

THE ART OF ETHICS AND THE ETHICS OF ART
BETWEEN KANT AND WALLACE STEVENS

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Abstract

In my dissertation I undertake to examine the relationship between ethics and art (aesthetics) through an analysis of the relationship between the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Wallace Stevens. I focus, in my analysis, on the concepts of metaphor, as embodied in Stevens' poems, and the thing-in-itself, as conceived by Kant in advancing his critique of pure reason. I argue that, unless we come to see that the thing-in-itself is a metaphor for the human condition and that metaphor involves and expresses a representation of "things" that describes not natural phenomena but what it means to be human, we will continue to flounder in the dualistic oppositions that often plague modern studies of ethics and art: the oppositions, for example, between the truth and its images, the good and the beautiful, the spirit and the flesh, and the concept and the content. It is in overcoming these dualisms that I aim to show that both the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens are at once ethical and aesthetic.

In undertaking to demonstrate, then, the relationship between the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens, I underscore, throughout my study, the fundamental difference between ancient Greek philosophy and poetry, on the one hand, and biblical concepts and images, on the other. For I argue that it is only when we truly grasp that the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens are biblical in origin, both ontologically and historically, that we will be in the position to account for the fundamental relationship between ethics and art in modernity. In sum, through an analysis of the works of Kant and Stevens, I undertake to show that, just as our ethical actions must be creative in order for them to be truly ethical, so must our artistic creations engage our most fundamental, ethical values in order for them to be truly creative.

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PART 1

Art, Ethics, and Modern Self-Consciousness

Introduction

In this study I examine the relationship between ethics and art in the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Wallace Stevens. As we shall see, Kant revolutionizes modern philosophy by demonstrating that, in the most fundamental terms, metaphysics is not a theory but a practice. Stevens, in no less dazzling a fashion, demonstrates in his great, major poems that the practice of poetry is truly constituted by the metaphysics of what he calls enduring love. My central aim, then, is to show that what Kant demonstrates in his critical philosophy—that metaphysics involves and expresses the ethical practice of building the kingdom of ends in which each and every human being is treated as a person and not as a thing—is what Wallace Stevens advances in his poetry—that the poem is the “making of the world,” the act of the mind involved in imagining the reality of the other in, through, and as its own metaphorical subjects.¹

I focus, therefore, on two major concepts: the thing-in-itself, one of the key concepts of Kant’s philosophy, and metaphor, as embodied in Stevens’ poems. For it is precisely in learning how to conceive of the relationship between the thing-in-itself and metaphor, as I undertake to show in the chapters that follow, that we shall learn what it is that constitutes the relationship between philosophy and poetry, between Kant and Stevens, and between ethics and art. That is, I argue that unless and until we see that the thing-in-itself is a metaphor for the human condition and that metaphor involves and expresses a representation of “things” that describes not natural phenomena but what it means to be human we will continue to flounder in the dualistic oppositions that typically plague modern studies of ethics (philosophy) and art (poetry): the oppositions, for example, between the transcendental and the practical, the sublime and the everyday, the spirit and the flesh, and the concept (the truth) and its content (the image). In short, I undertake to show that, unless we see that ethical practice is creative (a work of art) and that

engaging a work of art is an ethical practice, we shall continue to misunderstand the relationship between philosophy and poetry.

Thus, what I find to be both the challenge and the reward of examining the relationship between the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens is that it provides us with the resources for redeeming the common failures involved in our conceptions of ethics and aesthetics. Ethics is not the static or sterile study of situations far removed from our everyday lives. Rather, ethics is immanent. It involves and expresses how we view (think about) and live (act within) our lives every day. Yet, as Kant repeatedly points out, ethics is also not the pursuit of worldly or finite happiness. It remains, in his terms, transcendental. It is worth noting, then, that a study of ethics does not involve compiling a list of dogmatic prescriptions. Instead, it involves learning that morality—that ethics—is a dynamic and creative enterprise. As Kant demonstrates in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (as we shall soon see), ethics involves the practice of willing what he calls the kingdom of ends, a metaphor for the effort, on the part of the individual, to create the world from nothing by treating both oneself and others as subjects with dignity and not as objects with a price.

Aesthetics, like ethics, is at once immanent and transcendental. As Stevens' poems reveal, aesthetics is neither the imitation of nature nor the act of composing representations of ends (ideals) that are not inherent in its own creative process or that fall outside of human practice altogether. Rather, in Stevens' terms, art is the effort to find "what will suffice" as one wills the "sudden rightnesses" that embody one's own mind and the mind of others ("Of Modern Poetry"). Although the term "aesthetics," as Hegel observes in initiating his *Lectures on Fine Art*, describes "the science of sensation" and relates to immediate perception, engaging a work of art (e.g., reading a good poem) is not a merely sensible experience (1). A work of art is moving

neither because it involves the intuition, in Kant's terms, of physical motion nor because it evokes an immediate feeling or mood. Rather, art moves us because it demands a change in our consciousness, a change in the way in which we view the world by embodying a will to respond to human need with what Stevens calls not only enduring but visionary love.

In learning, then, that both ethics and aesthetics are founded upon a notion of will that demonstrates the self-determination (freedom) of all human subjects in contrast to determined, natural objects, we shall be able to avoid the following errors:

1. the assimilation of poetry (or any work of art) to philosophy, through which, as Sebastian Gardner notes in his essay on Stevens' poems,² the content of a work is divorced from, and viewed as subordinate to, its concept. The content of a poem is, as a result, unable to provide its readers with any evidence for how to interpret its (philosophical) concept.
2. the assimilation of philosophy to poetry, in which the spirit or the concept of a work is reduced to the formal aspects of that work: e.g., for a work of poetry, to its use of rhetorical devices or figures.³ The concept of a work of philosophy or poetry is thus absorbed in, and so viewed as subordinate to, its immediate and formal content. The concept of a work becomes meaningless, therefore, and of no account when assessing its true value.

Both of these accounts of the relationship between philosophy and poetry fail to provide any criteria according to which one is able to evaluate the concept and the content of a work of art or of a philosophical text. Both of these positions also fail to account for the dynamic relationship between ethics and art as embodied, for example, in the works of Kant and Stevens. That is, what advocates of these positions fail to see is that neither is philosophy reducible to poetry (rhetoric)

nor is poetry reducible to philosophy (transcendent concepts, i.e., concepts that do not engage our human practice). Rather, both philosophy and poetry present us, in unique and individual ways, with the task of developing a response to life that affirms the singularity and the dignity of each and every human person, a task that engages, at one and the same time, our ethical fortitude and our aesthetic creativity.

I make Kant and Stevens central to my approach to the study of the relationship between ethics and art for two interrelated reasons. First, I want to show how truly illuminating it is to read Stevens' most challenging poems in light of Kant's demonstration that metaphysics involves and expresses the ethical practice of human beings. What we shall discover is that the poetry of Stevens shares a metaphysical structure with the philosophy of Kant and that the philosophy of Kant shares an aesthetic structure with the poetry of Stevens. Furthermore, learning that what structures Stevens' poetry is the metaphysics that Kant aligns with moral practice and that what structures Kant's philosophy is the poetic framework that Stevens' aligns with the theological doctrine of creation from nothing will allow us to identify the inadequacy of the notion of aesthetics that Kant advances in the First Part of his third *Critique*, which he titles "The Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment." Developing the relationship, then, between philosophy and poetry through an analysis of Kant and Stevens such that we see that philosophy is truly poetic and that poetry is truly philosophical provides us with a basis for critically examining the following contradictory positions:

1. the philosophy of rationalism (what Kant calls the Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy), which, as we shall see, falsely attempts to know things as they are in themselves by extending the categories that properly apply to physical objects beyond what appears in space and time;

2. the philosophy of empiricism (whose chief representative, for Kant, is David Hume), which falsely assumes that the objects of natural space and time are things in themselves;
3. the theory of art for art's sake, which reduces art (e.g., poetry) to a subject of mere taste and against which Stevens, in his strongest poems, demands that his readers position themselves; and
4. the theory of art as social utility, which subordinates artwork to a utilitarian (moralistic) end and which results in reducing art to a depressing (because contradictory) parody of that which it symbolizes—a position that Stevens fundamentally eschews.

As the above philosophical theories (rationalism and empiricism) falsely assume that the thing-in-itself is an object that can be known according to those categories that properly apply only to physical objects, so too do the above theories of art share a false assumption that human works (e.g., metaphors) are analogous to the physical processes that we observe in natural space and time. What reading Kant and Stevens together allows us to do, then, is liberate ourselves from what they identify as the illusions that result when we model our notions of philosophy (ethics) and poetry (art) on the physical operations that we observe in nature. In other words, what this study argues is that we can liberate philosophy and poetry, and the relations inherent within them, from self-contradiction only when we see that both philosophy and poetry are at once ethical and aesthetic.

While my first reason for choosing Kant and Stevens is ontological, my second reason is historical. In developing a concept of metaphysics that is constituted by the free practice (at once ethical and aesthetic) of human beings, both Kant and Stevens are acutely aware that the basis for their critique of the dualisms that plague modernity is biblical in origin. Thus, both Kant and Stevens align their most fundamental concepts with concepts and images that are central to the

Bible. Indeed, Kant explicitly states in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* that the categorical imperative, the hallmark of his moral philosophy, agrees completely with the commandments of Holy Scripture to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.⁴

Stevens, for his part, makes biblical concepts, images, and figures central to his major poems. In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” for example, he directly links the biblical doctrine of creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) with the structure of modern poetry. Also, in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” he identifies Descartes, the putative father of modern philosophy, as the heir to the story of the “fall” of Adam and Eve in Genesis. Thus, he demands from his readers a close examination of the relationship between the concepts central to modern philosophy (e.g., doubt, thinking, existence, reason, the soul, God) and the account of the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible, in which we are told that they, in sinning, have become like God in knowing good and evil. In addition, Stevens demands from us, in identifying modern philosophy and biblical myth, an investigation of why he makes this relationship central to his modern poetry.

Not only, then, do Kant and Stevens provide us with the resources for overcoming the binary opposition between philosophy and poetry. But they also illustrate a concept of metaphysics that allows us to deconstruct the false oppositions so prevalent today between reason and faith, between the human and the divine, between atheism and theism, and between the secular and the religious. Moreover, it is in learning that the concepts and images that are central to both modern philosophy and modern poetry are biblical in origin and that the Bible is constituted by concepts and images that are profoundly modern that we shall be in the position to account ever more deeply for the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.⁵

In undertaking to show, however, that the true subject of philosophy and poetry is the metaphysics of human practice (i.e., of morals) and that the metaphysics of modernity is thereby biblical in origin, my study of the works of Kant and Stevens raises an acute challenge to conventional accounts of the history of modern philosophy and modern poetry, both of which begin, so the story goes, with the ancient Greeks, are subsequently forgotten during the dark ages of Christianity, but then re-emerge, in their true form, as ancient, classical texts become popular again among European thinkers. What these accounts, however, do not acknowledge is the crucial difference between, in Kierkegaard's terms, Christianity, as the work of loving others as you would want to be loved by them, and Christendom, as the reigning interpretation of Christian dogma still today in which pagan ideas and values are rationalized in Christian terms. In distinguishing with Kierkegaard and in concert with Kant between the true, moral service of Christianity and the counterfeit-service of Christendom, what we shall learn is that central to the discovery of the principles and values that constitute modern ethics and aesthetics is the distinction, at once historical and ontological, between ancient Greek philosophy and myth, on the one hand, and biblical concepts and images, on the other.

Although my focus in this study is neither ancient Greek metaphysics (philosophy) nor ancient Greek myth (poetry), I shall take the opportunity to discuss both Greek philosophy and Greek poetry (ancient mythology) when Kant and Stevens invoke them in their works with the aim of deepening our understanding of Kant and Stevens, of philosophy and poetry, of ethics and art in modernity. Indeed, while it is not Kant's project to develop a systematic and comprehensive philosophy of history, he does indicate, in key passages, that the concept of reason as practice that he advances is utterly different from the conceptions put forth by the ancient Greek schools of philosophy. It is also the case that, while Stevens does not articulate his

analysis of the human mind in terms of the difference between ancient Greek *poesis* and modern poetry, he does highlight, in several key poems, a critical distinction between two ages of poetry. For example, he opens his poem “Of Modern Poetry” by foregrounding a distinction between a time, stage, and scene when poetry simply repeated what was in the script (of natural space and time) and a time, stage, and scene wherein poetry acts as the theatre of the mind engaged in a hermeneutical relationship with its audience such that each undertakes to interpret the other as itself, through which he reiterates the golden rule that constitutes the ethics of the Bible. Thus, Stevens provides us with the hermeneutical basis for interpreting the critical distinction between Greek poetry and modern poetry (as biblical in origin), which is inherent in, for example, his poem “The Sail of Ulysses.” In so doing, he also provides us, alongside Kant, with a basis for distinguishing between Greek and modern conceptions of ethics.

As we are beginning to see, then, both Kant and Stevens demand of their readers a firm understanding of metaphysics (ontology) as ethics and of history as constituted by the difference between Greek and biblical thought. But it is precisely these demands that contemporary scholarship on Kant and Stevens has typically failed to meet. For example, in his essay “Wallace Stevens and Metaphysics: The Plain Sense of Things,” Sebastian Gardner shows real insight into the “transfigured world” of Stevens’ poetry when he indicates that it is identical with the world as conceived by Christianity under the conditions of faith, grace, and moral goodness (327). He also points out that the philosophical model of this world is the intelligible world that Kant posits on the basis of practical reason.

But the strengths of Gardner’s essay expose its gaps and weaknesses. Because Gardner does not see clearly that metaphysics is ethics, because he does not undertake to demonstrate, with Kant, that the truly intelligible world is the world of ethical human interaction, it is not

clear, at the end of his essay, what he understands to be the metaphysical subjects of Stevens' poems. That is, he does not see that what truly constitutes the images of Stevens' poems is the structure of human relationship. (It is important also to note that Gardner omits from his essay any analysis of the history of the metaphysics that he understands to be common both to Kant's philosophy and to Stevens' poetry.⁶) Thus, he concludes his essay, in which he begins with the resounding claim that "art can be thought of as redemptive and a vehicle of truth," by reproducing the false (albeit, typical) hierarchy among philosophical thinkers in which the explanatory power of art is demoted below that of philosophy, with the queen of the human sciences, theology, retaining a nebulous, neutral place either between or outside of these disciplines altogether (323).

In the next chapter I want to position my study in relation to contemporary scholarship on Kant and Stevens, and its common misconceptions, in order to show, in an introductory way, how truly important it is to conceive of the thing-in-itself (metaphysics) as metaphorical and to recognize metaphor as metaphysical (i.e., as the thing itself). It is only when we see, as I shall continue to argue, that the thing-in-itself is a metaphor for the human condition—as an end-in-itself—and that metaphor involves a representation of "things" that describes not natural operations but what it means to be a free human being that we will be in the position to understand why it is that ethical actions must be creative in order for them to be truly ethical and that artistic creations must engage our most fundamental ethical principles in order for them to be truly creative.

¹ I want to note here the method that I shall use for citing the works of Kant and Stevens. In citing passages from Kant's texts, I follow the scholarly convention of referencing the pagination of the standard German edition of Kant's works, *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences, which is indicated in the margins of the current leading translations in English. When I reference the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which Kant first published

in 1781 and then republished in 1787 with large sections either changed or completely rewritten, I also cite, as is standard, the edition of the work in which the passage is found (whether A [1781], B [1787], or A/B [for passages included in both editions, yet with different pagination]). For Stevens' poems (written in English) I use the edition published by the Library of America under the title *Collected Poetry and Prose*. This edition includes all of the poems, both published and unpublished, ever written by Stevens. It also includes a complete collection of his prose works. For citing passages from his shorter poems (of a single page or less) I refer to the title of the poem. For his longer poems (of two or more pages in length) I reference, in addition to the title, the part and/or section number of the poem in which the passage is located (e.g., "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" III, ii. refers to the second section of the third part of that poem). The passage that I cite above is from section VII of "Description without Place."

