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POETICS OF THE REAL

A Thesis Presented

by

Matthew Mersky

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

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ABSTRACT

The premise of my thesis is to approach poetics anew, using psychoanalysis and other related theoretical disciplines to help answer the often overlooked but fundamental question: “What is poetry?” This thesis is based on the notion that Freud’s insight into the unconscious is itself the key to unlocking the essential function of poetry as it has come to be understood in the 20th century, throughout the modernist period; and that Lacan, as a rewriting of Freud, specifically developed a theory of language that provides the beginnings of a psychoanalytic poetics. Another component of this thesis involves the claim that, of all the modernists, Wallace Stevens particularly embodies a poetic style that most closely embodies the theoretical position of psychoanalysis.

In the first chapter of this study my aim is to draw out thoroughly the relationship to Freudian psychoanalysis and poetry—and to make the specific argument that Freud’s technique for dream interpretation is essentially the one that we use to interpret or to read modern poetry.

The second chapter deals with repetition, a favorite of psychoanalysis and poetry, in order to make the claim that the ultimate form of metaphor is repetition, which, more than just a rhetorical technique, has much to do with the human psyche and the formation of subjectivity proper.

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I would like to thank my mentors of this project. Todd McGowan showed me, more clearly than any other Lacanian, and anyone else for that matter, the true Hegelian core of psychoanalysis, and planted the seeds for the idea that Hegel, more than Lacan, might represent the ultimate theoretical system—which is to say the theoretical system that most successfully goes beyond itself. I'm perhaps most grateful for the radical disjunction between Todd's understanding of theory and his taste in film; in the true style of the Big Other, it is precisely this gap (and the fiction of a lost cause that might fill it) that, more than Todd's theoretical command itself, impelled the labors of this project.

I owe a big thanks to Eric Lindstrom's singular dedication to working with students. Not only did he frequently agree to discuss my project, but without prompting he regularly provided me with articles and books he considered useful for my research; Eric spent more time and energy thinking about my project than I could have ever expected, and also taught me the value of considering other perspectives than my own.

I would like to thank Travis Roy Heeren, both for his help in theorizing a television show for which we will soon produce *the* work of reference, and his passion for coaxing out the

elementary songs which secretly roil beneath our regular experience of day. If the unconscious is structured like a language, then that language is almost certainly structured like a song.

I would like thank Sara “C” Clarke for her torrent of gifts, both material and intangible; without anything close to due thanks, she tirelessly sews the holes in friendship’s pockets, and picks up the shards of broken glass that result from its surprise parties.

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Chapter 1: Poetics of the Real

“The list of disciplines Freud considered important sister sciences for an ideal Department of Psychoanalysis is well known. Alongside psychiatry and sexology...I would be inclined to add: rhetoric, dialectic (in the technical sense this term takes on in Aristotle’s *Topics*), grammar, and poetics—the supreme pinnacle of the aesthetics of language.”

-Jacques Lacan

Poetics in the Freudian Field

i

There is a poetics lying dormant in the field of psychoanalysis. To bring it to life I pose the following: that poetry exhibits the precise structure of the unconscious. In fact, for a psychoanalytic poetics, poetry in its elementary state is nothing but a formal embodiment and sketch of the unconscious. Freud and Lacan, as primary figures in the field of psychoanalysis, have laid the groundwork for a study of poetics through their attempts to unearth the relation between language and the unconscious. Both have understood linguistic play as a flash of resistance but also a sudden release of repressed forms, the unleashing of ideas, drives. For Freud, the agency of the unconscious, discernible in the psychic work of condensation and displacement, provided the blueprint through which Freud was able to begin sketching out the disorder of the neurotic. Lacan went even further, melding the Freudian technique with semiotics and the dialectic in a self-conscious attempt to literalize Freud's science. This meant stopping cautiously before the very surface form of language, pausing before the veil of signification with the understanding that a belief in anything beyond it—including even Freud's belief in a beyond of the unconscious, a master key which when discovered would illuminate the human psyche—meant falling dupe to the very condition he sought to resolve. Lacan channeled the poetic quality of Freud's interpretive technique, yet rarely does he step into the role of literary critic, rarely does he deal at any significant length with poetry itself. Poetry, while adduced, while alluded to, is relegated to the periphery of the psychoanalytic field. And as much as dreams, slips and jokes, poetry stands out as the quintessential form through which the unconscious reveals itself as the force latent in all discourse. Poetry, as field, as a literary form, as a mark of irruption in the very

body of existence thus shows the radical, splintered dimension in the field of writing itself. To uncover a poetics of psychoanalysis means this specifically—that poetry reveals not only how the unconscious is nothing more than its own emergence as the absolute literal value of language, but that the unconscious itself is nothing but the ineluctable literal force that defines poetry.

What is poetry? “Poetry” can be divided into two related but essentially distinct ideas: 1) the idea of the literary field of poetry, which contains a multitude of possible definitions, but really qualifies as anything commonly termed “poetry”. And, 2) the “idea” of poetry, poetry as a linguistic event, a form of rupture, even a particular method of reading or interpreting language. Inherent in this poetics, a poetics of the real, is the belief that this second idea of poetry is primary—that the first definition, the poetry in the particular, that which is written or read, is itself a form of expressing or communicating, even communing with, an ineffable poetic force that can take shape within a number of rhetorical and other artistic forms, “poetry” and especially modernist poetry being the most radical and precise approximation of it. To sew the threads together as quickly as possible, it is the Freudian revolution—the Freudian revolution carried out by Lacan—that provides us with the interpretative framework with which to understand this so-called “poetic-force” and its relation to poetry. As I have already said, the poetic theory propounded in this essay stipulates that “poetry” is nothing but the Freudian (Lacanian) unconscious bubbling from the depths, manifesting itself as the strange, vivid and literal force through which we find ourselves certain only that somewhere in the poetic text “it” is being read.

Freud's contribution to poetics lies in his pursuit of the symptom. The dream was the seminal text of psychoanalytic technique and the poetics that lay within; the perfect form to inhabit the liminal space between literary text (story, image, wordplay) and the living form of the unconscious. It was Freud's patients who showed Freud in the direction of the dream: "My patients were pledged to communicate to me every idea or thought that occurred to them in connection with some particular subject; amongst other things they told me their dreams and so taught me that a dream can be inserted into the psychical chain that has to be traced backwards in the memory from a pathological idea."¹ Freud was taught not only to examine the dream, but to read it, to look at it in a chain of associations. Which led Freud to the symptom: "It was then only a short step to treating the dream itself as a symptom and to applying to dreams the method of interpretation that had been worked out for symptoms."² It is no coincidence that this technique crept up into the world of literature; that after the dream had become paradigmatic for psychoanalysis, literature was inevitably next. Freud began analyzing the motives of literary figures such as Hamlet, i.e. using types taken from literature to formulate his vision of the subject as split. In such a way he read Hamlet for his symptoms—saturated moments, words, behaviors, contradictions which seem to betray other motives, something refractory and elusive essentially linked to his symptomatic outbursts. "In *Hamlet* [phantasy] remains repressed; and—just as in the case of neurosis—we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences."³ This was our guide to reading the visible signs of the surface and trace them into the shadows. Freud gave us a sketch of how to identify unconscious expression in the human subject, and even

¹ *Interpretation of Dreams*. p. 133.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Interpretation of Dreams*. p. 299.

after Lacan—whose revolutions in the field of the signifier have helped clear the path—this method of psychoanalytic interpretation still prevails.

