

## WESTERN THEORIES OF POETRY

### Reading Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor"

I begin with some dialogical comments on Ranjan Ghosh's chapter 3, "The Story of a Poem." I agree with what he says at the beginning about the effect of current changes on writing, reading, and teaching poetry. He emphasizes, as I do, social, political, and technological changes, especially ubiquitous digitalization.

Ghosh's chapter, moreover, is, among other things, a learned and lucid introduction to Sanskrit, Chinese, and Arabic theories of poetry. Most Westerners know little about these. Ghosh's chapter is especially original in the way it mixes his accounts of Eastern theoretical terminology about poetry with many citations from diverse Western sources. The implication, as in Ghosh's other chapters for this book, is that a comprehensive set of transcontinental ideas about poetry exists, though that set is complex and diverse. Ghosh tends to assume that a poem may be reasonable but gives the reader access to something beyond reason.

I have learned especially from Ghosh's chapter about the ancient Sanskrit concept of *rasa*. *Rasa* is to a considerable degree the key or sovereign term in Ghosh's account of Eastern theories of poetry. Ghosh's chapter develops a subtle, complex, and capacious theory of poetry. His chapter makes use of conceptual and figurative assertions from many traditions, including diverse ones in the West, about what poetry is and what it is good for. A good example is the passages, often depending on figures of speech, about poetry and writing poetry that Ghosh cites from Wallace Stevens's letters and prose works. He does not, however, in his chapter investigate whether or not Stevens's poetry fits what Stevens says about poetry. That strikes me as an important question. Ghosh, happily, leaves it to me to try to do that in what follows in this chapter.

I have a quasi scientific commitment to beginning with the evidence. The evidence in this case is a short text that most people would agree is a

poem. I want to clear my mind as much as possible (it is not really possible, of course) of presuppositions about what poetry is and does. I want to try to identify as exactly as I can what actually happens when I read Stevens's short poem "The Motive for Metaphor."

My primary interest in teaching and writing about literature has always been accounting for specific literary texts by reading them for myself. I want to identify what they really say, how they say it, and how that matters to me. Theory, for me, is ancillary to reading poems. Theory is a handmaiden, not a queen who is a sovereign end in herself. Theory, for me, comes inductively, after reading, not before. In this I agree with Aristotle. Aristotle's *Poetics*, after all, the founding text in Western literary theory, is essentially a reading of Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. Aristotle wants to develop an abstract terminology to account for the salient features of that play in its context of other Athenian tragedies and their social uses.

I have, in my chapter 10 for this book, identified, under the aegis of questions about "the authority of literature," the main theories of poetry in the West. What is most striking about these theories is their diversity and their rootedness in changing historical contexts. My goal in this chapter is not to explore these theories. It would take a book to do this adequately, and then some. I just want to account for what happens to me when I read a single poem by Stevens.

I do not know at this point just where my exploration of Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor" will lead me. If I knew already where I am going with my reading of this poem, it would not be worth the bother of going there. In its own modest way, my account of Stevens's poem will exemplify what Stevens himself says, in a passage Ghosh cites from Stevens's *Opus Posthumous*, about his own experience of writing a poem: "It is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though I knew before it was written what I wanted to do."<sup>1</sup>

What I want to do is to account for what happens in my mind, feelings, and body when I try to come to terms with Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor." My claim is that this is much stranger than one might assume. It is not something that can be summarized as "making logical sense of the poem." Here is the poem in its entirety. It is the second poem in Stevens's *Transport to Summer* (1947).<sup>2</sup> How do I know for sure it is a poem? For various reasons. It appears in a book by Wallace Stevens entitled *The Collected Poems*. It fits the usual conventions in the West for the way a poem, especially a modernist poem, should look on the page. It is printed

in lines, the first words of which are capitalized. The lines do not go to the right margin. It is printed in five four-line stanzas separated by blank lines. The printed lines more or less (not always) alternate five beat lines with four beat ones, though rhyme is not used. Most literary scholars in the West would agree that it is a poem. One might guess from the absence of rhyme that it is a modernist poem. It would seem perverse to say that it is not a poem. I emphasize this because assuming it is a poem brings in all sorts of conventional expectations about the text's form and meaning, as well as the question of the relation between hermeneutics and stylistics that operates when you try to understand it:

