Wallace Stevens and Some Issues in Philosophy and Theology

John McDade SJ

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'Religion is poetry in which we *believe*, usually without knowing it to be poetry; hence it affects our behaviour.. The highest poetry is identical with religion.'[1] The comment from Milton Bates, interpreting George Santayana's *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion* (1900), bears upon how Wallace Stevens thought of poetry and religion. For Santayana and Stevens, poetry and religion are human inventions that express and partly satisfy our 'longing for the ideal'. They spring from an impulse within us which we can simply call at this stage the 'imagination', but the key thing is that they are not intrinsically different. The only difference there is comes from the consequences which flow from them: namely, how we act. The religions that we are familiar with lead into action and ethics, but poetry does not regulate how we should live although it can offer a different vision of the self and the world. 'The idea of God is a thing of the imagination,' Stevens writes in a letter of 1940:

> We no longer think that God was, but was imagined. The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet, appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and for that matter greater, if the idea of God is only one of the things of the imagination.[2]

'Pure poetry', 'essential imagination' and 'the idea of God' seem to be placed on the same exalted level and we should not think that Stevens is dismissive of the idea of God. I think, given his aesthetic, his statements are highly appreciative of the idea of God, even if they are filled both with an agnosticism. His letter in 1951 to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn should not be forgotten: 'I am not an atheist although I do not believe in the same God in whom I believed when I was a boy'.[3] But as we look at how God is treated in relation to imagination in his poems and critical writings, we should remember that he insistently joins 'imagination' and 'God'. For any reflective theist, but certainly not for our new atheists, God cannot be imagined at all without distortion. For most of the time, Stevens is concerned with the way in which we construct, picture, devise an imaginative account of God, with *our versions of the divine*. He may well judge that there are no versions other than imaginative ones available to us, but his focus is on how we construe and imagine God, gods and the real. He is primarily interested in religion as a work of the imagination, corresponding to what theologians call the cataphatic style, the use of positive categories to portray and imagine the divine in ways that we find significant.

Steven's view of religion is that it is the elaboration of fictive worlds, a work of semantic expansion and metaphoric colonisation. He is concerned, if you like, with the poetry, with the fiction, with the 'style' gods have as 'creations of the imagination'. The gods of the ancient world, on whom we look back now with interest but disbelief, were, he says, 'clear giants of a vivid time, who in the style of their beings made the style of the gods and the gods themselves one'.[4] In the address from which these remarks are taken, he speaks of our 'age of disbelief', with acute insight into the effect of this disbelief on us, rendering us homeless:

> To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; not as if

[1] M.J. Bates, 'Stevens and the Supreme Fiction,' in J.N. Serio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* (CUP, 2007), 48-61; 49.
[2] H.Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (Faber & Faber, 1968), 369. Hereafter *L.*
[3] *L*, 735.
[4] 'Two or Three Ideas,' *CP*, 841

> they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. Since we have always shared all things with them and have always had a part of their strength and, certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise this experience of annihilation. It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness. What was most extraordinary is that they left no mementoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of the soul or of the soul. It is was if they had never inhabited the earth. There was no crying out for their return. They were not forgotten because they had been a part of the glory of the earth. And the same time, no man ever muttered a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes. There was always in every man the increasingly human self, which instead of remaining the observer, the non-participant, the delinquent, became constantly more and more all there was or so it seemed; and whether it was so or merely seemed so still left it for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms.[5]

Do we really want those gods back? Is Stevens right to say that no one ever muttered a wish for 'those unreal shapes' to be restored? A post-religious world without such divine figures suits us very well and Christian believers need to understand the ease with which people today slide into post-monotheist atheism. A world emptied of divine presences, for many people, is a cleaner space in which to live. For Stevens, the imagining of God is of a piece with the imagining of gods, spirits and what naturalist philosophers call 'spooky realities', but it is also continuous with the imagining of the world in poetry and art. Religion is an impulse that for Stevens and many modern atheists is continuous with poetic imagination generally.

His prose description of the disappearance of the gods is echoed poetically in a section of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' ('It Must Give Pleasure: III') where the face of God, originally a 'lasting visage' seen in the Burning Bush, is imagined here as a carved face whose features become weathered, roughened and eventually obliterated. As God becomes faceless and can no longer be imagined, his reddened effulgence (the Biblical 'glory') fades, is used (understood as 'used up') and we are left godless, as Steven's commentary on the poem makes clear. That face, says Stevens, 'might have been', but of course is no longer available for adoration:

> A lasting visage in a lasting bush,
> A face of stone in an unending red,
> Red-emerald, red-slitted-blue, a face of slate,
>
> An ancient forehead hung with heavy hair,
> The channel slots of rain, the red-rose-red
> And weathered and the ruby-water-worn,
>
> The vines around the throat, the shapeless lips,
> The frown like serpents basking on the brow,
> The spent feeling leaving nothing of itself,
>
> Red-in-red repetitions never going
> Away, a little rusty, a little rouged,
> A little roughened and ruder, a crown
>
> The eye could not escape, a red renown
> Blowing itself upon the tedious ear.
> An effulgence faded, dull cornelian

[5] 'Two or Three Ideas' *CP*, 842-3.

Too venerably used. That might have been.
It might and might have been. But as it was,
A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell

And bade the sheep carouse. Or so they said.
Children in love with them brought early flowers
And scattered them about, no two alike.

Stevens' commentary on this passage makes clear how fundamental the 'face of God' is for the religious imagination.

> The first thing one sees of any deity is the face, so that the elementary idea of God is a face: a lasting visage in a lasting bush. Adoration is a form of face to face. When the compulsion to adoration grows less, or merely changes, unless the change is complete, the face changes and, in the case of a face at which one has looked for a long time, changes that are slight may appear to the observer to be melodramatic. We struggle with the face, see it everywhere and try to express the changes. In the depths of concentration, the whole thing disappears: A dead shepherd brought tremendous clouds from hell. And bade the sheep carouse, etc. This dead shepherd was an improvisation. What preceded it in the poem made it necessary, like music that evolves for internal reasons and not with reference to an external program. What the spirit wants it creates, even if it has to do so in a fiction.[6]

What is striking is the graphic description of God's face, imagined like a large stone carving whose features are weathered and eventually obliterated, leaving God faceless – and therefore the condition of worship (a 'face to face' contact, as Steven's commentary on the passage makes clear) is removed from us. When God can no longer be faced or imagined, his effulgence fades, is used up and disappears, and we are left godless.Because God has a face, he can be adored, but the modern experience which Stevens and others live through is that we are no longer able to read its features; consequently, God no longer appears before us as worthy of adoration and eventually, or suddenly, disappears. With the phrase, 'That might have been./ It might and might have been', there is an empty moment as the divine glory becomes 'used' – understood as the French *usée*, 'used up' – and the twilight of the gods brings darkness and silence. Until the arrival of the 'dead shepherd' rising from hell, bringing joy to the sheep, or at most a rumour of his arrival; 'Or so they said' is a way of deflecting the suggestion that the return of the dead shepherd might be an object of belief bearing upon the question of God's revelation that started in the Burning Bush. This must be the coming of the Risen Christ to his disciples to console them in their loss (of his presence, but also of the God whose face had faded). comes to lose its features) and, later, the descent of Christ to hell ('A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell'), from which he leads a triumphal procession of Old Testament saints, including Moses, to heaven: hence he 'bade the sheep carouse'.