² In his essay "Wallace Stevens and Metaphysics: The Plain Sense of Things" Gardner thoughtfully eschews the attempt to reduce poetry to philosophy—which he rejects as metaphysical Gnosticism (i.e., as divorcing the spirit from the letter)—and the attempt to reduce philosophy to poetry—which he rejects as aesthetic purism (i.e., as reducing the spirit to the letter) (322).

³ Gardner notes, moreover, that Stevens himself rejected this assimilation in his essay "Effects of Analogy," "describing it as 'poetry of the ivory tower' that has 'nothing to do with being alive'" (322).

⁴ See *Critique of Practical Reason* 5:83 and *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* 399. See also *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* 6:160, where Kant "sums up all duties" by recapitulating the instruction of Matt. 22 to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself (37-40).

⁵ Although I recognize the truly significant differences between Judaism and Christianity, along with the differences between what constitutes Jewish and Christian Scripture, I shall generally refer to "the Bible" and use the term "biblical" in order to allow me to focus not on Judaism or Christianity in particular but on the particular set of ideas and values that are found at the very core of both traditions. I do not discuss Islam, as the third, historically, of the Abrahamic religions, explicitly in my study.

⁶ Gardner exposes his misunderstanding of the twofold, metaphysical position of Kant, which we shall begin to analyze in the next chapter, when he argues that "there are two dimensions to the concept of reality: one which is connected with the independence of things from us; and another which is connected with the significance of things for us" (339). He is conflating, here, truly modern metaphysics with the opposition set out by Aristotle in the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he opposes the knowledge of things as they are in themselves to the knowledge of things as they are known relative to us (bk. I, ch. 4).

Chapter 1

Metaphysics, Metaphor, and Modern Self-Consciousness

In order to comprehend the relationship between ethics and art, it is crucial to recognize that central to both modern philosophy and modern poetry is the demonstration that metaphysics is metaphorical and that metaphors are metaphysical. In order to comprehend the relationship between metaphysics and metaphor, it is critical, moreover, to position modern philosophy and modern poetry in relation to their historical sources, i.e., in relation to ancient Greek and biblical texts. It is useful, then, for the purposes of introducing this thematic material in the texts of Kant and Stevens, to look at Simon Critchley's recent study *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, in which he demands that we raise for ourselves the task of discussing the relationship between philosophy and poetry.

Critchley invites us, in opening his work, to take poetry seriously by indicating that it engages our most fundamental questions about life, art, and what it means to be human, which are precisely, he also observes, the concerns of philosophy. Poetry, he tells us, "is an elevation, an enlargement of life. At its noblest, poetry helps people live their lives" (12). It appears, then, that he wants to position his study against any notion that art is idle entertainment or a subject of mere taste. Thus, he poses critical questions to his readers: What is poetry (art) for? What is the purpose of art? What is its role in our daily lives? What do poetry and philosophy add to our existence as human beings? For he tells us that meaningful works of philosophy and poetry (e.g., the poems of Stevens) engage the issue of the relationship between the mind and the world, between thought and things, and between imagination and reality. Critchley thus states, in moving terms, that "art is the supreme medium for attaining the fundamental grounds of life" and

that “the problems of the modern world can be addressed and even reconciled in the production of a critically self-conscious artwork” (20).

Still, because Critchley does not show us *how* a work of art bears the principles or values that comprise the “ultimate meaning and value of life” and through which it addresses the real problems of our times—because, that is, he does not indicate how a work of art embodies the resources required for responding to the needs of the human community—his moving statements about art and poetry, along with philosophy, remain empty platitudes (20). He does not see, in other words, that neither for Kant nor for Stevens is it true that *things merely are*—independent of their relation to the human mind. Indeed, he tells us that the pivotal figure for comprehending the relationship between modern philosophy and the poetry of Stevens is Kant. He argues that Stevens “begins from a perceived failure of Kantianism,” lamenting what he calls the abyssal distance between things in themselves and things as they are for us (40). But it becomes increasingly clear, then, that he views the thing-in-itself as an object that remains hidden behind or beyond the appearances of natural space and time, i.e., that he fails to see that the thing-in-itself does not persist beyond the appearances but exists as a metaphor for the human condition.

As Kant states, in an extraordinary passage in the midst of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “I cannot cognize as an object itself that which I must presuppose in order to cognize an object at all” (A402). As we shall see in the next chapter, in undertaking his quest to synthesize experience according to *a priori* (necessary, absolute, unconditional) principles, he finds that he must distinguish between the understanding (*Verstand*) of the physical objects of possible experience, on the one hand, and the thinking of the metaphysical subjects of pure reason (*Vernunft*), on the other. Thus, knowledge does not apply to the thing-in-itself, the concept of which provides the limit, for Kant, of what we are able to know (*erkennen*) of the sensible

world.¹ If or when, then, Kant uses the terms “behind” or “beyond” to describe the relation between the thing-in-itself and the appearances of the objects of possible experience, we must understand these terms as metaphors. That is, we must not understand the images of “behind” or “beyond” according to the relations between objects that we observe in nature. Our relation to objects bears no relation to the relations between objects found in the empirical (sensible) world.

Thus, in the concluding section of the *Grounding*, Kant states that “man thereby puts himself into another order of things,” an order, he continues, “altogether different from the kind when he perceives himself as a phenomenon in the world of sense (as he really is also).... Now he soon realizes,” Kant goes on to observe,

that both can – and indeed must – hold good at the same time. For there is not the slightest contradiction involved in saying that a thing as appearance (belonging to the world of sense) is subject to certain laws, while it is independent of those laws when regarded as a thing or being in itself. That man must represent and think of himself in this two-fold way rests, on the one hand, upon the consciousness of himself as an object affected through the senses and, on the other hand, upon the consciousness of himself as intelligence... (and hence as belonging to the intelligible world). (457)

This two-fold way involves, we learn, looking at the same scene from two different points of view, which involve two different points of reference: the world of sense, which is examined according to the theoretical categories of what Kant calls the understanding (i.e., the laws of nature), and the intelligible world, which is subject to, and the subject of, thought, will, desire, and action. The intelligible world does not describe a free-floating space that hovers above the world of sense but describes *how* we live our sensible conditions, the principle by which we employ these conditions in the service of our relationships with others.

Because Critchley does not see that the thing-in-itself, the limit of the sensible world, describes the intelligible world of human practice—the order of freedom—he forces onto Kant’s texts a contradiction of which Kant is never guilty by falsely assuming that the thing-in-itself exists, in a sensible way, behind or beyond the appearances of the world of sense. The irony is that it is precisely this contradiction, this false assumption, that Kant sets out to critique, to deconstruct, and to disown. Thus, it is not Critchley’s commentary that shows us how to read Kant, but Kant’s utter dismantling of the contradictions of idealism (i.e., the rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff) and empiricism that shows us how to deconstruct Critchley’s study.

Kant is so difficult for all of us because, while he never speaks from a position that is not his own, he employs the same severe terminology of those metaphysicians (both idealists and empiricists) against whom he positions himself. Stevens, on the other hand, is so challenging for us because, in undertaking to articulate the relationship between imagination and reality, he uses figures and speakers that speak from a position that is not his own in order to put to the ultimate test and, thus, to sharpen our comprehension of this relationship. Critchley rightly eschews the notion that poetry involves accessing a “transcendent reality” (12). He is also thoughtful insofar as he sees that Stevens rebuffs any attempt to reduce all human activity to a realm explicable by the natural sciences. However, because he does not undertake a systematic or comprehensive analysis of the different points of view involved in Stevens’ strongest poems, he does not see, ultimately, that the relationship between imagination and reality does *not* reiterate or describe the relation between human beings and nature. Thus, while he tries, in initiating his critical look at Stevens, to view his poems as an attempt to undermine what he understands by Kant’s transcendental idealism, he ends by absorbing Stevens’ poems back into a poetic tradition that is concerned, Critchley argues, with “*the thing itself*, the bare remote inhuman thing that lies

beyond all human understanding and meaning-making” (62). He thereby reproduces the false assumptions about things-in-themselves typical among Kant’s commentators from Christian Garve (the reviewer to whom Kant responds in the Appendix of his *Prolegomena*²) to H. J. Paton.³ Critchley does not recognize that the thing-in-itself, as known only in the appearances, describes another way of interpreting the significance of those appearances. Although he makes thoughtful observations and raises critical questions about Stevens’ poems, he does not see that the relationship between imagination and reality describes, as we shall see, that which constitutes “another order of things,” to recall Kant (cited above). He fails to see, in other words, that that which is both “beyond us, yet ourselves,” to invoke the theme of Stevens’ poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” which Critchley interrogates in his study, is the world of the other, the neighbor in relationship with whom I recognize myself in becoming other than myself. Thus, he ends his study in such depressing terms: “Stevens’s poetry fails. Maybe all modern poetry fails. And maybe this is the point” (87).

But what, then, is the point of reading Stevens? What is the purpose of reading the philosophy of Kant or of viewing a critical work of art? What is the point, we may ask further, of reading Critchley’s study? The irony of his book is that, in undertaking to show that philosophy and poetry provide us with the resources for casting aside the problem of the relationship between the mind and the world, he ends up becoming entangled in the contradictions that the texts of both Kant and Stevens allow us to work out. Indeed, the irony, which he sees, apparently, with an eerie prescience at the outset of his book, is that he ends by embracing what he foresees as the criticism of his work: that his own attempt to answer the questions that he raises at the beginning of his study is doomed to failure. He finds that he is unable to provide any answer to the fundamental questions that he raised except in the depressing terms: *things merely*

are. It is also important to note that Critchley does not situate, in systematic fashion, his study of philosophy and poetry in relation to the Bible or to Greek texts, i.e., to history. But what we learn from Critchley, then, is how important it is to comprehend the relationship between metaphor and the thing-in-itself and to position modern philosophy and modern poetry in relation to Greek and biblical sources. For my purposes, I read (analyze) his book in order to position my study in relation to contemporary scholarship on Kant and Stevens, both in terms of its strengths and its weaknesses, and the common assumptions and misconceptions that one finds in it, the contradictions of which we are all guilty whenever we fail to engage the critique that both Kant and Stevens advance.

I want, therefore, before launching into an analysis of the philosophy of Kant and, subsequently, the poetry of Stevens, to provide an initial sketch of what I understand by the thing-in-itself and metaphor, along with a sketch of what I understand to be the historicity of the principles and values embodied by these concepts.

As we shall see, it is precisely in advancing what he calls a twofold standpoint that Kant is able to untangle the contradictions that result when one fails to provide a critique of one's own metaphysical position. He articulates this twofold standpoint in a myriad of terms, all of which, however, are systematically aligned:

| | |
|-----------------|------------|
| freedom | nature |
| intelligible | sensible |
| subject | object |
| person | thing |
| thing-in-itself | appearance |
| ought | is |

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| (transcendental) idea | experience |
| metaphysical | physical |
| noumenon | phenomenon |
| (objective) reality | (subjective) reality |
| (moral) necessity | (natural) necessity |

... to name a few.

But Kant himself explicitly rejects the idea that his twofold standpoint involves projecting, in a sensible way, the existence of things-in-themselves behind or beyond the objects of possible experience. He tells us, in no uncertain terms, in the *Prolegomena* that “the word ‘transcendental,’ which with me never means a reference of our knowledge to things, but only to the cognitive faculty,” i.e., the human mind, “was meant to obviate this misconception” (293). Indeed, in the Appendix to the *Prolegomena*, in which he explicitly addresses the review of his *Critique of Pure Reason* written by Garve, in which Garve fails to recognize the critical distinction between dogmatic (“transcendent”) idealism and Kant’s own critical (“transcendental”) idealism, Kant tells us that the term transcendental does not signify, for him, anything “higher” than that which is immanent in our lives:

By no means ‘higher.’ High towers and metaphysically great men resembling them, round both of which there is commonly much wind, are not for me. My place is the fruitful bathos of experience; and the word ‘transcendental,’ the meaning of which is so often explained by me but not once grasped by my reviewer...does not signify something passing beyond all experience, but something that indeed precedes it a priori, but that is intended simply to make knowledge of experience possible. (373)

To be concerned with analyzing the texts of Kant is to be concerned with the *bathos* of human experience, that paradoxical juxtaposition of the sublime and the everyday, the extraordinary (miraculous) and the ordinary, the elevated and the pedestrian, the poetic and the prosaic. He tells us: “Nature is the existence of things, so far as it is determined according to universal laws. Should nature signify the existence of things in themselves, we could never know it either a priori [i.e., prior to experience; according to the laws of nature] or a posteriori [i.e., from experience]” (294). Knowledge of experience is possible precisely because we do not locate the existence of things-in-themselves “in” nature, in a sensible way, but understand nature, the relation between objects, according to laws and categories that are supplied by the human mind and that preclude viewing nature as anything but the appearances that are given to our senses. Thus, his sole concern, he tells us, is not to erect “high towers” or to take on the “bungling attempt” of previous metaphysicians to “build a castle in the air without a knowledge of the material [of their concepts] or of their fitness for this or any purpose” (329). Rather, he is concerned with the kingdom of ends, to recall the idiom that I introduced earlier, as it is wrought on earth, in the *bathos* of our humanity. His ultimate concern is how to justify, how to legitimize, human freedom.

It is, therefore, so critical that we, right from the outset, learn to distinguish Kant’s twofold standpoint, the distinction between the sensible world and the intelligible world, from Plato’s opposition between the appearances and the Forms. It is critical, in other words, that we learn to distinguish Kant’s twofold position from the suite of oppositions set out by Socrates in Plato’s dialogues: e.g., between the body and the soul, appearances and forms, qualified knowledge (the good as it is known relative to us) and unqualified knowledge (the good as it is known in itself), practice and theory, the in-finite and the finite, the imitated and the real, the

mortal (human) and the immortal (divine). In erecting his famous image of the divided line in the *Republic* (to which we shall return in later chapters), Socrates is clear that (mortal) human beings possess no knowledge of the good or of the Forms that describe the appearances as they are in themselves. The Forms, for Socrates and Plato, are *not* intelligible for human beings but real (i.e., finite: that which is at its end or contained in itself). Human beings possess no consciousness of that which *is* in itself (e.g., the good). Instead, for Plato, to know the good is to be the good and to be the good is not to possess any knowledge of it in relation to any of the things that appear, which are known only relative to other appearances. In other words, there is no intelligible world in Plato's dialogues.

It is no less true, however, that Plato's dialogues do not contain any concept of the sensible world as Kant understands it or as we understand it in modernity. For Kant, as we noted above, knowledge of nature is possible solely when we refrain from viewing it as a thing-in-itself (e.g., as possessing its own motivating force). For Plato, along with Socrates (not to mention Aristotle), the sensible does not exist apart from its moving principle: *nous, logos, anima, psuche*. The soul is entirely bound up with, although never known in—except as opposed to—the sensible world as it appears to the ancient Greeks. Thus, it is ever illuminating to realize that Kant's concept of the soul (to which he attaches human thinking) bears no relation to the Platonic soul, which, it is important to recall, is not personal, as we imagine it today, but is effused over the entire spectrum of the appearances. Kant, for his part, denies any concept of soul drawn from the knowledge of our internal experiences, perceptions, or feelings. Instead, the soul, Kant tells us in the *Prolegomena*, is aligned with what it means to be a thinking or a thoughtful person. (Again, we recall that, for Plato, the soul, although he aligns it with reason, is never known in the relations that are present to us in the appearances.) But thinking, Kant goes

on, is not internal. He is unwavering in his position that there is no sensuous representation of that to which all knowledge stands in relation: the mind, thinking. Instead, thinking involves a representation of ourselves as intelligible beings, i.e., as free.

Thus, freedom, he observes, is “no hindrance to natural law in appearances,” for it never disturbs the chain of cause and effect in the sensible world, “neither does this law abrogate the freedom of the practical use of reason, which is connected with things in themselves, as determining grounds” (346). The thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*), which he connects here with human freedom, is a subject of practical reason, not an object to be known according to the categories of the sensible or empirical world (i.e., according to what he calls *theoretical* reason). The thing-in-itself, in other words, does not apply to things of the natural universe; rather, it is a metaphor for the exercise of human freedom, will, or self-determination. But what, we now ask, is a metaphor?