For poetics, the greater Freudian insight comes from Freud's own claim that the symptom is visible not only within the human being but is fundamentally characteristic of the text. Freud reimagined the very parameters of the text and redefined how the world of critics, philosophers, and analysts would come to read it. When the dream became a text, and its defining feature was its characteristic ability to expose the unconscious, the very identity and composition of the text was irreversibly changed. No longer was it linked to, and primarily a product of authorial intent, but became simultaneously an artifact penned by conscious intent as well as something bearing the reflection of the unconscious. Freud created the paradigm within which the dream (of little to no agency), the joke (created, but by whom?) and the poem can all be studied for their formal link to the unconscious. And while the inclusion of the unconscious into the endeavor of poetry necessarily lowers the position of the author, at least from that classical canonical viewpoint, it does not in fact entail another death of the author. A good poet, in order to make us feel the effects of poetry, must be an author, be unique: like the analyst they must exercise a difficult balance of following language and yet stopping the flow of language at meaningful points. Poetry needs only a push, a guiding hand to do what it must, which is follow the structure of the unconscious. Writing poetry certainly requires skill; what good poets are doing is less a matter of manipulating language into an object-reflection of their own ego than it is giving body to the properly symbolic dimension of language. Language, when properly "freed" from the shackles of prosaic thinking, almost by itself returns in form to the state of language defined by the dream.

Freud thus, somewhat stumblingly, but all the more irrefutably edified a theory for interpreting the text. Freud was the first to listen to the deep sounds of symbols, the unconscious of language itself, his ear pressed gently to the door, listening not to the contents of the word, but simply to the raw element of speech. In his analysis of the Wolf Man's famous dream Freud interprets the image of several motionless wolves as signifying its exact opposite: frenzied animal movement. Yes, Freud posits a meaning, he locates something situated within the symbol; he says the dream image signifies *this*. But Freud is also much more radically saying that the symbol necessarily belies its own *anti-symbol*, a pure negativity which takes the very form—but the form *only*—of meaning. The stillness of wolves is in Freud's terms a reaction-formation, a stand-in for the heat and passion of animal movement. But the logic of Freud's claim, more than his theories of sexual repression, cannot but highlight the nature of the symbol. In other words, Freud's technique, his formal technique of interpreting symbolically, in the grand comedy of interpretation, supersedes Freud's own commitment to objective truth. Which is maybe itself the active force of poetry—the subservient, latent element become *in and of itself*.

Freud's technique, to put it concisely, is based on reading the literality of symbols as such, to understand them as self-referential units of signification, to follow simply the echoes of the symbol. Lacan later drew up this technique as a matter of interpreting what he termed the “*primary* character of symbols” which, as he put it, were “similar to those numbers out of which all other numbers are composed...”⁴ For both, analytic interpretation involves the act of breaking down the signs that we become accustomed to regarding as full, as definitely signifying this or that. And the analyst's task is thus to detect this primary dimension—the quasi-mathematical

⁴ *Ecrits*. p. 245.

dimension, the dimension detached from “meaning”—within all language. The core of this essay’s poetics is exactly the same, taking the seminal Freudian technique and its preference of the symbol as its starting point. To illustrate the Freudian technique and its investment in symbolic value let’s take an excerpt from one of Freud’s own dreams, reported in the *Interpretation of Dreams*:

Dream: *I had written a [botanical] monograph upon an (unspecified) genus of plant. The book lay before me and I was at the moment turning over a folded coloured plate. Bound up in the copy there was a dried specimen of the plant.*⁵

After a first reading this dream bears no immediate meaning for Freud. Nor is it surreal or even as interesting as many of the dream-analyses provided in his book. But through Freud’s reading the dream-façade eventually begins to proliferate with symbolic life:

‘Botanical’ was related to the figure of Professor *Gärtner* [Gardener], the *blooming* looks of his wife, to my patient *Flora* and to the lady [Frau. L] of whom I had told the story of the forgotten flowers.⁶

The thesis of Freud’s entire technique can be summarized with this example: it asserts that a certain meaning is embedded within the symbolic form that the dream acquires—that the dream’s method of processing “desire” as such is to mutate it into the absolute literal form of the unconscious. Or even more radically: that narrative and thus sense proper are premised entirely on the form of the pure symbol. The dream form for Freud has no inherent meaning in itself *as form*—nor does the disguised dream “meaning” around which the dream-form is built. This method of construing meaning is premised precisely on the existence of the symbol, symbol as

⁵ *The Interpretation of Dreams*. p. 316.

⁶ *Ibid.*

symbol. The dream expresses itself in purely symbolic form, so that it must be interpreted literally if one is to thread together any meaning. After interpretation we are able to give the dream a meaning, but the meaning is really nothing more than an emphasis of the symbol as such—the determination that the symbol has affected some original thought. And so our ability to construct meaning is absolutely reliant on our ability to let the symbol work on its own and form associations based on its own symbolic value. In terms of poetic theory, this technique represents a radically anti-platonic stance, where interpretation allows the aesthetic appearance, the symbol, to step out from its assigned place, to flow freely from the hierarchy which dogmatically restricts it to the order to fixed significance:

Looked at in isolation, a thought may be made important by another thought that comes after it, and, in conjunction with other thoughts that may seem equally absurd, it may turn out to form a most effective link. Reason cannot form any opinion upon all this unless it retains the thought long enough to look at it in connection with the others.⁷

On the one hand Freud asserts that the particular units in a signifying chain, meaningless units in themselves, are senseless without the greater context brought about by association: “Reason” is useless unless it comprehends a picture greater than any individual part which composes it. Yet Freud’s statement also suggests the intrinsic value of the symbol, the individual signifying unit; that, while units in themselves may be “senseless”, and don’t divulge the secrets of the symbolic puzzle, since the analyst must first look only at the units themselves, must stay firmly on the level of the symbol, Freud is saying something groundbreaking about the symbol:

⁷ Ibid. p. 135.

On the other hand, where there is a creative mind, Reason—so it seems to me—relaxes its watch upon the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it look them through and examine them in a mass.—You critics, or whatever else you may call yourselves, are ashamed or frightened of the momentary and transient extravagances which are to be found in all truly creative minds and whose longer or shorter duration distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer.⁸

The preference for the symbol shines forth with Freud’s phrase “momentary and transient extravagances”, used here to link artists with dreamers. These momentary and transient extravagances are precisely what Platonists seek to expurgate from the body of art, but are precisely what land psychoanalysis firmly in the realm of poetics. Momentary and transient extravagances sound exactly like the cornerstone of psychoanalysis, the Lacanian *objet a*, momentary apparitions, protrusions—in rhetoric the intense power of the signifier detached from anything but its own signifying power.

ii

Freud’s understanding of the symbol marks the birth of modern poetry, which can be situated at the crossroads of two parallel recognitions: 1) the unacknowledged theoretical recognition by Freud that the unconscious is premised on the pure function of the symbol, and is thus “poetic”; and, 2) the “poetic” recognition of modernism that poetry operates in the realm of the symbol, so that rather than theories of full Whitmanian subjectivity we find the poem, or the central fixed point of the poem, manifested in a symbolic montage. There is the assumption that

⁸ Ibid.

permeates the work of poets beginning somewhere, perhaps Baudelaire, almost certainly by Mallarmé, evident in Eliot and Pound, Hart Crane, etc., that the symbolic veneer of the poem has become irrevocably detached from anything resembling a signified subject matter. While this idea is evident throughout the modernist era—and who can't sense it?—Wallace Stevens, of all the modern poets, is the poet most formally committed to expressing in written form the unconscious. In order to show the convergence between psychoanalysis and poetry—the Freudian unconscious within Stevens, and the simultaneous existence of poetics within psychoanalysis—let us plunge right into the depths and begin with Stevens' poetry itself, observing as Freud did the way in which the symbolic structure of language inevitably emanates from the text. Let's take the poem *Bantam in Pine-Woods*:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

Damned universal cock, as if the sun
Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.

Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
Your world is you. I am my world.

You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,

Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos.

Much in the way that dreams tend to walk a line between nonsense and reality, this poem—particularly the first stanza—exhibits a collage of elements both logical and absurd: the plot, the “manifest content” of the poem appears to be a jumbling of nonsense, a number of fractured images and ideas; yet the syntax, grammar and even rhythm of the poem bear the trace of

coherence, outlining another potential, more logical poem. Like Freud's botanical dream, the introduction of absurdity into a recognizable formal structure demands analysis. The form itself defies immediate understanding, but once the work of interpretation begins some sense can be made.⁹ For example, the usage of "Chieftain" seems to place the poem in a tribal setting, though it is not immediately clear why this is relevant. However, once we gloss the many words related with birds—"hackles", "Bantams", "cock"—we begin to see a motif. It does not take long to see that the Chieftain described is the chief bird, the oppressor of the titular bantam. Why would Stevens describe a conflict between birds? It's not immediately clear, but if we take the poem to be like a dream, thus expressing a wish, one could read the dream conflict as one representing Stevens' own self-projection as an upstart New World poet (the smaller bantam) against the colossal stature of Old World verse (the "Chieftain" bird); then the battle between birds becomes a possible representation of Stevens' personal struggle as a poet. The permeation of the flower motif in Freud's dream is given a meaning once it is identified and associated, and in *Bantams* the bird theme begins to shape the poem in the same way. One can go further with the extent of symbolic association. "Pine" of the title echoes what we can call the smaller, oppressed bantam's "pining" freedom. And, if the Chieftain is taken as both the "literal bird, cock of the walk or braggadocio...[and also] the male sexual organ"¹⁰ the ribald double significance of "Pine-Wood", echoing the phrase "Damned universal cock", not only becomes apparent but the bantam's pining now gleams the additional signification of an erotic desire (reinforced by the phrase a couplet below, "blazing tail").

⁹ Much of the reading that follows belongs to Eleanor Cook, borrowed from her invaluable book on Stevens, *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens* (pp. 66-67).

¹⁰ Ibid.

This poem, which has often been downplayed or dismissed as an example of Stevens' rococo style¹¹, an early ornamental but ultimately limited experiment, represents in extreme form an example of what is necessarily common to all poetry. In opposition to the long-standing assumption that poetic essence derives from what is artistically or rhetorically universal, what is in the Aristotelian sense artistically "purged" from abstract particularity and sublimated into a universal value, the implicit thesis of *Bantams* is that poetry becomes poetic only when the pure value of the symbol supersedes its object.

But even poetry that operates according to the classical mode of representation still requires a form of reading which necessarily carries with the literal value of the symbol. When a reader is given a rhymed stanza, they are still being asked to make a symbolic association based on the material of language alone:

Muse of my heart, of palaces the lover,
Where will you, when the blast of winter blows
In the black boredom of snowed lights, discover
A glowing brand to warm your violet toes?

¹¹ Harold Bloom, for example, sees *Bantams* not worth the attention merited by longer poems: "After the *Comedian*, Stevens' poems from 1922 to 1924 do not renew their exuberance. Barely beneath the colors of such gaudy verses as *Bantams in Pine-Woods*...there is felt a kind of desperation not present in the *Harmonium* poems of 1915-1919 (*The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 82)." Critics such as Bloom who, without ever saying explicitly so, nonetheless so clearly tend toward the longer poems of an author necessarily suggest a kind of narrative chronology of the author himself—that the shorter, lesser regarded poems function as floating signifier themselves sutured by a "strong" poem. Reading poems thus is an avoidance of the *real* of language, using an authorial narrative to organize that author's work. Not that introducing the figure of an author into his or her own poem should be prohibited, only presented truthfully as what it really is—an interpretation based on the sheer presence of the symbol.

How will you there revive your marbled skin
At the chill rays your shutters then disperse?
The gold of azure heavens will you win
When empty are your palate and your purse?

These opening stanzas, taken from Baudelaire's "Venal Muse" do not present a rebus in the style of Stevens' *Bantams*. Yet the rhyme, which is no different from quatrain rhyming that has existed in poetry for millennia, introduces an element into the poem which is not immediately reducible to its manifest content: the shared sound of "lover" and "discover" adds nothing in itself to either the primary narrative line of the poem. Yet the linkage, based on sound alone, necessarily demands the attention of the reader, who must decide how to incorporate the element of rhyme (as well as meter, alliteration, etc.). The symbolic linkage based on rhyme ("lover"/"discover") opens up the possibility, for example, that the hero of the poem, "of palaces the lover" (muse of ornamentation, beauty, luxury) is through the love of appearance led to discover the poverty at the beneath appearance ("When empty are your palate and your purse?"). The 4th line which on its own invokes the image of the muse's feet being warmed, is with the tip of its own metrical foot—"toes"—linked with the winter wind ("blows"), which based on this linkage intrudes into line 4, in fact inverts the meaning of its image. If the entire narrative discovery of the poem is the inversion of a beautiful appearance, the muse, into an image of poverty, then there is some kind of irony in the fact that the classically aesthetic quality of sound and rhythm created by the organization of language into verse is itself empty. Baudelaire furnishes the "empty" gesture of verse itself with the image of a degraded goddess, an "empty purse". Which mimics the reader, who is forced to realize that finding an sort of objective cause for the poem's formal structure is based on the arbitrary, protruding quality of form itself.

This kind of interpretative exercise—which could be really just be called the practice of close reading—does not by itself reach the core of psychoanalytic discovery. The point of psychoanalysis is not to break the veil of appearance in order to access truth, but to understand how truth itself is an effect constituted by appearance. This truth is less obvious when in a poem like *Venal Muse* the image represented is not only not impeded by signifying material, but even reinforced. Yet reading the poem as symbolically constituted can only lead to the conclusion that the symbol, if it in fact does reinforce the meaning of the poem, does not do so because there is an actual, substantial connection between the symbol and its content. Rather, form and content fall apart; the reader is forced to conclude that the jaunty forms and rhythms are at odds with their representations. Formal elements could “represent” anything, and part of the sinister glee of “*Venal Muse*” stems not only from a certain indulgence for squalor and lust, but from the irrepressible spirit of, continuing along its way despite the constraints of the subject matter it’s supposed to obey.

iii

In poetry the literal element inherent in language is a necessary interference. Poetry is at its core the mode of discourse where that interference is made explicit. The most radical poetic texts require the reader to deal almost exclusively with the surface level, literal dimension language, before “meaning” is ever available. With *Bantams*, once one is able to feel out the words as signifying units which perform the sole task of resonating with other signifying units, we can begin to draw a picture. To read psychoanalytically is to, so to speak, chop the blinding

appearance into pieces, taking the fragments and inspecting as signifying units. Freud explains this in the following passage:

If we attempted to read [dream images] according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error. Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away, and so on.

Now I might be misled into raising objections and declaring that the picture as a whole and its component parts are nonsensical. A boat has no business to be on the roof of a house, and a headless man cannot run. Moreover, the man is bigger than the house; and if the whole picture is intended to represent a landscape, letters of the alphabet are out of place in it since such objects do not occur in nature.

But obviously we can only form a proper judgment of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance.

