central to the poem (and the title, literally) are the connotations associated with the word "without."

In my reading, the lack and desire suggested in "without" culminates in the "bareness" of the last stanza. The various attempts of the subject to satisfy his desires, or fill his perceived lack through language, exposes the ambiguous nature of the poem and the impossibility on the part of the subject of ever escaping conclusively from his desire. The best he (there is nothing inherently male about the narrator) can do in the end is refigure his position within the Lacanian Symbolic order of language.

The poem opens with an epigraph which at once summarizes and limits the discourses explored in the body of the poem:

the great interests of man: air and light, the joy
of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking.

Mario Rossi

Stevens' ability to enrich simplicity with complication and expansion, as was experienced in the title, is once again reflected in the epigraph. He uses a philosophical quote from a musical conductor, a quote one would expect to mention music or one of its attributes such as sound or hearing, as one of "the great interests of man." Why Mario Rossi himself fails to mention music as one of the great interests of man, and why Stevens, recognizing this, would use this particular quote, demonstrates the depths of interpretation immediately open to the reader of a Wallace Stevens poem. Also, the "interests" are all

non-verbal. The obfuscating nature of the epigraph toward the questions it stimulates reflects the circulatory motions of the Lacanian drive.

The Lacanian drive is "a primary energy whose aim is to suppress all tension to keep the organism constant" (Sullivan, 72). The drive is activated by the lure of the epigraph's physical apartness, its alien nature. The epigraph is at once both outside the poem (it's printed differently, and written by an 'alien' author,) and inside the poem. This blurring of the boundaries between inside and outside, internal and external, displays the symptom of the split in the subject and acts as one of the controlling metaphors utilized throughout the poem.

The drive points our desires as generated by this lure toward the epigraph, but the nature of desire is to always deflect from the object that might satisfy (eliminate) it. Language, because of its inherent characteristic as a symbol, provides desire with the necessary means of deflection. Lacan says "it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable" (Ecrits, 153). The epigraph, as language representing an attempt toward meaning, contains the themes that will limit and summarize the poem, while at the same time it deflects from this certainty by providing increments of uncertainty and instability by its very enactment in the poem.

How the terms of the epigraph relate to each other and the poem demonstrates an overriding structure to the poem. The themes of "air" and "light" are explored by the narrator throughout the poem, while the themes of "joy of having a body," and "the voluptuousness of looking" are enacted in

the poem. The poem, narrator, and reader are the "body," together and individually, while the narrator and the reader experience the "joy" and enact "the voluptuousness of looking." A dialectic, then, surfaces between what is spoken of and what is experienced, between nouns and participle phrases. On one level, we can view and interact with how the narrator treats the particular topics of light and air. Simultaneously, and on a less conscious level, we can experience how the other themes interact with us (or act on us) as we experience them through our engagement with the poem. That the mathemes of any particular dialectic elucidate meaning within the poem is a reflection our desire to overcome our desire and achieve complete signification: our desire for meaning. How the mathemes do this is part of the process involved in the relationship between the signified and signifier. But for Lacan what is also important is that meaning exists on an unconscious level as is manifested in dreams, and it is our inability to access this meaning on a conscious level that assures our ability to miscomprehend completely, "precisely" what we lack.

The epigraph can be viewed metaphorically as representing how language precedes the subject, how language is already waiting, a priori, waiting to place the subject within its structure. In this case, the epigraph, as language, places the narrator within the limits of its themes. It is the Symbolic label, like speech, placed over the original trauma, the initial cut experienced by the subject (as not yet subject) in Imaginary Register.

If we view the epigraph as language itself, as a priori to the subject's appearance in the Symbolic order, then the first stanza symbolizes the subject's initial experiences within the Symbolic order. According to Jonathan Scott Lee, "our initial linguistic

approach to an other takes the form of a question," (Lee, 78). Later on in his discourses, Lacan began to distinguish between an other with a little "o" and an other with a large "O." The "other" he associated with "the other who is me, the source of all knowledge" (Seminar III, 40), while the "Other" is that position within the Lacanian schema that, for the subject, possesses all that the subject lacks. It is this "Other" that Lacan and we are primarily concerned.

The Other is the locus in the unconscious of the subject's desire where the "discourse which control's any subject's speech is the Other's discourse" (Sullivan, 196). The questions of the speaking subject's then, reflect not only content but a response to the subject's position in the linguistic field of the Symbolic order. This position reveals at once the subject as a split subject where, "a person's linguistic articulations are made in relation to a lack" (Sullivan, 217).

For Lacan, all the analyst has at his disposal is the story, speech, the narrative of the analysand. Hence, it is extremely important to listen to what is said, what is not said, and how what is said and unsaid is delivered. In the first stanza Stevens introduces the narrator whose first utterance and act is to question.