I want to examine, before turning to one of Stevens’ poems, two remarkable images from the book of Isaiah in order to begin to show how metaphor works and what it demands from its readers. After indicating that it is the wicked who “turn aside the needy of justice and who rob the poor... of their right,” the author of Isaiah states that the man imbued with the Spirit of the Lord “shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (10.2; 11.3-4).⁴ He then provides an image for the justice that shall take place on the “holy mountain,” which is, at the end of the book, renamed the City of the Lord:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid [i.e., the young goat], and the calf and the lion and the fatling together.... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; and the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the

Lord.... (11.6-9)⁵

The spirit of the passage is then captured, as the biblical message is spread historically, in the terse formulation of which we are all aware: The lion shall lie down with the lamb. But let us look at how the image, the metaphor, operates in Isaiah. In nature lions devour lambs, leopards prey on young goats, and wolves hunt the weakest of the herd. The image accords with nothing natural. How, then, do we understand it? What is its content? How do we position ourselves in relation to it?

It is startling that, as we begin to focus upon the image, we find that it rebuffs us. What is the concept of power inherent in it, in which strong and weak are levelled upon an equal playing field? What is the image of weakness here when it is espoused to power upon this holy and, it would appear, unnatural mount? As Hegel states, in using the sensual, in using what we saw Kant characterize as the world of sense, modern art liberates us from the sensuous by allowing for “no purely sensuous relationship” to it (*Lectures on Fine Art* 39). The images that we find in Isaiah prevent us from using the relations that we observe in nature as a model for understanding them and the relationships they constitute. But *what*, then, is this image’s content, if it actively prevents us from using nature as a model for our understanding of it? What, to invoke Stevens, is the image’s truth?

We know the content, the message, the teaching: the justice of human equality or, in other words, human relationship, which bears no relation to the relations that we find within the operations of nature, that is, to the natural relations that constitute what Hegel calls the finite and what Kant calls the sensible world. Still, as both Hegel and Kant never fail to indicate, the sensible cannot be excised from the metaphysics of our lives. We are not able to recuse or to excuse ourselves from the world of sense, the finite. So Kant reports that “for the human being

the invisible,” which he associates with the kingdom of God, “needs to be represented through something visible” or sensible (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* 6:192). Indeed, the sensible does not disappear, it is not elided from Isaiah’s image. Rather, it is its attention to what is sensible that provides the image with its extraordinary (infinite) framework or structure. Isaiah uses the natural difference between the strong and the weak to demonstrate the principle of relationship by which we must appropriate, rather than eliminate, our natural or finite differences. He shows us that the task is not to escape the sensual (the finite) but to live it by establishing equitable human relationships, by founding the community that upholds the rights of all of its members. The indomitable power of our lives is the will that respects, indeed, that fosters, that shares in, the will of all others. Still, it is precisely by accounting for finite difference in and through the spirit of humane relationship that Isaiah shows us that there is nothing finite in (about) his images. There is nothing finite about metaphor or, as we shall see, about modern art. Metaphors are known, like the thing-in-itself, only in their similes with nature. Yet, to repeat, they invoke nature in such a way that they prevent us from viewing it as the model for our human practices and, thus, from viewing our human relationships or expressions as natural. That is, a metaphor is an act of moral critique. In demanding that its readers account for the distinction between nature and humanity (i.e., freedom, equality: the City of God as the holy terrain of our human relationships), Isaiah’s metaphor eliminates all hierarchy that results from treating nature as the standard to which our human relations, our lives, conform. Metaphor, in other words, *is*—it embodies—the critique of idolatry, i.e., that view that confuses things-in-themselves with natural objects whose modern sobriquet is dualism.

Indeed, Isaiah is insatiable in demanding that his people uphold the rights of the poor and that they care for those in need, which is consonant with his call for peace. But we see, through

our analysis of the above image, that peace is not found in the state of nature. Peace is not a natural state of leisure or luxury, but the work, as he puts it, to “defend the fatherless, [and] plead for the widow” (1.17). I.e., peace is a metaphor. Metaphors embody the work involved in instituting peace by eschewing all false images that view existence as, that reduce it to, a reflection of the finite (i.e., of nature).

That there is nothing finite about his images is also what Isaiah shows us in the second of his awesome metaphors that I now want to examine. All flesh, Isaiah notes, is grass. After posing for himself the question “What shall I cry?” he announces, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades...; surely the people is grass” but the word of God, he concludes, is steadfast (40.6-8). But, again, he throws his readers into crisis. For, in nature, flesh is not grass and grass is not flesh. In the sensible world that we observe empirically, flesh and grass are not identical. Are people grass? The answer is, surely, yes and no. Yes, each of us shall perish. We are mortal. Yet, to express care for our mortal nature reveals what is not mortal about us. We incorporate into our lives what is not perishable about them precisely through our care for our mortality.

The image, the simile between flesh and grass, does not describe, then, nature as it is in itself; rather, it describes our understanding of it. Nature does not know itself—as nature. *We* do. The finite, nature, or what is here called flesh is a concept, a category of the human mind by which we organize and evaluate our experience. It is we human beings, in other words, who understand that everything finite, however big or small, is equally finite. The image that all flesh is grass or, to use the version of Ecclesiastes, that “all is mere breath,” presupposes—and so exposes—a perspective that is not natural or finite (1.14).⁶ It exposes a standard of value in light

of which all finite things are shown to be of equally finite value and so a notion of worth for which nothing finite, including nothing finite about being human, is worthy.

According to the relative standards found in nature, there are bigger and smaller, stronger and weaker, faster and slower things. But, as we now see, Isaiah's image is not about flesh or grass. It is not about the finite, but our human understanding of it. It is about ourselves. It is fascinating to see, then, that, in demanding that we distinguish between the relative value of things and the infinite point of view of human beings, the simile between flesh and grass is not a simile at all but a metaphor the content of which is moral. Flesh, we learn, is *the* biblical metaphor for the embodiment of the principles according to which human existence is truly valued, or else, as an image for that which is worshipped before the spirit, it is a sign of our failure to do so.⁷ In engaging Isaiah's image, we realize that, in recognizing all flesh, including our own, as here one day and gone the next, Isaiah opens up before us the infinite perspective by which we view the finite. He exposes for us the knowledge that—lo and behold!—we are not denizens of the state of nature but citizens of the holy mountain, the City of the Lord from which we view existence as nothing but the opportunity to affirm the infinite value of each of its members: all of us.

That the desire to redeem ourselves—the desire to transform ourselves from idolaters enslaved to comparisons with the finite to creators of the City of God in and through our human practice—is the motive for metaphor is also what Stevens shows us in his poem by that name. It is revealing, in initiating our analysis of the poem, to point out that the term meta-phor means “to bear” or “to carry across” and thus invokes a notion of change.⁸ Indeed, the meaning of the term is identical to that of trans-fer and trans-port. Thus, there is an incredible self-reflexivity borne in the poem “The Motive for Metaphor.” Not only does Stevens analyze here the transformation

involved in meta-phor. But he also enacts that transformation in the use of his metaphors in the poem (as we shall see). He puts the reader on notice, then, that the concept of meta-phor (that which bears or carries across) must itself be understood metaphorically and not according to the notion of change that applies to natural or physical events. Metaphor, as we are beginning to see, is its own critical standard, the standard for understanding the concept of change or transformation that it embodies.

That the motive for metaphor is, therefore, drawn from nothing natural, that the source of our human motivation is not found in and among the motions that we observe in the physical universe, is what Stevens begins to indicate in the third stanza of his poem when he relocates our attention from the objects of nature onto the human subject. The subject desires, we are then told in the opening line of the fourth stanza, “the exhilarations of changes.” The motive for metaphor is not located in any natural object or event, but in the (human) desire to change. But, we ask, desire to change (to) what? For what do we desire change? It is not to abrogate the state of nature, the chain of cause and effect, that we desire anything. But what, then, to repeat, do we want when we want change? Why is it that “change” describes here the ultimate end of our wants and desires?

In order to begin to respond to these questions, it is important to recognize that the change invoked in the poem is not a change in space and time but a metaphysical concept of human practice: a change *from* the practice of imagining our motivations according to an analogy with physical motion *to* the practice of imagining our motivations as the subjects of our desire or will. But in locating human motivation in the will we discover that central to our desire is the desire (will) of the other. To locate our motivation in the will is to locate it, also, in the will of all others. Motivation is, thus, both centering and decentering, both our own and not our own, both

for ourselves and for others. It is both the metaphor's motive and the motive for constructing a metaphor.

It is equally important to see that Stevens paradoxically locates perfection—what suffices; what is enough for us; indeed, what it means to be human—in change. As he states, what we “like” is the “half-colors of quarter-things” where “things... would never be quite expressed, / Where you yourself were never quite yourself / And did not want or have to be.” We do not want or have to be perfect in a finite way: i.e., at our end, complete, finished. Our motivation is not to be finitely perfect but to be, instead, perfectly human. What we want—the end of our desire—is change. Desire *is* the desire for perfect change (that change that makes us what we are). What we want when we want change is a more ample, more subtle, more perfect expression of our desires.

The images with which Stevens then concludes his poem are severe. Indeed, he severely tests the reader's concept of his or her own images. For he tells us that the motive for metaphor, the will to imagine change, involves “shrinking from / The weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being,” which he continues to describe as “The ruddy temper, the hammer / Of red and blue, the hard sound – / Steel against intimation – the sharp flash, / The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.” But what, we now ask, is this series of images embodying? There are, evidently, three options:

- A. Natural reality;
- B. Our similes for (our images that describe) natural reality, which are drawn through comparisons with that from which we are motivated to shrink and which themselves enact the act of “shrinking;”

C. An awe-some series of metaphors that describe—involve and express—human reality.

But what we learn is that the extraordinary answer that the poem demands of us is D: All of the above! For as Stevens takes us through the thought-process involved in comprehending these images we find that he outlines for us the A B Cs of *being human*. To comprehend, to conceive, to know of (A) natural reality is not to comprehend, to conceive, to know it as it is in itself but according to (B) the similes that we use to understand its operations as it appears in space and time, which, nevertheless, point out to us that all of the similes that we use to articulate our understanding of nature (e.g., the food chain, the survival of the fittest, cause and effect, nothingness, X) are not similes drawn from our experience of the natural (sensible, empirical) world but (C) metaphors for our understanding of it. These images describe our human understanding of the finite, of nature as nothing in itself. The A B C of being is the letter of finite existence that becomes exhilarated with the spirit of human metaphor. The breath of all life—its exhilaration—is metaphor. Shrinking from the weight of primary noon, then, involves demonstrating that the weight of the natural sun appears weightless before the human mind, whose images demonstrate the nothingness of the sensible world and whose real weight, whose *gravitas*, is located in human desire or will. For, as the crux of the poem reveals, it is solely from a perspective that is not finite but infinite that we are able to see the nothingness of the world of sense and the vanity of our efforts to found our self-image upon that which is finite. The motive for metaphor is not natural but human. For metaphor is not natural but human—as even our natural metaphors, our metaphors of nature, demonstrate.

The severe images of the nothingness of the sensible world with which Stevens ends are thus transported to—are shown to describe—ourselves when we understand that these are not

images of the finite as it is in itself but are our intimations. Stevens' description of reality as "Steel against intimation" is itself an intimation (image) of reality. There is no reality prior to or outside of the human mind (imagination or intimation). The images that we compose of nature redound upon us, then, either to reveal the contradiction of the attempt to locate our desire, our will, ourselves, in finitude or to reveal that our infinite spirit is created from nothing natural, i.e., from nothing that is not creative.

The dominant X is, yes, reality. But what is that reality upon which our intimations work, upon which the imagination works tirelessly to transform? There is but one answer: it is human reality. It is the world of self and other, the neighbour, whose reality as a willing subject in the midst of our lives is undeniable. Note, indeed, the way in which the dominant X is described. Note the adjectives that Stevens uses: vital, arrogant, and fatal. Life, conceit, and death! The realities of life, conceit (our images and conceptions), and death, we learn, are transported from the sensible to the intelligible (the human) world by demanding that we readers recognize the nothingness of the letter of existence, the finite. Stevens signals to us, in other words, through his images of nothingness, that neither we nor any of our human expressions ever belonged to the nothingness of the sensible world. Life, conception, death are practical, human realities. Thus, we discover that the change that we desire is not a change of place and time but, to invoke the metaphor that Kant adopts, a change of heart.⁹ What we desire is the sharp flash, the infinite transformation, the dazzling sparks that result from the practice of creating the wor(l)d from nothing by distinguishing between persons and things, which involves and expresses the metaphoric work of upholding the real value of human subjects in relation to finite objects.

That metaphor enacts and expresses will, desire, and self-determination and that it engages, therefore, our moral practice is also what Cynthia Ozick recognizes in her truly

insightful article “The Moral Necessity of Metaphor: Rooting History in a Figure of Speech.”¹⁰ I introduce this article here because it allows me to begin to probe, in an introductory way, the history of the concept of metaphor and, by extension, of the thing-in-itself. For Ozick recognizes that, as I am also arguing, metaphor expresses the moral imperative involved in “the leap into the Other” (266). In recounting her address to a room of medical doctors, she asks her readers to bear in mind that the motivation to become a medical doctor, to treat sick patients, is one with the motivation to become a poet: to treat, to love, all others as ourselves. She indicates that the reason that we so readily oppose modern medicine and modern poetry, science and art, is that we stereotypically confuse metaphor (poetry) with what she calls inspiration or enthusiasm (*éntheos*: the god within), of which, she tells us, the archetype is that “agent of divination... the sybil possessed by the god,” the muse for the Oracle at Delphi (271). But enthusiasm and inspiration, she notes, do not apply to modern poetic practice. Rather, modern poetry takes its cue from a sentence of which we are all aware and that “we have built every idea of moral civilization” upon: Love thy neighbor as thyself. She argues that the “more compelling” and historic version of this imperative is: Love even thy stranger as thyself (278-9). But both of these instructions require that we imagine the other who is not like us to be like us, indeed, to be us, as well as imagine ourselves to be (the) other. “As thyself,” she writes, “becomes the commanding metaphor” (279).

Ozick sees, then, that the command to love the neighbour, stranger, or enemy as/like oneself invokes a notion of likeness that is not found in and amongst the appearances of natural space and time. That is, the law according to which we engage each other in our relationships is not drawn, to invoke a Kantian category, from experience. The state of nature is not the source from which we (ought to) draw the grounds of our human relations or comparisons. As Stevens

notes, following a series of oxymorons, there is “a law of inherent opposites” through which “relation appears” (“Connoisseur of Chaos”). Although he does not expose for us in this poem the “nature” of his comparisons, it is noteworthy that the law by which he is drawing these comparisons, the law by which “relation appears”—the law of *inherent* opposites—is not drawn from his experience of finite appearances, whose law is endless opposition. It is not located, in other words, in the state of nature in which big fish eat smaller fish and are then eaten by still bigger fish.¹¹ Rather, it is the moral law, the categorical imperative, in Kant’s terms, to treat each other always at the same time as ends and never merely as means. Love even your opposite—your enemy—as yourself!

Therefore, Ozick discovers that the practice of metaphor, which she links with this biblical command, was not found in ancient Athens. Indeed, she stops us in our tracks when she writes, “what was missing in the glory that was Greece was metaphor” (275). There are no metaphors in ancient Greek myth, e.g., Homeric epic (as I argue in following chapters). But it is no less that true that there are no metaphors in Plato’s texts. “In natural religion,” she writes, “there are no metaphors; the genii are *there*” in the natural scene and thus “poetry is not yet born” (271). Instead, ancient Greek imagery is constituted by similes drawn from sensible experience, which result in erecting the doctrine of opposites and which thereby demonstrate human ignorance of things as they are in themselves. Thus, just as it is important to highlight the difference between the twofold stance of Kant and the doctrine of opposites of Plato it is also critically important to learn how to articulate the difference between biblical or modern images (metaphor), on the one hand, and Greek images (or simile), on the other.¹²

In sum, Ozick argues that there are no metaphors without history, without distinguishing between what she calls the natural religion of the ancient Greeks and “our idea of religion as

conscience,” which she ties to the biblical command to love one another (274).¹³ But there is also, she notes, no history, no memory, without (outside of) metaphor. For history involves judgment. In obeying the instruction to love even strangers under one law with the caveat, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt,” the Hebrew people adopted a moral imperative that acted as a “principle of continuity” with the power to transform even the past by refusing to oppress their oppressors (282). Our relation to the past—how we organize it and comprehend its characters and events: good and bad—changes as we increase our comprehension of this principle. Thus, Ozick concludes her article by stating: “Through metaphor, the past has the capacity to imagine us, and we it” (283). In imagining the past, in imagining ourselves as the Hebrew people listening to Moses, we submit ourselves, our own lives, to the scrutiny of the imagination—the imperative to imagine the lives of others as one’s own—that we find voiced in the Bible, even as we scour the biblical scriptures—indeed, all historical texts—for the moral necessity of metaphor.