A dream is a picture-puzzle of this sort and our predecessors in the field of dream-interpretation have made the mistake of treating the rebus as a pictorial composition: and as such it has seemed to them nonsensical and worthless.¹²

Freud asks the question surrounding the seemingly impenetrable surface of the dream-text: how we can properly decode its manifest form without determining its meaning in advance? The answer is to take it exactly as it is, literally, which involves embracing rather than eschewing the one-dimensional and bizarre form of the dream. Freud's focus on the rebus image of the houseboat provides a sketch of how the unconscious manifests itself in the form of the literal: the dream image of the boat on the roof of the house is the purely literal interpretation of an idea, nothing more than a transparent idea becoming tangled in its own word form. Any speaker understands that the parts of the term "house-boat" are not to be taken literally—that they refer to

¹² Ibid.

something outside the idea immediately provided from the given words. The unconscious, however, interprets with a non-discriminating exactitude, a literal glee which in a method similar to some of the paintings of Dalí¹³ takes things as they are in naïve simplicity—in the dimension of the pure symbol. We might conceive of Freud’s move here as a transition from significance to signification, an interpretive stroke that takes language beyond the realm of meaning, the place of wholeness or the *a priori*, into the “truth” of symbolic value—where it becomes fragmentary, decomposed, the wholly non-meaningful material of language. The manifestation of the house-boat image can be thought of as nothing but a drive, a force of pure literality, which knots, distorts, infects the concept behind it.

Access to the truth of the text often involves a division of what at first seems to be a unified entity, which is a way of bringing before one’s eyes what was almost too visible to see. In *Bantams* the word or name “Iffucan” first suggests something pure, a Central American warlord, the bizarreness of whose name makes identifying the precise qualities of the word itself difficult while nonetheless suggest that *there are precise qualities*. The specificity of the name itself signifies a knowing agent. But what if instead of falling seductee of the name one takes the word as it is, grazing the surface of the word itself. Like Freud’s house-boat example, “Iffucan” at first suggests a complete meaning, seems in itself meaningful, a complete sign. But if, like the breaks into pieces, Iffucan becomes “If you can”, just as “Azcan” becomes “As can” or “As I can”. The first line of the poem no longer represents an exotic name but is revealed to be an instance of petty taunting by the “chieftain”. If in the text as a whole we can use certain resonances to make symbolic connections (stringing together the recurrence of words echoing

¹³ Take, for example, “The Metamorphosis of Narcissus”, where the image of the hero is reduced to an uncanny resemblance of his essential organs and “parts”.

birds or flowers), chopping up the assumed consistency of the whole text in order to extract bits for inspection, then we can do it with individual words themselves. Just as in the text, there can be revealed an-*other* meaning latent within the form of a word itself. Stevens' *Bantams* and Freud's houseboat example both share the same structure where a seemingly nonsensical form, once taken literally, is actually quite recognizable, even somewhat puny, far beneath the supposed fullness and purity which strange forms often suggest.

The reading of Stevens' poem so far would naturally suggest the classical, platonic mode of reading: that behind the symbolic edifice of the poem, the form, there lies a cogent meaning, the Form, which, through the work of rigorous interpretation, can be uncovered. But this is to fall into the mode of empirical and scientific thinking, which not even Freud was immune to. In this theory poetry is nothing but a patsy, a quick excuse to strengthen the position of classical representation (i.e. that behind the form of representation there *is* something objective, if only we could find out how to access it). The poem, the "distorted form" is presented as precisely the terrestrial, murky, mortal form which it is the interpreter's job to decode. This perspective on Substance has dominated philosophical thinking since both Aristotle and Plato gave it body in their own day. We can understand why Freud would fall into it—after all, the bizarre form of the dream almost calls out to us to decode it. It seems to be speaking, and we want to know what it's saying. But with poetry? The platonic theory of Essence raises the question: why "symbolize" the content of the poem at all, why "poeticize" objective thought? It is not that there is no "decoding"—interpretation, really—occurring; but decoding the hidden Essence, revealing it to the world once and for all is not the end of interpretation. If it is the manifest form, poetry has no value and stands only as an impediment to meaning.

If a word like “Azcan” is bizarre before a literal translation reveals the ordinary meaning within it, do we stop once that ordinary meaning is uncovered? Again, that would be Of course there really is no end: etymology shows the opposite structure, whereby a completely ordinary word (“goodbye”) holds as a literal value alien to its own perceived ordinary value (“*goodbye*” derives from the old salutation “*God-be/God-be-with-you*” similar to the modern equivalent in Spanish “*a-Dios*”). The point is also not that the words we use to express ordinary ideas themselves contain hidden truths, although this can sometimes be the case, but rather that the literal force through which ideas come into existence depletes those concepts of their supposed purity, and not through their relation to other, contrary ideas but by the sheer signifying presence. Any word necessarily contains *another potential word* with a contrary meaning because ideas must take shape in the material form of words. What a poem such as *Bantams* does is not to give us a puzzle to decode, but rather ruffles the comely façade of the signifier, creating multiple meanings, embedding one meaning within another, creating patterns of meaning throughout a text as a whole, which all bring to consciousness the forgotten, the unconscious literal element of language. If the first checkpoint of interpretation gives us the formulation of “false meaning—true meaning” the second checkpoint of interpretation reveals the first formulation to actually be this: “meaning—(other) meaning”. In the end it doesn’t matter if the progression of deciphering goes normal form to bizarre or bizarre to normal, but that, whatever is considered to be a self-contained entity *will always reveal the other form within itself*.

Poetic interpretation, in the vein of psychoanalysis, involves the interpretative stroke only of noting, pointing out, “sublating” what’s already in plain sight. It is the task of transforming reality into what it already is. And the difficulty of psychoanalytic interpretation is just that: that

due to a drive for ideological “meanings” on the grand scale it is difficult to see how units of signification, the “letter”, produce in themselves something counter to conventional meaning. Psychoanalytic interpretation involves the difficult act of balancing the primary (but meaningless) element of appearance with the final (but illusory) element of essence. This is what Freud means when writes that, “Reason cannot form any opinion upon all [these thoughts] unless it retains the thought long enough to look at it in connection with the others.” Reason must enter at some point, one cannot let the flow of association last forever, but the point at which it must enter is vague. “Retaining the thought long enough to look at it in connection with the others,” doesn’t specify the theoretical point at which the analyst has held “Reason” long enough to allow the complete picture to come to light. There is of course no theoretically “correct” point at which to start interpreting; if there were, it would mean there was an empirically grounded truth of that phenomenon. Rather than waiting for the “correct” moment to halt the chain of association, it is perhaps simply that one must act, the analyst based on her judgement, must choose a moment, and understand how that choice, based in some degree on the analyst’s subjectivity, is the necessary stop to the sliding of associations.

Lacan provides a useful analogy for this method of interpretation, highlighting the balance require for psychoanalytic interpretation, when he compares the psychoanalytic setting to a game of bridge. In contrast to the assumed dyadic (two-person) relationship of analyst and analysand in analysis, Lacan posits that there are at least always four people in the psychoanalytic setting: there is, obviously, the analysand and the analyst, but then there are two other players in the game: the Other (capital O) or the “dummy” as it’s known in bridge, and the unconscious of the analysand. Like bridge, the analyst’s job is to get the analysand (his partner)

to guess his own unconscious (the player's hand of cards that is face down) and he does so using the dummy, the empty hand laid face up. There are a limited number of cards in the game of bridge, and the point of the game is to try and use the revealed cards, consisting of the dummy, whose entire hand is on display (hence the Other, the matrix of symbolic association which is theoretically accessible to anyone) and the limited, "revealed" cards played by each player. This is where the comparison with analysis comes in to play: if the analytic setting is conceived of in terms of "turns"—the exchanges between analyst and analysand—then the analyst's goal is to prompt the right kind of responses in the analysand by the "cards" that he plays. But the catch is that the analyst should always inform the hand she plays, what he says, in terms of the Other. The analyst should play from the position of the Other, so that if the analysand says something that seems particularly significant, the analyst's job is to use the resonances of language to provoke a reaction in the analysand.

