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Beyond the Genius of the Sea:

An Ecocritical Analysis of Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium*

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Abstract

Existing ecocriticism focuses largely on the role of physical reality in literature, emphasising the accuracy at which existing environmental crises are portrayed in literary works. The poetry of Wallace Stevens, however, reveals how an appeal to and development of the *imagination* is valuable in shaping new ecocritical thinking and in contributing to the understanding of our relationship between the human and the non-human. Existing ecocritical scholarship has either disregarded the ecocritical value of Stevens or located his ecological engagement in the formal aspects of his poetry. Neglected in these examinations is the pivotal role of the imagination in shaping Stevens' poetics and the ecocritical potential of his imaginative effort. In this thesis, I argue that Stevens' poetry complicates clear distinctions between reality and the imagination and at the centre of his treatment of these concepts is the relationship of the individual, through the imagination, with the natural world.

This thesis examines Stevens' first and intimately revealing collection of poetry *Harmonium* on the basis of close readings, which are compared and contrasted to Stevens' essays and letters on poetry, as well as existing ecocritical and ecopoetic scholarship. The results of these examinations show how Stevens' imagination shapes the natural world of *Harmonium* into a state of continuous movement and metamorphosis, which ultimately comes to resemble the processes of the human mind, revealing an interdependence between the human and the non-human at the heart of Stevens' ecological engagement. Finally, the ecocritical value of Stevens' imagination is determined in regard to existing ecocritical discourse. Stevens' imagination ultimately reveals an interrelationship between the processes of the mind and the drift of the natural world, invaluable in establishing new ways of thinking about the environment and in imagining new ways of relating sustainably to our immediate surroundings.

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Introduction

In 2019, the *New Yorker* published an article titled "What if We Stopped Pretending" by the North American novelist Jonathan Franzen. In it, Franzen asserts that the fight against climate change is already lost, an argument he summarises succinctly in the subtitle: "The climate apocalypse is coming. To prepare for it, we need to admit that we can't prevent it". Seemingly dystopian predictions of environmental catastrophes such as "massive crop failures", "epic flooding" and "imploding economies" are fulfilling themselves at an alarming rate. Franzen surmises that "despite earnest efforts we've made essentially no progress" in preventing further disasters. To believe that climate change remains preventable, therefore, is an "unrealistic hope". Instead, he proposes a new way of thinking about climate change: "to rethink what it means to have hope". Despite certain, widespread catastrophe, he suggests that accepting this inevitability might open up potential for new meaningful ways of relating to the environment. Franzen refers to world-improving action in the broadest sense but emphasises most firmly the potential "to fight smaller, more local battles that you have some realistic hope of winning".

Although the article was met with considerable controversy due to supposed scientific misinterpretations and incorrect psychological assumptions (Samuel), Franzen's bleak conclusion on the fight against climate change exposes an often neglected aspect of environmental discussion, which is nevertheless at the root of any ecological issue: The way in which we *think* about climate change and, in the broadest sense, our relationship with nature. The focus in ecological discussion, therefore, lies in asserting the realness and urgency of the global ecological crisis and frequently overlooks the way in which meaningful action might occur on the minutest and most personal level: the individual mindset. In this sense, the relationship between the individual and his immediate surroundings could be seen as the centre of any environmental concern. So, whether or not Franzen is right and the fight

against climate change is indeed lost, new ways of *thinking* about the environment may contribute to the development of a meaningful relationship between man and his surroundings amongst increasing natural disasters.

In rethinking our relationship with the natural world, we must *reimagine* the relationship between nature and culture, and between the human and the non-human. How then are such matters best approached? Although Franzen, who is himself a novelist, does not quite take his article to such extents, one could imagine that the speculative and persuasive possibilities of fiction might be useful in this regard. It may be through literature, that new modes of thinking about ecological issues can be radically and effectively revealed and informed. In assigning to literature such sociological qualities, Richard Hoggart claims: “somehow the literary imagination can, by exploring a society in its own way, tell us something new about aspects of that society, provide illuminating hypotheses about it, suggest orders within it that are exceptionally revealing”.

Despite having been referred to as being “anything but ecologically oriented” (Knickerbocker 19), the poetry of Wallace Stevens is deeply concerned with modes of thought, or, to adopt his own language, with the relationship between ‘reality’ and the ‘imagination’. According to the broadest, and most widely held opinion amongst Stevens scholarship, it is exactly the abstractly philosophical aspect that most distinguishes Stevens as a pivotally influential modernist poet. Among the most prominent of Stevens’ scholars is Helen Vendler, whose examination of “Stevensian” modes of thought in studies such as *Wallace Stevens: Hypotheses and Contradictions* symptomatically exemplifies the focus on reflective aspects of his poetics. Clearly, Stevens is a poet intimately involved with the abstract and imaginative qualities of poetry and its relation to reality, evident already from his own statements on poetry as an independent form of art. In a lecture given in 1942 at Princeton, Stevens speaks of “the pressure of reality” and describes its influence on the

imagination: “By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (Stevens 20). If the most meaningful aspect of Franzen’s article is the argument for a shift in our thinking about the environment, from a focus on the global nature of the crisis to a more personal and local one, then Stevens too seems to be aware of the danger of external events, which might well include natural disasters, on restricting the potential of individual reflection.