Why seraphim like lutanists arranged
Above the trees? And why the poet as
Eternal chef d'orchestre?

In the first question, the narrator appears to be responding to a painting. The second refers to an overall self-reflective moment or situation. The first incorporates external perception, the second an internal one. According to Lacan, "[w]hat constitutes me as subject is my question"(E, 86). The sheer act of questioning reveals the subject's unconscious desire and his relation to an Other, which exposes the division, split, or gap that defines him as a speaking subject.

The image of seraphim and the poet's situation appeals to romantic themes. Indeed, the poem is set up like a dialectic that proceeds in a logical argument, between romanticism and modernism.² The questions ask why do we need "angels" in our lives, and why should the "poet" occupy the privileged position as the conductor.

According to Lacan, "the function of language is not to inform but to evoke," and it is "the performative dimension of speech that defines human subjectivity" (Lee, 77). The content of the questions reflects a heightened desire on the part of the narrator for recognition from the Other. The Other is the locus of language situated in our unconscious from which the subject speaks and desires throughout life.

In Lacan's schema of the relationship between the place of the Other and that of the ego he says:

² For a brief discussion of the dialectic between Romanticism and Modernism as it refers to Stevens, see the essay "The Metaphoric Stevens," by Joseph Kronick, in The Wallace Stevens Journal, Vol. 12, Fall 1990, pp 3-9. In it he refers in turn to Joseph N. Riddel's essay, "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking," Boundary 2, 1, no. 1, (1972), p 80.

...it is in the Other that the subject is constituted as ideal ... that where the subject sees himself, namely, where that real, inverted image of his own body that is given in the schema of the ego is forged, it is not from there that he looks at himself ... it is in the space of the Other that he sees himself and the point from which he looks at himself is also that space. Now, this is also the point from which he speaks, since in so far as he speaks, it is in the locus of the Other that he begins to constitute that truthful lie by which is initiated that which participates in desire at the level of the unconscious (FC, 144).

The subject, as such, is divided by the effects of language, the effects as speech, as he realizes himself more in the realm of the Other where he emerges as a signifier. The subject, then, forms his speech in relation to the desire of the Other as the subject's desire is the desire of the Other. The desire of the narrator's, however, is immediately deferred by the interruption of the stanza break, the gap, within which the speaker's desire regenerates as our eyes transgress the blank space.

The following stanzas are not so much an answer to the questions posed in the first as much as a validation for the questions' existence, for the subject's existence. The question announces the subject. After all, every rational being knows "air is air." And so the second stanza begins.

Air is air.

Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.

Its sounds are not angelic syllables

But our unfashioned spirits realized

More sharply in more furious selves.

"Air is air" is printed off center. It is not aligned with the beginning nor end of the succeeding line. Its off center positioning acts as a lure for our eyes and minds. The sentence at once represents the modernist desire for simplicity and primitivism. The line by itself reminds me more of the writings of William Carlos Williams than of Wallace Stevens. It even appears, after the first stanza's poetic diction, a bit ironic. Indeed, it does reflect the self-conscious attitudes of the modernist period that cry for a "break with the past."

The simplicity and clarity of the sentence acts as the lure of semantic unity which covers over our knowledge of the gaps that exist in signification. If we compare air to seraphim, the word seraphim produces an array of images while air produces only air. The sentence "air is air" gives air a degree of solidness, while the comparison reveals the semantic hollowness of seraphim. The symbol is revealed as hollow, while the insubstantial becomes solid. The imaginativeness of "seraphim like lutanists" when compared to "air is air" becomes difficult and dismissable, rather than informing and transformative. The short, concise structure of "air is air" acts as a solid base from which

the narrator's argument or investigation concerning the themes of romanticism and modernism can be launched.

According to Lacan, every request has an implicit demand which carries the articulator's veiled desire for recognition. This "excess," which cannot be met or satisfied, insures the subject's inscription in the realm of desire. The narrator expands upon this effect of desire in language, this need to fill the vacancy of air with something, by the very composition of his answer, "air," as a "vacancy" that "glitters." By filling in the vacancy of air with "glitters" the narrator provides air, or from the modernist point of view, with substance. This animism allows the narrator to perceive air better. Also, air glitters round "us" everywhere. The narrator's utility of the plural pronoun provides universality while creating a level of detachment for the narrator.