In the letter of commentary, Stevens wants us to understand that the shift from the fading of the divine face to the sudden arrival of the dead shepherd was required for internal reasons: I take this to mean that there is an *aesthetic* fittingness in the motif of the dead shepherd erupting at this point in the text. It fits the movement of his imagination rather than is demanded by anything extrinsic to the poem such as religious belief. But is he being disingenuous, not telling the whole story?

If the face of God has faded, why, suddenly, should the return of the dead shepherd from hell be thought at all appropriate? Why should Stevens think it fitting that the fading of God from human consciousness should give way to his retrieval of the ancient Christological theme that when the Good Shepherd dies, he descends to the underworld where the saints of the Old

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[6] *L*, 438. Notice that Stevens was uncertain whether to speak of the dead shepherd bringing 'clouds' (letter) or 'chords' (poem) from hell.

Testament await salvation, and then returns to the earth bringing joy to his flock?[7] Moses is a central figure among those saints in the icon tradition that flows from this myth. The imaginative power of this section is derives from Biblical themes about Moses who sees God in the burning bush ('a lasting visage in a lasting bush'). The bush is the focus for the presence of 'the real': a category traditionally associated with this revelatory moment because when Moses asks God his name, he is told, 'I am who I am' (Ex 3.14), a text read subsequently as a designation of God as 'Being', *Esse*, actuality. Revelation is of the actual, and of course for Stevens, although the designation of 'the real' ceases to be construed in religious categories, it continues to be the disclosure of the real to the person, like Moses, (the poet) who sees it. In 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', Stevens creates a fictional character, Professor Eucalyptus, who says,

> …'The search
> For reality is as momentous as
> The search for God.' It is the philosopher's search
>
> For an interior made exterior
> And the poet's search for the same exterior made
> Interior…[8]

It is impossible to read this statement from Professor Eucalyptus without thinking of Aquinas' designation of God as *ipsum esse*, 'being (or reality) itself': the search for the real is, by definition, the search for the divine, and Moses before the burning bush finds the divine/real. When God presents himself, he is identified as 'the real/reality.' The revelation culminates at Sinai when Moses and seventy elders of Israel 'saw God' (Ex 24.9-10); Moses demands that God show his glory, but while he is told that he cannot see God's face and live (Ex 33.20), he is directed to hide in the cleft of a rock while God's glory passes and, as God disappears, Moses will see his 'back' as God leaves.

In another letter of the same year, he writes that 'the major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God'.[9] When Harold Bloom, in his description of 'the American Religion', describes religion as 'spilled poetry', he is taking the same line. For Stevens and Santayana, our speech about God is in the same category of 'speech acts' as imaginative poetry. Our statements about God are invented, spun out of the poetic self as a spider produces the filaments that become its web. God is then in Stevens' words, 'the supreme fiction', because 'the God of religion is a product of the poetic imagination'.[10]

These two modes of perception and expression flow from the same source and are felt by us to be significant. But why? That's the puzzle. Not simply why do we *need* them or why do we *enjoy* them? But why do we *produce* them? Why do we create fictive accounts of the world, even entertaining the idea of a 'supreme fiction' that is solely of our making, the idea of God? You will remember that Descartes thought that the idea of God was planted in us by God himself and that it is not something that we could have devised. It was Descartes' way of deflecting the view that we project the idea of God out of an impulse within us, if it is made by us, it may be of no more significance than a centaur, a fantastic growth of human imagining. For Descartes, the idea of God is an effect of God and therefore cannot be dismissed as unsubstantiated.

One of the consequences of Stevens' approach is that if you ask about the meaning of religion, you are in the same breath asking about the meaning of poetry and imagination. There is an interesting question about where people 'locate' religion': in relation to what other modes of expression or disciplines should it be placed? The old picture – and I suspect that this a formal

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[7] Moses is a central figure among the saints pictured in the Orthodox icons of the Descent into hell that portray this theme.
[8] *CP*, 410.
[9] *L*, 378
[10] Bates, *op.cit.*, 52

move rather than an accurate reflection of how theological thought actually took place – is that theology and the religion proper to it are 'above' other disciplines, with philosophy perhaps as the 'serving girl' in the service of the theological queen. If you read Freud, he will place religion in the context of human neurosis, as an attempt to preserve an early stage of psychic development, 'another way of disclaiming the danger which the ego recognizes as threatening it from the external world'.[11] You could place it on the side of the emotional component of our nature, as Newman does in the 1877 Preface to the *Via Media*.[12] It can also be considered within the context of anthropology, cultural and social studies. If you read the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, you will find religion so entwined with ethical responsibility that he can say that 'doing good is the act of belief', and 'to know God is to know what must be done'.[13] The conjunction of religion and ethics in Judaism and Christianity treats religion as simply inseparable from ethical responsibility. This is not something that Stevens takes on board neither in his poetry nor in his critical writings that touch on the question of God. He considers it as one of the ways in which we exercise our imagination in relation to reality in ways that please and enchant us, not in ways that demand as moral and social responsibility. In reading his work, I do have a sense of entering a solipsistic world in which a very detached and introspective self draws the outside world into itself and recreates it.

What do poetry and religion offer us in his perspective? In his 1940 poem, 'Of Modern Poetry', he describes the goal of poetry and imagination as 'the finding of a satisfaction'; he speaks of 'the poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice'. If we are poetic/religious spiders who have to spin aesthetic/religious projections because that is what we do, if we construct poetic and religious fictions, when does the poetic or the religion imagination reach the point of knowing what will suffice? If I am weighing peas, I know when I have sufficient peas to measure a kilo. But how do I measure sufficiency in relation to poetic and religious expression? At what point do I know that I'm getting it right, whatever 'it' is? And of course identifying 'it' is what the whole discussion is about. As I will argue later, Stevens finds himself in the same position as a theologian who has to, and can, speak about 'God', but is faced with the reality that God is not a thing that can be spoken about. Having a word for God does not give you knowledge of God. Our language may treat God in this way simply because it is an instrument for dealing with things in the world and their relations, but you cannot point to God and verify that what you say about God is the case. For Stevens, the 'it' in question is what he calls 'the real', which in religious imagining and poetic imagining – the same thing, of course – is re-presented, re-worked, re-viewed in ways that satisfy and please us.[14]

The theologian has to face the same issue: if I speak about God and Jesus Christ, how do I know if I'm doing it correctly? Karl Barth, and earlier, Athanasius in the fourth century, took the view that the Christian religion is based not on our search for God but on God's statement about himself in a way that flows from God's self-expressiveness and issues in an unsurpassable, revelatory self-manifestation. God's speech, his Word, is a person, Christ; the interpretative words that accompany and elucidate this declaration are Biblical – they are said to be 'inspired' by God and directive of human understanding when they are read in the light of Christ.[15] These Biblical teachings fold into the doctrinal tradition of the Church by which some clarity and regulative order is worked out in relation to revelation and Bible. Only if there is such an event, such a foundational, revelatory self-communication, says Barth, can the Christian faith be worthy

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[11] S.Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Hogarth Press, 1979), 8.
[12] Cf J.McDade, 'Episcopal and Prophetic Traditions in the Church', *New Blackfriars* (2011), 176-88.
[13] E. Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, (Athlone Press, 1994), 164; *Difficult Freedom* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 17.
[14] The assertion that the Church simply says it is to be *this* approach rather than *that*, may be a strategy for enforcing doctrinal order, but it is not an answer to the theological dilemma of knowing when you are speaking correctly about God.

[15] Surely this is the only sense in which Scripture can be said to be 'inspired'?

of trust; without it, how can we avoid the accusation that it is spun out of us as a manifestation of our nature rather than God's?