The point of this analogy, and Lacanian technique in general, being that the analyst *must act*, must perform the act of interpretation, but it must be the interpretation deprived of prejudice or desire—it must be the position of, as Lacan puts it, a dummy. Psychoanalytic poetics is based on the same technique, the same balance where the reader *must act as reader, must read the poem, and must understand on some level that the poem represents the product of a voice*, yet must act in their interpretation from the position of language and its associations. *Bantams in Pine-Woods* is an example where interpretation is nearly impossible unless one discards the assumption that the language, especially of the first two lines, refers to something *in and of itself*, that there is a wholeness proportionate to the given, assumed-to-be-whole façade of form. The analyst in a similar position, and must always take the analysand's speech with distance, must

assume a second meaning in his words. To miss the reflexive relationship between the word-forms and their symbolic association—to miss that meaning is between these two, not located within one or the other—is to necessarily assume that there is somewhere a key within the text of the poem that will reveal its meaning. In the interpretation of *Bantams* provided below, I stopped after having noted some of the sexual connotations in the poem. Once the sexual, phallic elements of the poem become named, they are hard to ignore. The “universal cock” reflects upon the “bristling” (to “erect” one’s further or feathers) that occurs several lines down, as it does with the peculiar word choice “tang” (a pointed, sharp object). According to the interpretation where the “inchling” represents Stevens, who faces the looming Iffucan, then the occurrence of phallic allusions seems to suggest a sexually based origin for the poem.

But that is, I think, the precise mistake to be avoided. Freud comes dangerously close to claiming that the goal of psychoanalytic interpretation is locating the sexual origin of repression, which is the cause of the distorted dream form. If that’s the case, then the aim of interpreting *Bantams* is only to find the occluded instance of sexual desire, which determines the entire poem. But the point of psychoanalytic interpretation after Lacan redefines it to where the phallus *is not it*. The encounter with the supposed source of vitality is in fact nothing more than an encounter with constitutive lack undergirding representation. The encounter with the supposed source of vitality—for Freud sexual desire, which is the cause of all repression—is itself an arbitrary one. With *Bantams*, we might ask the question: if some form of repressed sexual desire took the form of a “cock” in order to disguise itself, how does the “bird form” of the dream take on a life of its own? It is perhaps that even if the phallus is the actual origin of the poem—which I don’t think it is—the phallus, as soon as it is represented, loses its supposed vitality, and that

vitality subsists purely with the manifest form presumed to be that vital source. The manifest form means more than any meaning that form is supposed to represent. Yet, in interpreting, we must posit *a meaning*, we must believe that our interpretation, the properly symbolic chain of association, is going somewhere. But then the ultimate point of following that symbolic chain is only for us to return to where it began, to the original signifier, so that we apprehend the part it plays in necessarily intimating its linguistic *other*—the fact that it *must always* lead to a linguistic other somewhere on the symbolic chain.

Chapter 2: Poetry and Repetition

“This notion of the death instinct must be broached through its resonances in what I will call the poetics of Freud’s work...”

—Lacan

Wallace Stevens is fond a specific rhetorical effect, one that appears throughout his writing. It is an effect that, remarkable as it is, has received no sustained critical attention. Moreover it is an effect, perhaps more than evidence that his work is concerned with themes akin to the psychoanalytic cause; it as an effect which shows that Stevens understands the literal quality of language is somehow the key to poetry. Let's first take the poem *Nomad Exquisite* from

Harmonium:

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green vine angering for life,

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth hymn and hymn
From the beholder,
Beholding all these green sides
And gold sides of green sides,

And blessed mornings,
Meet for the eye of the young alligator,
And lightning colors
So, in me, come flinging
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.

This effect happens in two places, first in lines 8-9, and then in line 14 at the end of the poem.

I'm first going to read the poem sequentially, up to the point of lines 8-9, in order to provide context for the aforementioned effect. The poem begins with the evocation of the natural, profuse and brutal life force of Florida. Water is "immense dew", a rampant, ubiquitous source of life. There is a sense of bigness and struggle, with the snake-like vine "angering" for life. Stevens provides more or less a depiction of life unmediated, life in a state of pure existence. Against that depiction in the first stanza comes a sort of domestication of it. The second stanza mediates the

first: the natural existence of life becomes a representation, a hymn. But the use of “hymn” is significant: the hymn is not only a neutral form of containment or representation—it is not a photograph—but rather a form of sublimation. Hymns are religious odes, odes to the gods or God, and for Freud this apotheosis of nature into God represents the sublimation of violent, natural oedipal aggression into feelings of love. Sublimation in the classic Freudian sense means nothing more than the metamorphosis of the unorganized, painful lust for life into a form of social accord, the putting aside of desire and its reification into what it is not (a renunciation). And in this view, the aggressive, unfettered, ultimately chaotic life of the first stanza becomes in the second the pure aestheticizing of that life—the movement through which trauma acquires form, and empty life is made into the poem. Which ultimately refers back to the necessary ascent of the signifier into the signified. Lacan, through a refinement of Freud’s definition, discards the insistence on sexuality and posits sublimation as the organization of meaningless “trauma”, sexual or not, into order. In a classic example, the flower, a symbol of beauty, is at heart nothing but an obscene, profuse sexual organ—yet, and without changing what it actually is (for the stamen of the flower is stands in clear view) the flower acquires the power of *repressing* its natural function and becoming, in its own way, sublime.

Yet to understand the first stanza as the material “truth” of the poem that the second stanza eventually represses is to fail to see the truth of the unconscious. Visions of disgust are in fact nothing more than a decoy which, for all his prudence, sometimes ensnared Freud. The truth of the repressed is that, empirically speaking, the repressed is *nothing*—there was nothing before the signifying act of sublimation. So that a depiction of “natural” sexual life is an effective representation of the repressed insofar as it evokes in a precise fashion *the sheer gap between the*

form of the repressed and the form of that repressed form sublimed. Stevens' depiction of wild Floridian life is an effective contrast to the hymn that follows it insofar as this depiction of Florida presents us with an irreconcilable gap between them, and tends toward the lack of meaning that is to be contrasted with the hymn as *pure form of meaning*. Lacan's ultimate point is that rather than the brutality of life it is precisely this gap between form of mediation/sublimation (the hymn) and the thing "sublimated" (wild life) that represents the truth of the unconscious. As Žižek puts it, "The paradox of the Sublime is as follows: in principle, the gap separating phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself is insurmountable – that is, no empirical object, no representation [*Vorstellung*] of it can adequately present [*darstellen*] the Thing (the suprasensible Idea)."¹⁴ Meaning that there is no causative relationship between nature and culture as such, between the "angry" (phallic) vine and the hymn. Žižek's definition aligns Stevens' depictions of Floridian life on the side of the sublime, since it evokes more precisely the horror of *Das Ding* [The Thing-in-itself]. Yet we understand this life as angry, pure, "in itself" only once we have the aestheticizing of it; the act of the hymn is an act of sublimation which retroactively posits its object as sublime. The "hymn" is thus not so much a smoothing over of something repulsive as it is a pure signifying act through which, retroactively, something becomes repulsive. In other words, something is not repressed because it is repulsive, something is repulsive because it approximates the Real of the repressed: which is *nothing*. If we think of the second stanza as a the poetic version of the first then there is nothing inherently "poetic" about this poem except that it *has become a poem*—"nature", if you will, has through the pure signifying act, the stroke of signification, been placed within the domain of art.