Popular discourse on ecological issues, as described by Franzen, focuses almost solely on the realness of the crisis and on projecting potential future disasters with an ever-increasing frequency. Although with an entirely different set of reference, Stevens parallels Franzen when he says:

> And for more than ten years, the consciousness of the world has concentrated on events which have made the ordinary movement of life seem to be the movement of people in the intervals of a storm. The disclosures of the impermanence of the past suggested, and suggest, an impermanence of the future. (20-21)

The ordinary movement of life as occurring in the intervals of a storm does indeed sound prophetic for the abounding floods, wildfires and other catastrophes, in between which ordinary life commences seemingly indifferent. Stevens’ attention, however, lies not on the physical impact of a modernising world, but rather on the influence of external events on the inner mind’s workings, or, of reality on the imagination. In his lecture, he asks what the role of the poet is within these developments and concludes: “I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfils himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others.” (29). Importantly, therefore, Stevens appeals to poetry in developing the imagination and in doing so to “help people live their lives” (29).

This thesis aims to bring such thinking that informed the poetry of Stevens to what is commonly understood as the greatest challenge to how we can "live our lives" in the twenty-first century. I want to establish how it is valuable to look at the role of the imagination in Stevens' poetry and its potential in shaping new ecological thinking. In doing so, I expand upon concepts and methodologies adopted from 'ecocriticism', which according to Timothy Clark's introduction to *The Value of Ecocriticism*, "asks fundamental questions about the nature and causes of environmental crises, the ways they are represented in language and culture, or contested or interpreted in literature, in art or daily discourse" (5).

Early ecocriticism was informed greatly by Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth, William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley and "their vision of a lost state of psychic balance" between man and the natural world (Goodbody 63). The concepts set by these authors, over a century earlier, formed a guide and example for the cultural discourse around environmental issues of the early 1990s, when ecocriticism first arose as a self-conscious movement (62). However, ecocritical scholarship soon departed from and expanded on these Romantic notions, which were thought to be restrictive to its intellectual scope (64). The lost state between man and nature in Romanticism, caused by the radically industrialised society of the 1800s, spawned anthropocentric and individualist texts which implied too simple an opposition between the mechanical and the natural as to address the increasingly complex relationship between the human and the environment in the twentieth century. As among the most influential philosophies upon which ecocriticism expanded, Axel Goodbody identifies that of Martin Heidegger and 'Heideggerian ecophilosphy' (65). Heidegger explored the way in which human consciousness acts as a place in which material things 'disclose' themselves, or, "reveal their thingness" (65). To this process, Heidegger assigns to human consciousness a responsibility "to let things disclose themselves in their own way, rather than forcing them into meanings and identities" (65). Apart from the central

role of poetry that Heidegger assigns to this process, this philosophy is of special importance to ecocritical thinking and this thesis in particular, as he associates this 'mode of being', signified as 'dwelling', with *saving* the earth.

Jonathan Bate, who alongside Lawrence Buell, significantly shaped contemporary ecocriticism in literary studies, draws on Heidegger's thinking in his influential work *Song of the Earth*. In the final note of his exploration of the relationship between man, nature and literature, he distinctly echoes Heidegger: "If mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth" (283). In other words, poetry not only possesses the quality of being able to expose ecological issues but also to affect real-world change. This emphasis on the performative agency of poetry within ecocriticism can be traced back to ecocriticism's origins, when it emerged first as a contentious response to poststructuralism, which focuses primarily on the textuality of its subject. Or, as Scott Knickerbocker summarises: "if poststructuralists are on the side of language, then ecocritics have largely been on the side of physical reality" (3).

If ecocriticism is on the side of physical reality, it is no surprise that the poetry of Stevens has been deemed largely unsuitable to ecocritical analyses: "to abbreviate an old argument: for Vendler and others, Stevens's 'imagination' takes precedence over 'reality'" (Knickerbocker 19). In this respect, Scott Knickerbocker's book *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* is of especial importance to this thesis. For one, his scholarship outlines a framework of 'ecopoetics', a term whose coinage is most commonly attributed to Jonathan Skinner. In defining ecopoetics, Skinner provides a wide set of possible denotations and applications, but the underlying sense of the word is perhaps most succinctly summarised as being "that aspect of poetics concerned with the extinction event that human success represents" (111), thus positing an antagonist relationship between humans and nature. In Knickerbocker's work, however, he draws most strongly from Clark's

interpretation, in which he defines ecopoetics as a genre of poetry rooted in the understanding that "environmental concerns have become both increasingly unavoidable for poetry, and implicated in profound questions as to what poetry is or can be" (57).

The significant role of Knickerbocker's reading of ecopoetics within this paper is due to his application of the term to the poetry of Stevens. This thesis will expand upon the details of his application more elaborately in the following chapters, but at the centre is his claim that the *language* of Stevens, most notably metaphor and sound, contain the most revealing ecological features of his poetry. Although this is a convincing claim, this thesis will adopt aspects of his examination of ecopoetics and expand upon these ideas to include too, the role of Stevens' imagination within the study of ecopoetics.

In doing so, I hope to show how Stevens' poetry complicates clear distinctions between reality and the imagination, and that at the centre of his treatment of these concepts is the relationship of the individual, through the imagination, with the natural world. Through the analysis of his poetry, I hope to prove, too, that an appeal to and development of the imagination is invaluable in shaping a new way of ecological thinking. To do so, the chapter "The Nature of *Harmonium*" looks at the way in which the natural, non-human world is portrayed in Stevens' poetry and what some of its central themes are. This chapter includes further elaboration on aspects of Stevens' concepts of the imagination and reality. The second chapter, "Language and Nature," examines the relationship between language and the natural world. This chapter focuses on linguistic aspects such as sound, metaphor and figurative language and their role in shaping the nature of *Harmonium*. The third and final chapter, "The Imagination and Nature" shows how these linguistic aspects are all part of an imaginative effort of thinking and relating to the natural world. This chapter will establish the value of the imagination in ecopoesis, based on the close readings of the preceding chapters. Further, in reconsidering the ecological value of Stevens' work, this thesis will consider how

to account for and allow the simultaneity of multiple, different perspectives, which, according to Robert Rehder, is “fundamental to Stevens’ way of thinking about the world” (31).