Caught in the metonymy of desire the narrator continues in this vein by providing air with "sounds." The "sounds" are first defined through negation. The sounds of air are not "angelic syllables," are not fantastic, metaphysical, unnatural sounds, but sounds that come from one's own "unfashioned spirits," that is, from one's natural (primitive), unadulterated being. The negation of not and the prefix un indicate the direction in which these meanings fail by highlighting "angelic" and "fashioned." These "spirits" of nature are "realized / More sharply in more furious selves." This beautiful negation points to an unconscious dialogue that corrupts the possibility for meaning on the conscious level. The "spirits" become "realized" and the "more sharply" reveals the musicality of the stanza. "Air" and "everywhere," "syllables" and "selves" rhyme, and the "more furious selves" spin like the wind defying signification and meaning, while enticing us to try. Even when

we know meaning is only an approximation, the act of negating exposes "more sharply" these gaps. It is within the gaps that desire exists. The gaps exposed between the signifier and the signified, sign and referent, as well as the gap between the narrator's conscious understanding of the inadequacy of "seraphim" and all its romantic implications, and the reality and perceived solidness of air and all its connotations as espoused by the modernists. However, while the narrator's desire is revealed within these gaps it is his recourse to language that at once exposes his desire to fill these gaps.

One of the paramount concerns of Stevens was the notion of the "death of God," the inability of religion to satisfy our spiritual needs, fill the void or cover up the lack in the human subject. For him poetry was to take the place of religion. "If one no longer believes in God (as truth)," he writes, "it is not possible to merely disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else" (Letters, 379). The desire for "something else" is reflected in the processes of the narrator's speech and in the logic of the poem as well. The narrator retreats or moves from one idea or postulation to the next in search of that "something else" to replace the lost idea of a viable God.

In the romanticist view, man can find what he needs in nature and doesn't need another man, priest or poet, to explain the world to him, to make sense out of the world. The modernist, as constructed here, senses the transparency of things, of nature, and with it their substance. For Stevens the poem "is the cry of its occasion" (Palm, 338) and in this case the poem appears as a cry for an unspoiled, unfashioned, modernist response to the world and existence. This primitivism is proposed and questioned in various ways throughout much of Stevens' poetry. In "Sunday Morning" Stevens questions the

constructed ideals of Christianity as he examines and exults the simple realities of nature. The poem demonstrates the inconclusiveness of such an endeavor. But the process itself produces many wonderful sparks. After a while what becomes apparent from this construction is the instability of the narrator's argument inherent in his own language. Up to this point, I sense the speaker in "Evening Without Angels" as one who desires the absence of "angels."

And light
That fosters seraphim and is to them
Coiffeur of haloes, fecund jeweler--
Was the sun concoct for angels or for men?
Sad men made angels of the sun, and of
The moon they made their own attendant ghosts,
Which led them back to angels, after death

The speaking subject's language begins to fracture, however, in the third stanza. He goes from air to "light" in the steady progression of his argument. The sentence begins with a conjunction, which represents the continuation of the thought of the narrator as he continues to advance his argument. And as the stanza begins, we note how the off center first line is lined up neatly with the succeeding line, providing a sense of control and achievement on the part of the narrator. Once again the lure of a transparent signification, a semantic unity is presented.

The speaker, however, soon gets caught up in his chain of signifiers, in the metonymy of desire, and his attempt toward meaning ends in a dash, a mad dash to say something definitive about "light." The narrator seems to have fallen entranced by his own language, which has progressed from the literal simplicity of "And light" to the figurative complexity of depicting light as a "fecund jeweler." And it is in this complexity of imagery, in this metaphoric moment, that the grammatical punctuation of the dash imposes itself, appears, stabbing and stopping the poetic language and narrator. The narrator's enthusiasm for his own ideas has gotten subsumed by an even greater enrapturing of the sound of his own voice.

Whereas, previously the speaker gave air substance, he now personifies light. The discourse of the narrator begins to unravel. His attempt to negate and discredit "seraphim" has only resulted in producing the metonymy of the signifier where the subject of any signifier points to another signifier. This in turn reveals another dialectic where his refutation of seraphim, of the romantic, produces in turn an accumulation of them by his continual reference to them. He needs something else to replace them, a substitute.

This light that "fosters" and crafts, comes to an abrupt end at the dash on line eleven where the speaker catches himself and reverts back to the syntax that defined him earlier: the question,

Was the sun concoct for angels or for men?