If theology springs simply from 'our words about God', even our most inspired words about God, we are in no position successfully to be sure that we are truly dealing with God and not with human imagining. You will recognise the challenge launched above all by Feuerbach in the nineteenth century whose work, *The Essence of Christianity*, treated God as a projection of human aspirations and values: religion and theology are no more than a poetic anthropology, telling us something about ourselves and nothing about God.[16] Barth thought that if you dealt with the question of God by locating it as the object of a movement within us, we would not be able to pass unscathed through the 'fire-stream' that is Feuerbach.[17] Liberal Protestantism, guided by Schleiermacher, has no defence against Feuerbach, he judged.

The only alternative that Barth saw was to found the Christian religion and its theology on God's 'language' about himself, his Word spoken to us from within the very being of God as an objectively constituted self-expression of the divine. On the basis of Christ, the divine Word made flesh, we can claim to have a knowledge of God that does not originate in human imagining. Of course the revelation is to be interpreted and human categories must be used, but according to Barth, this reception of the revelation belongs with the dynamic of the revelation itself and is not a subsequent 'human work' – as a good Calvinist, he has a low opinion of all 'human works'. The Holy Spirit, 'the seeing eye of grace in us' (Balthasar), ensures that the revelation in Christ is interpreted correctly, with consequences for the doctrine of God appropriate to this particular shape of God's self-iteration.

If this is the correct approach, Barth argued, then Christianity is not a religion alongside other 'religions'. *Revelatio dei non est in genere*: God's revelation is not one instance among others in a category of religious systems. A religion is how humans imagine God; by contrast, Christianity is based, not on how we construe and project the divine, but on God's statement about himself in the history of Israel, the person of Jesus Christ, the faith of the Church and the Scriptures associated with this revelatory Word. So Christianity is removed at a stroke from the category of 'imperfect', non-cognitive religions that can give us no more than a version of human aspirations projected on to putative divine figures. And, at a stroke, it is removed from the category of human imagination proposed by Santayana and Stevens.

If you take the Santayana and Stevens line, there is no objective basis on which our knowledge of God or Jesus Christ can be calibrated, tested and evaluated. Santayana thought that Statius's line, *Primus in orbe deos fecit timor* ('fear was the first to make gods in the world') 'is as true as anything so brief can be on so great a subject'.[18] If the first gods were the imaginative effects of fear, others presumably follow so 'it would be nearer the truth to base religion on the whole psychic complex of man';[19] Freud's attribution of religion to structural neurosis is not far away. Because religion, the older form of the imagination, is able no longer to enchant us, now we are to achieve the same outcome aesthetically. When religion ceases to be credible, the same quality of significance can be attained through poetry and art, as Stevens asserts:

> One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different

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[16] George Eliot translated Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* in 1854.
[17] Barth's criticisms are primarily directed against Schleiermacher who responded to Kant's critique of God-talk by choosing to begin theology as an exploration of the *humanum*, the experiences and impulses within human nature that indicate a relatedness to the Infinite.
[18] Quoted in J.Ratner, 'George Santayana's Theory of Religion', *The Journal of Religion* 3 (1923), 459-75; 464
[19] Ratner, 466.

> intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing, but the intention is not to foster a cult.[20]

So what is imagination expected to do, especially in the modern context? In his essay, 'Imagination as Value', he draws on some ideas from Ernst Cassirer that imagination 'now has universal *metaphysical* value' and 'poetic imagination is the only clue to reality'.[21] He distinguishes between on the one hand, imagination 'as a power of the mind over external objects', such as might be found in the sculptures of Michelangelo or the Jesuit church in Lucerne which fuses the 'real' and 'the visionary', presumably in High Baroque *trompe l'oeil* and, on the other hand, 'the imagination as metaphysics'. It is a mistake, he thinks, to discuss only the question of imagination in relation to the arts and letters; more significant is the role that imagination plays in life itself:

> To regard the imagination as metaphysics is to think of it as part of life, and to think of it as part of life is to realize the extent of artifice. We live in the mind.[22]
> Poetry is the imagination of life. A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it.[23]

An interpretation of this might be the following: the mind that springs from the world has the capacity to interpret the world. The only reality there is – what Stevens insistently calls 'the real', although he knows that it is elusive – is the reality that is interpreted by us heuristically, through acts of discovery and disclosure, and semantically, through the bestowal and creation of meaning. Interpretation is all; imaginative interpretation – as issues in poetry and art – is no less truth-seeking and truth-bearing than other approaches. In many ways, Stevens' poetry is an extended exploration of issues that are no less philosophical than aesthetic, bearing upon language and reality and the possible presence of God within both language and reality.

If this reading is correct, then the imagination in its fictive, poetic/religious productions intensifies what takes place all the time in our ordinary knowing. Poetry and the fictive work of imagination are not activities distinct from the other activities of the mind, but they are particular ways in which the meaning-creation and meaning-finding activities of the mind engage with 'the real' in ways that please our imaginative and intellectual taste. Stevens thinks of poetry as 'at least the equal of philosophy'.[24] Truth is the object of both: a rational idea satisfies the mind; an

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[20] *L*, 378. One of the substitutes for religion Stevens explores is the fictive hero, the 'major man', 'the fictive man created out of men', an echo of the Nietzschean *übermensch*, a life-affirming identity offering fictive possibilities. (*CP*, 336) 'The major man… is real enough to be believable, but he is also the man of imagination, the embellisher of reality… the major men can bring to life the fictions of the imagination, without which no man can survive, but, at the same time, they do not compromise the undistorted reality, without which all fictions are evasive' (G.S.Lenning, 'Stevens' Letters of Rock and Water' in *Critics on Wallace Stevens*, ed. P.L.McNamara (University of Miami Press, 1972), 52). Cf., J.Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: the Later Years 1923-1955* (Beech Tree Books, 1988), 242; B. Eeckhout in *The Cambridge Companion*, p.111. Stevens' comment on Nietzsche is perceptive: 'In his mind one does not see the world more clearly; both of us must often have felt how a strong mind distorts the world. Nietzsche's mind was a perfect example of that sort of thing. Perhaps his effect was merely the effect of the epatant ['*épater la bourgeoisie':* to shock people in a shallow way]. The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus. Nietzsche is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink.' (*L*., 431-2)

[21] 'Imagination as Value', *CP*, 726; emphasis added.

[22] *CP*, 730

[23] 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', in *CP*, 666-85; 684.

[24] *CP*, 668. 'My object is to write esthetically valid poetry. I am not so much concerned with philosophic validity.' (*L*, 752)

imaginative idea satisfies the imagination. A rational idea may not satisfy the imagination, and an imaginative idea may not satisfy the mind, and you know where this is going:

> From this analysis, we deduce that an idea that satisfies both the reason and the imagination, if it happened, for instance to be an idea of God, would establish a divine beginning and end for us which, at the moment the reason, singly, at best proposes, and on which, at the moment, the imagination, singly merely meditates.[25]

The verbs here ('proposes' and 'meditates') are significant: all the mind can do is propose an idea for adjudication and rational acceptance, while all the imagination can do is meditate, presumably on the aesthetic quality of what is created; Most of the time (all of the time?), they work separately, 'singly' not jointly.