The scope of this thesis does not allow for the examination of Stevens’ entire oeuvre and will therefore restrict itself to his initial and most acclaimed book of poems, *Harmonium*. First published in 1923, *Harmonium* is the basis upon which his consequent poetic career was built, and it contains many of Stevens’ most anthologised poems. Although it is an obvious restriction to a comprehensive delineation of Stevens’ potential for ecopoetics, *Harmonium* stands amidst existing scholarship as his most intimately revealing collection of poetry (Jarrell, Rehder).

Chapter One: The Nature of *Harmonium*

Stevens once famously declared in an essay titled *Imagination as Value* that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of earth remains to be written" (142). If he had any intention of writing it, the first poem of *Harmonium* would be his most promising contender. "Earthy Anecdote" depicts a solely natural scene, devoid of any human presence, including anthropocentric symbolism. In 1918, Stevens wrote to Carl Zigrosser, editor of *The Modern School*, that in the poem he "intended something quite concrete: actual animals, not original chaos" (Stevens 209). He conceded, however, that despite its supposed absence of symbolism, "there's a great deal of theory about it" (204). Accordingly, Eleanor Cook and Bart Eeckhout have pointed to the strange position of "Earthy Anecdote" as the entrance into the collection. Its final note is of an animal falling asleep, as opposed to the final, poetically evocative, "To the Roaring Wind", which may traditionally be expected to initiate the poetic world of *Harmonium* (36, 176). However, despite the sleep of the firecat, this chapter will prove that the imaginative power suggested in this poem continues to swerve and transform the natural scenes of *Harmonium* into what Stevens himself called: "the opposite of chaos in chaos" (153).

Upon first inspection and as suggested in "Sunday Morning"*,* the natural world of *Harmonium* seems to revolve solely "in an old chaos of the sun" (Stevens 70). Its landscapes are of various shades and colours, so full of the diversity of life, that to assign a single quality to it, would sell its array of potential meanings short. Stevens' inclination towards a natural world of diversity may be illustrated with a journal entry, written during a train ride in which he describes the passing landscapes as a "disparate monstrosity", stressing its "physical hugeness, its rough enormity" (134). The *heterogeneity* of nature's phenomena, its "solitudes & barrens & wilds", is the source of its monstrosity and the reason it "dwarfs & terrifies & crushes" (134). To suppose, however, that nature is defined solely by its harsh

tumultuousness, is denied even in the lines directly following “Sunday Morning’s” suggestion of chaos. In a typically Stevensian anaphora, he follows his first supposition with two more:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependence of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable. (70)

The natural world then is not simply one of discordance but dependent too on cyclicality and the movement of the waves.

Ecocritical analyses of Stevens have focused largely on the first of these dependencies, for it is exactly such compositional features as cyclicality that adhere his poetry most distinctly to the reality of the natural world. The introduction has already expounded on the importance of physical reality in ecocritical analyses, but it may be useful now to look at a previous example of an ecological examination of Stevens. George S. Lensing’s influential study *Stevens’ Seasonal Cycles*, included in the *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, examines the role of the seasons in “the drift of Stevens’ idea’s” (118). Lensing’s conclusion identifies Stevens as “one of the great pastoral poets of modernism”, in that his poems of the seasons trace “the subtle and only partially hidden attempts on his part to justify his own place in the world as an isolated human being” (132). “Like the seasons,” Lensing claims, “Stevens’ poetics is itself incremental, cyclical, and variously composite” (131). Lensing makes a convincing argument, and the proposed relationship between Stevens’ poetry and the seasons demonstrates his distinct ecological engagement.

Importantly, however, my thesis argues that to examine Stevens' poetry as ecopoetry, we need to see it as exceeding mere mimesis of physical relations within the natural world. J. Scott Bryson's examination of ecopoetry is helpful in this sense, as he distinguishes ecopoetry as a subset of nature poetry, that "while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues" (5). The distinguishing factor, then, is that ecopoetry provides a new perspective on the human-nonhuman relationship from that of invested Romantic thought (5). In *Stevens and Romanticism*, Joseph Carroll examines Stevens' concept of poetry as the 'supreme fiction' and distinguishes it from Romantic investment in traditional Christian belief (90). To Stevens, poetry, not religion, "is the supreme medium of imaginative activity" (90). Just as ecopoetry needs to distinguish itself from the poetry of the Romantics, so Stevens claims "we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic" (Stevens 138). Consequently, it is through the imagination that the nature of Stevens' poetry is most distinctly ecopoetic.

How then does Stevens *imagine* the natural world of *Harmonium*? To turn back to the lines of "Sunday Morning", the cyclicality proposed in the "dependence of day and night" is only one of the various compositional possibilities of defining the natural world of his poetry. Further attempts at categorizing the ecological features of *Harmonium* may focus on religious aspects (e.g. "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et les Unze Mille Vierges"), nature's exoticisation (e.g. "The Load of Sugar-Cane", "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock") or its transitory quality in poems like "Anatomy of Monotony:" "Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows / The same. We parallel the mother's death" (108). Such compositional attempts may go on for much longer yet, but it is important to establish a notion of nature within *Harmonium* that might be useful in an *ecocritical* analysis. In this sense, it is Stevens' poetically imaginative force, which renders the natural world of *Harmonium* in a

continuously moving and collectively transforming state, that is at the centre of its ecological thought and ecocritical value.