According to Lacan, "[w]hat I seek in speech is the response of the other ... I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object" (Ecrits, 86). Unlike the first stanza, the narrator in stanza three attempts to answer his own question within the stanza. The verb tense of "concoct" doesn't agree with the verb "was," and, therefore draws attention to itself. Perhaps the narrator is using some obscure derivative form of the verb concoct, from the original Latin most probably, which makes the word simply appear disjointed, appear condensed. The term condensation primarily refers to what Freud described as that part of the dream process where a multitude of meanings get "condensed" within a symbol. The linguist Roman Jakobson took this concept along with its complement, displacement, and identified them along with the two primary operations of language: metaphor (condensing meanings together), and metonymy (displacing one for another) (Eagleton, 157). Lacan expropriated this idea from Jakobson and used it to substantiate his famous claim that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (FC, 20). And yet, who's doing the concocting here? If one can use that term with regard to the content of a Stevens poem, the sun was concocted for men because both men and the sun are real and part of the paradigm represented by "air is air."

The "sad men" of this section are the theologians who constructed the universe to fit their image of God. The sun and moon were placed in positions to best explain their unfathomable truths. The sad men harp back to the poet of the epigraph except that when you juxtapose each section the words "eternal" and "death" clash. The eternal poet reflects romantic sensibilities, while "death" at the end of the third stanza reminds the reader of the serious side of the poem's subject. The word death and Stevens' treatment of it as it

relates to desire echoes the opening lines of Canto VI in "Sunday Morning" where Stevens writes:

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her
Alone, shall come fulfillment of our dreams
And our desires.

Stanza four continues to address the question(s).

Let this be clear that we are men of sun
And men of day and never of pointed night,

The tone is demonstratively firmer, tenser, more intent than the previous stanzas. It has become more authoritative and aggressive. Men of the sun then are:

Men that repeat antiques sounds of air
In an accord of repetitions. Yet,
If we repeat, it is because the wind
Encircling us, speaks always with our speech.

The authoritative tone reflects the Lacanian "je" of the speaking subject which "takes on its fuller sense in relationship to what it represents itself as speaking for, i.e., the subject" (Sullivan, 64). The je is "sure of itself even in doubt" (Sullivan, 63), and speaks assured of an unified self because it lacks it. The voice implies that we repeat sounds in harmony with the sounds that themselves are repetitions. The repetitions refer to traditions that act as the glue that holds "men" or a society together. The ideas associated with "seraphim," the beliefs produced by it, can no longer hold society together in the twentieth century. The narrator recognizes this as well as the need for something to replace "seraphim." The word "accord," when read as meaning like minded, has a fascist ring to it. The idea that romanticism no longer "speaks" to or about modern man is recognized. That modernism "speaks" to or for modern man is still not realized, has yet to satisfy the narrator's desire.

The term "antiquiest" is the superlative of antique. Its novelty draws a lot of attention to itself. This attention is siphoned away from the tone of the voice that introduces the stanza. The term is exotic, especially in its sound, an*tea*kest, and its pronunciation disrupts the strong iambic pentameter rhythm evident in the first two lines, subverting the authority purported in the tone. This subversion is 'repeated' syntactically by the conditional sentence that follows the initial declarative one.

This subversion and repetition relates to the meaning inferred in the stanza. The speaker declares what "we" are and in doing so what "we" also are not. But in his attempt to substantiate this claim to the authority of such knowledge he creates his own alienation, his own aphanisis. For Lacan, the subject experiences his own alienation as he takes up

meaning in the symbolic, "we are men of ..." and aphanisis (disappearance) as he, in the process of alienation, simultaneously effaces himself by giving up the part of his being which cannot be interpellated into the symbolic.

Yet,

If we repeat, it is because the wind

Encircling us, speaks always with our speech

The "wind / encircling us" expands upon the "accord of repetitions" with a softened tone illuminating the fiction of the authorial voice, while exposing the gap the subject desires to cover over with that tone. By exposing the hollowness of the opening voice Stevens opens up a space for the metaphoric wind to move around in, thus creating new avenues for "our speech" and its music to venture. However, while the authority of the speaker is reduced, subverted, or nullified by his own speech, the authority of the "wind's" voice, the voice of the "air" is heightened. More and more the discourse of the narrator's reveals the discourse of the Other, when, for Lacan, the subject,

is uncertain because he is divided by the effects of language. Through the effects of speech, the subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing there more than half of himself. He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the

circumscribable metonymy of his speech. The effects of language are always mixed with the fact, ... that the subject is subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other, the subject proceeds from his synchronic subjection in the field of the Other (FC, 188).

Stanza four also displays the polyphonic characteristic of Stevens' poetry. Stevens utilizes this technique to subvert the notions of a meta-language or privileged voice. These attributes are especially associated with the romantic poets such as Shelley and Wordsworth. For Stevens, Romanticism isn't defined by the metaphysical assumptions and styles propounded by these or other individuals. Stevens believed that "poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new, and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic" (Letters, 277). The polyphonic nature of his narrator undercuts the whole notion of authority as demonstrated specifically in this stanza.³

In stanza five, the unitive quality of the voice flows against the disjunctive quality of the rhythm. The steady tone creates an aura of clarity and certainty. There is a sense of maturity of feeling and thought, a composure not sustained in any of the previous stanzas. The feeling of wholeness is reinforced by the stanza's structure as one sentence.