Later I will express doubts about the possibility of 'speaking God' at all in language unless there are strict, subversive controls in operation. I also wonder about the possible inclusion of God within 'the real' as Stevens and others construe it. My fear is that this would result in what, following Heidegger, is called 'onto-theology', the creation of a single category, 'being', in which God and the world are conceptually placed. But *Deus non est in genere*: God is not one item in a class of things. A great deal of modern atheism seems to treat God as a possible 'fact' within the world, as a 'secondary cause' alongside other (creaturely) secondary causes – a 'fact' of course to be rejected as unnecessary and fantastical. In an important sense, God does not add anything to the world, and if you are a Thomist, you will also hold that the world does not add anything to God. These points are true because the relation of God and the world cannot be viewed as an addition of one thing to another: you do not get a better account of the world by including God as an element in the account. If you include God as a feature in such an account, it can only be as a pointer to why the world is at all, not as a datum that alters other data. We may speak of 'God and the world' but God is not added to the world in the way that John is added to Mary to make two possibly happy people, nor does the world mark an ontological enhancement of God. The world is not alongside God in any serious sense other than in how we use words.[26]

What is difficult to see is how God might be, could ever possibly be, a fiction such as Stevens thinks. Of course there are fictive gods whom we imagine, whom we create out of our metaphors and projections, whom we and others declare to be dead, but such gods are how we meet the meaning-creating dimension of ourselves and eventually come to be pleased, satisfied by what we imaginatively grasp about the real. But by definition, this is not the transcendent reality, the radically other goodness that is not an object in the world and therefore cannot be the object of our imagining. The god who might be the supreme fiction is created by our imagining; the condition of knowing the true God lies precisely in withdrawing God from the web of such imagining. Where, in an Idealist aesthetic, such as I suspect that Stevens offers, we are in touch with the supreme through the idea of the supreme, by contrast, classical theology, less tainted with romantic or philosophical idealism and keener to distinguish between 'the real' and 'the idea of the real', denies that having the idea of God gives you access to God at all. [27] *Conceptio dei non est deus*.

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[25] *CP*, 668. The essay begins with his discussion, and rejection, of Pascal's strict disjunction between reason and imagination.

[26] 'In the phrase "God and the world", the word "and" carries all the connotations of relatedness, dependence, communication, revelation, union, and a destiny of ultimate blessedness. The world is not alongside God but is grounded in God's act, so in the phrase 'God and the world', 'and' signals a deep relatedness' (J.McDade, 'Covenant in Christian-Jewish Relations' unpublished paper on Heythrop Staff Webpage). In Aquinas' terms, God's action is 'primary causality'; what things (and people) do is 'secondary causality'; the key rule is that there is no conflict, contrast or binary opposition between primary and secondary causality as though the presence of one interferes with the operation of the other.

27 'Stevens can be said to be offering a poetic transposition of transcendental idealism, where the relation between thought and things and words and world is re-described as the relation between

If Santayana and Stevens are right, the imaginative style of religion now gives way in the modern age to the imaginative style of the poetic and the fictive. But why should the new poetic, the articulation of the 'supreme (non-religious) fiction', that Stevens struggles to express do it better than the God or gods of religion? He will try to answer this in his poetic charter, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', by insisting at the start that 'It Must Be Abstract'. The word 'abstract' is important here because it signals the denial of imagery and content in relation to the supreme fiction, a preference for the apophatic route of negation of imagery. Steven's strategy is to discover the 'essential poem at the centre of things', 'the central poem', 'the poem of the whole', 'the huge, high harmony that sounds,' the 'Primitive Like an Orb', 'a nature to its natives all /Beneficence, a repose, utmost repose'. Returning to the letter we quoted earlier:

> I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The NOTES [the poem 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction'] start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract. Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure.[28]

Note the importance too of 'change' issuing in 'pleasure' as the effect of poetry: imaginative delight is the outcome of a successful engagement with an effective supreme fiction. What is interesting is that he begins with the same strategy as theologians when they want to protect God from what Nietzsche calls the 'mobile army of metaphors' that are always threatening to colonise the divine. The formula from the IVth Lateran Council in 1215 dispels fogs of theological nonsense: there is 'no similarity between God and creature without an even greater dissimilarity'. We might paraphrase this by saying that you should undermine your *positive* statements about God by making even stronger *negative* statements about God. If you say 'God is like this', you must immediately undercut it by affirming even more strongly that God is even more unlike this.

In the terms we used earlier, if we 'spin' religion out of the fiction-producing impulse of the mind, we must not think that these schemes give us a mastery over the divine. Theology, however, although it acknowledges the value of this Lateran prescription, rarely feels bound by it, particularly in its florid, frequently mythological, treatment of Trinitarian relations.[29] John Henry Newman's characterisation is highly relevant to how Stevens handles the aesthetic alternative to religion. I commend to you Newman's comparison of doing theology properly to doing an algebraic equation of adding and subtracting, 'saying and unsaying', to try to reach even a minimal level of sense:

> When we reflect on Him and put into words our thoughts about Him, we are forced to transfer to a new meaning ready made words, which primarily belong to objects of time and place. We are aware, while we do so, that they are inadequate, but we have the alternative of doing so, or nothing at all. We can only remedy their insufficiency by

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imagination and reality, the two master concepts of Stevens' poetics.' ((S. Critchley, 'Poetry as Philosophy,' *European Journal of American Culture* 24 (2005), 179-90; 185). In Critchley's words, the imagination is 'the transformation of the external into the internal through the work of subjective creation, a creation that is given sensuous form, and, therefore rendered external in the work of art, the poem'. Simpler is the Mallarméan principle 'Tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre' ('Everything in the world exists to end up in a book'). But See Steven's comment: 'recently I have been fitted into too many philosophic frames. As a philosopher one is expected to achieve and express one's center… if I felt the obligation to pursue the philosophy of my poems, I should be writing philosophy not poetry; and it is poetry that I want to write. (*L*, 753)

[28] *L*, 430

[29] What do we know so precisely about God that would enable us to speak with the assuredness of Balthasar and Moltmann about God's mode of being? In addition to tritheistic patterns of a plurality of 'persons' incompatible with monotheism, they promote an essentially Gnostic ontology of hypostases doing things to one another in mutually affecting ways. This seems to be favoured in the modern Church but it is profoundly wrong.

> confessing it. We can do no more than put ourselves on the guard as to our own proceeding, and protest against it, while we do <frame> <adhere to> it. We can only set right one error of expression by another. By their method of antagonism we steady our minds, not so as to reach their object, but to point them in the right direction: as in an algebraical process we might add and subtract in series, approximating little by little, by saying and unsaying, to a positive result.[30]

Theology for Newman, one feels, was a 'zero-sum game': the more you take away what might be positive, the less grasp you have on God. Theology is not an accumulation of things we know about God; properly conducted, it issues in a growing number of things that we know do not apply to God. Newman knows that theology is chastening and difficult, a struggle with crude, resistant words, 'a raid on the inarticulate/ With shabby equipment always deteriorating', as Eliot puts it.[31] But of course, that is theology, a reflective discourse on religion which is always in danger of escaping from the intellectual controls of the theological thought police engaged in quality control. It would follow then that the goal of fiction and imagination, in the absence of God – a fictive idea anyway – is not to persuade us, but to pleasure us intellectually. Clearly the status of the 'supreme fiction' that would replace God bothered Stevens, and with good reason. He describes himself as obsessed with this idea of the 'supreme fiction'? He writes:

> When I get up at 6 o'clock in the morning… the thing crawls all over me; it is in my hair when I shave and I think of it in the bathtub. Then I come down here to the office and, except for an occasional letter like this, have to put it to one side. After all, I like Rhine wine, blue grapes, good cheese, endive and lots of books, etc., etc., etc., as much as I like the supreme fiction.[32]

Stevens' closing remark is meant to be light-hearted of course, but there is a serious point here, as I suspect Stevens knew: does the supreme fiction that issues in intellectual, aesthetic pleasure, do anything more for us than these other things – wine, grapes, cheese, etc. – except that it does it in a way that pleases and satisfies the mind and not the taste buds? A form of intellectual hedonism sated by what is on offer, perhaps much as an Oxford don might have savoured a clever remark from Isaiah Berlin in the 1960s. Does the supreme fiction do any more for us than Isaiah Berlin or even Irving Berlin?

