

Article

The Negative Theology of Wallace Stevens's "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"

William Franke

Department of French and Italian, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, 37235 TN, USA;
william.franke@vanderbilt.edu

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Abstract: The supreme fiction is the one that cannot be said or represented at all. Like a negative theologian, Stevens starts from a position of critical reflection that can no longer naively believe in the myths of the gods. They have become fiction rather than revelation. And yet this supreme fiction, now become nameless, nevertheless animates all his desire: "For what, except for you, do I feel love?" These myths or fictions bring him peace of mind in vivid transparence, even though he can assign them no definite reference in reality. What becomes transparent in this late age of critical reflection is that the world we see and talk about is an "invented world," the product of our own imagination and language. This destroys our naive belief in the myths projected by our language. Our gods die. Yet precisely this realization can open us to that "heaven/That has expelled us and our images," the heaven that we do not perceive and cannot conceive—since it is beyond the reach of language.

Keywords: imagination; invention; negation; Platonism; poetry; mystery

Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) staked out an original approach to questions of religion and faith by treating them within the scope of his poetic quest for some kind of knowing of the real—or perhaps rather an embrace of it in unknowing. Stevens's approach, as *sui generis* as it is, can nevertheless be illuminated by a certain paradigm that tunes in intensely to the negativity inherent in language and in thought as such. This is what I call "negative theology." It can bring heightened clarity for the general reader to the discernment of Stevens's poetry and, more specifically, can have an important bearing on the critical deciphering of his work. Stevens's epoch was marked by a loss of traditional religious belief and as the age of a profound realization of "the death of God." He reflects, and reflects on, these epochal shifts perhaps nowhere more profoundly than in his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (Stevens 1923–1990). This text can provide a particularly fruitful starting point for reading much more widely in Stevens's *oeuvre*. Its first section is a self-announced beginning from its opening verse:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

... ..

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,
Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.
There is a project for the sun. The sun

Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

(Wallace Stevens, from “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”¹)

In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” as in many other places in his poetry, Stevens interrogates language as itself made-up and as making up or re-making the whole world in its own image. Language thus fulfills its vocation as *poiesis* in the original Greek sense of the word. A vision of the real as linguistic through to its core may have seemed inescapable for Stevens, as for many of his contemporaries in the wake of the “linguistic turn” at the beginning of the twentieth century signaled by the philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger and by the linguistics of Wilhelm Humboldt and Ferdinand de Saussure. Nevertheless, a crucial question lurking in the background that rises irrepressibly with this pan-linguistic vision of reality is: What lies beyond it—beyond language and the world that it makes? Where do *they* come from? What is the source of poetic invention, if *poiesis* is itself the source of everything that is articulated?

Such questions have been dwelt upon with great concentration and speculative acumen throughout the Western traditions of negative theology that have recently emerged as a distinct field of academic inquiry.² It is as a contribution to this field extended specifically into the literary arena that the present essay proposes to read Stevens’s “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Stevens’s poem, in effect, retraces certain essential movements of thought leading to and even constituting negative or “apophatic” theology. These movements, carried out with breathtaking poetic economy and lucidness in his poem, leave some strikingly original configurations on this terrain. It is difficult to describe and define the actual workings of negative theology, since it defies discursive handling, but Stevens’s poetry embodies it in some eminently revealing forms.

Leaving aside certain peripheries and framings that introduce the poem as a whole, we can begin where the poem itself instructs us to begin:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

We make our beginning along the path of negative theology by perceiving the inventedness of all our names, that is, of all our concepts and of the language they require in order to be expressed. We have no word that can give us reality itself, least of all the reality of God as God-self rather than as constructed by our conceptions and inventions. The actual source of reality—in good Platonic tradition figured as the “sun”—is inconceivable, for all conceptions are derivative fabrications and not identical with this source. We can at best have an idea of “the inconceivable” and can perceive even this idea in its inventedness. But to see the inventedness of this idea is not to know where it comes from: such seeing is to see it rather “with an ignorant eye.” To assume that our insight into its being made up by us answers the question of where it came from—or accounts for it in rational and causal terms—is to miss the mystery of its being gratuitously given in its inventedness. As the poem enjoins, “Never suppose an inventing mind as source/Of this idea . . . ” To “see it clearly in the idea of it” is to see that what we see is only an idea and thereby to open an abyss behind what we see, the abyss of its being, which we cannot perceive. This abyss is what it is beyond our idea of it, and this source or deeper “being” is what to us is inconceivable.

¹ In what follows, citations are from (Stevens 1923–1990), “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” sub-sections I–IV of “It Must Be Abstract.”