³ The polyphonic nature of Stevens' narrators creates "a poetry with powerful political potential," according to M. Keith Booker. See his article, "Stevens and Bakhtin," in The Wallace Stevens Journal, Vol. 14, number 1, 1990.

Light, too, encrusts us making visible
The motions of the mind and giving form
To moodiest nothings, as, desire for day
Accomplished in the immensely flashing East,
Desire for rest, in the descending sea
Of dark, which in its very darkening
Is rest and silence spreading into sleep.

The speaker attempts through a steady, composed tone to once again re-enact for "light" the initial simplicity he found in the sentence "air is air." Indeed, the tone is reminiscent of the one found in stanza two. There, however, the unfettered rhythm of the lines gives the tone an almost sing-song quality, that accentuates the imaginistic quality of the words while undercutting, to a degree, the import of the meaning generated. In stanza five, the purposeful, steady tone of the speaking subject, the fluidity of the tone, propels the reader forward while the numerous commas and highly imagistic diction compels the reader to dwell on the content and slow down. This stylistic technique provides a complexity to the structure of the stanza reflective of the content's meaning. The fluidity enables the speaker to explain and clarify "light," while paradoxically the reader experiences a buildup, an accumulation of material that obfuscates any clear or particular meaning. The juxtaposition of the disjunctive syntax and overdetermined diction with the unitive voice provides the stanza with a dream-like, meditative quality.

The "light" of stanza five is an external light that "encrusts" the narrator just as the wind "encircles" him in the previous stanza. And just as the wind has access to the speech of the narrator (suggesting an access to the internal operations of the narrator), the light of stanza five permeates and confuses the boundaries between the external and internal by simultaneously encrusting the narrator while "making visible" the internal motions of his mind. This blurring of the boundaries limits and complicates the possibilities of meaning much the same way the Lacanian Bar of the signifying algorithm, S/s, separates and confuses the possibilities for meaning of any word.

The fundamental structure of language is reflected in this distinction between the signifier and the signified. Lacan's view of language differs from the structuralist camp of Saussure in that Lacan posits language as self-referential where signification never involves a pure indication of the real, but always refers back to another signification (Ecrits, 126). The implications of this concept are explored in Lacan's famous example of two identical doors whose only difference is that one is marked "Ladies" and the other "Gentlemen." The one door is what it is only in relation to the other door, and the signifier "Ladies" is meaningful only in relation to the wide variety of discourses in which such doors appear or are discussed. "Among other things, Lacan uses this example to stress the fact that the signifier not only can be found in the signified but is responsible for the signified's being what it is" (Lee, 55). The signifier is made up of "differential elements" and is part of a "closed order" or "signifying chain."

The structure of language is defined by the processes involved in the algorithm S/s. The essential character of the signifier is that "it is constituted as a signifying chain"

(Lee, 55). Lacan argues that there are two basic laws that govern the flow of the signifying chain, and that these laws can be reduced to the governing processes involved in the figures of speech, metonymy and metaphor (Lee, 55). Metonymy involves a combination of signifiers that is grounded in "a word to word connection" between signifiers. Metaphor involves the substitution of "one word for another." The power of metaphor resides in its ability to make present the absent or "occulted signifier." There can be no signification except through metaphor, which by its definition will always prevent a "true" signification (Lee, 55-56).

For Lacan, the bar of the signifying algorithm does not suggest a sovereignty of the signifier over the signified. It demonstrates, instead that they are discontinuous with one another. But because of metaphor there is a muddling or confusion that occurs between the registers. This confusing of the two registers Lacan exemplifies in his demonstration of the Mobius Band. This band may be considered to be comprised of either one or two sides where the outside becomes the inside and vice versa as one traces a line down its center. In this way, the bar acts to keep the registers separate and discontinuous while simultaneously confusing the two registers by acting also as a corridor between them (Rapaport, 59-60).

The bar separating the signifier from the signified also acts, for Lacan, as the "'place' in which the subject comes to appear as an 'effect'" of his own speech (Rapaport, 60). The speaking subject loses any claim of sovereignty over the signifier, while at the same time, finds himself in the "non-place" occupied by the bar. The subject is now a

signifier that first emerges in the place of the Other (FC, 198). The subject, then, is split in more ways than one, which can always be seen or referred to as a dialectic.