¹⁴ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. p. 229.

However, once so, *Das Ding* remains inaccessible. But Stevens brings us one step closer to the Thing. In the very stanza of sublimation, of the hymn, we do not get beatified pictures of nature—we tellingly get symbolic rupture. By the end of the second stanza we have become so enthralled by nature’s transformation into the hymn that we have lost sight of what we are really reading, and Stevens’ reminds us with the introduction of the pure presence of the Symbol. First, there enters a “beholder” into the poem (a significant detail) who suddenly has the capacity to perceive the “green sides”—angles, perspectives—of nature. In other words, the beholder begins metonymic thinking, to think of it as such, employing one of many possible substitutes or parts that might represent a whole. But metonymic perception fails, it in fact mutates, breaks off its own symbolic form: Stevens instead of furthering the metonymically the idea on the level of content, he illogically repeats the *form of that idea*, past its point of meaning. The line “gold sides of green sides” subverts the supposed place of the “side”, exposing the radical truth of metonymy (that there is only side upon side) and reduces the “Object”—nature—to the mere level of “side”. Stevens through this turn (turning to the real side, of course this side of the Real) negates the integrity of the image he has so far conjured, breaking it apart and taking us into the world of the symbol. “Gold sides of green sides” is precisely an example of the unconscious, the precise way in which language repeating itself is language becoming conscious of itself *as nothing more than language*.

If we are tempted to interpret the first stanza as the form of life repressed by the hymn, then at this point in the poem, a pure repetition of form, we understand the true dimensions of repression: that is in fact not the covering up of something undesirable (A) by something desirable (B), but it is the simple act of “A” becoming “B”, through the repetition of itself. The

formal repetition of a certain element introduces a destructive element into the fabric of the poem, which can only appear as a logical glitch, a form (“gold sides of green sides”) incompatible with the poetic method of representation established thus far. Poetry operates upon the assumption, even given the fact that poetry typically paralyzes prosaic modes of representation, that each line of a poem advances its meaning in some way, that the relationship between two lines is that of an advancement, the second carrying forward the meaning of the first. But the relationship between lines 8-9 is only that of pure meaning itself, whereby the attempt to repeat an element, a “side”, results in that thing becoming *other to itself*. And so, Stevens shows us that, opposed to the imaginary binary produced in his poem, the real repressed, the real unconscious is the reemergence of the *otherness* of language itself, that a change or coincidental *insistence* on the presence of words immediately negates the given authenticity of content. Stevens performs this effect—which is essentially a form of metaphor, again on line 14. This time, however, it is not a relationship between lines but that of words in a phrase. The last phrase of the poem “flames of flakes” has an uncanny assonant quality about it, almost as if the last clause of line 14 attempts to repeat the word “flames” but, through the attempted repetition of itself, produces itself as its own *other*. Both imagistically and symbolically the “flakes” represent And, through use of predication (“flakes of flames”) Stevens shows precisely how meaning emerges from a repetition of the same, how difference, *otherness* is produced from within. If Stevens had written, “flames, forms and flakes” there is merely produced, however interestingly, three different “sides”, three separate ideas which emerge as aspects of the speaker (“So, in me, come flinging [these three things]”). Within lines 13-14 the subject is in a sense

divided, and witnesses *pieces of himself* come flinging into the world.¹⁵ But the crucial aspect is that the “flames” flinging from the speaker’s body are themselves divided. The flame begets its own “flakes”, a flake which is above all an instance of the flake, the fragment, the remainder of the unconscious in language. Stevens presents both a certain image (man’s creative “flame” springing forth) and pairs that image with the very material of language itself springing from its imaginary creation.

The word “flake” is the crux of poem, arguably. While Bloom prefers the line Stevens concocted in an earlier draft (“I wish Stevens had kept its earlier version: ‘So, in me come flinging / Fruits, forms, flowers, flakes, and fountains.’) “flake” is, as Bloom puts it in his own way, “a hard or antithetical one, flaking off into the component tropes of the poem.” Breaking the flame into the component tropes is exactly what the flake does. One here does not exactly have the paradigm of the Stevens Florida poem, but we have in condensed form all the ingredients of it. We have, we might say, an instance of what might have been a poem lush in life, of the fecund world of Florida in the very process of becoming conscious of itself *as poem*—which happens in the phrase “flakes of flames”. Thus the immortal couplet from *Farewell to Florida* might be viewed as an attempt to capture the becoming-conscious of *Nomad Exquisite* a more eloquent expression of now-impossible potency of the Florida Sublime, reduced to the mere concept, the flat skin of the snake,

Go on, high ship, since now, upon the shore,
The snake has left its skin upon the floor.

¹⁵ Not unlike, I should add, Lacan’s Lamella. “Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the *homlette*, or the lamella.” *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. p. 197.

As mentioned earlier, the detail in *Nomad Exquisite* of the beholder, and its emergence in line 7 (“Brings forth hymn and hymn/ from the beholder”) is logically connected to the bursting forth of the symbolic order into the imaginary dimension of the poem. In fact, the intervention of the pure symbol into the imaginary realm, because it implies self-consciousness (the poem has become conscious of its own artifice) there is necessarily another self, a stepping-out of the frame of the imaginary dimension of the poem.

One of the most forceful and perfect examples of this technique is found in the short poem from *Harmonium, Valley Candle*:

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
Until the wind blew.
Then beams of the huge night
Converged upon its image,
Until the wind blew.

In this poem Stevens lays bare the precise way in which he apprehends the necessary literal excess of language. What defines this poem? The reader’s attention is first directed toward the image of the candle, to antitheses of light and darkness, and related ideas of metaphysical “vision”. The poem invites readings about the interplay between clarity of vision, and the impending void that lies beyond that vision. There are questions of the symbolism of the candle, the valley, the night, and wind. Wind returns throughout Stevens’ work, significantly in *The Idea of Order at Key West*, where its arbitrary, meaningless dimension is emphasized (“The

meaningless plungings of water and wind”).¹⁶ But I think this is not what the poem is truly about, at least this image, this manifest content is only a single dimension of the poem, its imaginary dimension if you will, the occasion of the poem which gives way to something fundamentally beyond the image’s scope. The *other* meaning of the poem is the felt sense of “something” which occurs at the moment of its center, the break between lines 3 and 4. During this transition, where the poem is split in half, the poem as a whole attempts, simply put, to repeat itself. The first half of the poem creates an image: a candle burning in an “immense valley”, the ambivalent “converging” of night upon the candle, and the wind blowing out the candle. The second half of the poem prepares the reader for some kind of transition, a development of the original image, a forward movement. But the structure of that movement gives us only the same, returns us to an uncanny repetition of an original “thing”. The second half of the poem does nothing more than present the mediated, actualized, “signified” incarnation of its first half. Line 4 (“Then beams of the huge night”) suggests a progress in the relationship between the night and its surroundings, it has already consumed the candle and, following the logic of the causative “Then”, we assume this scene must develop itself, must progress the desiring movement of its logic. Stevens however gives us two surprising changes: line 4 replaces the candle itself with the image of the candle, putting forth the idea that the transition in this poem is based on the mediation of a natural object, a candle, into a mere representation—that the shift from first to second half is a shift from natural object (candle) to medium of representation itself *as object*. The other change in the second half is that the poem breaks up, enjambes line 2 (“Then beams of huge night