² A survey and detailed interpretation of these traditions is available in (Franke 2007). Classic Formulations (1); Modern and Contemporary Transformations (2).

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images...

The opening verses of section I, quoted at the beginning of this essay, instruct us to begin by perceiving the idea that this world is “invented.” To perceive not simply the world but the *idea* of the world is to perceive “the world” as invented. Yet this idea itself is not invented but “perceived.” It is the starting-point, the given, from which reflection can “begin.” It is something that the speaker discovers and directs his addressee, “ephebe,” to observe. It is the source and ground of all that we invent, as well as of the world—metaphorically, the sun. But this source is in itself “inconceivable.” To see the sun “in the idea of it” is to see that it cannot be named or conceived as it is in itself, for any such naming or conceiving can be but the invented idea in which we see it.

The idea of the sun is interpretable as its *form*, $\tau\alpha\ \iota\delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \alpha$ in Greek—a sub-textual language present already by implication in the address to “ephebe” (from $\epsilon\phi\eta\beta\omicron\sigma$, an adolescent male pupil). This form of being might be intellectual, as in Platonic ideas, but it might also be sensual, phenomenal form. In either case, in this particular vocabulary of thought, form is a qualification and delimitation of being. Being can be perceived only thanks to its form. Its form is what makes something individual and distinct so that it can be perceived. Yet that is not all that it is. When this perception is understood to be invented, to be *only* a perception, then what is perceived can be understood as having an even deeper reality and a more remote source. This source is itself imperceptible, even inconceivable, but as source it can be represented metaphorically as “the sun.” For the sun is the source of the phenomenal world, the engenderer of its light and energy.³

To be aware that one is perceiving form (and thus something relative to the perceiver’s own faculties and their receptivity) and not directly the depth of being as such enables one to become ignorant of being itself. Without “us and our images,” pure form or the “idea” is left, yet not as being itself but rather only as “invented.” Inventedness by Nothing and No One that can be conceived—symbolically, the sun—becomes apparent in the sun seen purely in its idea. All gods are then dead, and supposed substances are exposed as merely constructions, but the very inventedness of all that is thereby exposed evokes what is *not* invented, what is not just form or idea. This *other* with respect to all the forms and identities of the world, its source, which is unidentifiable and inconceivable, is nevertheless figured as the sun, although this is in effect to think in mythical terms equivalent to using names of the gods: “But Phoebus was/A name for something that never could be named.” The sun (in classical mythological “Phoebus Apollo”) stands for a difficulty that remains even after the pure, phenomenological form has been cleansed and freed from all metaphysical impositions. This is “the difficulty of what it is to be.”

Perceiving form as form without attributing a grounding in being to it, perceiving it as pure invention (by no one) leaves being without any determinate form. It is, then, what Stevens elsewhere calls “mere being,” and as such it is “inconceivable.” The inconceivable source of being, nonetheless, can be metaphorically represented, as we have seen, following Plato, for example, as the sun. To this

³ The paramount importance of the metaphor of the sun to the whole metaphysical foundation of Western culture is evidenced by (Derrida 1972). The essay is available in (Derrida and Moore 1974).

extent, it too becomes an idea, albeit an idea or metaphorical form for what is inconceivable because it is in itself without form.

We begin by perceiving the inventedness of all our names in order to see if there is anything that is not invented. Would this origin, which is more original than anything that we can name, be itself a Name? What it may *be* is in any case beyond us, but since our only possible access even to imagining it is through our names for it and the perception of their inventedness, inevitably it cannot but be *for us* a name. And yet in itself it is what stands behind all our naming, even without itself being able to be named. Similarly, we cannot but conceive as an idea the inconceivable something/nothing from which all the ideas that make up the world spring. We conceive of it, for lack of anything other than ideas, as a “first idea.”

There is, in Stevens’s conception, a first idea, a truth uncontaminated by truth and our ideas, a hermetic silence in our metaphors. Stevens’s way of evoking this otherness is to say that “The first idea was not our own.”

IV

The first idea was not our own. Adam
In Eden was the father of Descartes

...

But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
In imitation. The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.

Self-certainty of consciousness (Descartes) is derivative from creaturely being (“Adam”), which must first be created before it can become conscious of itself. Made from mud rather than from pure ideation of himself, Adam is not his own maker.⁴ All his ideas notwithstanding, the first idea is not his own. His ideas of the clouds are imitations and not the clouds themselves: he did not create them. “The clouds preceded us.” There is an anteriority to all our fabrications, and it is first recognized by our fabrications being exposed *as* fabrications. By highlighting precisely what they are, namely, their being as fabricated, something that is not fabricated becomes conceivable as their negation and must even be presupposed, since fabricated realities alone can never be self-sustaining. Where does the fabricating itself take place and come from? Whatever we say and think is always already only a fabricated product and thus unable to answer to this question of ultimate origins, which lies out of its range.