#### THE MOTIVE FOR METAPHOR

You like it under the trees in autumn,  
 Because everything is half dead.  
 The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves  
 And repeats words without meaning.  
 In the same way, you were happy in spring,  
 With the half colors of quarter-things,  
 The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,  
 The single bird, the obscure moon—  
 The obscure moon lighting an obscure world  
 Of things that would never be quite expressed,  
 Where you yourself were never quite yourself  
 And did not want nor have to be,  
 Desiring the exhilarations of changes:  
 The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
 The weight of primary noon,  
 The A B C of being.  
 The ruddy temper, the hammer  
 Of red and blue, the hard sound—  
 Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,  
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.<sup>3</sup>

Why have I chosen this poem? I have done so somewhat arbitrarily, but primarily because it is, like only three other poems by Stevens, not only overtly about metaphor but also has the word *metaphor* in its title. Many or even most people would agree that metaphor and other related figures of speech are essential to the way poetry works. Aristotle in the *Poetics*,

after all, said, in his inaugural wisdom, “By far the greatest thing is the use of metaphor. That alone cannot be learnt; it is the token of genius. For the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the power of metaphor is one of the big topics in Stevens’s prose works, gathered in *The Necessary Angel* and in *Opus Posthumous*.<sup>5</sup> These works are full of provocative formulations about metaphor. An example is one of the *Adagia* (a wonderful collection of adages about poetry) that says, “Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be unreal.”<sup>6</sup> If I were to try to account for all Stevens affirms about metaphor in his prose works, or even just about what he says about the motive for metaphor, I might never be done with doing that, so subtle, abundant, and contradictory is what Stevens says. I might never be able to turn to “The Motive for Metaphor.” So I set all that aside, as I will do later with Aristotle, Benjamin, de Man, and Derrida.

Well, what actually happens in my mind, feelings, and body when I (you) read the poem? Let me confess at once that it is impossible for me to read the poem without theoretical presuppositions, however tacit, just as it impossible for me to read it without the implicit awareness of all I remember (quite a lot) about Stevens’s life and work, about other criticism of his work, and about the many previous essays I have written about Stevens’s poetry. I have not just stumbled on a copy of the poem among autumn leaves, an ignorance the American New Critics tended to assume was the best starting point for reading a poem. An example is Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry*.<sup>7</sup> Many of the students who used *Understanding Poetry* in courses were in just that situation of fairly complete ignorance.

Just to put my terminological cards on the table at once, let me say that I have had much in mind recently the distinction Paul de Man, following Walter Benjamin, makes between hermeneutics and poetics or stylistics. Rhetorical reading or stylistics or poetics (de Man uses all three terms) is attention to the way the tropological dimension of any discourse interferes with its statement of a clear, logical meaning. That is one reason I was attracted to Stevens’s “The Motive for Metaphor.” It seems to be about that issue. Benjamin, and de Man after him, claims that poetics (*die Art des Meinens*, the way meanings are expressed) interferes with hermeneutics (*das Gemeinte*, what is meant).

Here is what de Man says, in a wonderfully ironic passage in “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” about this interference:

When you do hermeneutics, you are concerned with the meaning of the work; when you do poetics, you are concerned with the stylistics or with the description of the way in which a work means. The question is whether these two are complementary, whether you can cover the full work by doing hermeneutics and poetics at the same time. The experience of trying to do this shows that it is not the case. When one tries to achieve this complementarity, the poetics always drops out, and what one always does is hermeneutics. One is so attracted by problems of meaning that it is impossible to do hermeneutics and poetics at the same time. From the moment you start to get involved with problems of meaning, as I unfortunately tend to do, forget about the poetics. The two are not complementary, the two may be mutually exclusive in a certain way, and that is part of the problem which Benjamin states, a purely linguistic problem.<sup>8</sup>

The play of pronouns here (*one, you, I*) implies that I cannot avoid repeating, for example, in this essay, the betrayal de Man names and with rueful irony confesses to performing. I do hermeneutics at the expense of poetics, as when I try, more or less in spite of myself, to identify what Stevens says in this poem, even though I say I just want to report what happens in my mind and imagination when I read the poem. The latter is something quite different from hermeneutics. Asking what Stevens really says implies that what he says can be clearly identified and paraphrased, that such clarity is not fatally interfered with by the way Stevens says it.