The unitive tone and disjunctive syntax of stanza five also reasserts the Lacanian subject as a place of tension and conflict between the moi (imaginary identification) and the je (symbolic narrative) (Lee, 47). The unitive tone reflects an effect of the moi, since the desire of the moi is for constancy and wholeness. The entire structure of the moi, however, is based on a fiction, but not one to be dismissed as "the narcissistic and aggressive structure of the moi pushes it to obliterate differences" (Sullivan, 59). The je on the other hand, is "the subject of language and meaning" which functions to temper the moi's "intentions by rules and cultural conventions" (Sullivan, 59). If the subject indeed occupies a place or "non-place," can we locate it within the stanza?

Stevens actually locates the subject, metaphorically, in the third line of the stanza between "nothings" and "desire," (right where Lacan has always said we'd find him.) The subject takes on the position occupied by the simile "as." The subject as "as," as a simile works rather well. Stevens locates the subject between the nothingness of who the subject really is, and the desires which exist as a result of the subject's denial of this reality. When the narrator speaks of the day as "the immensely flashing East" he attempts through metaphor to deny the nothingness that he is. Conversely, when his desire for "rest" accrues into "silence" which spreads and culminates in "sleep," his use of metonymy reveals the extent of his Spaltung of split.

The speaking subject's desire for harmony, unity, and clarity suggested by the unitive tone of stanza five also reveals the endless chain of signifiers, the metonymy of

desire, that propels him to speak in search of the lost object that will fill his lack. The stylistic disruptions, whose effects the speaker is fully aware of, manifest the impossibility of the subject's desires. The very goal of the discourse of desire then is revealed as dialectical and structured so as to not "satisfy Desire, but to make oneself 'seen' or to pass on a 'message'" (Sullivan, 82). We pass on the "message" to the place of the Other in our unconscious, the locus of language. Desire, then, testifies to a fundamental lack in the subject, an anxiety or metonymy which does not point to wholeness, but to the subject's inherent incompleteness (Sullivan, 82).

According to the narrator, the "light" in stanza five not only allows us to perceive our inner most sensibilities but it "gives form" to these sensibilities. The world is posited as a reflection for our inner selves. One's desire for day, then, is realized in the rising sun. According to Lacan, metaphors, such as "the immensely flashing East," and "the descending sea of dark" are mere substitutions for a lost object repressed in the subject's unconscious. Lacan calls these substitutions, these part-objects, 'objet petite a', or just 'objet a.' The 'objet a' acts as a substitute even though the subject never thinks of it as a substitute. It exists only as a symptom of the barred subject's initial loss and essential sense of lack. In the subject's continuous quest to satisfy his desire he comes under the illusion (hallucination) of there being a real object that will satisfy his desire. The 'objet a,' then, only exists as a projection of a desire that acts as a "message" both to and from the Other in the unconscious.

Lacan says that the speaking subject is constituted, among many things, as "an effect of language." And the more he speaks the greater the potential for him to come to

realize the extent of his Spaltung, of his own alienation and aphanisis. Lacan argues that "when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested somewhere else as 'fading' as disappearance"(FC, 218). The stanza ends on the word "sleep" which seems appropriate to the state of the speaker at the end of the stanza. The speaker has transversed from nothingness to metaphor and metonymy and back again to nothingness. The stanza ends with a period, suggesting closure, while the last stanza begins with an ellipsis suggesting many things.

The ellipsis usually implies the passage of time or an omission of words. As the previous stanza ended on such a soft note one could surmise the speaker to have continued indefinitely in a meditative state, or to have gone to sleep. But the narrator still feels compelled to speak. The "wholeness" of thought and action, the clarity and confidence of voice couldn't fulfill the speaker's desire, and therefore render him speechless. But, as the split subject is conscious of his own rupture, his desire for the phallus, which he knows is a fraud, and the impossibility of ever being "whole," it is this knowledge that the ellipsis most adamantly addresses. For the ellipsis is also a symbol of repression, that is, that within it lies the unspoken as well as the unspeakable.

The ellipsis demonstratively suggests a change. Words have been omitted, time has passed, everything has in some way been effected by the progression of the poem. In the final stanza, he is the amalgamation of the voices and tones expressed in the previous stanzas. He is a "barred subject" who "imagines himself to be a man merely by virtue of the fact that he imagines himself" (FC, 141). This is part of the process of the difficulty of signification when the subject is a signifier that does not signify any

signified, but simply another signifier. The subject as "barred" or "split subject" enters the "dialectic of the subject" where the "uniary signifier emerges in the field of the Other and represents the subject for another signifier, which other signifier has as its effect the aphanisis of the subject" (FC, 218).