The recognition of everything that we are conscious of or come into contact with as our own artifice enables us to dispel the illusion of positive realities immediately present in objective form around us. The positivist bubble is burst. But it also opens the question of what, if anything, there is that is not made up by us. Where does all our making come from, or on what does it rest? Any answer to this question will be a fabrication, yet neither can we seal up this idea and image factory of ours, and say that it has no further dependency, and is itself the Creator of all. The question evoked by the “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is at bottom the same as that of negative theology: What is there before we start to say what there is, or even to think it (since thinking, as Plato suggests, may already be itself a form of saying or of articulating being to oneself)? What precedes all our saying?

This is a question that subtends Stevens’s poetic work as a whole. It is approached another way in his poem “Of Mere Being.” This is the poem that gives us the image of “the palm at the end of the

⁴ For Dante, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (I, iv), Adam’s first thought and word are the Name of God (“El”). It is by not turning to himself like Narcissus and the fallen angels (and Descartes) but rather by opening in joy to his Creator, who is pure joy (*gaudium*), that Adam manifests the life and being that have been granted him, and thereby honors his Maker.

mind” that stands as the general title for Stevens’s selected poems and closes the volume. In this poem, Stevens expresses his strong sense of the “Mere Being” that is beyond all our reasons and yet lies at the bottom of our happiness or unhappiness.

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze decor,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song,

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird’s fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

(“Of Mere Being”)

Especially through the reference to something beyond human meaning and feeling, we are pointed by way of negation to what is beyond our ability to think it, “beyond the last thought” of the mind. We are led down the path of the *via negativa* by means of exquisitely exotic, albeit still natural imagery. These brief verses vividly describe the predicament of negative theology as I understand it.⁵ Stevens hits on several of the fundamental orientations of an apophatic philosophy and gives them lapidary expression in poetic images. The strangeness, the incommensurability of an Other to language, or a beyond of language, cannot be figured except in terms of language. Yet such terms can nevertheless abstractly conceive of an alternative to language and can concretely imagine a kind of heightened language, namely, “song,” in fact a “foreign song” by an exotic “fire-fangled” bird. At the end of the mind and almost beyond the reach of consciousness, then, is the something/nothing at which poetic thinking aims—“beyond the last thought.”

This last thought—just like the “first idea” in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”—is also beyond the human. The wind moving in the branches intimates some more mysterious animations of a higher power swaying over our happiness or unhappiness with its influence. The dangling down from above of the bird’s exotic feathers likewise hints at a higher source of our fascination. The image of the palm at the end of the mind suggests how the hand that writes receives something mental or spiritual as the result of thinking that it then magically converts into another medium, a tangible, graspable, sensuous form. However, the poem’s emphasis on estrangement and foreignness suggests that underlying this conversion, more than a making and shaping (as in the great shaping power of imagination exalted by Romantics) there may be an unmaking or a “decreating.”

Borrowing a term from Simone Weil, Stevens wrote in an important critical essay that “Modern reality is a reality of *decreation*, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief but the precious portents of our own powers.” (Stevens [1951] 1965). That the immense sense of mystery expressed by poetry should all be of purely human making he pondered again, for example, in “The Idea of Order at Key West”: “For she was the maker of the song she sang,” and we

Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

⁵ I have sketched my own quasi-canon of negative theological thinkers and artists and poets in (Franke 2007). I was not able to include Wallace Stevens, but the present essay serves as a kind of supplement making up for that omission.

Though Stevens places himself in an age *after* belief in religion, nevertheless a tension of belief haunts his verses, for precisely when all formulated beliefs are dismantled and exposed as our own constructions, a yet deeper mystery is touched, one that cannot be named at all but, nevertheless, remains still intact. It can be experienced as religious mystery, and it may even have prevailed over Stevens's on his deathbed so as to induce him to convert to Roman Catholicism.⁶ In any case, his poetry served him as a means of developing in the shadow of this mystery a poetic sort of mystical theology (Morris 1974).