His insistence that the Supreme Fiction 'Must Be Abstract' [the title of the first section of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'] is meant to eliminate earlier, inherited fictions such as the idea of an 'inventing mind' such as God, and cleanse the mind of its old furniture. With reference to this long poem, Joan Richardson speaks of the influence on Stevens of Freud's case for the 'necessity of clearing away illusions of all kinds' among them 'the outworn remnants of religious attachments'.[33] Nietzsche too is also present in the purifying of perception that precedes an engagement with the real:

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

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[30] J.H.Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, ed. J.D.Holmes (Oxford University Press, 1976), 102
[31] 'T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker' in *Four Quartets*.
[32] *L*, 431
[33] J.Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: the Later Years 1923-1955* (Beech Tree Books, 1988), 58.

Of this idea not 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 death of one god is the death of all.[34]

Stevens says he is trying to describe 'the truth of the poet in a time of disbelief' (847), with the possibility that 'the revelation of reality takes on a special meaning, without effort or consciousness on the part of the poet, at such a time'.[35] I think this may be true, partly because the critique of religion can be as stimulating and as important in the search for truth as positive religious affirmations may be: we often come to truth more by denial than by affirmation, as Maimonides taught Aquinas to think. '[T]he great poems of heaven and hell have been written,' Stevens avers, 'and the great poem of the earth remains to be written. I suppose it is that poem that will constitute the true prize of the spirit'.[36] Clearly his explorations of imagination in a time of disbelief are intended to foster such a poem. If we are poetic/religious spiders who spin aesthetic/religious projections because that is what we do, if we construct poetic and religious fictions, how does it bear upon 'the revelation of reality' which, I presume is the meaning of 'the great poem of the earth'? In a late, untitled poem, Stevens considers the relation of image/mythology to place and poet:

A mythology reflects its region. Here
In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
When mythology was possible – But if we had –
That raises the question of the image's truth.
The image must be of the nature of its creator.
It is the nature of its creator increased,
Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region
Wood of his forests and stone out of his field
Or from under his mountain. (*CP*, 476)

The question of the 'image's truth' is connected with the 'nature' of the poet and is directed towards enhancing the poet's identity. The world around the poet, 'wood', 'forests', 'stones', 'mountains' seem to enter him and come to expression in his images. But what is the significance of these images and fictions that cannot find mythological (religious) expression? A month after the letter quoted above, he expresses his bewilderment about how to approach and characterise the 'supreme fiction' that is to stand in the place of the disappearing gods:

> I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction. A man as familiar with my things as you are will be justified in thinking that I mean poetry. I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean. The next thing for me to do will be to try to be a little more precise about the enigma. I hold off from even attempting that because, as soon as I rationalize, I lose the poetry of the idea… As I see the subject, it could occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations. In trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been, and for that matter remains, the first necessity seems to be breadth. It is true that the thing would never amount to much until there is no breadth, or, rather, until it has all come to a point. [Some lines earlier in the same letter, he wrote of the 'abstract' quality of the supreme fiction, by which I think he means 'non-representational' or apophatic:] The abstract does not exist, but is certainly as immanent: that is to say, the

[34] W. Stevens, *CP*, 329.
[35] *Collected Poetry and Prose* (Library of America, 1997), 847-8. Hereafter: *CP*.
[36] 'Imagination as Value' in *CP*, 722

> fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract.[37]

When he tries 'to be a little more precise about the enigma', he backs off from it for fear that the too much rational attention will destroy 'the poetry of the idea'. He really doesn't know what he is talking about, and that is good and right; Herbert McCabe used to say that Thomas Aquinas thought that theologians don't know what they are talking about. By definition, theology is about *nothing* ('no-thing'). Stevens' comments in this letter can replicated in the experience of any theologian or any 'school of rabbis' trying to speak about God. Why should it surprise us that Stevens encounters the same problems of knowing how to *refer* and how to *predicate* anything of a reality that by definition is indeterminate? God ('the abstract') is not accessible to language. His statement 'the abstract does not exist' corresponds exactly to the scholastic principle, *Deus non est in genere*: God is not one thing in a category of things, so how can words of existence and attribution be predicated of either 'the abstract' or 'God'? As the theologian does not know how to proceed, neither does the poet. If the poem is 'a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract', so is theology. How can we get it right if we do not know what it is? And 'where' is it? Not a silly question at all, I think. Look at how Riddel, reviewing the publication of Stevens' letters in 1967, interprets Stevens' 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction':

> …its occasion is the process of the mind contemplating what it can conceive of but not possess – an ultimate reality – except that it possesses the supreme in its very grasp of the possibilities of the supreme. The mind, that is to say, possesses its moment of the supreme in the act of meditating the idea of the supreme; for the idea is its own creation. If the imagination exists only in relation to otherness, it *realizes* itself only in the phenomena of its own creation – what we call the poetic image, the fiction….this impulse [towards the supreme fiction] is nothing less than the primal impulse of the imagination seeking the 'centre of reality', seeking repose or order, a place to realize itself. For the 'centre of reality' lay assuredly within the self, even as reality lay without.
>
> For the supreme fiction, Stevens seems to discover, exists not beyond not out of this world, but in the center of the self, and in the imagination's new beginnings. It is the image of the human need to discover its humanness, and the pleasure it affords is the pleasure of bringing into reality, or image, what otherwise is only the formlessness of desire.[38]

This is helpful because it identifies how the supreme fiction is significant for us and where this significance lies. It is our internal version of the external world: that might be an initial description. It comes to realisation in us through the idea that we devise of it; the idea conveys the real in a significant way. We can say, surely tautologously, that the imagination expresses itself, 'in the phenomena of its own creation' and in these phenomena – surely the images and linguistic webs of imagined versions of the real? – it expresses the 'human need to discover its humannness'. The supreme fiction then is how we construe the real in ways that please us and that enable us to be at ease with our identities by constructing a 'house of imaginative meaning' drawn from, but ultimately tangentially related to, the world outside.[39]

The supreme fiction would be how our humanity is delivered to us through the imaginative webs we create, by which we enchant ourselves by a detour through the external world on which variations, 'asides', are played intellectually and sensually. This may be what Stevens' 'supreme

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[37] *L*, 434-5
[38] *The English Journal* 56 (1967), 525-34; 527, 530.
[39] This is not far from Rilke. 'The primary task of living, for Rilke, is *imagining* the real: interior *representation* of Chartres, music, night, spring, earth and tree.' (M.R.Miles, *Reading for Life: Beauty, Pluralism and Responsibility* (Continuum, 1997),137. 'Nowhere, beloved, can world exist but within.' (R.M. Rilke, *Duino Elegies* 7)

fiction' is about. Stevens will speak of 'the poem of the mind' *composed* by the mind to *satisfy* the mind. This will deliver truth experienced *aesthetically*. I want to approach some of these matters through Stevens' poem, 'Of Modern Poetry':

> The poem of the mind in the act of finding
> What will suffice. It has not always had
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
> Was in the script.
> Then the theatre was changed
>
> To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice. It has
> To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage,
> And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
> With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
> In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
> Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
> Of which, an invisible audience listens,
> Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
> In an emotion as of two people, as of two
> Emotions becoming one. The actor is
> A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
> An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
> Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
> Beyond which it has no will to rise.
> It must
> Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
> Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
> Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.[40]

What do the words of the poem bring about? Not an understanding of the reality outside the poet or the listener: the poem is not a dispatch from a far country or the conveying of one person's experience to another. No. Although the poet's words spoken on a new stage are accountable to 'the men and women of the time', the focus of attention quickly passes to what takes place internally, within the listener's mind. The 'poem of the mind' enables the listener to be deeply in touch with herself. The poet has to find words that enable the listener to hear herself in the words of the poem, words which enable the 'finding of a satisfaction'.