The voice and tone of the final stanza appears hushed, tentative, solemn, though not necessarily afraid or defeated. The speaker's vernacular is as imaginative as ever, and on the surface even a touch more obscure than usual.

...Evening, when the measure skips a beat
And then another, one by one, and all
To a seething minor swiftly modulate."

In the fourth stanza, the speaker was a man of the sun and of the day. Now it is evening. (We've gone backwards in terms of the title, in that Stevens began the poem talking about angels and is ending it in the evening. The content is presented as working against the title.) So the constant "measure" of day skips into evening and progresses "swiftly" to a "minor" measure. An accord of repetitions denotes a consistency where what is repeated is the "sounds of air" the speech of wind. Then this speech shifts from the major scale of daylight to a "seething minor" scale at evening. A "seething" minor because we are "not of pointed night." But it is a swift transformation, as well as a reduction: from major to minor. The ellipsis also suggests that the speaker could not hold off the swift approach of evening with his speech.

Beats are the components of a measure, just as words are the components of speech. The process of skipping beats would eventually leave the narrator beatless. The sound of this seething minor becomes a constant modulation equating silence. The evening and modulation connote a deadening of lights and sounds:

Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare,

the subject intones.

We repeat what we do not quite understand and in doing so we avoid confronting the real. According to Lacan the real, with regard to repetition, "is that which always comes back to the same place - to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the 'res cogitans', does not meet it" (FC 49). By repeating the word "bare" the speaker is able to avoid the real's manifestation just as in Lacan's rendering of Freud's "Fort - Da" story, the child covers over the trauma of separation with its mother by symbolizing her absence as presence through language.

"Bare" precedes and supersedes "best." The speaker having discovered, or desiring that the solutions to the questions of his existence reside in nature, in the "furious selves" of which he is a part and participant, now wants to rid himself of all metaphor, illusion, poesy, and get down to the very essentials of existence.

The speaker in stanza six desires the absolute purity of bareness. He is an object within language: "Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare," He drives to achieve a mental state devoid of the abstract. He wants bare "night," "earth," explicitly bare

nature. The progression of the poem has been one of simultaneously stripping away to get to the truth through speech, but because of the very nature of language (metonymy and metaphor), the speaker only gets himself caught up in his own chain of signifiers, in the accumulation of words. It becomes a process of acquisition through discarding, just as the very word "absence" as a signifier becomes or gets turned into something present or signifiable.

The line becomes heavy, weighted down by the accumulation of bareness. The implication compels the narrator to retreat from this idea:

... Bare, bare,

Except for our own houses, huddled low

The "houses" resonate metaphorically as bodies, as the head, the subject's mind. A "bare" minimalist world is "best" but we must have a mind that is not totally bare in order to apprehend and appreciate the bareness of bare.

Except for our own houses, huddled low

Beneath the arches and their spangled air,

Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire

The narrator retreats from the idea and imagery of bareness and returns to the original imagery of the trees. Unlike the first image however, "spangled air" replaces the

"seraphim" about the trees. Because of the repetition of "Beneath" we can claim the music of "the rhapsodies ..." as an appositive phrase equivalent to the "arches ..." thereby adding music to the visual. The narrator retreats from imagistic bareness and the modulation of a "minor" key.

The poet has moved rather "swiftly" from this bareness, from this rejection of the human imagination to a full-blown enactment of imaginative articulation. However, the re-presentation of the metaphorical imagery of arches (trees) and fire (music (d'orchestre)) is starker or more "natural" than what we first encountered in the original metaphors.

The activity moves or vacillates between the "rhapsodies" and images outside of the narrator and his insides where the voice "within us rises up" and "makes a true response." The "Where" that introduces these two lines remains between the nothings and desires of stanza five, in the simile "As" that begins the last line. But it does not remain there, as the subject is reinscribed in the following pronoun "we."

What the "true response" signifies is Lacan's notion of the phallus. According to Lacan, the phallus "can only play its role as veiled" (Feminine, 43). The phallus is a fraud in that it is a signifier that signifies nothing, but without which nothing is signifiable. It is the pivot around which the metonymy of desire as enacted through language revolves. The articulation of the "true response" would reveal "the phallus as a signifier that serves to constitute the unconscious as a language" and thereby dismantle one's ability to communicate, to make sense out of the symbolic world. This "voice" is an ideal of the narrator's that makes a muted, unheard response "in us," and that rises though it never surfaces.

The narrator still desires an "evening without angels," and he has one, but the absence of angels only provides space for the "something else," the absence only spurs the desire of the narrator to fill it with speech. The narrator is now beneath the "rhapsodies of fire and fire," where the perceived fullness and the imaginative powers of the mind are not viewed as the liability "bare" implied. Beneath the music and specular of the evening sky the narrator stands where "the voice that is in us makes a true response." The arrival of reality for Stevens is re-constituted as the appearance of a still desired manifestation, a response that can be noted, like a moment of the Real, but not articulated.