Stevens is one of myriads of modern poets who have been acutely reflective about the linguistic medium of their art.⁷ Such poets have found and expressed the nothingness of language as a mere medium of representation, as empty of reality, at the very center of its expressive possibilities and creative power. The opening stanzas of the first section of Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" are exceptional, nevertheless, for their lucid penetration of the philosophical imponderables of the whole question of the unsayable made miraculously accessible in the language of poetry. The poem has been analyzed as embodying Stevens's skepticism towards language and as a sort of proposal for the deconstruction of language.⁸ But it is specifically the project of apophasis that brings the theoretical considerations adumbrated at its outset into perfectly sharp focus.

The supreme fiction is the one that cannot be said or represented at all. Like a negative theologian, Stevens starts from a position of critical reflection that can no longer naively believe in the myths of the gods. They have become fiction rather than authoritative religious revelation. And yet this supreme fiction, which has now become nameless, nevertheless animates all his desires: "For what, except for you, do I feel love?" in the words of the opening dedicatory verse of the poem. The myths or fictions of poetry bring him peace in vivid transparency. They are like shiny wings that sing (again in the "bright, green wings" of "Sunday Morning"), even though he can assign them no definite reference in reality. Most important is what such images do not communicate or encompass, the real beyond our imaginings, for that alone can continue to nourish the imagination (Stevens 1941).

What becomes transparent in this late age of critical reflection is that the world we see and talk about is an "invented world," the product of our own imagination and language. This realization destroys our naive belief in the myths projected by our language. Our gods die. Yet precisely this realization can open us to that "heaven/That has expelled us and our images," the heaven that we do not perceive and cannot conceive—since it is beyond the reach of language. It is the "first idea," covered over by the elaborations of language, the poisonous "ravishments of truth so fatal to/The truth itself . . . ," but still secretly dwelling there in language, in what it leaves unsaid, like "The hermit in a poet's metaphors" ("Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," section II). Thus we are sent back from the "celestial ennui of our apartments," where we dwell out of touch with the earth because of the idealizations of our language to "the first idea, the quick/of this invention" (ibid.). This inventing that produces false images is itself truly our life beyond us, beyond all that we can name and say.

Stevens uses mythic names like "Phoebus" (that is, Apollo, the god of poetic invention) for the sun, noting that this god like all gods is dead, except for the fact that "Phoebus was/A name for something that never could be named." Like the God of negative theology, this "something" or nothing must "bear no name" but simply be "in the difficulty of what it is to be." As the Unnameable, this vital force symbolized in the sensible world by the sun seems to be as alive and compelling as ever. The learner, the aspiring poet or "ephebe," fills the empty place left by the dead god, his namesake, with a living incarnation that animates this name with the infinity and unnameability of its own life, which is open and desiring and undelimited.

The fact that the "first idea," the originary creative act of ideation itself, is not grounded in anything we can name or define makes it apt to engender belief in mythic origins. In modern times,

⁶ (Cirurgião 2000). This story is controversial, but not implausible.

⁷ I find particularly instructive here the work of (Brogan 1986) and (Brogan 2003).

⁸ See, for example, (Byers 1989). See, further, (Riddel 1972) and, more generally, (Bové 1980).

these mythic origins are likely to be imagined anthropologically rather than theologically. There is no other agent than man mentioned in Stevens's statement that "The first idea was not our own. Adam/In Eden was the father of Descartes . . ." But these words also suggest that our createdness, our simply being here, precedes self-reflection, the "I think" that rationally infers and posits that "I am." Again, "The clouds preceded us": indeed, they are our "pedagogues." Their amorphousness precedes and informs and instructs whatever we might say about whatever precedes our saying. In relation to this inconceivable origin, all our language is fiction or myth, but this very power of inventing alludes to what was before myth and articulation began. It is in this sense that "There was a myth before the myth began."

Curiously, what cloudily precedes us is inevitably construed by us in transparently linguistic terms anyway—and therefore as myth. Since it cannot be called anything properly, this antecedence to all that our language can grasp—and in relation to which our language is utterly disqualified—cannot but be represented as metaphor or as myth. Such myth, as myth, can even be said to be complete, indeed "Venerable and articulate and complete," since there is nothing, or at least no *thing*, outside it to which it could be compared and found to be lacking. At this level, it is no longer any given content of images but the very faculty of inventing itself that counts as being beyond fathoming. As such, the "source" is not fixed but is cloudy and inexhaustible and unsurpassable.