What does the listener come to understand? Nothing directly, I would suggest, about the world itself, but only about how the world is conveyed imaginatively in the fiction offered in poetry. There is an imaginative transformation through art that gives us access to the real, via a detour which is the poem itself. The function of the poet in relation to the people, Stevens says, 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. His role, in short, is to help people live their lives'.[41] How strange it is, and yet how significant, that the final lines of the poem evoke scenes from Dutch 17th Century genre painting: 'a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/combing'. These are the realized images of artistic transformation that give us access again to 'a man', 'a woman', emblematic signs of ordinariness. Modern poetry is to return us pleased to the real, the undramatic and the ordinary.

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[40] *CP*, 218
[41] 'The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words', *CP*, 660-1.

If this works, it will be, I suspect, an intensely, solipsistic experience: the poem will cast a spell on the mind and bring it to a pitch of perception and awareness. The listener, through the words of the 'modern poetry' that is to stand in place of God, is to hear the words and thereby hear *herself* intimately, as in an emotional exchange in which 'two people' experience themselves becoming 'one'. (Surely a sexual reference here.) The 'metaphysician in the dark' (the poet) produces sounds (words) which wholly contain the mind raised to heightened and understanding. Stevens wants us to think that the real is transformed by imagination in such a way that we grasp the real pleasurably in its poetical reordering. Against the accusation that art is an escape from the real, a preference for the imagined over the real (Plato), Stevens insists that a poetry that deals with reality does not remove us from it, but returns us there:

> There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates 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.

He continues in ways which surely evoke the experience described in 'Of Modern Poetry' of the insight and understanding which comes to us when the poem works:

> The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them.[42]

You should not ignore the phrases 'all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions,' because they signal the only transcendence available to us in the imaginative spell of the 'supreme fiction', the transformation of the real through the act of imagination. We have a 'deepening need' for words that convey to us 'a finality' and 'perfection'. Just as earlier ages, Stevens surely suggests, devised images, dramas and styles of deity which gave us a fiction in which we could believe because it was treated as real, so now, when we realise that God has been imagined, we now live within poetic, imaginative fictions that we know to be both true and fictive. Stevens' quest for the supreme fiction intends it to have a determinative power over us so that what we create imaginatively governs us by enchanting us with its version of the real. 'Imaginative truth is the most immediate way of presenting ultimate reality to a human being … ultimate reality is what we call God.' [43]

But what is conveyed in this fictive way? I suspect that the goal envisaged by Stevens is the experience of full, authentic selfhood through contact with a reality whose impact on us cannot be expressed in words.[44] The work of artistic imagination is the epiphany of the concrete particulars of the world, the manifestion of 'the poem of pure reality', which , if it can be attained, is the fulfilment of authentic 'vision' (existence). In his poem, 'Angel surrounded by Paysans,' 'the angel of reality' appears at the door and says that in the angel's presence we are led to see again:

> I am one of you and being one of you
> Is being and knowing what I am and know.
>
> Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
> Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

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[42] 'Noble Rider', *CP*, 662-3.
[43] R. S. Thomas : Priest and Poet" (BBC TV, 2 April 1972) R.S.Thomas on Wikiquote.
[44] Some of the ideas in this section first appeared in J. McDade, 'The Moon Prince and the Angel of Reality,' *The Way* (1988), 19-26.

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of half-meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition appareled in
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulders and quickly, too quickly, I am gone? (*CP*, 423) [45]

The angel of reality personifies the search for a reality, glimpsed through images and fictions – the angel is, after all, the 'necessary' angel – which is essentially wordless and imageless, in whose presence we discover our deepest capacity for 'vision' and truthful existence. The ancient prohibition in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions against employing images of the divine is prompted by a sense that ineffability is not a deficiency in the mode of divine presence, but a positive factor in drawing us beyond images to the mystery which discloses our identity. In a consciously non-religious way, Stevens finds his way back to this insight: for him, human beings seem nothing less than 'the poem of pure reality', direct contact with 'what is', without the deviation of reflective thought and its interpretative symbols:

We keep coming back and coming back
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word.
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point of which it is itself
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
Nothing beyond reality.[46]

The image which designates the association of reality and authentic selfhood is that of *vision*, the irreplaceable metaphor which signals a perfected response to the true and the real. In the presence of the 'angel' of reality, we 'see the earth again,' 'with the sight of simple seeing' without the intrusion of ideas of the real. The angel takes us beyond imagining.

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[45] 'In Angel Surrounded by Paysans the angel is the angel of reality. This is clear only if the reader is of the idea that we live in the world of the imagination, in which reality and contact with it are the great blessings. For nine readers out of ten, the necessary angel will appear to be the angel of the imagination and for nine days out of ten that is true, although it is the tenth day that counts. (*L*, 753) 'The point of the poem is that there must be in the world about us things that solace us quite as fully as any heavenly visitation could.' (*L*, 661)

[46] 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,' *CP*, 402

Clearly, I am proposing here a very religious reading of the themes of reality and vision which pervade Stevens' poetic vocabulary. Later I will argue that by reducing God to one of the fictive imaginings that delight us rather than as the necessary foundation of a reality in which we can delight imaginatively, Stevens' aesthetic is weakened. Another, to my mind, contradictory possibility which receives more attention from him than it should concerns the question of whether we can be said to believe in what is untrue. In a letter, he entertains

> the idea that, in the various predicaments of belief, it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield, ourselves to a declared fiction… the same thing as saying that it might be possible for us to believe in something that we know to be untrue.[47]

You can believe in something if you think it is real and true: that was the strength of religion – and still is, I hope, unless we succumb to a non-realist version of God-talk as found in Don Cupitt's 'Sea of Faith' movement. But can you really be said to 'believe' in a declared fiction, as distinct from 'entertaining' such a fiction? If you know that what you might believe in is fictive, the product of the imagination, how can you *credit* it? Belief in God is surely inseparable from a fundamental trust in relation to the world and ourselves. Can you put your credence in a lie, even a lie that gives you pleasure, 'as if' it were true?[48] Stevens records a conversation with a student one evening as they walked home:

> I said that I thought we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction. The student said that that was an impossibility, that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time. There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief; if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. There are fictions that are extensions of reality. There are plenty of people who believe in Heaven as definitely as your New England ancestors and my Dutch ancestors believed in it. But Heaven is an extension of reality. [49]

Stevens' opening sentence says we are now able to believe *only* in what we construct through imagination, what he calls 'fiction'. His assumption, of course, is that our reflective grasp of all our instruments of understanding, including religion and art, recognises that everything to which we give our trust, our faith, our credence, is devised by us. We are now sophisticated enough, suggests Stevens, not to be frightened by our critical 'coming of age' and can now believe while knowing that what we believe depends on our creativity: truth, even when it is discovered, is framed by the categories which the mind brings to the world.

That what Nietzsche calls 'the mobile army of metaphors' not only indelibly infects the narratives of belief, but even generates these narratives in the first place seems to have been Stevens' view.