Ozick introduces into her article, then, without explicitly addressing it, a wonderful paradox. For she tells us that, on the one hand, the motive for metaphor is one’s love for the stranger, a category that is infinitely inclusive and that extends universally to all of humankind. As we saw above, however, she also notes, on the other hand, that the particular, historical source for metaphor is the Bible, i.e., that metaphor (although a classically Greek term) is absent from Greek texts. She introduces, thus, the paradox of history.

It is the paradox of history to which, in order to address the history of philosophy (metaphysics: the thing-in-itself) and poetry (metaphor), I now want us to attend in concluding this chapter. Indeed, it is precisely the issue of the paradox of history that Paul raises, in challenging terms, in opening his Epistle to the Romans.

Paul states that “what can be known about God is plain” to all, both to the honest and to the wicked; for, “Ever since the creation of the world his [i.e., God’s] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1.19-20). So, he concludes, the wicked who incur God’s wrath are “without excuse” (1.20). But if the statement that God is “clearly perceived” is literally true, then there is no point in Paul’s even writing it. If it is true that we are able to perceive, in an immediate and direct way, the presence of God in the sensible world, then there is no point to reading (or writing) any of the Scriptures, including Paul’s letters (not to mention this study!). But, go outside, what do you see? Or look at what Kant calls the appearances of even this page, its black and white contours. What do you see? Do you see God, or creation? But we see, then, that Paul places an enormous burden of proof on his readers. What does it mean that the proof of God’s existence is, paradoxically, both visible *and* invisible? With what eyes, with what vision, do we see the act of creation?

We discover, furthermore, that, if one views this verse as meaning that we see in the appearances of the sensible world (i.e., in nature) the proof of God’s existence, then one fails to account for that which is invisible about the divine and, thus, one fails to comprehend the paradox of Paul’s statement. Yet, if one projects the existence of God, and so the act of creation, into a space and time that invisibly persists beyond the appearances, then one fails to account for that which is visible of God and once again one fails to comprehend the paradox. What, then, are these things that have been made, which “invisible or visible or both,” to use Stevens’ phrase, involve “a seeing and unseeing in the eye” (“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” I, vi)?

I focus our attention on this verse because, as it turns out, the issues involved in learning how to comprehend the terse paradox of Paul’s statement are identical to those involved in comprehending Kant’s metaphysical proof for the existence of God, along with his stunning

critique of what he names, and of what we now know as, the ontological argument. Indeed, how we conceive of Romans 1.20, how we read it, how we respond to the burden of proof it places on us is how we read the *Critique of Pure Reason*. How we understand Paul is how we understand (or fail to understand) how synthetic *a priori* propositions are possible, i.e., how it is possible that the metaphysical subjects of Kant's texts exist synthetically (really: as the connective tissues of our lives) and yet also exist prior to any experience in the world of sense (or *a priori*). In addition, the issues presented by Paul's verse are identical to those that we face in undertaking to interpret Stevens' concept of the abstract giant of nothingness.¹⁴ How we comprehend Romans 1.20 expresses how we comprehend both modern philosophy and modern poetry, as well as their intimate relationship.

It is fascinating to note, then, the extraordinary history of this verse and its role in shaping modern philosophy. As philosophy begins to burgeon into what it is in the early seventeenth century, Descartes, the "father" of modern philosophy, cites Romans 1.20 in his dedicatory letter to the Faculty of Sacred Theology at the Sorbonne in Paris as proof that Scripture justifies, indeed, demands that we become responsible for proving the existence of God from reason alone. But the history of the exegesis of this verse, the interpretive work to become responsible for the notion of proof inherent in it, begins, we can say, with the theologian Augustine, who wrote at the end of the fourth and into the early fifth century (CE). Augustine, after distinguishing between the sight of the body and the sight of the mind, tells us to be on our guard against the natural theology of the philosophers: "For where it has been said by him, 'that God has manifested to them by those things which are made His invisible things, that they might be seen by the understanding,' there it has also been said that they did not rightly worship God," as true wisdom (*The City of God* bk. 8, ch. 10).¹⁵ This verse's exegetical demands are also noted by

St. Anselm who, at the request of the monks of his prior, undertakes to demonstrate the existence of God in his *Proslogion* (c. 1077-78 CE) without the aid of Scripture and who initiates, therefore, the ontological argument.¹⁶ The interpretive work begun by Anselm is carried on by Petrarch¹⁷ and then by Montaigne, who begins his essay “The Apology for Raymond Sebond” (1588)—in which he shows us that there is no route from the philosophy of nature to the demonstration of the existence of God (as conceived by human beings)—by citing this verse.¹⁸ The story of modern philosophy is rooted, indeed, in the story of Romans 1.20.

For our purposes we do not need to take up the ways in which each of these thinkers undertakes to respond to Paul’s paradoxical challenge, through which he also demands that his readers become responsible for thinking through the concept of creation as set out in the opening of the Hebrew Bible. For Paul provides us with an answer, with a method for demonstrating what it means that God’s existence, attested to, for Paul, by faith, is borne in life. After voicing this paradox, he critically distinguishes between the Creator and the creature.¹⁹ The Creator, he tells us, is the standard by which we judge or by which we see creation (*a priori*). Thus, he demands that we use as the standard of our judgment nothing drawn from our experience of nature. Instead, we note its principle, its origin: the distinction between Creator and creature, spirit and flesh, wo/man and nature, metaphors and natural images, persons and things. For it is solely in distinguishing between spirit and flesh, to cite another of Paul’s well-known distinctions, that we are even able to maintain a concept of the natural generation involved in the sensible world (e.g., of its reproductive systems).

In invoking the story of creation, Paul asks us to recall that in the first and second versions of that story men and women are created not in the image of nature, but in the image of God. The image, therefore, that truly applies to humanity is not to be drawn from our

experiences in the world of sensation but, as we learn in Genesis, from the knowledge of good and evil (3.22). The image of wo/man is a metaphor that elides all sensible content in order to bespeak the moral content that it embodies, the responsibility for the knowledge of good and evil, which demands that we distinguish the human and the divine, on the one hand, from things or creatures, on the other. For, although we are creatures of the sensible world, it is precisely the act of distinguishing between persons and things that allows us to see both that which is sensible and that which is intelligible about us. But that which allows us to see, that by which we see, is entirely, then, a subject of practical, not of theoretical, reason, in Kant's terms. In Paul's terms, the distinction between Creator (spirit) and creature (flesh) is a spiritual or faithful distinction for which there is no analogy in and among the differences (or relations) between creatures. Instead, Paul's distinction demonstrates a faith in the worth or worthiness of human beings who know themselves as creatures and thus who know "all flesh is grass."

Indeed, when the poet John Donne points out that, although faith and grace are not explicable by reason, still, "we are not bound to believe anything against our reason, that is to believe we know not why," for it is "but a slack opinion... [and] not belief, that is not grounded upon reason," he calls upon the same distinction that Kant draws between (theoretical) reason and (practical) reason.²⁰ Donne then cites Romans 1.20 in his sermon on the relation between the light of faith (*lux fidei*) and the natural light (*lux naturae*) as textual evidence for his claim that not to find the invisible God in what is visible is inexcusable. However, what he discovers is that, given that faith and grace are inexplicable according to the categories that rationally (theoretically) apply to visible objects, what it means to search for the demonstration of God's existence is to search our human creations, i.e., the Scriptures, "not as though thou wouldst make a concordance, but an application" (131). To search Scripture is to search for its application to

my life. To search Scripture for its truth is to investigate its commitment to human dignity, but it is also to submit one's own life to the scrutiny "of that rule of Christ's," the golden rule of ethical practice (131). To seek God, we learn, is to examine human texts, the expressions of myself and others, for that which testifies to the critical—the practical, the moral—distinction between things and persons, between that which is determined and that which is self-determining, nature and freedom. The interpretive work that Paul's verse demands is no less the challenge, it will turn out, of modern and contemporary poets.

We learn, in light of Donne, that to test the visibility of one's images (descriptions, expressions) for the true image of God involves testing the depths of our understanding of the Scriptures, involves exposing and, thus, retesting the knowledge of good and evil by which we judge what is truly applicable to our lives. Thus, Paul concludes his Epistle to the Romans with a claim that (at first glance) appears to be the direct opposite from that with which he began in Romans 1.20: "the revelation of the mystery [of God and the teaching of God] which was kept secret for long ages... is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings [i.e., Scripture] is made known to all nations" (16.25-6). It is between the "ever since the creation of the world" in 1.20 and the "long ages" of secrecy here-stated that the paradox of history, of which Paul gives multiple versions in his Epistle, is conceived. For Paul knows that creation and history, revelation and mystery, God and Scripture are reciprocal concepts. The challenge of reading Romans is the challenge of discerning the continuity involved in human history. The challenge is holding its beginning and its end together: for then we see that the creation of the universal history of human beings is particular to—its source is located in—Hebrew Scripture and its universal message: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom. 13.8). As Paul states, "The commandments... are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as

yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (13.9-10).

But it is staggering to learn then that Paul, in knowing that the existence of God is revealed by (as) Scripture, i.e., as human action (love), finds out that in order to uphold the universal concept of humanity, the idea that all people, universally, are created equal in knowing good and evil, he must introduce a historical distinction: between the Greek (Gentile) and the Jewish, between the long ages of the past and the creation of the world. (It is worth noting that, while Paul and Jesus are figures central to what is today Christianity, each of these men were Jews who knew and who taught only Jewish Scripture.) In directing his speech to the Gentiles, Paul constructs an image that contains both the “rejection” and the “acceptance” involved in his paradoxical relationship to the Gentile community and to history (11.15). He states that the source for his preaching is Jewish Scripture and that “if the root is holy, so are the branches.” “But,” he continues, “if some of the [sick: unholy] branches were broken off and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree... remember, it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you” (11.13-8). But what, we ask, is this tree? What is the tree that is not, evidently, wild (i.e., natural) but cultivated and civil (i.e., artificial or human)? In posing the question, however, we recognize it instantly: the tree is the knowledge of good and evil whose true poetic likeness is the practice of metaphor and whose true philosophic likeness is the practice of observing what Kant calls the moral law. It is this knowledge that ramifies infinitely as it demands of its thinkers the practice of treating all others, whether Jew or Gentile, with love.

Here, then, we find ourselves before the paradox of history, which we saw Ozick introduce, without explication, into her article. The paradox of history is that, in promoting a

notion of universality, a notion of human dignity common to all, Paul finds that the source of his humanity is uniquely and solely biblical, that his faith is rooted in the principles and values of Hebrew Scripture. Precisely because “what can be known about God is plain to all,” he finds that he can identify long ages of the past in which God had remained unknown. The paradox of history is that, in order to become self-consciously critical of the idolatry in which God becomes an idol veiled in our modern (Neoplatonic) version of the unmoved mover—thought thinking itself, to recall Aristotle—of which human consciousness remains forever ignorant, we are required to uphold the total difference between Greek texts (sources: roots) and biblical texts (Scripture: roots). Indeed, it is precisely the distinction between Greek (Gentile) metaphysics and Jewish ontology that allows both Paul and Jesus, along with the Hebrew prophets and authors, to formulate a concept of the value of humanity that, in contrast to the finite (relative) value of things, is wholly and universally applicable to every human being.

But to look at the paradox from the other end, it is also true that we must uphold the total difference between ancient and biblical (or modern) sources in order to prevent any attempt to impose our own modern point of view onto ancient texts, which results in the patronizing view that, while the ancients possessed the same way of viewing the world as we do, those authors merely got it wrong when interpreting its phenomena (as evident, we are told, in ancient Greek mythology). The sole way of defending ourselves against this pejorative view of Gentile (extra-biblical, pagan, or ancient) culture is by demonstrating that Greek and biblical, ancient and modern, Gentile and Jewish texts bear no relationship to each other precisely because (as we shall see, ultimately, in Chapter 5) the two do not share a concept of relationship.

We find ourselves before, then, the full circle of Paul’s paradoxical verse and creative Epistle. To search far and wide across the peaks and valleys of creation for the proof for the

existence of God, to search the “things that have been made” of Romans 1.20 is to search for the truth of the Scriptures. To search creation is to search our human and historical descriptions of it. Scripture is, in other words, the tree of human activity and expression, round which the wilderness of history grows and which, in distinguishing between creature and Creator, allows all people to distinguish between good and evil so that we are all “without excuse.”

The image of Scripture, of the knowledge of good and evil, of ethics, of metaphor, of art... Stevens’ embodies in “The Anecdote of the Jar.” He writes:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The anecdote is the jar, the jar is the anecdote placed (by the poet? by God? by humanity?) in the midst of the wilderness of the natural state; or, rather, the anecdote is that which allows us to see

the difference between the wild world of sensible nature and the intelligent, artful, and civil world of *humanitas*—without which not even the wilderness is made evident. Thus, it is important to see that not even the wilderness (i.e., the state of nature) enters into existence prior to the act of creation: the act of distinguishing between persons and things, freedom and nature, the intelligible and the sensible world. That is, the organization of the physical universe does not precede its historical anecdotes. But we thus see, in turn, that the anecdote, the jar, the act of distinguishing between the wild and the civil, does not precede the organization of the physical universe in time. Rather, it describes the precedent, the priority, the principle by which we distinguish between the wild and the civil and by which, therefore, we appropriate the wilderness (the finite) for our own humane ends—thus, “no longer wild.” The action of the anecdote, in other words, is the act of metaphor by which we accommodate all sensuous difference and likeness in and through the principle of relationship in which we are commanded to view each other as *like* ourselves.

Thus, when Stevens ends his extraordinary anecdote by stating that the jar “did not give of bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee,” he puts his readers on notice that the *likeness* represented by—borne in—the image of the jar bears no likeness to the notion of likeness found in and amongst the objects of nature, i.e., everything else found upon the hills of Tennessee. That is, he alerts us to the difference between natural likeness and metaphorical (artful) *likeness*, whose bearing is represented by, or represents, a “port in air,” i.e., whose stately guide, grounding, locale, destination (or destiny) is not located in nature but, impossibly, in the airs of the human spirit. But it is equally important to see, then, that Stevens’ point is not that the jar is *unlike* everything in a physical or sensible way, i.e., that the jar is unlike things like things of nature are unlike each other. Rather, metaphorical likeness, by preventing any analogy between

poetic imagery and that which is given to us through the senses, presents us with a principle of relationship, a way of living—indeed, of celebrating—our natural likeness and difference. The jar is another version of the Scriptural tree, the tree of Scripture that, placed in our midst, took dominion everywhere by demanding—*lex Domini!*—that we treat others as we would want to be treated by them.

Let us take on, then, the burden of proof, the burden of proving the thesis that, unless and until we see that the thing-in-itself is a metaphor for the human condition and that metaphor involves and expresses a representation of “things” that describes not natural phenomena but what it means to be human, we shall continue to misunderstand the relationship between philosophy and poetry. In the chapters that follow I undertake to show that Kant’s philosophy and Stevens’ poetry share a concept of metaphysics as human practice—at once ethical and aesthetic—that enables us to account for existence (including death and sin) with dignity. What counts is not whether or not these authors themselves altogether understand the implications—metaphysical, metaphorical, and historic—of their own work, but that *we* do so that we can avoid becoming lost in the contradictions of Kant’s aesthetic theory or in the ambiguities involved in Stevens’ poetry. How we understand the relationship between philosophy and poetry involves, as we shall discover, how we understand the relationship between ethics and art, whether in philosophical or in poetic texts. Thus, what counts for us is that we expose the art of ethics in Kant’s philosophical works and the ethics of art in Stevens’ strongest poems in order to show that both philosophy and poetry testify to the fundamental relationship between ethics and art. Just as ethics without art is empty, so art, we can say (echoing Kant), without ethics is blind.²¹

¹ The German verb *erkennen*, meaning “know” or “recognize,” is translated as “cognize” in the English editions published by Cambridge University Press. The term is translated as “know” by Lewis Beck, whose translation of the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* I cite above. I

shall use the terms “know” and “cognize,” along with “knowledge” and “cognition,” interchangeably when I am discussing Kant’s epistemology in my study.