Theory is resistance to reading, as de Man argues in his extremely complex essay entitled “The Resistance to Theory,” though he does not say so in so many words.<sup>9</sup> Theory is resistance to reading, apparently because theory pretends to foresee clearly the results of reading (demystification of aberrational acts of taking metaphors literally), whereas reading itself is unpredictable. You never know beforehand just what you are going to find in a given text. Each genuine reading is, consequently, *sui generis*. It is not reducible to the application of a formula that knows what it is going to find. I claim, therefore, that the distinction between hermeneutics and stylistics raises questions rather than programming answers.

When you read “The Motive for Metaphor,” you may first note that the title tells you that the theme of the poem, its hermeneutical meaning, is identification of the motive for metaphor. The poem is about the question of what motivates the poet or any other person to use the evasions of metaphor to avoid thinking of the “A B C of being,” whatever that is. You may

also note that *motive* and *metaphor* alliterate. This suggests some obscure connection between the words, perhaps by way of the fact that *motive* can also mean “motif,” which a metaphor might be, especially if it or similar metaphors recur in a text.

I then note that *you* is the first word of the poem. Stevens does not say, “I like it under the trees in autumn.” He says, “you like it under the trees.” The *you* works in two ways at once. The poet is clearly addressing himself, self-reflectively, dividing himself into two persons: the one who likes it under the trees in autumn and the one who reflects on what that liking means. At the same time the poet is addressing the reader as “you” and inviting me, him, or her, to put himself or herself in the place of some you who likes it under the trees in autumn.

I doubt whether when you read “The Motive for Metaphor” initially you are likely to stop with the title or worry about that *you*. When I first read the poem, I went right past all that and began creating in my mind three imaginary scenes, one after the other. The first is an autumn scene. The second is a spring scene. The third is a strange scene of pounding with a hammer on some object glowing with heat from a forge and making a big spark fly. The creation of these three imaginary scenes on the basis of the words on the page is spontaneous and irresistible. I may know that the autumn and spring scenes in poem are in aid of conveying a theoretical concept, that is, what Stevens claims is the motive for metaphor, but that does not stop me. The motive for metaphor Stevens finds is quite different, by the way, from Aristotle’s praise of the gifted poet for having an eye for resemblances. For Aristotle, metaphor helps the poet make the reader see something more vividly. For Stevens, metaphor helps the poet avoid seeing what is there to see. The scenes that arise spontaneously in my mind when I read the poem exceed any conceptual use *you* can make of them. Those scenes are also, I would claim, different for every reader, and never quite the same twice for the same reader.

I have said the interior scenes in my mind and feelings are imaginary. I mean by that not that it is wrong when you read the poem to think of Wallace Stevens himself, walking in the autumn woods near Hartford, Connecticut, or out for a nighttime moonlight stroll in the spring. I mean rather that nothing is said about that in the words of the poem. The parallel is much more with the vivid mental images I have of the characters and their surroundings when I read a novel. The words of a novel create a purely imaginary world. Once more these are different for every reader, and they are based on relatively limited verbal evidence. I have, for exam-

ple, vivid mental images of Lucy Robarts and Lord Lufton in Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* (discussed in chapter 10 of this book). I would know Lucy if I saw her (by her match with my imaginary picture of her). Trollope's words, however, are not by any means as specific as my mental image of Lucy or my feelings of admiration and affection for her. She exists only in the imaginary world the novel's words create when I read them. In the same way, I create my mental images, my feelings for them, and my subliminal muscular movements of walking in Stevens's autumn and spring scenes, as well as the feeling in my arm of hammering when I read his forge scene, from my knowledge of New England autumns and springs, and from my memories of the sparks flying at my grandfather Critzer's farm forge in Virginia when I visited there as a child. There is no use telling me these are irrelevant associations. My mind, feelings, and my sympathetic muscular reactions are too strong to be negated by that common-sense advice. *Spontaneous* is the key word here. Don't blame me. I cannot help it.

If you look a little harder at the words on the page, however, some big problems begin to arise. Just what is the status of those three scenes? Are they ends in themselves? That is, are they what the poem is "really about?" Does the poem intend primarily to call up in the reader ("you") some version of those scenes? Is everything else in the words merely ancillary to that? Or are these scenes in some way figurative expressions of something else, perhaps examples of metaphorical transformations? Perhaps they do what they say, as speech acts, as performative utterances that resist the weight of primary noon. The poem, after all, is the second item in a book of poems Stevens called *Transport to Summer*. *Transport* is a more or less literal translation of the Greek word *metaphor*, which means "carry over." Is the poem an example of the way the poems in *Transport to Summer* intend to carry the reader, performatively, from spring to summer, transport her there?