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[47] *L*, 443

[48] We know that Stevens had read Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* carefully in 1928 and 1929. In it, Freud discusses the philosophy of 'As if' in relation to Hans Vaihinger: 'The ['As if' philosophy] asserts that our thought-activity includes a great number of hypotheses whose groundlessness and even absurdity we fully realize. They are called 'fictions,' but for a variety of practical reasons we have to behave 'as if' we believed in these fictions. This is the case with religious doctrines because of their incomparable importance for the maintenance of human society… I am reminded of one of my children who was distinguished at an early age by peculiarly marked matter-of-factedness. When the children were being told a fairy story and were listening to it with rapt attention, he would come up and ask, 'Is that a true story?' When he was told it was not, he would turn away with a look of disdain. We may expect that people will soon behave in the same way toward fairy tales of religion, in spite of the advocacy of "As if".' Richardson, *op.cit.*, 58-62; quotation 58-9. Cf. Stevens on Freud in 'The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words', *CP*, 651.

[49] *L*, 430. The 'will to believe' is from William James.

Aquinas and others may have worked out important strategies about how metaphors when applied to God can be true, but the accusation from Stevens and his intellectual mentors, Santayana, Nietzsche and Freud, is that the very idea of God or gods lies in metaphorical, imaginative, fictive impulses within us. And yet, the fictive can be an object of 'belief'.

Presumably the argument is that the only meaning there is is the one that flows from our impulse to interpret mute reality: we are the 'semantic point' at which the world develops semiotic categories and imaginative vision. We see the world imaginatively, metaphorically, in categories which are embedded in us – surely echoes of Kant here; our sign-bearing systems shape how we engage with the world, and they come back to us as interpretations of 'the real'.[50] Reality is conveyed to us through the interpretative impulses and categories; hence, if I interpret Stevens correctly here, all our engagement with the world is filtered through the lens of our mind. (And why wouldn't it be?)

In defence of Stevens, we should recognise that to create a metaphor or fiction is not to engage in mendacity; we use them and other semantic devices meaningfully, knowing that metaphor and semantic expansion is part of our activity of seeing and giving meaning. Metaphor and imaginative description are not fraudulent: we trust them and use them in reasonable ways, in ways that promote understanding. The meanings we produce, the connections we create through seeing one thing as another, are the only meanings there are and these must be regarded as versions of 'the real' – an important designation for Stevens.[51] What are we to make of the singer at Key West?

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang, and singing, made.[52]

One hesitates to derive strictly philosophical lessons from a poem, but the assertion surely is that the world at Key West is made by her in her singing and that is its reality: it is a landscape created, constituted, by her voice. The conjunction of landscape and voice is the fictive account of the real in which we imagine the world being made by her singing over it.[53] When Peter Geach wrote that 'God sustains the world as a singer sustains his song', he was transposing the same image into a principle of classical theism quite different from Stevens, but not unrelated. God's singing is the condition of the world's existing. Stevens uses the image in a very different way. 'What the spirit wants it creates,

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[50] 'On Kant's picture, the realm of sensibility is our access to a world that is indeed real for us, but that world is always already shot through with conceptual content, it is articulated as such through the categories of the understanding and in dependent upon the spontaneity of the subject… It is in this Kantian lineage that Stevens has to be placed. (S. Critchley, 'Poetry as Philosophy,' *European Journal of American Culture* 24 (2005), 179-90; 185.

[51] His poem 'Earthly Anecdote' describes deer frightened and harassed by a prairie fire seen as a 'firecat'; 'There's no symbolism in the "Earthly Anecdote". There's a good deal of theory about it, however; but explanations spoil things.' 'I intended something quite concrete: actual animals, not original chaos' (*L*, 204, 209).

[52] The Idea of Order at Key West,' *CP*, 106

[53] Is it absurd to derive this from cinema: a landscape over which the camera pans, with a music soundtrack?

> even if it has to do so in a fiction,' he writes.[54] This phrase ends his commentary on the section 'It Must Give Pleasure: III' of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' that begins, 'A lasting visage in a lasting bush'.

The status of our image-making, or our singing, is that it enhances us, its creator and singer, increasing and heightening our grasp of our own reality, through our fictive imagining of the outside world. If you find this problematic and fear a collapse into a Kantian assertion of 'noumena' to which we do not have access, you are probably a post-Kantian, but certainly pre-Nietzschean, ontologist who holds that all truth about the world is grounded in an absolute truth, God himself, the guarantee of all instances of veracity. Nietzsche, in frustration, exclaimed: 'I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar'.[55] This powerful remark says that if we still trust that sentences carry truthful statements, and that there is an underlying realism in relation to language and truth, then, Nietzsche judges despairingly, this is intrinsically theistic. That there is an objective order that can be interpreted linguistically and semantically is the theological/realist context against which Nietzsche's atheism rages. As long as we make coherent, truth-bearing sentences, we are still caught in the God-governed order of things, words and truth. (Damn! How can I be an atheist when my language won't let me?) Alastair MacIntyre's comments on Nietzsche here has a bearing upon the status of Stevens' discussion of the supreme fiction. He says that

> What is preserved in this kind of residual 'non-theistic theism' [which Nietzsche attacks] is the assumption that there is a single true view of the world and of its ordering, and for human judgments to be true and for human desiring and willing to be aimed at what is genuinely good they must be in conformity with that divinely created order. … [The accusation of Nietzsche] is that the conception of rationality, indeed the conception of language and its mode of application to the world presupposed by that conception, is itself theological…. So [Nietzsche's] accusation is not just that theism is in part false because it requires the truth of realism, but that realism is inherently theistic.
>
> What Nietzsche means by belief in grammar was belief that the structure of language somehow mirrors and presupposes belief in an order of things, in virtue of which one mode of conceptualizing reality can be more adequate to that reality than another. To rid oneself of such a belief would be instead to treat purely linguistic meanings as a set of context-free structures, available for expressing and indefinitely large number of alternative conceptualizations, none more adequate than any other, because there is *no* underlying reality in relation to which adequacy could be measured. It was Nietzsche's insight that so long as reference to such a reality is still presupposed, belief in God is covertly present. And in so asserting Nietzsche simply inverted the Augustinian standpoint: without God there is no genuine objectivity of interpretation or conceptualization.[56]

Should we characterise Stevens' approach to imagination and the real as a form of 'residual "non-theistic theism"' attacked by Nietzsche and elucidated by MacIntyre: while explicitly denying that there is a God, nevertheless there is a working ('residual') assumption that the role of the poet is to interpret, imaginatively, the features of an ordered world – a form of 'implicit, non-theistic realism'. Or does Stevens belong to the other camp in which we have rid ourselves of the idea of an ordered world and 'adequacy' no longer is identifiable or measurable? Align poetry and religion as Stevens explicitly does, linking them only apparently chronologically – religion was for an earlier age, poetry is for now – declare God to be the 'supreme fiction', and you are left facing,

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[54] *L*, 438.

[55] F.Nietzsche, '"Reason"' in Philosophy', *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols* ed,. A.Ridley & J.Norman (CUP, 2004), 170)

[56] A.MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 67, 98.

in the second phrase, an 'indefinitely large number of alternative conceptualizations', none of which can be said to deal with the real because, in a paradoxical but perhaps inevitable phrase, *the reality of the real cannot be secured* by this account of the world and the imagination. Signs and things are related only arbitrarily.