² Garve’s review, heavily edited and redacted by Johann Feder, was first published anonymously in January of 1782 in *The Göttingen Review* (*Kant’s Early Critics* 279). Although Garve is sensitive, in his analysis, to Kant’s demonstration that knowledge must be limited to experience, because he continues to locate things in themselves in the sensible world in the same way in which things can be placed in each other, he conflates Kant’s twofold standpoint with the old, dualistic metaphysics that Kant had rejected and so he cannot appreciate the revolution involved in Kant’s metaphysical position.

³ In his book *Kant’s Metaphysic of Experience* Paton rightly rejects those commentaries that attempt to reduce the thing-in-itself to a “mere concept” (457). However, he limits his exegesis to the first half of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and does not discuss the second half, the Transcendental Dialectic, of Kant’s work. Because his own book, as he says, is limited to the portico of the edifice that is Kant’s thought and work, he does not escape, in the end, the dualism that underlies those commentaries that he wants to correct. He gives us no indication that he sees, in concluding his book, that the thing-in-itself is actual precisely because it is a concept that applies to social, human practice.

⁴ The authorship of the book of Isaiah is complex. Scholars generally agree that the book was written at different times, both before and after the Babylonian exile from 605-539 BCE, and by different authors. For ease of reading, however, I shall refer to “Isaiah” as the singular author of the book.

⁵ In 60.14 the peaceful state in which the knowledge of God is found is called the “City of the Lord.” The author of these concluding chapters then proceeds to return us to where we began, meditating upon the holy mountain in which “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (65.25).

⁶ I cite here Robert Alter’s translation of Ecclesiastes in *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes*. For all other biblical passages, I cite the Revised Standard Version (unless otherwise stated).

⁷ As Denis de Rougemont reminds us, “*The condemnation of the flesh, which is noted by some as characteristically Christian, is in fact of Manichean and ‘heretical’ origin.* For it must be borne in mind that when Paul speaks of the ‘flesh,’” with a condemnatory tone, “he means not the physical body but the *whole* of unbelieving man—body, mind, faculties, and desires—and hence his *soul* too” (*Love in the Western World* 82). He characterizes the Manichean view, which he aligns with that of Plato, as the interpretation “of the universe [that] holds the fact of being alive in the body to be the absolute woe... and death it holds to be the *ultimate* good” (66). According to this view, “The fulfillment of Love is the denial of any particular terrestrial love, and its Bliss of any particular terrestrial bliss” (66). From the standpoint of modernity, however, which he associates with the life-affirming standpoint of adherents to the biblical teaching, it is this Manichean idea of love “which is the absolute woe” (66).

⁸ Brayton Polka observes, in demonstrating the difference between simile and metaphor, “*metapherein*, like *trans-ferre*, means to bear or to carry across” (*Truth and Interpretation* 52). Polka is the only scholar, so far as I am aware, who argues, in systematic fashion, that the thing-in-itself is a metaphor (see *Truth and Interpretation* 52-69). My study is deeply indebted to the work of Polka, not only to his particular studies of Kant and Stevens but also to his more general studies of the relationship, at once historical and ontological, between philosophy and poetry, philosophy and (biblical) religion, poetry and the Bible, and the secular and the religious. Indeed, that modern thought is biblical in origin and that the Bible is constituted by concepts and images

that are profoundly modern has been central to Polka's work from the publication of his first book *The Dialectic of Biblical Critique: Interpretation and Existence* to his new book *In the Beginning Is Philosophy: On Desire and the Good*.

⁹ See Chapter 3.

¹⁰ Ozick republishes her article (appearing in Harper's magazine in May 1986) under the new title "Metaphor and Memory" in her book of essays by that name in 1989. When I cite her article, I reference the pagination of her book.

¹¹ I am appropriating here Spinoza's formulation for his understanding of the natural state with which he opens Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. In the state of nature might is right, "fish inhabit water, and the big ones eat the smaller ones" (173). In Axiom 1 of Part IV of the *Ethics*, he notes further, "There is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed." There is always, in other words, a bigger fish. There is nothing in nature than which something greater cannot be conceived. Therefore, there is nothing in nature that is truly (infinitely, invaluablely) greater than anything else.

¹² It is important to expand our understanding of metaphor and simile beyond their usual syntactical definitions: i.e., beyond those definitions based on whether or not a comparison involves the use of "like" or "as." As figures of speech, (a) metaphor and (a) simile embody the ways in which we view, think about, and act within the world. Thus, they demand from us a critical investigation of their structure in order to become accountable for the very ways in which we interpret existence.

¹³ It is telling that when, in modernity, the IRS of the U.S.A. has to define what it is that qualifies as religious for the purposes of offering tax exemptions they do so by defining a religious institution as an organization with a charitable objective. As Section 501(c)(3) states, "The organization's activities may not serve the private interests of any individual or organization. Rather, beneficiaries of an organization's activities must be recognized objects of charity (such as the poor or the distressed) or the community at large (for example, through the conduct of religious services or the promotion of religion)." The IRS agrees with Ozick: what is fundamental to religion in modernity is the conscientious work to provide for the needs of ourselves and others, i.e., charity.

¹⁴ The giant is a recurring figure in Stevens' poems. I discuss this figure, as it appears in "A Primitive Like an Orb" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

¹⁵ Augustine cites Romans 1.20 twice in his discussion of Platonist and Christian conceptions of God (bk. VIII, chs. 6 and 10). Although he argues that the Platonists "approach nearest" to the concept of God and the morality of Christians, he also observes that any notion that the principle of all things is material is gravely false (bk. VIII, ch. 9). Thus, he finds that Plato, in supposing the gods to be plural, had an erroneous concept of divinity (as he points out in bk. VIII, ch. 12, bk. IX, ch. 16, and bk. X, ch. 24). Plato's concept of god, then, as blindly enslaved to the perception of the body, never truly approaches the infinite concept of the God of the Bible. Augustine also asks himself and his readers in his *Confessions*: "how could I expect that the Platonist books would ever teach me charity" (bk. VII, ch. 20)? He then tells us that it is charity upon which all understanding of the Bible and the knowledge of God, as true wisdom, depend (bk. XII, ch. 25).

¹⁶ See Anselm's "Reply to Gaunilo" in which he cites this verse in his attack against those—both those who refuse sacred authority and those orthodox Christians who accept it—who foolishly

deny that they can form an idea of the existence of God as that than which nothing greater can be thought.

¹⁷ Petrarch cites Romans 1.20 in his attack against those who, in using Aristotelian philosophy to interpret biblical ideas, fail to know what it means that “God made the world by the Word” and out of absolute nothing (“Of His own Ignorance and that of Many Others” 98-9). For an explanation of Petrarch’s relation to my study and his role in the story of modern philosophy, see note 15 of Chapter 5 below.

¹⁸ See the end of the section of his essay titled (by the editor) as the “First Objection to Sebond: Defense” (395-6). Montaigne paradoxically defends the statement of Paul—alongside the effort of Sebond—by letting down all of his defenses, i.e., by defending the failure of Sebond’s essay to demonstrate God’s existence using natural means.

¹⁹ Romans 1.25. Paul inexcusably falsifies his insight, however, when, in the very next paragraph, he condemns homosexual relations by appealing to what is “natural” and not to the truly divine basis for evaluating human interactions: love (see 1.26-7). We know that Paul knows that “God is love” (I John 4.8). Thus, Paul simply reveals his inability here to condemn homosexuality on the basis of what he considers to be the true teaching of the Bible: love one another! Indeed, while Paul can echo the condemnation of homosexuality found in his religious tradition, he cannot falsify the truth that the Bible, in both Testaments, supports loving human relationships and loving human beings of every gender and gender-identity.

²⁰ See *John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions, and Prayers* 123.

²¹ In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (to which we shall turn in Chapter 2) Kant writes, “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (A51/B75).

PART 2

Kant and the Thing-In-Itself as Metaphor

Chapter 2

Critique—as Rational Practice

The Desire for Existence

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant launches his quest to solve the “unavoidable problems of pure reason... [namely, those of] **God, freedom, and immortality**” by founding his metaphysical adventure on the twofold standpoint, the distinction between the objects of possible experience, which we know (cognize) according to the theoretical categories of the understanding, and the subjects of pure (practical) reason (B7). That is, he systematically distinguishes between understanding, that which regulates our knowledge of natural processes, and thinking. He observes that the illusions with which metaphysics is beset and which result in positing a contradiction between natural processes and human freedom are due to our attempt to extend the categories that apply to our understanding of nature to those subjects that pass beyond the objects of possible experience. He thus sets out to limit all use of the understanding to objects that it is possible to experience empirically (i.e., through the senses) and “consequently” to show us “that we can have cognition [i.e., knowledge] of no object as a thing in itself, but only insofar as it is an object of sensible intuition, i.e., as appearance” (Bxxvi). But what follows, as I shall argue in this chapter, is that the thing-in-itself, while remaining unknown to us as an object, is the singular subject of all human thinking. It is not known, therefore, as a thing but is realized as a metaphor for the practice of according human existence an unconditional value or dignity. What we learn, in analyzing the *Critique of Pure Reason* together with the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, is that the limit or boundary that Kant sets out for metaphysics is an image for the ethical bonds that tie us to each other in relationship.

From the outset of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant displays an incipient consciousness of his end, his goal: the enigmatic destiny of reason. He states, in the opening lines of his Preface to the first edition, “Human reason has a peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer,” since the resolutions to these unavoidable problems are transcendental (Avii). Thus, he tells us that reason falls into perplexity. For, through its rightful and warranted use in experience, it finds that none of the conditions of the sensible world (which we experience) is sufficient for the whole, the unconditioned: i.e., that which provides the reason for or that which justifies existence. That which is unconditional, he notes, is “something under which all experience belongs, but that is never itself an object of experience” (A311/B367).

However, “because the questions never cease,” because reason remains restless in its striving for that which justifies the human experience, “reason sees itself as necessitated to take refuge in principles that overstep all possible use in experience.... But it thereby falls into obscurity and contradictions, from which it can indeed surmise that it must somewhere be proceeding on the grounds of hidden errors,” but which it “cannot discover,” for the principles upon which it extends its quest for knowledge “no longer recognize any touchstone of experience” (Aviii). The contradictions, Kant then reports, in which reason becomes mired are the result of the illusory premises that found the uncritical positions of both dogmatists and skeptics.

The dogmatist, in his attempt to know with certainty that which goes beyond all possible experience, finds that he is without a rationale for what he claims to know. But he is, then, the ultimate skeptic in claiming that there is no rationale or justification for that which he knows to

be true—except that he says so. Skepticism thus appears to take up the standard on the “battlefield of endless controversies... called **metaphysics**” (Aviii). But when the skeptic looks up she sees that the colours of her standard are identical with those of the dogmatist. For the skeptic can adhere to her own position only by asserting her dogmatic authority. The skeptic claims, by appealing to the uncertainty of what appears before us, to be ignorant of the truth. But she is unable to demonstrate or to know, therefore, that her own position is true—
notwithstanding her statements to the contrary.¹

As the domain of dogmatists and skeptics, Kant explains that metaphysics has not “been so favored by fate as to have been able to enter upon the secure course of a science, even though it is older than all the other sciences, and would remain even if all the others were swallowed up in an all-consuming barbarism” (Bxiv). Still, he notes that it does no good to be indifferent to metaphysical questions or to metaphysics. For even indifference betrays a skeptical attitude towards it and thereby demonstrates that “human nature **cannot be indifferent**” to the objects of metaphysical inquiries (Ax). There is no neutral place upon this battlefield, and yet, to locate ourselves either on the side of the skeptics or on the side of the dogmatists results in the failure to demonstrate anything about what we claim to know as we vacillate from side to side. Nonetheless, Kant claims that because “the answer must arise from the same source as the question” we are “in no way allowed to plead unavoidable ignorance” regarding the transcendental problems of pure reason (A476/B504). Thus, although all previous attempts to resolve these questions became lost in contradiction, Kant ventures to see “whether we cannot successfully steer human reason between these two cliffs [i.e., dogmatism and skepticism], assign its determinate boundaries, and still keep open the entire field of its purposive activity” (A94/B128).

In undertaking to determine “the domain and the bounds of [reason’s] attempted use beyond all bounds of experience,” Kant refuses to give up either dogma or criticism (B23). He refuses to eschew either the *a priori* principles demanded by the dogmatists, according to which one assess the truth of one’s claims, or the synthesis of experience demanded by the skeptics, according to which one demonstrates the existence, whether factual or actual, of that which one claims to know. Indeed, joining the revolutions hitherto advanced by the mathematicians and the natural scientists, who, above all, provide him with examples of propositions that synthesize experience according to *a priori* principles, he observes that the real problem of reason is contained in the question: How are synthetic *a priori* judgments possible? For, he explains, that “they must be possible is proved through their actuality” (B20). He thus proceeds to formulate the question that motivates his critique of pure reason: Given that “metaphysics is actual,” how is it possible (B21)? He does not ask: Is metaphysics even possible? Instead, he finds himself asking, given that reason “inexorably pushes on, driven by its own need to answer such questions as cannot be answered by any experiential use of reason,” how is the metaphysical use of reason possible (B21)? Given that “a certain sort of metaphysics has actually been present in all human beings..., and [that] it will also always remain,” what are the conditions that found the possibility of metaphysics (B21)? Given that there is no one who is not implicated in the quest to solve the metaphysical problems of existence, what is it that justifies our solutions to these problems?

Kant provides an awesome summary of his account of the crisis of reason in the opening of Book II of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. He writes, “Pure reason always has its dialectic,” that is, its problematic illusions,² “for it requires the absolute totality of conditions [i.e., the whole or the unconditioned] for a given conditioned, and this can be found only in things in themselves. Since, however,” he then observes,

all concepts of things must be referred to intuitions which, for us human beings cannot be other than sensible and hence do not let objects be known as things in themselves but only as appearances, in whose [natural] series of the conditioned and conditions the unconditioned can never be found, an unavoidable illusion arises from the application of this rational idea [i.e., the unconditioned]... to the appearances as if they were things in themselves..., an illusion which, however, would never be noticed as deceptive if it were not revealed by a *conflict* of reason with itself in the application to appearance of its basic principle of presupposing the unconditioned for everything conditioned. (5:107)

The illusion into which reason unavoidably falls is the assumption that the appearances of nature are evidence of things that persist in themselves (apart from the appearances). However, in attempting to locate that which exists without prior conditions (the unconditioned) in the series of conditions, reason ends up contradicting its own understanding of the objects that appear to it in the sensible world (none of which contains its own source of motivation and, thus, none of which ever reveals that which is not the effect of a prior cause). In addition, in locating the thing-in-itself within the sensible world, reason (the mind) views its own concepts as passively determined by the objects that surround it and, thus, the mind contradicts its own conception of the spontaneity (freedom) that it demonstrated in studying those objects that we experience in the first place. In conceiving of that which is intelligible according to sensible categories and that which is sensible according to categories that apply to the human mind, reason enters into a conflict not with the objects of experience but with the self.

The failure to uphold the distinction between objects and the mind results in imposing a dualistic opposition between the sensible world and the intelligible world, between nature and freedom. For, in viewing that which is only intelligible (things in themselves) according to the

categories that apply to objects that we can experience, one ends up modelling one's view of the relation between these "worlds" upon the empirical relations that constitute the world of objects. That is, one views the difference between these "worlds" according to distances that are measurable in space and time. One thereby sets out a false opposition or, in Kant's terms, a false antinomy, which results in self-contradiction.