As any adept reader of Stevens knows, however, the names of the seasons, for Stevens, each had a complex symbolic or figurative meaning. Autumn and spring were for him times of transition or change, while winter and summer were times of fixed states. Winter was, for Stevens, the time of seemingly endless cold, as in "The Snow Man," one of his most famous and often-anthologized poems.<sup>10</sup> Summer was, for him, a poise at warm, high noon, as in the wonderful "Credences of Summer."<sup>11</sup> "The Motive for Metaphor" exemplifies that coding in the figurative meanings of autumn, spring, and summer that the poem asserts. Both autumn and spring,

transitional seasons on the way to winter and summer, respectively, exemplify the “exhilarations of changes.” Enjoying those changes through language is the motive for metaphor. My three imaginary scenes, so spontaneously vivid in my mind, feelings, and body, turn out by no means to be what the poem is literally about. They are figurative examples of what metaphors do.

At this point I am (you are) beginning to see that neither Aristotle’s definition of metaphor (“an eye for resemblances”), nor Benjamin’s or de Man’s clear theoretical distinction between hermeneutics and stylistics are of much use. They are theoretical formulations to be tossed out when the actual work of reading “The Motive for Metaphor” begins.

Aristotle apparently means that the metaphorical term or, as I. A. Richards put it, in a mixed metaphor, the “vehicle,” helps us see what he called the “tenor,” or literal meaning, more vividly. The vehicle and the tenor resemble one another. Aristotle’s example is “the ship plows the waves.” A ship is like a plow. A plow is like a ship. Not insignificantly, this example of a metaphor is a means of transport, a ship. The example turns back on itself to do what it says. You see the ship more clearly in your mind’s eye when you say it plows the waves.

That does not really work, however, in “The Motive for Metaphor,” for example, with Stevens’s ostentatious and grotesque simile: “The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves.” I can see in my mind’s eye a cripple moving among the autumn leaves all right, but it is a big stretch to say that resembles the autumn wind’s way of moving. It is as much a startling dissemblance as a resemblance. I suppose the comparison is based on Stevens’s assertion in the line before that he likes it under the trees in autumn “because everything is half dead.” You could say a cripple is half dead. In any case, “like a cripple” is not much like Aristotle’s more conventional metaphor, based on resemblance: “The ship plows the waves.” Stevens’s “like a cripple” also, it happens, is a personification or prosopopoeia, which Aristotle’s plow is not, except covertly, insofar as a plow implies a plowman. Stevens explicitly personifies the autumn wind as “like a cripple” struggling through the leaves. Ghosh’s dialogical intervention about the tradition of theories about metaphor in various cultures is, by the way, much more in tune with Aristotle’s “eye for resemblances” than with Stevens’s idea of metaphor as evasion.

Moreover, when I try to apply the distinction drawn by Benjamin and de Man to “The Motive for Metaphor” I find it does not really work as a theoretical tool any better than Aristotle’s definition of metaphor. I dis-



cover I cannot easily distinguish hermeneutics from stylistics in what I must say about the poem. Are those scenes that arise so powerfully in my mind's eye hermeneutical meanings or stylistic devices? I think any decision about that would be arbitrary and unfounded. Is "like a cripple" a simile for the literal meaning of the way the wind moves in autumn woods, or is that scene not already a figure? Is "like a cripple," therefore, a metaphor (or rather simile) of a metaphor? Stevens says in one of the *Adagia*, "There is no such thing as the metaphor of a metaphor. . . . When I say that man is a god it is very easy to see that if I also say that a god is something else, god has become reality."<sup>12</sup> The first metaphor becomes the literal, of which the second locution is a metaphorical resemblance or transport. Stevens's choice of an example, by the way, is surprising and by no means innocent. It implies that metaphor is always grounded in some theological scheme.

Moreover, what happens to me is the reverse of what de Man says happens to him. He tries to do stylistics and ends up deplorably doing hermeneutics. I try to do hermeneutics, that is, to account straightforwardly for the meaning of "The Motive for Metaphor," but I almost instantly end up getting snarled in stylistics, for example, in trying to establish the linguistic status of "like a cripple," or the linguistic status of those three scenes that rise up in my imagination when I read the poem.

As you can see, I am just getting more and more entangled when I try to use my two theoretical formulations, the one from Aristotle and the one from de Man. I had best jettison them both, along with all that Stevens says elsewhere about metaphor, and go back to reading "The Motive for Metaphor" as best I can on my own, without their help.