Upon closer inspection, the natural world of *Harmonium* is a place of “perpetual undulation” (60), of things coalescing into a communal ‘moving’. The ecologically transformative power of Stevens’ poetic imagination enables the perception of “the opposite of chaos in chaos” (153). This may be illustrated by turning back to “Earthy Anecdote” and its seemingly conspicuous scene, in which a group of bucks are impeded by a ‘firecat’. Already, however, its apparent simplicity comes under question: What is a firecat, a term which is absent from any dictionary? Scholarship on Stevens has a long history of discussing the term’s true meaning, and most convincingly, “the unique and vivid firecat has been understood as at least partly a trope for the poetic imagination” (Eeckhout 183). The poetic imagination, which then comes to stand in for the firecat, continually and incessantly causes the bucks to move:

> Wherever they went,
> They went clattering,
> Until they swerved
> In a swift, circular line
> To the right,
> Because of the firecat. (3)

If the firecat had not been an ambiguous term, the scene would simply have been of the old struggle for life, a predator disturbing its prey, the epitome of natural chaos. If the firecat represents, at least partially, the poetic imagination, however, the almost geometrical exactness of the swift, circular lines suggests that it transforms its chaos into an organised

relationship. This interchange goes on continuously until finally, "the firecat closed his bright eyes / And slept" (3). The scene comes to an abrupt stop and the bucks seem to have disappeared with the closing of the firecat's eyes. Only as long as the poetic imagination is awake, the chaotically clattering bucks are transformed into a single, continuously moving force.

"Earthy Anecdote" is evidently a poem of motion, of swerving from right to left. In other poems, movement may not be quite as apparent, but it is always directly involved with the natural world. In "Domination of Black", for instance, the strangely unsettling mingling of leaves, hemlocks and peacocks are transformed into a state of collective 'turning'. In this poem of repetition, of things "Repeating themselves" (8), the verb 'turning' demands unignorable attention as it appears nine times within its three stanzas. In an almost hypnotizing anaphora, Stevens converges the shapes and sounds of the night into this communal turning:

> Was it a cry against the twilight
> Or against the leaves themselves
> Turning in the wind,
> Turning as the flames
> Turned in the fire,
> Turning as the peacocks
> Turned in the loud fire,
> Loud as the hemlocks
> Full of the cry of the peacocks?

As a result, sensory boundaries dissolve and all that remains is the ambiguous turning in which finally, even the planets participate. Due to heavy repetition, the verb is additionally stripped of its meaning, until all that remains is a sense of fear: “I felt afraid” (9). The poetic imagination, which transforms these distinct natural and sensory phenomena into so powerful and assimilated a vision, turns frightful along with the rest of the world.

Various other poems demonstrate how, in Stevens’ ecopoetry, the natural world is a continuous and transformational force. In “The Load of Sugar-Cane”, the natural image of “rainbows / That are like birds, / turning, bedizened” (12) is reminiscent of “Domination of Black”, though here the coalescing is far less threatening. Here, the turning of the images is accompanied by “water flowing”, a recurrent and central vehicle for the power of the poetic imagination over the natural world in *Harmonium*. It is a theme introduced already in “Infanta Marina”, where things combine and “flowed around” (8) and taken up again in “Peter Quince at the Clavier” in which the transitory nature of life merges with the natural flow: “So evenings die, in their green going, / A wave, interminably flowing” (92). In “The Place of the Solitaires” the incessant nature of the imaginative effort to shape the natural world into images of movement is distinctly apparent: “There must be no cessation / Of motion, or of the noise of motion,”. The ceaseless motion of the waves is foregrounded too, by the onomatopoeic ‘-tion’ on which six lines end. The coalescing force then becomes prominent again in “Six Significant Landscapes”, in which the image of a collective movement of an old man’s beard, larkspur and pine tree all transform into an imaginatively factitive “Thus water flows / Over weeds. (73). Examples then of the natural world moving continuously and transforming collectively are manifold and swerve throughout *Harmonium* until the very last poem.

What these examples and examinations show is that at the centre of Stevens’ ecological thought lies the transformative power of the imagination to turn the “disparate

monstrosity" of the natural world into a single force of motion and metamorphosis. With the exception of "Domination of Black", where the poetic imagination is taken to its extremes, it creates a poetic landscape in which "Foam and cloud are one" and in which the "Sultry moon-monsters / Are dissolving" (23). In other words, "As a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same" (35), so the natural world of *Harmonium* is a force of the imagination and not the reality of which it is composed, which is never the same.

Chapter Two: The Language of *Harmonium*

The first chapter has touched on some aspects of Stevens' ecological engagement, but a deeper examination of his treatment of the natural world reveals a system of ecological *reference*, which may further solidify the value of Stevens' poetry in ecocritical thinking. In order to examine more closely the structures and methods that underlie the ecological system proposed in the first chapter, this chapter will draw significantly from Scott Knickerbocker's study *Wallace Stevens, Eco-Aesthete*. In it, Knickerbocker reconsiders the ecocritical value of Stevens' poetics and proposes that: "much of Stevens's poetry explores the relationship between language (the product of "imagination") and earthy reality and in doing so expands our understanding of what that reality consists of, emphasizing the rich, earthy texture of language itself" (22). His focus lies on the 'aesthetic' properties of Stevens' language, that is to say its formal characteristics, pointing to the potential of Stevens' poetry to expose "the natural in the artificial and, alternately, the inevitable role of artifice – its necessity and limit – in shaping the way we perceive and experience nature" (55). Knickerbocker's re-evaluation of the relationship between artifice, or more specifically language, and nature departs from early ecocritical tendencies to focus solely on physical reality and adopts a more inclusive ecocriticism, which finds the middle ground between physical reality and poststructuralist efforts of prioritising language over nature.