Those, as we read in the final section of the *Grounding*, who claim "to have seen deeper into the essence of things" and who profess to know objects as they are in themselves thus "boldly declare freedom to be impossible" (459). But whence, then, is wo/man? Are human beings merely objects to be used and manipulated? As we learned above, it is because reason does not owe its conflicts to anything but its own misprision that it is able to note the deception involved in taking objects for things in themselves and become responsible for mistaking the thing-in-itself for an object of possible experience. As Kant therefore notes, in response to those professors, "One can only show them that their supposed discovery of a contradiction lies nowhere but here: ... when they are required to think of man qua intelligence as thing in himself as well as" a part of the sensible world, "they still persist in regarding him as appearance" (459). In demanding that we position ourselves in relation to the conflict between the sensible (nature) and the intelligible (freedom), Kant undertakes to show us that our knowledge of the appearances, our understanding of the laws of nature, does not demonstrate that we are not free but that we are wholly free.

We see why Kant is so concerned to take up "the first and most important occupation of philosophy": to deprive these dialectical illusions "once and for all of all disadvantageous influence, by blocking off the source of the errors" (Bxxxix). For it is his ultimate concern to defend freedom from both the academics and the populists who, although destined to fail,

attempt to excuse us from the obligations involved in free human practice. However, in noting that reason is responsible for its own deceptions, Kant concludes his summary of the crisis in which we all find ourselves in Book II of his work on practical reason by indicating that “reason is forced to investigate this illusion – whence it arises and how it can be removed;” thus, the false opposition between nature and freedom,

which becomes evident in its dialectic, is in fact the most benevolent error into which human reason could ever have fallen, inasmuch as it finally drives us to search for the key to escape from this labyrinth; and when this key is found it further discovers what we did not seek and yet need, namely a view into a higher and immutable order of things in which we already are.... (5:107)

The reason that this error is benevolent, i.e., that it is the product of good will (*bene volent*), is that it demonstrates that reason contains no errors for which it is not responsible. The error involved in confusing the sensible with the intelligible presupposes a will to comprehend both worlds. It is possible to posit the error—actually to commit it—precisely because we are willing (free) members of the intelligible world, who know (are conscious of) the natural realm. We remove the contradiction, then, into which reason falls not by avoiding the source of our errors but by identifying it. As Kant notes, “The charm in expanding one’s cognitions is so great that one can be stopped in one’s progress only by bumping into a clear contradiction” (A4/B8). It is in identifying this false antinomy, by positioning ourselves in relation to it, that we provide ourselves with the opportunity to undo its contradiction; otherwise, unperturbed in our smooth progress, we end up blindly repeating the metaphysical errors that lead us uncritically into dogmatism and skepticism. Thus, what is left for reason to do, we are told, is that it “should take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge” by instituting “a

critique of pure reason itself” (Axi-xii). Kant demands that reason, seeking to eliminate its errors, take on the responsibility of its own critique. That is, he is asking his metaphysical readers to become self-critical.

It is worth noting, then, that while Kant holds that illusion is unavoidable and stands ever ready to deceive us, he also shows us that we can entirely avoid the fraudulent claims of its dialectic. The desire to be altogether error-free results either in wilfully (dogmatically) ignoring one’s mistakes or in languishing (skeptically) in one’s errors as though they were irremediable. What is truly unavoidable is the idea that error is unavoidable, that all of us rational persons are liable to err. For the errors or illusions of which Kant is speaking are neither empirical (for example, those errors that result from failing to apply the scientific method correctly) nor logical (those fallacious inferences that result from failing to apply logical rules correctly). These errors can be corrected and eradicated, as Kant indicates.³ Transcendental illusions, however, have to do with what we posit as the metaphysical or transcendental ground, the very reason, for existence. Paradoxically, the only way to avoid these errors is by continually exposing them within our very own metaphysical positions.

But what do we discover when we join Kant and institute reason’s critique, the critique of pure reason? How do we conceive of the relationship between that which is sensible (nature) and that which is intelligible (freedom)? How do we avoid the contradictions that arise when we confuse the conditions of space and time with the whole, the unconditional subject of reason’s spontaneous desire? How do we block off the source of these errors and, thus, deprive illusion of its disadvantages while using it, benevolently, to our advantage in showing how it in fact demonstrates the coherent relation between nature and freedom? What is the key to discovering the “higher and immutable order in which we already are?”

Kant tells us:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* [i.e., prior to experience] through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that objects must conform to our cognition.... (Bxvi)

Either the mind conforms to objects, which, conceived as things in themselves, determine how and in what capacity we are able to know those objects. Or objects conform to the mind. Either we locate that which is unconditional, the thing-in-itself, behind or beyond the appearances by drawing an analogy between it and the way in which objects are located behind or beyond each other in space and time. Or objects are organized into representations by an act of the mind. Either we claim to know the unconditioned in and through the series of natural conditions, which, however, lands us in the contradictory position of also claiming to be ignorant of the content of that which is unconditional and, thus, of claiming that all of our descriptions of it—that all of our claims to know it—are illusory speculations. Or, Kant observes, the mind limits its own use of the categories of the understanding to the appearances and “**the contradiction disappears**” (Bxx). The contradiction disappears because Kant no longer directs his metaphysical inquiries toward the objects that we experience but toward the way in which we, as human subjects, conceive of our experiences.

The idea that objects conform to the mind comprises, Kant explains, the altered method of our way of thinking in which a “rule is expressed in concepts *a priori*, to which all objects of experience must conform, and with which they must agree” (Bxvii). That is, the revolution in metaphysics that Kant advances involves recognizing, he tells us, “that we can cognize of things

a priori only what we ourselves have put into them” (Bxviii). The laws of nature that we apply to objects of possible experience are not derived from our experience of the appearances but by attending to the concept of objects brought to our experiences by the mind. This revolutionary insight is also, Kant explains, what launches the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century. He notes that the laws of gravity determined by Isaac Newton “would have remained forever undiscovered if Copernicus had not ventured, in a manner contradictory to the senses yet true, to seek for the observed movements not in the objects of the heavens but in their observer” (Bxxii). The revolution in our relation to objects involves the realization that all of our descriptions of nature are metaphors. Although all objects of nature appear, “nature” is not an object available to the senses but a concept through which we organize, study, and comprehend the objects of space and time. We do not see “nature.” Rather, “nature” is a metaphor for our understanding of the appearances.⁴

As Owen Barfield reminds us in his penetrating study *Saving the Appearances*, while the “popular view is, that Copernicus ‘discovered’ that the earth moves round the sun. Actually the *hypothesis* that the earth moves round the sun is at least as old as the 3rd century B.C., when it was advanced by Aristarchus of Samos...” (49-50). Copernicus himself, we are then told, knew this: “The real turning-point in the history of astronomy and of science in general was something else altogether. It took place when Copernicus... began to affirm that the heliocentric hypothesis not only saved the appearances, but was physically true” (50). Prior to this revolutionary insight those who studied the night’s sky conjured hypotheses that, while consistent with the appearances, bore no relation to the truth (reality). For those who studied nature, following Aristotle, located its reality (or truth) behind or beyond the appearances and in things themselves, which remained inaccessible to mortal men and women. The Copernican revolution, therefore,

did not involve a reorientation in physical space, but a change in the way in which we view physical objects and of our understanding of scientific hypotheses. It is, indeed, a revolution in the concept of “revolution,” which, no longer modelled on the cyclical orbits of the night’s sky, bespeaks a change in the point of view from which we examine our points of view.

Kant explains this revolutionary perspective by pointing out that human knowledge arises “from two fundamental sources,” the first of which involves the reception of sense-impressions by means of our five senses (which form “intuitions”) and the second of which describes the faculty of understanding that represents objects according to theoretical concepts (e.g., atoms, causality, natural selection, etc.) (A50/B74). “Neither of these properties,” Kant holds, “is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought” (A51/B75). He then provides a terse summary of his position (which ultimately applies to all three of his categories of the mind): “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions [i.e., contents] without concepts are blind” (A51/B75). While there are no intuitions to which our understanding of objects does not apply, there are also no veritable concepts of the understanding (no laws of nature) that are not verifiable in experience. Any concept of the understanding that is impossible to verify through an experiment is not a reliable concept of nature. The concepts of natural science, then, are both synthetic and *a priori* (albeit in a different way from which the moral law is synthetic *a priori*). Thus, Kant limits all use of the understanding to the phenomena of the sensible world.

However, because, as Kant puts it in the *Prolegomena*, experience has not bound itself—because the limit that he sets for what we can know of objects cannot itself be known as an object—it turns out that the centre of our experience, that which provides its axis or point of orientation, is not found within its circumference (360). The centre of experience is not a

physical location in space and time but an image for the point of view through which we assess what is central to our lives. The circle of experience is that impossible circle whose centre is outside of itself. It is a metaphor for the revolution in the way in which we now orient ourselves, not in space and time, but in thinking.⁵

We are thus at the metaphorical heart of what we saw Kant identify, in our introductory chapter, as the twofold way in which we conceive of human existence, namely, the twofold standpoint. For, in limiting the understanding to objects of sensible intuition, reason rebounds upon itself to show that its own limits are not objects of possible experience and that they bear no analogy to the barriers that demarcate different physical locations in space and time. In other words, only freedom knows limits. The limit that Kant posits doubles as the passage, the proof through which the reality of the intelligible world (freedom) is enacted. All human knowledge, including all of our transcendental illusions, are indicative of the difference between that which knows objects and the objects that we know. Nature is not conscious of itself. Nature does not understand its own processes. But we do. What we learn, then, is that there is no spatio-temporal distance between nature and humanity (the intelligible world). For it is precisely in its assessment (understanding) of nature that the mind demonstrates its distinction from it.

It is thus truly instructive to concentrate on how Kant articulates his conception of the twofold standpoint. In a key note in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he writes that “the same objects can be considered from two different sides, **on the one side** as objects of the senses and the understanding for experience, and **on the other side** as objects that are merely thought” by reason “striving beyond the bounds of experience” (Bxviii-xix). There is but one world, but there are two notions of “one” that are brought to it by human intelligence: the first, the physical one, which is measured according to its definition in space and

time; the second, the metaphysical one, which is measured according to the spirit of solidarity that is embodied in the circle of human relationship whose centre is each and every one of us. Kant continues: “If we now find that there is agreement with the principle of pure reason when things are considered from this twofold standpoint, but that an unavoidable conflict of reason with itself arises with a single standpoint,” then his critical distinction is decidedly correct (Bxix). A “single standpoint” is unable to avoid contradiction precisely because it involves viewing human beings as either completely natural or completely transcendent (intelligible).⁶ A single standpoint is founded upon the idea that nature and freedom exclude each other. But how is it possible to know that I am natural except as an intelligent being? How is it possible to argue that I am intelligible except in and through the use of the sensible world? The reconciliation between these two ways of describing the world that, we are told, is demanded by reason as a necessary idea “will never come about except through this distinction [i.e., the twofold standpoint], which is therefore the true one” (Bxxi).⁷

It is important to see, then, that Kant’s aim and achievement in his first two *Critiques* is the union of the experience of objects and the freedom of human subjects. There are no sides to Kant’s twofold concept, empirically speaking. There is no finite difference between the finite and the infinite. Rather, Kant sets out a distinction that is embodied by the thoughtful practice of human subjects and that serves to preserve human freedom and dignity. As Kant states, “what cannot be an object of sensuous intuition, such as the concepts of metaphysics and of morals, lies entirely without its sphere... and there is not, as it were, any point or line of contact” (*Prolegomena* 353). There is no physical point connecting the appearances and things in themselves, objects and subjects, nature and freedom. But there is also no line separating them. As Kant explicitly states in the *Prolegomena*, “I made use of the metaphor of a boundary in order

to establish the limits of reason with regards to its suitable use” (360).⁸ The boundary or limit for human understanding that Kant establishes is a metaphor. It is not what we see (empirically) but what we will (morally), i.e., it embodies that which we desire for existence.

Thus, the key, we learn, to unlocking that “higher and immutable order in which we already are” is the metaphoric interpretation of the twofold standpoint in which we discover that the limitation of knowledge involves and expresses the principle by which we live (in) the world, the principle by which we know anything at all and that which we support in our interaction with others. For the relation between subjects and objects bears no relation to the relations that govern the natural world but enacts, instead, “another relation” (Bxxix). This relation, it turns out, is not a relation to objects at all (as they are in themselves) but to other human beings with whom we share our experiences and knowledge. This order is not “higher” in space and time. Instead, Kant uses the term “higher” as a metaphor that signals to us the difference between the unconditional value of people and the conditional value of things. That higher and eternal order is the order of human relationship in which we begin from the point of view that all human beings are warranted freedom. Ultimately, the whole of reason “is given in itself through the final intention of pure reason in the practical” (Bxxxviii).

The limit that Kant prescribes through his twofold standpoint as a principle of relationship according to which we live the sensible conditions of existence is not, however, what Plato describes as the limit of mortal knowledge when he formulates his image of the divided line. As Kant notes, in a subtle but critical passage, “The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space. Likewise,” Kant observes,

Plato abandoned the world of the senses because it set such narrow limits for the

understanding, and dared to go beyond it on the wings of ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding. He did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance, no support, as it were, by which he could stiffen himself, and to which he could apply his powers in order to put his understanding into motion. (A5, B9)

Kant hereby indicates to his readers the absolute difference between his own position and the Platonic opposition between the Forms and the appearances. To return to Plato's conception of human knowledge is to return to the notion that we "could do even better" without the resistance provided by the erroneous contradictions in which we find ourselves entangled and through which we are called to work out a comprehensive concept of human freedom. Through his image Kant indicates *what* it is that Plato is ignorant of, i.e., what he "did not notice" but what we do notice: the resistance and the support, the obligation to freedom, through which modern metaphysicians gain both an understanding of sensible objects and a rational idea of subjects that are not reducible to the bounds of possible experience. To confuse Plato's opposition between the Forms and the appearances with Kant's twofold conception of existence is to fail to see that what joins nature and freedom, according to Kant, is the practice of limiting ourselves to those actions that support the dignity of one another.

In the *Republic*, after Socrates tells us that "the form of the good is the most important thing to learn about... [and yet] that we have no adequate knowledge of it," without which even the "knowledge of other things is of no benefit to us," he notes, "there are many beautiful things" that are "visible, while the forms are intelligible but not visible" (book VI, 505a, 507b). He thus sets out a division between that which is visible and that which is intelligible (the terms of which he shares with Kant). But the nature of Plato's opposition bears no relationship to Kant's metaphor for the twofold meaning of existence. For Plato founds his division on a direct analogy

with the light, whose god is the sun, by which we naturally see anything (507e-508b). After then indicating that even good opinions are as blind to the knowledge of that which is truly good as the bad ones, Socrates asks Glaucon, his interlocutor, “Would you be willing to say that...: As the opinable is to the knowable, so the likeness is to the thing that it is like” (510a)? Glaucon agrees. Socrates then indicates to his Athenian audience that any image or imitation—likeness—of an object is ignorant of that which it claims to be like. In claiming not to be the thing itself, an image demonstrates that it is utterly unlike—that it bears no likeness to—the thing (in itself) that it is imitating. In other words, similes operate according to what Kant calls the rule of identity, which puts on display the contradiction between things (as they are in themselves) and their images. (I shall discuss the rule of identity in detail when I take up Kant’s commentary on Stoic and Epicurean philosophy.) Plato’s image of the sun (his simile) founds, and is founded upon, the doctrine of opposites that structures all of his dialogues and that shows mortal men and women to be ignorant of that which really *is*. Thus, when Socrates conjures his image of the hypothetical “stepping stones” whose knowledge propels man across the divided line to “unhypothetical first principles of everything,” in which one moves “from forms to forms” and ends in forms, his audience is dumbfounded. Is this image like or unlike that which it claims to be like (i.e., that process by which one gains knowledge of the good in itself, which bears no relation to anything that appears) (511b)? There is no answer. The answer is: . The image is but a reiteration of the point that Socrates insists upon in the *Apology*: that, unlike his fellow Athenians, he, at least, knows that he knows nothing.