And yet (to dwell a little longer on section IV of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"), this mythic making is also in some sense a falsification of the true source that remains beyond our reach, since the poem springs from a place

That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves,
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

Even the world, as source of images, is not within reach of our ideas. Although Eve "made air the mirror of herself" and of her sons and daughters so that

They found themselves
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth. . . ,

In reality the world is not our reflected image but abides stubbornly opaque to us. The world is but a backdrop that remains in itself an indifferent sounding board for all the theatrical tragedies that we constantly invent and play out. As such, it is merely susceptible of sustaining or supporting our antics, like a stage, but not of being revealed in itself by the diverse and changing colorations with which we endue it:

The air is not a mirror but bare board,
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

This transmogrification or masking of the real by our making of meaning is comic as well as tragic. It lends to things tones as well as colors that are reflective simply of our dramatic delusions. The evocation of "tragic chiaroscuro" is immediately followed up by other, comedic nuances, including even trivial "pips," that likewise interpret, with a touch of irony, the abyss of emptiness lying behind all our articulations—or rather inhering in our very linguistic means and "instruments":

And comic color of the rose, in which
Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them.

Stevens's entitling of his poetic masterpiece "Notes" already makes clear its intention to back off from any powerful claims to being a definitive statement that would somehow capture the presence and plenitude of the real. The piece under discussion, while imagining the inconceivable source of all imagining as itself perfect and complete, is deliberately fragmentary and unfinished, merely preliminary, or else residual—and it is reflective even before it is creative. The opening section

entitled “It Must Be Abstract” suggests a speculative and Platonic mode that rhymes well with negative theology as a reflection upon religious revelation contemplated from a critical distance. This is reflection after it has become critically conscious of its own ineluctably mythical status and language. Indeed, “abstraction” (“aphairesis”) is a traditional technical term for the *via negativa*.⁹ Stevens offers a powerful testimony to how negative theological insight can be reached through stubbornly secular poetic probing into the condition and limits of language.¹⁰

As its emblem, crystalizing the fact that what we can never say is, nevertheless, what is most “there” in front of us and in being, Stevens left the exquisite image of “The Snow Man.” This image figures one who superimposes no pathetic thoughts of his own on the bleak winter scene that he partakes of and so does not “think/Of any misery in the sound of the wind” but simply

... listens in the snow
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Paradoxically, this envisioning of Nothing restitutes reality, the reality of things, which after the nihilism into which Romanticism had driven poetry later in the nineteenth century, again becomes believable. No longer reduced to a mere subjective projection by the unlimited will to power of the human subject, the real recovers its own mysterious life, and the subject once again enters “barefoot into reality” (Stevens, “Large Red Man Reading”). The reality reentered is not simply the “new immediacy,” “a presence within things and not beyond them,” the “immanence” without depth that is described by J. Hillis Miller in his historical-critical outline of “the poetry of reality.”¹¹ After the death of God, or more exactly of every possible mythical conception of God, the life of the real returns, welling up from a dimension of depth that can be sounded best (and perhaps only) by negative theology and poetics.

Stevens often elsewhere refers to this dark metaphysical dimension that is everywhere and nowhere present as “being.” He does so expressly, for instance, in “Metaphor as Degeneration”:

The swarthy water
That flows round the earth and through the skies,
Twisting among the universal spaces,
Is not Swatara. It is being.

The point here about the “river” pivots more on what is *not* its name than on what it really is. Not “Swatara.” “Being” says nothing in particular—and so stands for saying nothing. Nonetheless, it serves to evoke the (for us) inevitably mythic dimension of the universe that encompasses in its entirety the real such as we can (hardly help but) imagine it. This Supreme Fiction of reality, paradoxically, is a means of access to what we cannot properly know but must imagine as the source of all, including imagining itself.

These operations of negation in Stevens’s poetry illustrate ways in which language, by negating itself, opens a much vaster and more imponderable realm beyond the range of what it is able to define and describe. Stevens’s poems do this in self-reflective ways that call to be analyzed theoretically in terms of negative theology. In mobilizing this type of critical and yet incorrigibly believing thinking, they also model and enact Stevens’s ambiguous and finally undecidable relation with religion.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

⁹ (Ragg 2010) along with (Altieri 1989) explore the very rich connotations and backgrounds of “abstraction” in Stevens’s vocabulary. They seem, however, generally to overlook the pertinence of this background in Platonist negative theology.

¹⁰ For an extensive, richly contextualized treatment of this theme, see (Eckhout 2002). The topic is adroitly addressed also by (Maller 2014) which is in process of conversion to a book entitled *Beyond the Limits of Thought: Stevens’ Modernist Silences*.

¹¹ (Miller 1965). “There can be for many writers no return to the traditional conception of God as the highest existence, creator of all other existences, transcending his creation as well as dwelling within it. If there is to be a God in the new world it must be a presence within things and not beyond them” (10).

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