The narrator's "gazing at the rounded moon" is a mere substitution for a Buddha, Cross, or Sacred Mountain. And this is precisely Lacan's point. The narrator's movement to an internal meditative state, or outdoor church doesn't preclude the realm of the Other. The moon is "rounded" which reflects the sheer desire of the narrator for unity, totality, and a conclusive resolution to the questions that have been plaguing him. The rounded moon acts as a promise of fulfillment. But the gaze of the moon, ("I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (FC, 72)), and the voice are outside of the subject's control. They are part of the Real in that they cannot be symbolized. The moon can be symbolized but the lure, the effect of its position in the field and function of the gaze cannot be. The Real is Lacan's term for "the moment of impossibility onto which both (the Symbolic and Imaginary Orders) are grafted, the point of that moment's endless return" (Feminine, 31).

This instance of the Real the narrator experiences, renders him speechless. Lacan deems this accessing of the Real as a moment of recognition of one's falseness. We are subjects only because we are capable of repressing in the unconscious, the censored chapter, our nothingness.

One's experiencing of the Real is known as *jouissance*. *Jouissance* "describes what the infant loses on leaving the mirror stage and what must be sought ever after through displacements. *Jouissance* has both sexual and abstract meanings: pleasure or ecstasy, and orgasm" (Sullivan, 81). The narrator is speechless. The moon as "rounded," is such a sensuous term. The gaze of the subject is returned by the moon, in that he deems it as "rounded," and as such it restores the subject as subject through its recognition. As Lacan says, "the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (*Ecrits*, 58). There doesn't have to be any person or thing looking at the subject for the subject to experience the gaze just as the subject doesn't need someone to hear him in order to speak. The "gaze is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (*FC*, 84). The subject is not unaware of this discrepancy between the gaze as 'objet a' and in this case the impossibility of the moon "seeing" himself. But according to Lacan, no one sees me from where I see myself, "You never look at me from the place where I see you ... what I look at is never what I wish to see" (*FC*, 103). For Lacan the subject is caught up in this dialectic between the eye and the gaze which involves a lure (*FC*, 102-03). However, the subject effectively alienates himself from himself by identifying with the 'objet a' as the object that will fulfill his lack. As Sylvia Plath says, "The moon is no door" (*SP*, 173). Once again we return to the moi and the Imaginary register.

The actual act of gazing reflects the mirror stage in which the subject recognizes himself or defines himself as (not "in") the world of perception and sensation. In the mirror stage the infant recognizes himself in the "mirror," eyes, or reflection of the (m)other, but only as a false Gestalt, as an alienating image of the self the moi will always defend as real (Ecrits, 4-6). This misrecognition, or *meconnaissance*, on the part of the subject as to his own definition establishes the gap that creates desire and that is essential to his relationship to language. Desire promotes language while language acts as a veil to cover over the perceived gap revealed by desire in the subject. The "rounded moon" mimics a mirror and reveals once again to the subject the metonymic character of his desire to find that "something else" which will fill the void that defines him as a subject.

At the end the evening sky appears to be void of angels. The "rounded moon" can be viewed as a "false" mirror that provides at least a sense of unity and resolution to the speaking subject. The subject ceases to speak in many ways because in the instance of accessing a part of the Real he has been forced to recognize the nothingness upon which his subjectivity is built, and conversely, re-structure or re-figure his relationship to language, while restoring his place in language and the realm of desire by not unveiling the phallus occupying the place of the "true response." As E.R. Sullivan states in reference to the superego, "in this sense, the phallic superego saves the individual from psychosis, and society from genocide, while also imposing tyranny and alienation on being" (Sullivan, 58).

In conclusion, the desire of interpretation to find a totalizing meaning of the poem is a form of transference, where it is my desire to find meaning in the discourse of the other. By doing a close reading of the poem I am reminded of my own desires for unity, coherence, closure, even "a true response," that Stevens' poetry deflects. As Lacan states, "the desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other..." (FC, 214). In the end, the narrator is left "gazing," to stand in the twilight between the absolutes of day and night. His attempts to answer the questions raised in the first stanza have brought him full circle in that he has achieved a re-structuring of the very metaphors and elements that composed the questions. The subject remains a subject of his own desire, affirming that "the symbolic register alone cannot fully capture what it (means) to be a human subject" (Lee, 57). The poem ends with the image of a "rounded moon" which waxes or wanes even as we speak.

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