Notably, Knickerbocker repeatedly touches on the constant flow of the natural world, which the first chapter has found to be central to Stevens' ecological engagement. Knickerbocker emphasises the "indeterminacy, constant movement" of natural phenomena and identifies the continuous force of nature in Stevens' poetry as "the eddying, insistent pressure of the real on the human subject" (30). He emphasises this process most distinctly in his analysis of "The Auroras of Autumn," in which he identifies formalistic qualities, such as its "frequent caesuras, as well as the hesitant start-stop rhythm" that come to enact "the

beautiful 'change' and 'transformation' of the physical auroras" (48). Of these qualities, it seems that Knickerbocker distinguishes metaphorical and aural devices as most effectively performing the actual drift of nature. He asserts that these poetic devices are part of Stevens' aesthetic, or, formal effort of "figurative drifting", in which language comes to represent "nature's actual drift" (48). Knickerbocker diverts the assumption that reality is entirely swept up and erased in Stevens' poetic imagination, because "earthly reality persists, often in poetic form itself" (23). I understand Knickerbocker here as arguing that, although language is a product of the imagination for Stevens, its formal characteristics reveal the involvement and interdependence of the artificial, constructed, nature of language and physical reality. As a consequence, language turns into "a physical phenomenon, another wonder of nature that never ceases to surprise us" (55).

Knickerbocker's examination of the formal elements of Stevens' poetry relies partially on what he refers to as Stevens' "effort to naturalize metaphor" that is to say the inherent *resemblance* between figurative language and "the incessant creation of nature's patterns" (24). Suggested here is that, for Stevens, language and nature resemble each other in the way they *function*. In "The Snow Man," for instance, Knickerbocker reveals how Stevens asserts the "necessity of figurative thinking in communicating one's direct experience of nature" (28). The figurative resemblance between language and nature remains inconclusive however, for, several antagonist readings may apply to the poem's figurative intricacy and ambiguity. According to Knickerbocker, therefore, Stevens' final choice "seems to be based more on aesthetics – on what sounds right – than on any working of logic" (53). For, even if "the poem seems to privilege the imagination at a semantic level, it simultaneously betrays what Stevens calls the 'pressure of reality' pushing through the poem at the level of sound" (23). In my understanding of Knickerbocker's central argument, the

most revealingly ecological aspect of Stevens' language thus resides in the *sound* of his poetry.

Knickerbocker illustrates this on the basis of readings of several poems, such as "The Idea of Order at Key West" in which "sound evokes the sea again and again" (23). Lines like "It may be that in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water and the gasping wind; / But it was she and not the sea we heard" exemplify for Knickerbocker how Stevens *aurally* invokes the sea, "in the 'z,' 'sh,' and 's' sounds as well as the assonance of 'she,' 'sea,' and 'we'" (23). In this poem, as in others, Knickerbocker asserts that the relationship between the aesthetic *aural* property of language and nature reveals their similarity and interdependence: "Sound in Stevens's poems is not just a matter of prosody but also a matter of experiencing language as a physical phenomenon" (55). The intimate involvement of Stevens' language, through sound, with physical reality then is central to Knickerbocker's affirmation of Stevens' ecocritical value.

Although Knickerbocker inevitably regards Stevens' language as the product of the imagination, his conclusion seems weary of departing too strongly from the role of physical reality in defining Stevens' ecocritical value. For, what Knickerbocker emphasises is most powerfully ecopoetic, is also what adheres Stevens' poetry most distinctly to the real: the "experience of the raw sound of language *as* the natural remainder of reality" (34). Although his interpretation helps divert ecocritical convention slightly – from focusing on the way in which ecological truths are converted into metaphor, to exposing the fundamental interdependence of language and the natural world – his final assessment seems to lose track of the *imagination* and its seminal role in defining Stevens' ecopoetry. As revealed in the first chapter of this thesis, at the heart of Stevens' ecological engagement is the *imaginative* effort of shaping the natural world into a state of continuous movement and metamorphosis. In the following examination I will try to prove how, ultimately, Stevens' poetry reveals how this

natural drift comes to resemble the way in which we *think*, exposing an interdependence between the imagination and nature, antecedent to the formal qualities discussed by Knickerbocker, and pivotal in reconsidering the value of the *imagination* in ecocritical thinking.

The first chapter has established a notion of the ecological flux of *Harmonium*, but the role of the imagination in shaping the natural world of Stevens demands still deeper examination. In this respect, the “verses wild with motion” of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” are particularly revealing, in that here, Stevens directly alludes to the artistic process of rendering natural phenomena into art (Cook). In an early part of this long poem, Stevens asks through rhetoric, which is itself more than anything “congenial … to the imagination” (145) if all artistic portrayals of nature have been futile due to the transitory drift of reality: “Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain / That not one curl in nature has survived?” (14). A few stanzas later, he seemingly offers a consolatory note, in that there is “a substance in us that prevails” (15). The substance referred to here is the product, notably, of the artistic process: “If men at forty will be painting lakes / The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one, / The basic slate, the universal hue” (15). In transforming into art the diversity of life, the *assimilative* force of the artistic imagination is decisive. As this is so in painting, it is so in poetry. The artistic product of a continuously moving and metamorphosising poetic landscape is due, therefore, to the imaginative process of a similarly merging nature.