Let me then turn back once more to "The Motive for Metaphor" to try to see what it really says. The first thing I note when I do this is that the grammatical armature of the poem is not descriptive or referential (e.g., "everything is half dead. / The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves"), but a series of subjective assertions, each followed by one of the scenes I have mentioned. Each turns on a word that names your feelings, your intimate emotions: "like," "happy," "desiring." "You like it under the trees in autumn." "In the same way, you were happy in spring." "Desiring the exhilarations of changes." These locutions explain the motive for metaphor. The motive is pleasure in feelings of liking, happiness, or desire.

As the poem says, the motive for metaphor is to escape from "the weight of primary noon." Autumn and spring figure such an escape, and you therefore like them, or they make you happy, as the poem says. They are the location of things that are neither this nor that, but both at once,

in transport or transition. You like the fall because “everything is half dead,” neither fully alive, nor fully dead. You were happy in spring because it is the time of “the half colors of quarter-things.” Such things are not quite one color or another color, and not quite one fully developed thing, in diminishing portions: half colors, quarter things.

This exhilarating escape to things that are not quite anything definite is expressed in the wonderful description of a spring evening as the dusky place of things that are not quite one thing or another thing, and that are in constant, exhilarating change. This constant changing is expressed by present participles (“melting,” “lighting”): “The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds, / The single bird, the obscure moon— / The obscure moon lighting an obscure world.”

It was a big mistake on my part to leap to those vivid, imaginary images of the three scenes as somehow primary, that is, as what the poem is about. That this was a mistake is indicated in part by the way each of the segments naming them ends in a reference to language. The wind that moves among the leaves like a cripple “repeats words without meaning.” Such locutions are something you like because though the sounds are words, they are words without the painful definiteness of words that have a fixed meaning. When are words not words? When they are words without meaning and when they are murmured over and over, in a continuing suspiration.

The phrase *words without meaning* recalls Walter Benjamin’s “pure language.” Such expressions exist between, below, above, or outside all languages, in the form of sounds or meaningless marks. “In this pure language,” writes Benjamin, “which no longer means or expresses anything, but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished.”<sup>13</sup> The scene lighted by the obscure moon in an obscure world is a “world / Of things that would never be quite expressed.” These things are neither expressed nor not expressed. This obscure world (in the sense that a text may be obscure, hard to read, such as “The Motive for Metaphor”) means that when you enter it you can escape being a fixed self. This is a scene “where you yourself were never quite yourself / And did not want nor have to be.”

Please note that these assertions about the languages of autumn and spring are not hermeneutical meanings but figures of speech, manifestations of stylistics or poetics. Autumn winds, for example, in reality, don’t repeat any words at all, not even words without meaning. They only do so

figuratively, by a poetic metaphor. “The Motive for Metaphor” is a tissue of metaphors from one end to the other, with nowhere a literal meaning that you can hermeneutically identify, except to say that the whole poem explains what the motive for metaphor is. That explanation can only be done, it turns out, in metaphor.

A tissue of metaphors without literal referents is a series of catachreses, that is, displaced locutions for things that have no literal name, as in “leg of a chair,” or “face of a mountain.” A catachresis is neither literal nor figurative. It is not literal, because that stick of wood that holds a chair up is not really a leg. It is not figurative, because the word *leg* does not substitute for some literal word. “Leg of a chair” is what you call it. Aristotle, in his wisdom about figurative language, already called attention to such strange locutions and to the way they put in question the neat distinction between literal and figurative words.<sup>14</sup> The word *catachresis* in Greek means “forced or abusive transfer,” “against usage.” Many catachreses are personifications, as in *leg*, *face*, or, indeed, as in “like a cripple among the leaves,” among my examples.

Stevens calls the referent of the metaphors that make up his poem, in the last word of all, X. X is the sign in mathematics for an unknown and as yet unspecifiable number that can be identified by solving the equation. I think Stevens’s equation cannot be solved. The X remains unknown except as a “sharp flash,” an evanescent glimpse.

That brings me at last to an attempt to account for the last two stanzas of “The Motive for Metaphor.” These are the most obscure and difficult lines by far. I shall dare to try to read them. The grammar of these lines in their context of the whole poem is clear enough. The poem says you like autumn and spring because you desire “the exhilarations of changes” that occur in those seasons, both in the outside world and in your subjectivity, including in your selfhood itself. You desire these ongoing changes because you are constantly, through time, “shrinking from / The weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being.” Metaphors aid in that shrinking. That is the motive for inventing them, not, for example, the search for resemblances that Aristotle saw as the motive for metaphor.