In other words, Socrates composes his image of the divided line from the side of the appearances, which renders it unlike that to which it is likened. It is opposed to any real knowledge of the route through which one acquires an unqualified understanding of the forms.

Its structure, therefore, is contra-dictory. The image shows all human speech (including any image and imitation) to be ignorant of that of which it speaks. But because the divided line, then, is not a metaphor but a simile drawn from experience, Plato's concept is no different from the mythical images of Homer or the tragedians: it is an imitation of an imitation, the images of which Socrates shows to be ignorant and thus sentences to expulsion from what he imagines to be the truly just city. (We shall return to this expulsion and to the relation between Plato and Homer in Part 3).

For the purpose of explicating Kant's text, however, it is important to note, first, that the intelligible world of Plato, which is real in itself and thus supplies the first principles according to which everything is known, is not the intelligible world of Kant, the resistance and support of which is provided by the will of human beings, and second, that Plato's knowledge of the appearances is utterly different from the knowledge of the natural world deduced (justified) by Kant. While the raw material given to the senses is the same, the way in which Plato and Kant organize the undetermined appearances into experiences of the sensible world is worlds apart. Plato derives his knowledge of the appearances from experience, i.e., he categorizes the relations between objects by composing similes that identify the apparent likenesses between those objects (which generates, as we know, the doctrine of opposites through which he determines that nothing is known in itself). His categories of experience are not categories of the understanding (the mind) but categories drawn from that which appears to him. Thus, the phenomena of nature that, for Kant, are organized according to laws brought to experience by the understanding are not the appearances of Plato. Plato's categorization of the appearances bears no relation to the category of phenomena in Kant.⁹

The reason that I concentrate our attention upon the difference between Plato's conception of the appearances and Kant's conception of nature is that it is important to see, in order not to misunderstand either Plato or Kant, that what the ancient Greeks see in nature is not characterized by beliefs (as Barfield points out in his study [*Saving the Appearances* 58-9]). As both Kant and Barfield remind us, what *we* see in nature is. Thus, it is not as if Plato views the world in the same way that we do and then gets it wrong when he interprets the phenomena as the consequences of the Forms (things as they are in themselves). Nature is not a thing in itself—identical for all people at all times. Rather, nature is a historical concept that actually changes—how we understand objects and so our experience of the phenomena changes—as we advance in our understanding of its laws. Thus, this historical distinction is so important in order to avoid both misunderstanding Plato and idolizing nature as a thing in itself, as if its laws were not a product of the mind. (It is also important to grasp, as we shall see in Chapter 4, the idea that our concept of “nature” is not known to the ancient Greeks in order to evaluate what we understand by the concept of “natural mythology.” In a certain sense, the mythology of nature does not exist in ancient Athens but is, rather, an idol for which not ancient but modern or biblical culture is forever liable.)

In addition, it is critical to point out the distinction between Plato's metaphysics and Kant's metaphysical position in order to prevent a misunderstanding of Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself. For Kant, the thing-in-itself is unknown, as a thing, except in its appearance as an object of possible experience. But it is, therefore, thought as that which limits all understanding of nature to the appearances in order to prevent the scandals of the idealists and of the empiricists (to whose theories we shall turn shortly) from taking root. The twofold posture is the “moral standpoint” in light of which Kant instructs all academics and all schools of philosophy to “limit

themselves to the cultivation of those grounds of proof alone that can be grasped universally,” i.e., to the cultivation of purely practical reason (Bxxxiii). Nonetheless, before proceeding to investigate the precepts that govern our human practices, it is important to highlight key ideas in the “Transcendental Aesthetic” (the First Part of the “Transcendental Doctrine of Elements”) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and to attend to the devastating critique of the illusions that surround the soul, the cosmos (freedom), and God advanced by Kant in the Second Part of this section (i.e., the “Transcendental Dialectic”).

Kant begins the “Transcendental Aesthetic” by defining his terms.¹⁰ He observes that the receptivity through which we are affected by objects “is called **sensibility**” (A19/B33). Sensibility alone affords us intuitions, which, as related to objects through sensation, are called empirical. The “undetermined object of an empirical intuition is called **appearance**” (A20/B34). That which allows the appearances “to be ordered in certain relations” he calls the “**form** of appearance” (A20/B34). But Kant then adds his transcendental twist: “Since [however] that within which the sensations can alone be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot itself be in turn sensation... its form must all lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*” (A20/B34). The forms through which we organize the appearances are not themselves objects of the senses. The two forms of empirical experience, namely, space and time, describe the subjective conditions through which it is possible to experience anything at all. What Kant is demonstrating is that the concept of “empirical” is not derived from our experience of empirical objects (immediate sensation) but is a human construct whose formal rules are conceived *a priori*. Thus, he notes, “We can speak of space, extended beings, and so on, only from the human standpoint” (A26/B42). Still, Kant is adamant that without sensation, that is, without our intuition of objects of possible experience, space and time do not exist. These forms are “nothing as soon as we

leave aside the condition of the possibility of all experience, and take [them] as something that grounds things in themselves” (A28/B44).

Thus, Kant provides himself with the resources for utterly dismantling the positions of the idealists or rationalists, among whom, he notes, there are both skeptics and dogmatists. He observes that the objection to him “that must naturally occur to every reader” is that space and time are “real” (A37/B53). However, he then notes that those who hold that space and time are real (in themselves) are unable to point out anything real or actual that pertains to them—apart from what appears to our senses. Thus, Kant determines that the empirical reality of space and time is demonstrable only when we see that these forms are not things in themselves (subsisting when all content is removed from the scene) but the subjective conditions of our empirical experience.

Indeed, Kant is adamant that we must rid ourselves of the idea that the appearances hide anything from us. Through sensibility, he states, “we do not cognize the constitution of things in themselves merely indistinctly, but rather not at all, and, as soon as we take away our subjective constitution, the represented object... is nowhere to be encountered, nor can it be encountered, for it is just this subjective constitution that determines its form as appearance” (A44/B62). In short, we “have nothing to do with anything except appearances anywhere (in the world of sense)” (B62/A45). There is no top or bottom to the world of sense. There is no topping up or bottoming out in the appearances. Rather, top and bottom are examples of the spatial qualifications by which we organize the appearances and that represent the subjective conditions that make experience possible. The “Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy,” then, in which matter is conceived as a thing in itself whose form is supplied by a study of the relations between the appearances, “has therefore directed all investigations of the nature and origin of our cognitions

to an entirely unjust point of view” in its account of the division between the sensible and the intelligible worlds (A44/B61). For Kant points out that Leibniz and Wolff understand this distinction as if it were a “division of objects” in which sensible things are viewed as possessing intelligible qualities and intelligible subjects are accorded the attributes of sensible objects (A255/B311). Human knowledge thus gets divided by Leibniz and Wolff into distinct and indistinct representations, which are clarified by appealing to their experiences of the sensible world, none of which, however, represents that which is intelligible about objects themselves.

Kant knows, therefore, that both dogmatic idealism (represented by Berkeley) and skeptical idealism (as represented, for Kant, by the popular ideology associated with Descartes¹¹) are powerless before his arguments. He knows that the arguments of Leibniz and Wolff are revealed as specious before his rational critique. He notes that “if one ascribes objective reality to those forms of representation [i.e., space and time] then one cannot avoid thereby transforming everything into mere illusion” (B70). If space and time are imagined to be substances that exist in themselves apart from the appearances, as Leibniz and Wolff would have it, then the apparent world becomes a giant illusion that there is no way to penetrate and “one cannot blame the good Berkeley if he demotes bodies to mere illusion; indeed even our own existence” (B71). However, because, as Kant never flags in holding, the soul is not an object of intuition and because, therefore, my intuitions of things inside or outside me depend on a relation to objects that are given to me through the senses, idealism is moot. Kant deconstructs the opposition between that which is internal and that which is external upon which idealism rests by showing that both internal and external experience depend on objects of sensible intuition. Thus, objects are real precisely because they do *not* exist as things in themselves. Kant’s refutation of idealism is

devastating; for he shows us that even idealism, in privileging inner experience, demonstrates the empirical reality of objects.

Kant's deconstruction of empiricism is no less severe.¹² While he truly appreciates the value of the investigations in which Hume demonstrates that it is not possible to glean *a priori* (necessary and universal) knowledge of the operations of nature from experience, Kant also points out that Hume failed to examine the assumptions of his own skeptical approach. Hume rightly saw that any attempt to derive necessary and universal rules of nature from our experience of natural phenomena results not in the discovery of necessary laws but in the observation of frequent associations between objects that, nonetheless, may have turned out otherwise than they did. For Hume points out, Kant reports, that we do not observe the necessity of the connection between objects but, instead, experience the recurrence of various associations within the events that we perceive; however, "Of no event could one [then] say that something must have preceded it, upon which it necessarily followed, that is, that it must have a cause; and thus, however frequent the cases... one could still not, on this account, assume it as always and necessarily happening in this way and one would also have to give blind chance its right" (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:51). Hence, the law of cause and effect, which contains the necessity of the connection between objects, "was proscribed and in its place stepped custom in observation of the course of perceptions" (5:53).

While Kant candidly reports that it was Hume who awoke him from his dogmatic slumbers and that it was the Humean skeptical teaching that occasioned the labour of his entire *Critique of Pure Reason*, he also dismisses Hume's skepticism outright.¹³ For he notes that "it never occurred to him [i.e., Hume] that perhaps the understanding itself could be the originator of the experience in which its objects are encountered" (A95/B127). Rather, "Hume took objects

of experience as things in themselves (as is done almost everywhere)” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:53). That is, Hume does not see that to go to nature at all in order to show that it is impossible to derive any knowledge of necessary and universal laws from the experience of natural operations requires that he possess a concept of nature, i.e., that it is the understanding (the human mind) that organizes the appearances into an empirical experience. What he does not see is that nature is not a thing in itself but a concept brought to the appearances by the mind, which provides the conditions that make his empirical experience of nature possible in the first place. Thus, Kant’s refutation of Hume is gentle, yet absolute. For he shows us that even empiricism, in its attempt to begin with the objects of possible experience, demonstrates the transcendental ideality of the categories of human understanding: those concepts through which we know the world around us and a study of which allows us to determine the *a priori*, necessary, and universal laws of nature.

“That nature should direct itself according to our subjective ground,” Kant observes, “indeed in regard to its lawfulness even depend on this, may well sound quite contradictory and strange” (*Critique of Pure Reason* A114). Indeed, it sounds strange to say, in the terms of this study, that the laws of nature are metaphors. Yet, as Kant also shows us, we cannot defend the insights of the natural scientists from the scandals of the idealists and the empiricists unless we locate the truth not in the objects themselves but in the judgment of human subjects. What justifies this relocation is that accompanying all of our experiences, Kant explains, is a unity in accordance with which one organizes the manifold of appearances into “**one** experience, in which all perceptions are represented as in a thoroughgoing and lawlike connection” (A110). We organize the “swarm of appearances” into an experience of specific objects by categorizing our sensible intuitions according to our concept of an object in general, which he aligns with the

“transcendental object, = X” (A111; A109). Still, there remains a mystery surrounding this transcendental object, = X. For, as transcendental, it is not an object of empirical experience and thus does not fall under the categories of the understanding, which never apply to objects beyond those of possible experience. The transcendental object is reality as it is in itself. But what, then, is this unknown reality, X? What is the thing-in-itself, of which there is neither any theoretical understanding nor any *a posteriori* example?

We are back within the paradoxical transfer of metaphor. Indeed, the paradox of the transcendental X, the revelation that Kant elicits through it, is identical with that of the dominant X with which Stevens ends his poem “The Motive for Metaphor.” What we see in X is human reality. For that unity that attends all of our experiences and through which we view our relation to objects is not an object at all but a concept of the human mind. That is, our relation to this unity (this transcendental object, X) describes a relation to ourselves in and through our relation to each other. In other words, our *relation* to objects is not an object, for no object can be the object (subject) of relation. Rather, our relation to the knowledge of our experience is a relation to our own consciousness. It describes and reveals, as Kant puts it, the “thoroughgoing unity of self-consciousness” (A112). What justifies the revolution in our relation to objects through which Kant locates, alongside the natural scientists, the rules and regulations that govern the sensible world in human understanding is the insight that the distinction between subjects and objects is made not by objects but by and among human subjects.

Thus, we see yet again where the twofold standpoint actually stands: in and as human self-consciousness. Our own self-consciousness is not subject to investigation by the tools of the understanding (theoretical reason). Any attempt to do so inevitably results in conjuring up the chimeras that populate our dialectical illusions. Our self-consciousness describes, instead, the

necessary relationship between thinking and what it is that we think about: existence. It describes our relationship with ourselves and with one another. What it means to think about our existence—as thinking things—is also, as we shall soon see, what it means to think about God as the *summum bonum* of existence, through which we enact the fulfillment of our will or desire.

The thing-in-itself, in other words, is not a thing. Kant uses the term “thing” here to apply to that which coordinates human consciousness, to the subject of all human thinking: the self. But the thing-in-itself is equally that which stands over against the self and provides the edges, the contours, and the parameters of existence: the other of the self (known—loved, encountered, respected—as the self of the other).¹⁴ While Kant never states directly (as far as I know) that the thing-in-itself is the self, while his texts maintain a gap here, that gap is important for preserving the identity of the two.¹⁵ For it is in and through this gap that Kant demonstrates that the thing-in-itself is also that which is wholly other than the self, that for which my experience provides no similes or immediate comparisons and yet that which stands forever in relation to the self. The gap preserves the relationship between the two (the self and the thing-in-itself) by showing that both are constituted (at once individually and universally) by the relationship between self and other, i.e., that both are truly (metaphorically) comprehended through ethical concepts.

Thus, Kant’s difficult metaphysical terminology meets with the colloquial terms of our everyday conversation. For, when we today ask each other, as we do all the time, “How are things?” we are not asking, in principle, about the objects of the other’s life but about her relation to those objects, about her as a subject. The “thing-in-itself” is a placeholder, yes. But—and there is no avoiding it—a placeholder is a metaphor for that which is without place in space and time, i.e., for human self-consciousness or relationship. It is no accident, then, that Hegel, when he reformulates this concept for his own philosophical purposes, does so by describing it in terms

of being-in-and-for-itself in and through being-in-and-for-another. The thing-in-itself is an image for that which is not an object of theoretical reason but a subject of human practice: being-in-relationship. The thing-in-itself is a metaphor, in other words, for the constitution of human subjectivity.

That the truth is subjectivity is also what Wallace Stevens begins to reveal in his early poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”¹⁶ In noting that there are multiple ways of looking at a blackbird, Stevens puts us on notice that the focus of the poem is not the bird but the ways of looking. The focus is not on the object of description but on the way in which the object is described. As he notes, in a section in which the poem becomes self-conscious of its own methodology, “I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms / But I know, too, / That the blackbird is involved / In what I know” (VIII). Or, as he puts it in section IV, “A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one.” These three are not physically one, but metaphysically or metaphorically one. Their unity is an idea whose reality is demonstrated in section VIII as the necessary relationship between knowing (thought) and being (existence). Thus, the intelligible world of human description, of human subjectivity, opens up before us. Stevens joins the Kantian revolution, whose altered way of thinking demonstrates that we can know of an object only what we ourselves have put into it.

Because, like Stevens, Kant is fully conscious that truth is subjectivity—because he recognizes that subjectivity bears witness to the truth that human beings cannot be used or manipulated like natural objects—he states, “I cannot even **assume God, freedom, and immortality** for the sake of the necessary practical use of my reason unless I simultaneously **deprive** speculative [i.e., theoretical] reason of its pretension to extravagant insights” (Bxxix-xxx). Thus, he writes, “I had to deny (*aufheben*) **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**”

(Bxxx).¹⁷ The roommate of practical reason, whose subjects are God, freedom, and immortality, is faith. But faith, we can ask, in what? What is this room, which appears miraculously out of the critical distinction between objects and subjects but which cannot be imagined according to the categories of space and time? As we shall see in the next chapter, it is the room that we make for others in our lives: it describes, as the accommodation of both self and other (i.e., of human subjectivity), an act of grace. Still, as Kant has indicated, before he is able to launch himself into an investigation of the practical ground of these metaphysical subjects, he must clear the way by showing the groundlessness of all claims to go beyond the objects of possible experience by theoretical means and, thus, the error involved in all attempts to intuit the soul, to understand freedom, and to know the existence of God.