The analysis of “Earthy Anecdote” has touched already on Stevens’ investment in “the sense of order” that is the result of this process. but other poems reveal even more distinctly the role of the imagination in dissolving the chaos of physical reality and its influence on the mind. One such poem is “Homunculus et la Belle Étoile”, to which Stevens ascribed exactly this quality in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer: “This seems to have been an early poem of order” (306). In the poem, a young emerald that Cook interprets as a symbol

for Venus, but which principally stands for the evening star, shines upon a world of confused tumult, evident from the rhythmically and semantically chaotic lines of the early sequences of enjambment:

> The light conducts
> The thoughts of drunkards, the feelings
> Of widows and trembling ladies,
> The movements of fishes. (26)

The poem then shines its lights on the evening star itself, first in a philosophically interpretative attempt, leaving of the young emerald nothing but the abstracted image of a "gaunt fugitive phantom" (26). Stevens describes such risk of substantive loss if the imagination is taken to its extremes: "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (6). The philosophical imagination is distinguished from the vitality and intensity of the poetic imagination, revealing "degrees of the imagination" (7). For, by adhering closely to the sensory perception of the star's appearance, with such descriptions as "wanton", "abundantly beautiful, eager" and "fecund", the *poetic* imagination ultimately uses the star's light as a vehicle of "Tranquilizing with this jewel / The torments of confusion" (27). The evening star, which is at once a part of nature and of the poet's imagination, exposes how natural phenomena come to enact the inner mind's workings. The light of the star dissolves simultaneously the confusion of the poem's natural scenes and the inner confusion of its spectator. It is the careful imaginative effort of the poet, in establishing a balanced relationship between the human mind and its surroundings that transforms the light of the evening star into a jewel of order, as "he sees his imagination become the light in the mind of others" (29).

"Homunculus et la Belle Étoile" is a distinct appeal to the transformative power of the imagination in rendering into art an experience of chaotic reality, partly through the sensible materiality of its language but most powerfully through the imaginative force which is language's antecedent. As demonstrated, the effect of the transformative nature of the imagination is finally one which establishes an interdependence between the natural world and modes of *thought*, both informed by and about the relation between man and his surroundings. In "Stars at Tallapoosa" – a poem in which, once more, celestial bodies are intertwined closely with the transfiguring power of the imagination – the natural landscape transforms even more explicitly into a natural force, resemblant of human thought. As Cook points out as well, this poem is playing on imaginative 'lines' as an associative vehicle, merging the "imagined lines that link stars into constellations, lines of an eyelid, the line of the night-horizon, lines of waves, lines of wave detritus, lines of shot arrows" into ultimately, the lines of poetry. Through these poetic lines, the imagination arranges the "nimblest motions" of the "ever-mingling" natural world, along which eventually even the mind is aligned: "The mind herein attains simplicity" (71). Poetry thus becomes the vehicle for the imaginative effort of giving order to the natural world and thus arranging physical reality along the mind's processes.

The potential of the imagination to transform the natural world into a harmonised movement, which finally shapes the mind of the spectator may also be illustrated by the most alliterative line of "Sunday Morning" in which Jove, being inhuman, is excluded from this exclusively human process: "no sweet land gave / Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind" (67). The simultaneous motion of the mind and of nature exposed by Stevens' poetry is itself continuous and according to Stevens, must be so. As discussed in the first chapter, the waves of "The Place of the Solitaires" move in perpetual incessant undulation. In Stevens' own words, it is "a poem actually in motion". "In motion," Stevens adds, "with the activity of

thought in solitude" (463). The perpetual undulation of the waves then moves according to and dependent on the motion of the *mind*'s imaginings, for the place of the solitaires is "most, of the motion of thought / And its restless iteration" (60). "The Place of the Solitaires" thereby merges the natural flow of the waves with the imaginative drift of the mind and in doing so, reveals the role of the poetic imagination in shaping a continuously undulating interdependence between the human and the non-human.

To conclude, at the heart of Stevens' ecological engagement lies his imaginative effort of shaping the natural world into a state of continuously coalescing movement, which, having been transformed, exposes the fundamental resemblance and interdependence of nature and the mind. The imagination, which in "To the One of Fictive Music" is alluded to as, "the music summoned by the birth" (87) is a distinctly human quality, which "separates us from the wind and sea". Stevens' poetry reveals, however, how the imaginative force transforms nature until the earth "by being so much of the things we are" (87) is intimately involved even with our inner mind's imaginings. Not principally, as in Knickerbocker examination, through the artificiality of Stevens' language, but most importantly, through the imagination "which proclaims, / The near, the clear" and transforms nature into "an image that is sure" (88).