What is truth in poetry if the condition of all realistic claims, namely God, is declared in advance to be simply another imaginative fiction alongside the poetic imagination itself? If God is declared by Nietzsche and Stevens no longer to be the basis of the order of the world, but a delusion no longer worthy of credence, this surely has bearings of how 'truth' and 'truth in poetry' are conceived. If Stevens' 'purely linguistic meanings' are free-floating 'conceptualizations, none more adequate than any other', it would undermine his claim that the imagination operative in poetry deals with 'the real'. We saw that the question of adequacy and sufficiency is central to Stevens' poetic, evoked in the phrase 'the poem of the mind in finding what will suffice'. As mentioned earlier, perhaps the only criterion by which the fictive can be judged adequate lies in how far the products of imagination please and enchant.

In Stevens' perspective, there is nothing outside the fictive, against which the fictive can be judged in terms of accuracy or veracity, because the fictive is how the real comes to delight and please us. The real is available to us, presumably, only in the categories of the imagination. So on what basis can 'the real' have any distinct status apart from its mediation in 'the poetic' or 'the imaginative' or 'the fictive'? It is this very frustration, I think, and the ambiguities it contains, which prompts Stevens' repeated circling of the question of language, the imagination, fiction and 'the real'. And it is this frustration that haunts all his discussion of God, imagination and fiction. If the real is accessed, and its meanings created, by the activity of the imagination, is the real no more than what surfaces in our schemes of imagining, without a true engagement with *what is*? It is a poetic transcription of Kant's distinction between the *phenomena* with which we engage and the *noumena* that elude the mind. Is the world constituted by the real that is God (Aquinas)? Or is the world constituted by the imagination's re-working of it? That is surely the central question and I think that Stevens never really settles it. I see echoes of this in his poem, 'A Child Asleep in Its Own Life':

> Among the old men that you know,
> There is one, unnamed, that broods
> On all the rest, in heavy thought.
>
> They are nothing, except in the universe
> Of that single mind. He regards them
> Outwardly and knows them inwardly,
>
> The sole emperor of who they are,
> Distant, yet close enough to wake
> The chords above your bed tonight.[57]

Who is the 'one' who broods on the old men 'in heavy thought'? Old men who have no reality except in the 'universe of that single mind', who is 'sole emperor' in relation to them? Transcendent ('distant') yet immanent ('close') in ways that create music in the child's dreams ('the chords')? God, I suggest, is evoked all through this poem, but not named, and this is deliberate. You have the evocation of divine presence, but in ways that give you an 'unalterable vibration' (n.39) of the divine, but with God formally occluded.

At this point it may be helpful to develop some ideas of an alternative account of God, the imagination and the real that might be drawn from classical theism. You will remember that Aquinas' formula for God is simply *ipsum esse*, 'actuality itself': God is the real and the true problem for Christian theology is not God's existence but the existence of everything that is not

[57] *CP*, 468

God. Are all our meanings ultimately, despairingly for Nietzsche, grounded in the reality of God's making an order of being which is the condition of there being a *creaturely, freely constituted* world that the mind, emerging from properties within that world, comes to explore and express? When I listen to Johann Sebastian Bach's instrumental music, I hear it as a musical transcription of an infinitely complex world coming from the silence of a simple God: it is, in sounds, what the world looks like when it comes from God, ordered, subject to dissonances because it is physical and imperfect, but these dissonances are ultimately resolved by harmony, the musical equivalent of grace.

In this realist perspective, the world has an objective status which is interpreted artistically: if art enchants, it is because the world is suffused with the beauty of the divine action. Enchantment then is not the consequence of aesthetically pleasing imaginings, but what happens when we come into contact with a world sustained by 'actuality', *ipsum esse*. There is an order of reality: namely, the world as it comes from God, and this is an extension of the expressiveness proper to the divine being itself, and it is suffused with the qualities of goodness, truth and beauty.

For Aquinas, the condition of there being a world at all is that there is are movements of self-imaging and unitive love in God that come to be *causal* 'outside' God.[58] This enables Aquinas to secure the status of creation as the object of divine goodness springing directly from the dynamic life of God. His argument is that if there is a *Word* in God, an exuberant expressiveness proper to the divine nature, and if there is also *Love*, the impulse of charity, goodness and self-gift, then within the generativity of the real (*Ipsum esse*) arises the fictive making that produces the world. God's self-imaging Word – for Aquinas and Bonaventure, the Word is the image not only of God but also of the creatures that will come from God – is the condition of the world's existence. For Aquinas, then, the Word is the 'supreme fiction' within God that makes the world be; it wholly contains the divine mind, 'below which it cannot descend,/ Beyond which it has no will to rise' ('Of Modern Poetry'); it is 'the finding of a satisfaction', God's articulation of his reality in a way that, when it is extended *ad extra*, makes the world be.

Put crisply, the *intransitive* actions within God of knowledge and love are the conditions of the *transitive* actions outside God, namely, creation. The otherness of the creation is the created effect, the extension *ad extra*, of an intelligent alterity within the divine life; the existence of creaturely agents capable of free self-determination is grounded in the free circulation of being, thought and love within God. Because there is a divine Word that gives rise to things, our (lesser) words are transcriptions and signs of the things constituted by divine goodness. When we create visual, verbal and auditory art, we enact and evoke, in ways proper to our nature, the divine act of imagining that makes the world be in the first place.

From this classical theistic perspective, the truth and beauty of the world are features of things as they come from God. The work of the poet or artist connects with the real as a finite 'making' (in words, objects and sounds) that corresponds to, evokes and in some measure participates in God's infinite 'making' the world to be. The divine intellect 'thinks' the world and, by thinking it, makes it, and the artist analogously thinks a version of the world and makes it in his or her chosen medium. The Catholic Cathedral in Palermo in Sicily was built by Arab workmen, and they were permitted to place an Arabic inscription – I think from the Qur'an – above one of the doors that reads, 'When God made the world, he did not make everything': there is, in other words, still the scope for human 'making' as a participation in the creation of a 'true, beautiful, good' world.

These are elements in an account which is as imaginative as it is (or claims to be) ontological. Its strength is that it preserves the status of the world as participating in an objectively constituted order of truth and goodness. It differs considerably from the presuppositions which guide

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[58] 'The going out of the persons [of the Trinity] in the unity of essence is the cause of the going out of creatures in the diversity of essence' (Aquinas, I *Sent.* d.2, *divisio textus).* 'The eternal processions [of the persons in God] are the cause and reason (*causa et ratio*) of the production of creatures' (Aquinas, I *Sent.*d.14,q.1,a.1).

Stevens' treatment. Stevens, I suggest, fails to do justice to God because he is intent on viewing God as an object of the imagination, rather than as the reality who cannot be imagined without betrayal and idolatry. This leads him to equate God, fiction and the imagination in ways that in the end undermine the possibility of the imaginative mind engaging truly with the real, because he cannot secure the distinct status of the real.

By treating God as a product of human imaginings, his aesthetic, although it deals with what he insistently calls 'the real', is in the end not an engagement with 'what is'. His aesthetic is rather an intellectually pleasurable, perhaps solipsistic enchantment of the mind through what it imagines as it re-works, re-configures, re-views engagement with the world via its imaginings. The role of the world, we might say, is to end up in the poet's mind, giving him satisfaction. Not much of a vision, but certainly recognisable as an alternative to a Christian doctrine of creation in which the world matters not because we think it but because God thinks it and in thinking it makes it be. Stevens' quest for the supreme fiction asks us to do what God does, namely imagine the world and in imagining it cause it to be real noetically and ontologically, but Stevens does not seem to be aware of this. In the absence of God, he expects that the poet will do or try to do what God does. That the poet, Stevens himself, circles round this task, constantly trying to hint allusively at a central meaning in things and behind things, in words and behind words, looking more and more like a theologian who, rightly, finds God difficult, should not surprise us.