The difficulties with reading those last two stanzas begin when you try to explain to yourself or to others two things: the exact meaning of its various phrases and the exact relation among the cascade of phrases and words that are given in that grammatical relation called apposition, that is, in a list bound together by commas as ligatures: “The weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being, / The ruddy temper, the hammer / Of red and

blue, the hard sound— / Steel against intimation—the sharp flash, / The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.” That sequence is really weird. It is by no means to be accounted for by my correct but somewhat desperately reductive attempt to read it as a scene of hammering on an anvil at a forge. The reader will note that there are two appositive lists, the primary one and then a secondary one within that first one made up of a series of adjectives modifying X.

The problem with appositive lists is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide whether each item is another way to say the same thing or whether they progress or digress in some way or another. Each may say something different from all the others. Only by looking at the semantic meanings of each can we hope to work toward an answer. It might be safest to assume that Stevens uses so many words in apposition because no single word is adequate.

What the “weight of primary noon” is can be guessed. Stevens often makes a parallel, in a kind of code language, between the round of the seasons and the times of a twenty-four-hour day. It is not an accident that Stevens’s spring scene takes place under an “obscure moon,” neither the pitch dark of midnight, nor the broad daylight of noon, but in between, as the clouds melt. Midsummer is primary noon, that is, a moment when everything inside and outside the self freezes for a moment. The solar context of the phrase I cite below, from “Credences of Summer” (“without evasion by a single metaphor”), confirms that reading. At primary noon, everything is just what it is. Stevens’s you in this poem (though not in “Credences of Summer”) finds that fixity an intolerable weight. He will do anything to escape it. He believes metaphors will provide that escape in “the exhilarations of changes.”

What then is “the A B C of being,” the next item in the appositive series? Is it just another way to say “the weight of primary noon?” Well, yes, but not quite. *Being* is a loaded word in Stevens. This could easily be demonstrated by many citations from his work. Roughly speaking, *being* has an Aristotelian or Heideggerian overtone in Stevens’s work. These authorities affirm two quite different meanings for *being*, by the way. *Being* means, for Stevens, I dare to assert, not just what is, “things as they are,” “without evasion by a single metaphor,” but also the invisible ground or rock beneath.<sup>15</sup> This ground is the substance of things, not only in the sense of their isness, their existence, but also in the etymological sense of what stands beneath them and holds them up (their sub-stance).

That seems to explain *being*, but why “A B C?” B echoes *being* all right, so the phrase has an internal alliteration, but so what? An A B C is, of course, the common name for the basic alphabet of English. It is often used metaphorically to name the rudimentary knowledge you have of a given topic: “I know my A B C’s about that!” As for Heidegger, so for Stevens in a slightly different way, being is inextricably entangled with language. The references to language in this poem attest to that (“words without meaning,” “things that would never be quite expressed”). Primary noon is a time when being is reduced to absolutely literal locutions, without possible evasion by a single metaphor. The spaces between the first letters of the alphabet, as Stevens gives them, invite the reader to think of a finite and exhaustive appositive series going all the way to Z: “Being is A, is B, is C, . . . is Z.” Only if the poet can bring metaphors to bear can he hope to escape “the weight of primary noon” even by way of the evasions of metaphor employing “The A B C of being.”

Tom Cohen, in a recent e-mail to me, has brilliantly suggested a possible relation between the metaphors for being and that fatal X. Cohen writes: “Rumination: Does the ‘abc of being’ forestall the latter [being] by the seriality and inescapability of the former [A B C]—leading to an X that wants to get out of the bind (x marks the spot), but is itself a letter, and a Chi at that.” Cohen here suggests that the inescapable seriality of metaphors for being forbids ever reaching being itself, only more metaphors for it. The letters of the alphabet, intoned in sequence, as we were taught to do in grade school, finally reaches the letter X. It is a letter, all right, but differs from other letters in being a traditional catachresis, not a metaphor, for being itself. As Cohen says, “X marks the spot.” X is chi, both a Greek letter (uppercase X, lowercase χ) and Ch’i or *qi* (氣), “energy force” in Chinese culture. Though Stevens may or may not have known about Chinese Ch’i, his X certainly names being as a pervasive energy that is present in everything, for example, the autumn wind in the fallen leaves, as well as being outside everything as its dominating master. As Cohen also says in a subsequent e-mail, X is an example of the blank materiality of inscription, in the de Manian sense of that phrase. “Inscription,” writes Cohen, “harasses tropes, like a fox scattering the hens.”