It may seem counterintuitive to locate the ecocritical value of a literary work in its abstraction, but, if anything is true of the poetry of Stevens, it is that he is intimately involved with the imagination and the "extreme of its achievement," Stevens claims, "lies in abstraction" (139). It is only consistent with Stevens' imaginative commitment, therefore, that it is *here* that Stevens is most revealingly ecopoetic. However, as exemplified here by Knickerbocker but symptomatic of ecocritical examinations of Stevens, is the assertion of physical reality in establishing Stevens' ecological engagement. The pressure of reality seems to extend to the scholarship of Stevens, although it is through Stevens' *imagination*, that "the

pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" may ultimately be relieved. Stevens' imagination is invaluable in asserting the intimate relationship between the natural world and the way in which we think, exposing the necessity of the imagination in ecocritical thought. The image of nature as of continuous movement and metamorphosis, which is so distinctly resemblant of our most personal essence, must move firmly to the centre of the relationship with our surroundings, as Stevens himself declares in the final line of "To the One of Fictive Music:" "Unreal, give back to us what once you gave: / The imagination that we spurned and crave" (88).

Chapter Three: The Imagination and Nature

The previous chapters have delineated a vision of *Harmonium*'s natural world, specifically the role of the imagination in shaping the collection's "natural drift." These chapters' examinations have repeatedly indicated the ecocritical value of Stevens' ecological engagement, but this chapter will establish firmly how, through Stevens, an appeal to the imagination is invaluable in shaping a new way of ecocritical thinking and, in the broadest sense, our current thinking about the ecological crisis.

Knickerbocker's analysis serves in this thesis as a foundational example of ecocritical scholarship on Stevens and as representative of the state of contemporary ecocriticism in general. His work reveals how ecocriticism has expanded from focusing solely on the role of physical reality, to asserting the role of language in exposing the interrelationship between man and his surroundings. In this respect, Gyorgyi Voros' influential work *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* further solidifies the assertion that ecocritical scholarship on Stevens has largely favoured Stevens' investment in physical reality over the imagination in asserting his ecological value.

At first glance, Voros' conclusion is resemblant of the findings of this thesis, in that she, too, seems to locate Stevens' central ecological engagement in the mutual drift of the human and the natural: "What is had is a new knowledge of Being rooted in the bedrock of reality, at home on Earth, completing itself in flux, existing as part of the amassing harmony in spite of itself" (165). However, recurrently evident in her analyses is the understanding that to Stevens, nature is fundamentally distinguished from the human, and specifically, the human mind: "The paradox of Wallace Stevens' poetry is this: that in order to reinstate Nature as the fundamental power and foundation of human life, Stevens did *not* try to demonstrate an identification or continuity between Nature and the mind or spirit but did precisely the opposite: he regarded Nature to be unmitigatingly other" (70). In asserting the

ecological value of Stevens' poetry, she emphasises how Stevens' language exposes the inherent difference between man and nature, and between the imagination and reality, thus allowing for a relationship between the human and the non-human, clearly distinguished from Romantic "panaceas of transcendence" (71). As in Knickerbocker's examination, language, or, "the process of his poetry to be part of, and analogous to, the processes of Nature" (80) is at the heart of Stevens' ecological engagement for Voros. In other words, in both Knickerbocker's and Voros' understanding of ecocriticism, the goal of ecopoetics is inherently entwined with the potency of language to portray physical reality and fulfilled only in, "that moment when human song perfectly replicates and matches Nature's wordless expressions of itself" (119).

In this sense, Knickerbocker and Voros are emblematic of conventional ecocritical and ecopoetic thinking, which seems to return inherently to the assertion of physical reality in determining ecopoetic writing. This may finally be demonstrated on the basis of Jonathan Bate's understanding of ecopoetics:

> [T]he rhythmic, syntactic and linguistic intensifications that are characteristic of verse-writing frequently give a peculiar force to the *poiesis*: it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre itself – a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat – is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself (76).

In Bate's understanding, and representative of ecopoetic thinking in general, even if ecopoetry does not engage in physical reality on a semantic level, its *formal* qualities inherently echo the patterns of nature. It is important, at this point, to note that this thesis

does not attempt to disprove the potential of ecopoetry to engage sensibly with the natural world on a formal level. Knickerbocker, Voros and Bate provide meaningful perspectives on Stevens' ecological engagement and of the interdependence of language and nature in the broadest sense.

However, this formalist relationship between poetry and nature can only go so far, as Bate himself admits that ultimately, "The impossible task of the ecopoet is to speak the silence of the place" (151). Catherine E. Rigby's examination *Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis* similarly recognises how, "Works of ecological art might be invaluable in calling us to attend anew to the complex interweaving of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals" (440). Ultimately, however, she concludes that "rediscovering the art of dwelling" may only be achieved through changing the way we *think* about our relationship with nature: "as we endeavor to find new ways of creating and relating, new ways of living and dying, new ways of letting be and letting go" (440).

As the previous chapters have begun to reveal, it is through the imagination that Stevens exposes the most powerfully intimate relationship between the human and non-human. Notably, Charles Altieri's examination of Stevens' imagination closely echoes the findings of these chapters, although his angle is not ecocritical. To Stevens' poetry, he ascribes, "an ability to make visible the life of the mind in its most intimate exchanges with the world" (163). Similar to this thesis, too, is that Altieri elaborates on the role of the imagination in exposing this relationship and asserts its predominance over the influences of reality: "One possible reason is that he thought the emphasis on sensation and the related world of physical things simply could not sustain his ambitions to make a difference in how people viewed their lives" (172). If Stevens' understanding of the role of the poet was that he should "help people live their lives" (Stevens 29), then he may achieve this only through the development of the imagination. So, when Altieri asserts how Stevens is able to "pursue

identifications that could satisfy the psyche at its most intense level without subjecting it to conventional forms of life ill-suited to such intensities" (168), he may well refer to the way in which Stevens' imagination exposes the fundamental identification between the processes of the mind and the drift of nature. Altieri's examination is emblematic of traditional scholarship on Stevens' imagination and although not from an ecological angle, it becomes clear in the light of this thesis that such examinations expose various ecocritically relevant aspects. Altieri finally asserts that it would be silly, "not to honor the quite different mode of philosophizing that makes *Harmonium* still perhaps the most innovative challenge in American poetry to conventional ways of thinking about lyric speech," (172) and, ultimately, about our relationship with nature.