¹⁶ The candle features often in Stevens. Much later in his oeuvre, it occupies a prominent place in the poem *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour*, where candlelight is described as “Within a single thing, a single shawl/ Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,/ A light, a power, the miraculous influence.”)

converged upon the candle)” into “Then beams of huge night / converged...”. Taking these two “events” in conjunction with one another, we might say that they present the same thing on the two levels of form and content. The substitution of the candle for its own image suggests a dialectical identity between the candle and its form of representation, as if the attempt to return to the candle, to repeat it, begets the truth that the candle itself was never anything but a representation. The shift in form is perhaps even more revealing: what happens is that line 2, like the candle, is unable to reproduce itself. The fact that in the second half what was formerly a complete foot of verse is now broken apart (4-5) tells us that the poem has undergone some kind of fundamental shift, that the form of the poem stutters, skips, loses its formal consistency. In the same way with *Nomad Exquisite*, a near repetition signals the poem approaching its logical limit. *Valley Candle* essentially gives us two poems: it gives us a poem, pure presentation, and then the mediation of that poem, that poem becoming its own form—like the candle—of representation, a poem about a poem (i.e. “Poetry is the subject of the poem”). When we arrive at the line break of 4-5, which fragments the idea expressed in line 2, we necessarily feel that something in the imagistic world of the poem has been broken—its visual amplitude has been traversed not only by our gaze, the subjective viewpoint of the reader; but even more significantly, the very frame of the poem itself becomes the object to itself, and is embodied precisely within the contradictions, the gaps of the poem’s second half—nothing more than the minimal differences between each “poem”. A metrical line broken into two, the metamorphosis of a candle into a picture of a candle—true difference is expressed not by metonymy’s desire to layer trope upon trope, to turn around endlessly and ignore the impetus of the expression, but exactly in the moment when an element is juxtaposed next to itself, and by that very juxtaposition is revealed

to be *at least minimally different from itself*. The differences of the second half of the poem are, in Hegelian fashion, nothing more than the expression of the contradictions contained implicitly within the first half.

Instead of citing this poem as an example of the adage “form follows content”, I think the poem favors some much more radical: what happens if the content, the image of the poem is itself nothing more than a remainder, a hollow photograph of the “break” that the poem, or that poetry, essentially is? In this case Stevens’ conceit as a poet is to dupe us into an imagist piece which suggests a clear, economic presentation of a certain evocative image—the candle as “first idea”, vital flame of objective vision—only so that we then feel metaphor announcing itself from beneath the poem’s surface. Combining the “Rift” on the planes of both content and form, instead of aligning their meaning and thus performing a compounding, redoubled effect (a simulation of the same effect on two different planes shows us only the more rudimentary gap between form and content itself. Stevens, in this poem, and in *Nomad Exquisite*, proffers us a specific image only to subvert that image by then giving us an “image” of the pure signifier, which can only be expressed through the gaps and inconsistencies of language. What emulating the rift between form and content—the rift between image and object—does is to expose that the relationship between form and content embodies the same gap that each expresses distinctly. In addition to getting two versions of the same effect, we have the precise effect simulated in the gap between form and content, so that the poem creates another gap fueled by form and content, and furthers the radical, unbound automatism of the unconscious in language.

If the “image”, the content of the poem, shadows the real rupture within, this rupture is nothing but the contradiction of the object, that it is never purely an object. “My candle burned

alone in an immense valley”—from the beginning the dubious solitude of the candle is presented to our minds. How do we reconcile this paradox? Is the candle in the possession of the speaker? How is it then alone? Is the speaker herself the candle, as her own subjectivity manifested as an object? This poem shows us the truth of the fantasy of solipsism—when we posit the candle, the original moment of light, of clarity, in a pure state, the tiny flame is then surrounded by darkness. The properly uncanny dimension of the fantasy occurs when it is revealed that the thing we are supposedly witness to is also witnessing us; and it is even more uncanny (what Lacan terms gaze) when we discover that the supposedly pure, independent external object is, because it is determined by us, it is *nothing but ourselves as the external*.

Metaphor-da

Freud's purpose in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is to ask a simple question: why do we repeat experiences that are unpleasurable? In his earlier thinking, Freud sought to justify all human pathology and phenomena in terms of an economy of pleasure. Dreams, for example, were a way to subvert conscious, ego-controlled regulations and prohibitions. The dream, if it so conveniently depicted the deposing of one's father, would be according to Freud the psyche's way of overcoming conscious prohibitions and pursuing a repressed desire. But in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud acknowledges the reality of certain types of behavior which do not clearly have pleasure as their aim. In particular, Freud recognizes an example of such behavior in the favorite game of a child, the famous *fort-da* case. The child throws a reel outside of his cot so that it is no longer visible. He then uses string attached to the reel to fetch the thrown reel and

pull it back into his cot. Accompanying this, the child utters the German words “*fort*” (gone) and “*da*” (here); “*fort*” when the reel is thrown, “*da*” when retrieved. Freud first concludes that the game represents the child’s overcoming of an instinctual attachment to his mother—the game “was connected with the child’s remarkable cultural achievement—the foregoing of the satisfaction of an instinct—as the result of which he could let his mother go away without making any fuss.”¹⁷ Freud posits a connection between the transience of the child’s mother, and the child’s overcoming of that transience through conceptualizing, through repeating it.

It is this conclusion which leads Freud to another observation: “The departure of the mother cannot possibly have been pleasant for the child, nor merely a matter of indifference. How then does it accord with the pleasure-principle that he repeats this painful experience as a game?”¹⁸ Accepting that the child’s game is a form of overcoming loss, why does the form of that overcoming mimic, even reproduce the loss? Freud proposes a few hypotheses to his own question. His first suggestion is that the child “recites” the experience of his mother leaving with the reel in order to prepare the more joyous moment of the return. However, Freud observes, “the first act, the going away, was played by itself as a game and far more frequently than the whole drama with its joyful conclusion,”¹⁹—there is a certain satisfaction derived from the “going” action itself. Freud then suggests that the *fort-da* game might be based on an attempt to master what’s beyond the child’s control—the independent will of his mother—or that the game is a masked attempt to express his unconscious contempt for his mother: his preference for “*fort*” ultimately being a way for the child to say, “Yes, you can go, I don’t want you, I am sending

¹⁷ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. p. 13

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 13-14.

you away myself.”²⁰ But these theories, “are of no help, since they presuppose the existence and supremacy of the pleasure-principle and bear no witness to the operation of tendencies beyond the pleasure-principle, that is to say, tendencies which might be of earlier origin and independent of this.”²¹ The problem, for Freud, is that all of these suggestions ultimately refer back to the pleasure principle—all yearn for some biologically based, evolutionarily grounded explanation for the phenomenon of pain. There is an undeniable insistence, evident in the child’s behavior itself, toward something beyond mere ego-based pleasure.

Much of this essay’s stake is centered on the belief that there is something inherent in the repetition displayed in the child’s game that is a fundamental part of our experience of reading poetry. The effect I have set out to describe in Stevens’ poetry is itself a “repetition”, but a repetition on the level of form. The question then becomes of what a certain textual repetition or rhetorical effect has to do with our broader subjective experience—really the experience of *being*. What does the child’s game, as an early form of neurosis, has to do at all with the traversal of a text? Picking up where Freud left off, Lacan agrees that the child’s game is not a form of mastery. In his own words,

The function of the exercise with this object refers to an alienation, and not some supposed mastery, which is difficult to imagine being increased in an endless repetition, whereas the endless repetition that is in question reveals the radical vacillation of the subject.²²

The key for Lacan is vacillation. An understanding of Lacan’s revision of Freud immediately identifies vacillation, the very movement of lack, as inextricable from of repetition. The *fort-da*

²⁰ Ibid. p. 14

²¹ Ibid. p. 16

²² *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. p. 239.

game is not a fortification, but the child's way of defining himself by staging, sculpting, framing his own constitutive lack. And this lack is embodied, defined by the frenetic back-and-forth movement inherent in the repeated gestures of a game.