The final stanza is the hardest of all to explicate hermeneutically. I claim it is a series of items that would be present when someone strikes a glowing piece of metal with a hammer in a forge. These items are in apposition not in the sense of being different words for the same thing, but in the

sense of being a progressive series. You pound with a hammer the glowing metal in order to temper it, that is, to make it harder by changing the way its molecules are ordered. You turn iron into steel by adding carbon and other ingredients. That, to some degree, explains “ruddy” (that is, red hot) and “temper.” An obscure play on *temper* as “feelings” is also present.

The hammer is “of red and blue” not just because it is glowing hot from striking the piece of metal it is tempering, but also because the words “red” and “blue” are part of Stevens’s private color code. “Red” is for reality, things as they are, and “blue” is Stevens’s name for “imagination.” Imagination, for him, changes things as they are into other things, as opposed to the fixity of being’s X. These changes happen primarily by means of metaphors, in the extended sense of figures generally, seeing what is, the weight of primary noon, as a potentially endless series of other things, from A to Z. You see the wind in the autumn leaves as a cripple. In a typical evasion, Stevens does not say “steel” against “iron,” but “steel against intimation.” Intimation is, I take it, a name for the glowing metal that is being tempered by a steel hammer. The metal being forged (evocative word in the light of the language theme in the poem) is full of intimation of the other molecular forms it might become when it is tempered. Red and blue are the twin poles of Stevens’s constant oscillation in his poetry. That oscillation brings about the exhilaration of changes. The clash of steel against intimation brings a “sharp flash” like the spark that flies when the forger’s hammer strikes the metal glowing from the forge that is being tempered by that blow.

The sharp flash of that spark is then called “the vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.” The flash is a momentary glimpse of being, generated by the blow of imagination and reality against intimation. That final series of words in apposition (“vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant”) names in personifying catachreses what has no proper name, what is just a nameless unknown X, that is, being. The sound of X is like the brief explosion of a sharp flash when the glowing hammer hits the glowing metal. *Steel* is Stevens’s name here either for the metal being forged or for the hammer. The spark from the glowing metal being tempered is called intimation because it intimates the other things it can become: “steel against intimation.”<sup>16</sup>

It would seem that the poem ends with an example of the triumph of metaphor over the weight of primary noon. The ending is not quite so simple, however. A metaphor substitutes a figurative name for something that has a proper name, as when we say the ship plows the waves. A catachresis confesses in its enunciation its powerlessness to give adequate

language for what it gestures toward. Moreover, Stevens conspicuously grants sovereign power to the X of being by naming it in a series of personifications. These call the X of being some sovereign, no-doubt masculine, vital, arrogant, fatal, and dominant person. A personification is more properly called a prosopopoeia. The word means, etymologically, “to give a name, a face, or a voice to something that has none of these.” The poem ends with a striking submission of the you to the irresistible power of something, an X, that cannot be touched by the evasions of metaphor. It is bigger than “you,” much bigger. Nevertheless, the X can be alluded to in extravagant metaphors or, rather, personifications.

“The Motive for Metaphor” is therefore, in the end, a poem not about the triumphant power of metaphor but about the failure of metaphor to evade primary noon. This, however, can only be said in that peculiar figure called catachresis.

I have read Stevens’s “The Motive for Metaphor” as best I can, with help from Tom Cohen. I have also found, *pace de Man*, that I cannot do hermeneutics in writing about this poem without doing poetics or stylistics in extravagant ways at the same time. As I might have known, my reading turned out to be more complicated than I expected it would be. I also meant it when I said I did not really know where my reading was going to lead. I especially did not foresee that turn at the end in which the weight of primary noon wins out, after all, over the powers of metaphor. Nevertheless that winning out is expressed in that strange species of metaphor that is not a metaphor, catachresis. My reading confirms the hypothesis that that you never know just where a reading is going to lead you until you do the reading. It confirms also my further hypothesis that all the theoretical knowledge in the world is of little help in the actual business of reading a given poem in its uniqueness and in its resistance to oversimplifying theoretical presuppositions.