That the most valuable ecocritical aspect of Stevens' poetry lies in the abstraction of natural phenomena and their transformation towards a mutual drifting of the mind is in line with Stevens' own ideas on what poetry is and can be. In sketching a possible poet, Stevens emphasises that, "He must be able to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination" (23). As the previous chapters have revealed, the poet of *Harmonium* thereby creates a world in which the boundaries between the mind and nature dissolve, enacting and creating a world in which the human and the non-human *move* in imagined conjunction. Although true of physical reality, the abstract movement of the imagination exposes simultaneously the intimate systems of the mind and its revealing alignment with the natural world. Stevens creates, like his possible poet, "the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (31).

Current environmental catastrophes may develop on a global scale, but its effects reverberate to the level of the individual mind and its relationship with the immediate surroundings. If ecocriticism is to address and affect the way in which we *think* about the

environment, then it needs to adopt methods according to all scales at which ecological engagement occurs. Even, as Stevens succinctly pronounces, in the struggles of the mind: "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (36). Therefore, conventional ecocriticism and its investment in reality is unsuitable to meet the *imaginative* potential of Stevens' ecopoetry. For Stevens, reality is inherently constructed by the imagination: "The general sense of the word proliferates its special senses. It is a jungle in itself. As in the case of a jungle, everything that makes it up is pretty much of one color" (25-26). Distinctly apparent again, is the immediate coalescence of reality in its apprehension with the mind. At the root of reality, or the natural world, is the power of the imagination to convert it into a state which satisfies the human mind.

Finally, the development of the imagination in ecocritical thought may contribute to our ecological plight in the broadest sense. As Franzen suggests, with the current rate and extent at which ecological crises occur, it is time to rethink what action still remains realistically meaningful. That is to say, how might the ordinary movement of life continue to move in the intervals of a storm that continues to grow in severity? Ultimately, the answer may lie in the imagination, for, as Stevens convincedly demonstrates: "We live in the mind. […] If we live in the mind, we live with the imagination" (140). In moving the imagination to the centre of the way in which we think about the reality of our immediate surroundings, the fight for climate change begins to extend to our most personal being, the inner mind's processes and its incessant creation of and dependency on the natural world. The more we lose sight of the imagination in our ecological engagement, "the less able we are to see that it has any heroic aspects or that the spirit is at stake or that it may involve the loss of the world" (141). For, if Franzen is right and climate change is indeed irreversible, we need the imagination to see what a sustainable future could look like. In order to move toward that

future, the imaginative and speculative powers of poetry open up necessary new modes of thought.

Stevens' famous claim that, "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (142) has long been interpreted, especially in ecocriticism, as the call for a poem fundamentally grounded in physical reality. As this thesis has shown, however, it may be in the most highly *imaginative* poems of Stevens, that the true poem of the earth resides. For, it is in the imagination that the human and the earth *move* collectively, "As they flowed around / And uttered their subsiding sound" (7). The potential of Stevens' ecopoetics resides in his act of finding what will suffice in order to sing, "*beyond* the genius of the sea" (128) in the variously drifting poems of the imagination.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to prove how at the centre of Stevens' ecological engagement lies the relationship of the individual, through the imagination, with the natural world. Stevens' imagination transforms the natural world into a state resemblant of and dependent on the processes of the mind, revealing a relationship at the heart of the individual experience of physical reality. Finally, I hope to have proven how an appeal to and development of the imagination may contribute to shaping new ways of ecological thinking.

Stevens shows how the imagination, in being so intimately involved simultaneously with our most personal being and the physical world outside of ourselves, may help in creating a sustainable relationship between man and nature, built on a fundamental interdependence. In order to expose the necessity of the imagination in ecocritical thinking, ecocriticism must expand its scope to include what may ordinarily be expected to be most removed from physical reality. If, as Franzen suggests, the fight against climate change needs to shift towards battles on the most personal scale, then this thesis has proven how the imagination may be our most powerful guide.

I have drawn significantly from existing ecocritical examinations of Stevens and emphasised how these studies have insufficiently discussed the role of the imagination in establishing Stevens' ecocritical value. Nevertheless, their arguments for the ecological engagement of Stevens has formed a revealing basis upon which the examination of Stevens' imaginative efforts could expand. Still, the scope of this thesis has restricted the extent to which Stevens' potential for ecocriticism could be delineated. Further research could therefore elaborate more thoroughly on the intricacies of Stevens' concepts of reality and the imagination and carry out a more exhaustive analysis of the imagination in relation to his poetry. For, although *Harmonium* may be Stevens' first and most revealingly intimate collection, the thoughts and notions initiated in these poems would later be developed in

various ways, potentially useful in expanding upon the ecocritical value of the imagination in Stevens' poems and poetry in general.

To conclude, if ecocriticism is to confront the environmental crises arising presently, then it must be willing to discern the ecocritical value of such lines as:

> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
> And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (65)

For what these imaginative lines of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" represent, is not the seeming superiority of the imagination over reality, but the fundamental understanding that in the way we *imagine* is bound up not just the fate of the earth, but of ourselves.

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