If the mother's absence is considered to be traumatic, and thus worth repeating, it is not because the mother's absence as such is traumatic, but because the mother's absence, the act of her "going", represents a fundamental part of the subject's self, which is precisely that self *as absence*. The mother's *being* (mother) is only a product of her absence, which "being gone" itself is both the primordial gesture of vacillation and the loss which grounds all future repetition. The fact of the mother's departure is necessarily seen as a contingent loss that must immediately be recovered; but the fact that the mother is torn from the child, that she leaves him once and for all, is nothing but the necessary manifestation of lack *within the child's being proper*. The comprehension of the mother as a separate entity is viewed as an alienated part of the child's being. The child recognizes he has lost a part of himself, but misrecognizes that this core absence both inaugurates his "vacillation", and that both the absence and subsequent vacillation are absolutely necessary for the child's identity. The child can only ever sustain a fantasy of a mother that might return insofar as he experiences the (repeated) trauma of her departure. The gap introduced by the mother's departure is itself an element necessary for the child to understand himself as *such*, as child, as *being*. This is what allows the child to posit the mother as external to itself, the lost thing, of which his attempts to recover activate the infinite oscillation that properly outlines his own constitutive gap.

This structure is mimicked, or repeated, in the assumed structure of writing. There is the (necessary) assumption that writing is premised on the structure whereby one part (the latter, the

ever-to-come) completes another (the subject). We might say that any piece of writing, whether considered complete or no, necessarily implies a “supplement”, a lost piece of itself which will complete its meaning and make it final. Prefaces to works, while always somewhat excessive appendages, are given rise due to the necessary meta-space that any writing, any utterance at all implies. In fact we might think of the preface or introduction to work as absolutely nothing more than the delineation of a space beyond the relevant text. This structure is at work on a microcosmic level in *Valley Candle*, where the poem’s first half necessarily designates the space for a second, a supplement, a predicate which will suture the first half as complete. In fact, the poem does do this, but only in the most radical way possible: the poem shows that the central position, the position of subject or ego, is fortified only by repeating and thus extruding itself as the lost *other*, which, because it has been masked as *other*, appears as a key piece of the incomplete puzzle. What *Valley Candle* does, and what poetry is especially suited to do, is to expose: a) the dialectical identity between the two parts of this signifying structure, the dialectical identity between meaning (1) and non-meaning (2), as well as self (1) and *other* (2).

The act of “losing” oneself is thus as fundamental as the then-initiated quest of recapturing that piece recast as counterpart. Endless repetition is the child’s attempt to produce the very act of extending a piece of himself (symbolized originally by the “loss” of the mother) into the world, and allows him to repeatedly move across the “vacillation” that defines the child as subject. Says Lacanian theorist Alenka Zupancic, “In this game of *fort-da* both terms are essential, for it is with both that the child designates the gap, the jumping of which he plays at. He plays at jumping this gap by repeatedly ‘sending over’ something that functions as a

detachable part of himself...”²³ The two parts of the child-mother, part 1 and 2 of the dialectic are necessary because each acts as a bookend to frame the defining gap of subjectivity. The child’s need to repeat the game can thus be seen as an attempt to renew afresh this gap, to feel the extrusion of a piece of himself and the profound gap that the symbolized “loss” engenders. This gap the child plays it is nothing but the gap internal to subjectivity externalized, it is the impossibility of eternal union thus rejected from the body, the child’s own being transformed into an “It” and thrown out into the world. Freud’s observation of a child’s, a neurotic’s, anyone’s compulsive return was his recognition of the primacy of this moment, his recognition that this scene occupies a place at the core of the development of subjectivity. But Freud also noticed the conspicuous way in which the child’s fascination with repetition at some point gives way to an utter aversion to it. Adults characteristically eschew forms of repetition which insists on exact sameness:

A witticism heard for the second time will almost fail of effect; a theatrical performance will never make the same impression the second time that it did on the first occasion; indeed it is hard to persuade the adult to read again at all soon a book he has enjoyed. Novelty is always the necessary condition of enjoyment.²⁴

There is a way in which typical “adult” pleasure is attained by a constant movement, a shuffling or sliding of object-choices. Metonymy is precisely the name for this shuffling, characteristic of adult behavior, by which we seek to distance ourselves from the very “Thing” we supposedly seek. One, for example, can only read Lacan so many times before the freshness begins to wear and they need someone else, Freud, to provide a sort of signifying counterpart to Lacan.

²³ *The Odd One In*. p. 168.

²⁴ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. p. 43

Boredom is the name for the beginning of the process when something else begins to emerge in the place of meaning. We look to most sources of meaning (language, art, media) to give us respite from this radical act of repetition, yet we have also designated a number of proper venues for it, often within the very media that supposedly avoid it. Yet it is never quite as radical as it is in the world of the child, who according to Freud,

never gets tired of demanding from a grown-up the repetition of a game he has played with him before or has shown him, till at last the grown-up refuses, utterly worn out; similarly if he has been told a pretty story, he wants always to hear the same story instead of a new one, insists inexorably on exact repetition and corrects each deviation which the narrator lets slip by mistake, which perhaps he even thought to gain new merit by inserting.²⁵

If the child derives so much fascination from repetition, then what form of desire is repressed by the adult? Not surprisingly, Lacan responds directly to Freud's query. He writes,

Whatever, in repetition, is varied, modulated, is merely alienation of its meaning. The adult, and even the more advanced child, demands something new in his activities, in his games. But this 'sliding-away' (*glissement*) conceals what is the true secret of the ludic, namely, the most radical diversity constituted by repetition itself.²⁶

The child's repetition of the game resonates with his because it automatically signifies that, but because the relationship between the first and the secondary, repeated form of the *fort-da* game is, in fact, itself the very structure symbolized by *fort-da* (*fort-da*=the first act-its own repetition). In other words, pure repetition is an attempt to see a binary signifying structure emerge from singleness, to witness the first, undifferentiated moment become *other* to itself. So that the child's game is not repeated because it plainly signifies an important concept, the child's subjective gap, but moreover because that gap is itself given body by the way in which a specific

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 43-44

²⁶ *Four Fundamental Concepts*. p. 61.

iteration—a game, a child’s fable, a gesture—is done twice over. As Lacan notes, older children and adults eventually repress the pleasure of radical repetition. There are a number of ways in which it resurfaces, some pleasurable, some painful, some both. Poetry, if it is to become what it ideally is, is nothing other than this ludic enjoyment of repetition (itself perhaps just the ultimate form of metaphor). One might even say that poetry is the mode of repetitive enjoyment resurfaced in the field of language. If language and prose are brought by metonymy into the light of reason, then poetry is the necessary return metonymy’s unconscious *other*. Much of the popular aversion to poetry stems from its frequent insistence on repetition, its demand that the reader embrace a form of “pleasure” which breaks open the fortress of the ego. *Valley Candle*, as an exemplar, puts forth a gesture of “meaning” without giving a reader anything but an empty form. Meaning in this context, rather than producing significance, simply “means”.

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