After once again pointing out that all of our transcendental illusions are the result of imposing empirical categories on ideas through false, logical inferences, Kant takes up, first, what he calls the paralogisms that surround our concept of the soul. In this section, he informs us that the statement “I am” —which is identical to and is given in the statement “I think” —is not a statement of empirical fact but a principle. He determines that we neither perceive nor know what constitutes the soul or the self. In other words, he points out that consciousness is not an object of empirical intuition. Instead, Kant indicates that I can know myself only insofar as I appear to myself as an object available to the senses. He is a staunch critic of the attempt of the rationalists to know what it is that constitutes the thinking subject by adding, through a logical formula, an empty predicate to it (e.g., the position that consciousness is a “simple substance”). Thus, he concludes that “if **materialism** will not work as a way of explaining my existence [as a thinking thing], then **spiritualism** is just as unsatisfactory for it, and the conclusion is that in no way whatsoever can we cognize anything about the constitution of our soul that in any way at all

concerns the possibility of its separate existence” (B420). Kant is unshakeable in his insistence that the soul does not exist separately from the body, that thinking (consciousness) does not operate in a realm outside of the knowledge (cognition) of the material world.

Thus, in order neither “to be thrown into the lap of a soulless materialism” nor “to get lost wandering about in a spiritualism that must be groundless for us in life,” Kant observes, “we should turn our self-knowledge away from fruitless and extravagant speculation toward fruitful practical uses, which, even if it is always directed only to objects of experience, takes its principles from somewhere higher... as if our vocation extended infinitely far above experience” (B421). The soul or the self is not a self-subsisting entity. It is no surprise, then, that Kant argues that self-knowledge is not theoretical but practical. Indeed, he notes, “the propositions of the rational doctrine of the soul,” which thwart materialism and rationalism (spiritualism), “begin not from the concept of a thinking being in general, but from an actuality” (B418). The statements “I am” and “I think” are neither synthetic (empirical) nor analytic (logical) propositions but synthetic *a priori*. Thus, Kant introduces into consciousness a synthesis, a categorical relationship, that bears no relation to the categories of empirical relations that describe the interaction between objects. The actuality of thinking involves and expresses the self-determination of rational beings, which entails not self-subsistence but a relationship to one’s relationships with others. The statement “I am” is a moral principle whose sole subject is freedom, which is also the subject of what Kant famously calls the third antinomy of pure reason, to which I shall now turn.

After distinguishing between the first two antinomies of reason, which he dubs “mathematical,” and the second two antinomies, which he calls “dynamic,” he tells us that, while the claims involved in the first two antinomies are both false, the claims involved in the second

two antinomies are both true.¹⁸ I shall concentrate on the third antinomy, in which Kant presents his critical commentary on the apparent (dialectical) contradiction between natural necessity and freedom. For it is here (together with the *Grounding* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*) that Kant fully explicates what he calls, in his section on the paralogisms, the community of the thinking subject (the soul) and nature (the body), which, he notes, is so troubling for us precisely because we begin with the false premise that objects exist as things in themselves and hypostatize consciousness as if it were an object of physical intuition. We fail to see, in other words, that “nature” is a concept that exposes our consciousness of it.

Indeed, in the *Prolegomena* Kant observes, “Contradictory propositions cannot both be false, except the concept on which each is founded is self-contradictory” (341-342). The illusory and self-contradictory premise on which the first two antinomies are based and which gives rise to the position that nature and freedom are mutually contradictory (i.e., that these two notions of causality exclude each other) is the assumption that objects exist as things in themselves. However, as Kant is relentless in showing, within the series of natural conditions we never observe things as they are in themselves but only things as they appear to us in and through the senses. Thus, we never know what objects of nature are in themselves but only the rules and regulations according to which they operate. Atomic theory, for example, in its modern version, does not describe things in themselves but the rules governing the appearances of the natural world. Not only, then, do we give up on freedom if we assume that objects exist as things in themselves. But we also give up any claim to reliable knowledge of natural processes, i.e., any scientific understanding of nature.

Nature, then, is not the cause of its own laws. Rather, the laws of nature demonstrate the existence of an intelligible world. Yet, Kant then notes that the intelligible cause through which

we begin to comprehend a notion of freedom cannot be modelled on the law of cause and effect that describes the operations of the nature. As he states in the *Prolegomena* and as he indicates in his commentary on the third antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, freedom describes a cause or beginning that does not precede action in time. As he puts it, “no before or after” applies to freedom (A553/B583). Freedom is not an act that is performed all on one’s own. Rather, it describes an act of relationship. In short, freedom is not theoretical but practical. Thus, the reality of freedom is proved by the profound (in-finite) effects that the rules according to which we ought to act—the rules of practical reason—produce in our lives.¹⁹ Not only, then, do freedom and nature mutually confirm each other. But also, Kant concludes, if we presupposed that objects existed in themselves or attempted to conceive of the thing-in-itself (i.e., a free cause) according to material categories, “then neither nature nor freedom would be left” (A543/B571).²⁰ Instead, through its practical use, reason gives existence to transcendental ideas that are not found in nature but according to which we determine our own actions. Reason, ultimately, is a concept of human power, whose other names are the faculty of desire, will, action, freedom, and morality.

That freedom does not describe a beginning that precedes action in time is identical to the awesome paradox of desire that Stevens also articulates in his strongest poems (as I shall show in Chapters 5 and 6). For Kant and Stevens, desire is not an act of seeking but of finding. It is precisely this paradox of desire, what I am calling here the desire for existence, through which Kant also provides his infallible proof for the existence of God, which involves and expresses what he calls the highest good of existence and through which he continues to refine our understanding of human freedom.

On the proofs for the existence of God, of which there “cannot be any more” than three, Kant notes that both the cosmological argument (the argument from nature) and the physico-

theological argument (the argument from design) rely on what he calls the ontological proof (A591/B619).²¹ Because, in nature, we never reach the summit of the series of conditions that constitute the world of sense, “there could not be any unconditioned member anywhere in the series of dependent existences”; hence, “an intelligible condition, would not belong to the series as a member of it (not even as the supreme member) at all” (A560/B588). The idea of a cause, Kant reports, loses all significance and meaning outside of empirical experience. Thus, all attempts to prove the existence of the most real being—the *ens realissimum*: God—rely on an idea or concept that is not found in experience but to which existence is added as a predicate. The problem that arises, Kant then points out, is that “**Being** is obviously not a real predicate” of anything (A598/B626). In the analytic proposition “God exists,” existence adds nothing to the composition of the idea. In turn, the logical definition of a thing does nothing to demonstrate the existence of that thing, for which a synthetic (empirical) experience of the object is required. As Kant observes, the idea of \$100 does nothing to add a one-hundred dollar bill to the lining of my pocket, although the value of the one-hundred dollar bill is not in the least increased through my experience of it.

Kant puts his readers in a bind. For he states that of any proposition the question remains: “is this proposition... an analytic or a synthetic proposition” (A597/B625). If it is analytic, then existence is not given in it, for a logical proposition does nothing to prove the reality of its concepts. If it is synthetic, then its existence is given *a posteriori*, i.e., in experience, in which God is nowhere to be found. He shows us that the claims about the existence of God from those on both sides of the “God debate” that begin with empirical evidence or logical deductions are irresponsible speculations that are founded upon a shared misunderstanding of the concept of God. But what about the categorical proposition that is synthetic *a priori*, the actuality of which

spearheaded Kant's entire critique and upon which the edifice of metaphysics, we are told, either "stands or falls" (*Prolegomena* 276)?

Kant plays the ultimate fencer's trick. For, after seeming to put down all weapons with which to stab at determining the existence of God, he silently reintroduces, in opening the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the ontological argument in its true character, the critical thrust of which there is no bypassing. After demonstrating that God is not an object of theoretical reason, he states, relocating us in the practical domain, that "the concept of freedom," which is categorically moral or ethical, "constitutes the *keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason; and all other concepts (those of God and immortality)... their *possibility* is *proved* by this: that freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law" (5:4). To think about God, we learn from Kant, is to think about what it is that constitutes the highest good of human existence. But to think of the highest good of which we, as human beings, possess any idea is to think about what we will (desire) as good for both ourselves and others. The highest good does not exist outside of the exercise of human freedom. In turn, our freedom does not exist without (outside of) the idea of the highest good, the *summum bonum* of human existence, however adequate or inadequate our conception of it.

That is, God does not exist as a theoretical entity. God is dead—as that which subsists behind (or beyond) the appearances of nature and of which we possess no knowledge. As the prophets shout from the rooftops of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel, in concert with Kant, God does not bespeak human ignorance. Rather, God is that which we know (*sic!*) to exist. God is that which constitutes human knowledge, that which we think in(to) existence. Still, as Kant decries in counterpoint, in concert with the prophets, God is also not located in experience. Any claim to intuit God, whether internally or externally, expresses nothing but the

human fear to engage existence thoughtfully. Indeed, any claim to know intuitively the existence of God revolves around the desire to shirk the burden of proof, languishing, instead, in ignorance of divine (transcendental) content.

Again we find ourselves before the burden of proof that Paul places squarely upon our shoulders in Romans 1.20. What Kant shows us through his devastating critique of the ideal of pure reason is that there is no proof for the existence of God on the grounds of speculative or theoretical knowledge. He denounces the dialectical version of the ontological argument in which existence is added to the subject of God as a logical predicate. But the argument, as first formulated by St. Anselm, in which being is added unto thought—in which necessary existence is joined to the idea of God ontologically—is neither analytic (logical) nor synthetic (empirical). As Kant hints in his concluding remarks of the Transcendental Dialectic (before the Appendix) and as we learn from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the argument for the existence of God is not a theoretical but a practical proof.²² Because he aligns God and the moral law, Kant finds himself reiterating the argument posed by St. Anselm: “the practical a priori concepts [i.e., God and immortality: the soul] in relation to the supreme principle of freedom... do not have to wait for intuitions”; instead, “they themselves produce the reality of that to which they refer” (5:66). The practice of freedom, in which the concept of God as the highest good of existence is implicated, is its own proof. The existence of God is proven neither empirically nor logically but by the thoughtful, human practice of loving one another (i.e., by the expression of freedom).

The ontological argument is identical, then, with the metaphoric imperative that the lion shall lie down with the lamb. To think the existence of God is to think of that which truly enlarges (empowers) our lives. To be one with Kant in demonstrating, however silently, the ontological proof for God’s existence is to show that true (divine) power is identical with

human(e) service. Indeed, we know that any abuse of force inevitably bespeaks a lack of power, for this abuse demonstrates that the other's will is not in your own power or control. There is no total (notwithstanding the abuses of totalitarian) power over oneself or others. Thus, Kant notes that "in the order of ends [i.e., the peaceable kingdom: the human community founded on the moral law] the human being... is an *end in itself* [and] can never be used merely as a means by anyone (not even by God)" (5:131).

Kant repeats this claim in his essay on the "Conjectural Beginning of Human History." In critically distinguishing between objects and subjects, we learn, he reports, how to use objects as tools for obtaining our chosen ends. But this "view of things also implies (however vaguely) the thought of its contrary": that one may not use human beings as tools "but should rather regard [the other] as an equal" (8:114). Thus, "human beings became *equals of all rational beings*, whatever their rank may be ([Genesis] 3:22)" (8:114). Because Kant rejects any attempt to conceive of God or divine power through a simile with nature or natural power, he establishes the equality between God and humanity, alongside the equality of all human beings, consistent with the authors of Genesis whom he cites. God is not an example of total(itarian) power modelled on the laws of cause and effect but the principle of human empowerment or justice. What testifies to the existence of God is the other, the neighbor whom I love as myself.

Thus, yet again, Kant sets out the limit of human thinking: here, the limit for all of our ideas concerning divine existence. But the limit is *itself*—yet again—a metaphor for the transformation involved in establishing human relationships on the grounds (the foundation) of critical thinking. That is, we recognize the freedom of others (and of ourselves) according to the standard, at once human and divine, of what Kant calls necessary existence, the necessity of which involves and expresses the moral imperative (the law) to treat each other as ends and

never merely as means. To think about the existence of the highest good is to think about the existence of others who populate your life in accordance with the principle of freedom and thus to affirm the existence of human beings not as determined (conditioned) objects but as willing (necessary) human subjects. The highest good (God) proves its reality by what it does, by how it operates, in the midst of our lives. To prove the existence of God is to prove that you truly know what it means to be human.

So Kant states in a stunning passage in the *Grounding*, “worse service cannot be rendered morality than that an attempt be made to derive it from examples. For every example of morality presented to me must itself first be judged according to principles of morality in order to see whether it is fit to serve as an original example, i.e., as a model” (408). Kant indicates that in order to judge what truly constitutes an example of a moral act we ourselves must possess a criterion by which we judge that action. In short, the moral law is not derived from examples. Rather, anyone who is an example of morality is held to be so because his or her conduct can be shown to conform to our idea of the moral law, which is irreducible to what is seen or present in experience. But what is the transcendental source, then, of this principle or standard? Who is the origin of the moral law, by which we judge those who are fit to serve as original models, those who model our own free origins?

Kant continues, in reference to Jesus:

Even the Holy One of the gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is recognized as such. Even he says of himself, “Why do you call me (whom you see) good? None is good (the archetype of the good) except God only (whom you do not see).” But whence have we the concept of God as the highest good? Solely from the idea of moral perfection, which reason frames a priori and connects inseparably

with the concept of a free will. (408-9)

The demonstration (proof) involved in Jesus' statement is majestic in its subtlety. Note that when he asks his interlocutors why they call him good he is asking them to defend, to justify, that claim. Thus, Jesus demands that they themselves, his followers, prove the veracity of his next statement. For, in defending their claims, his interlocutors must invoke a concept of moral perfection (a concept of God) according to which they compare him (Jesus). Thus, Jesus does not deny their claims but demands that each of us sees—that his followers become responsible for—proving them. He is demanding that we become truly original in willing the good in our own lives.

It is also important to point out that, in invoking God as the standard by which to measure his own goodness (the goodness of human beings), Jesus reveals that God, according to his view (which he shares with the prophets), is a concept of moral perfection. Thus, Kant indicates in his commentary that the God of the Bible is an ethical concept—that which comprises the highest good of our relationships with others—constituted by the moral law or freedom. God is what(ever) you desire for existence, for your own life and the lives of others. What(ever) you desire for existence is (your) God. But the origin of the idea of God, then, is at once divine and human. God embodies the rational idea that the origin (and end) of the moral law—the highest good—is neither me nor you but is co-produced through the union of the will of one and all. The origin of any shining example of morality is at once I and Thou (to use Martin Buber's terms). That is, God presents us with the concept of a relationship in which both of its participants are first (original) and according to which we can assess our human relations in order to ensure that no one is accorded a second-class status.

Kant writes in utter support of Jesus and his demonstration that God is a moral concept, of which no one (including himself) is an example (surely, we are not gods!). In pointing out that Jesus can be seen, Kant demonstrates (again, in concert with Jesus) that in order to know how or in what way Jesus exemplifies morality, he must be examined according to a principle that his listeners (interlocutors, followers) share with him. Thus, what his text demonstrates is that Jesus, like any person, cannot be seen (known) but must be conceived (thought). In other words, Kant writes in utter repudiation—indeed, Kant backs Jesus’ own repudiation—of those within Christendom who extol (idolize) Christ as an example. Kant is clear: Christ, according to Jesus’ own doctrine, is not an example for any believer. Indeed, we can say that God is also not an example for us—unless and until we test our comprehension of God’s perfection against what it is that truly perfects us as human beings. But neither, we soon realize, can the texts of Kant nor the poems of Stevens be viewed as mere examples for the philosophers or the poets among us. Simply because one has read their texts does not mean that one has appreciated what their concepts and critical distinctions reveal about philosophy or poetry, which can only be discovered by making the principles of their works account for the terms, assumptions, and perspectives that one finds in them. There is no rubric or cheat sheet for evaluating right and wrong (morality) in our lives or texts. The hard lesson that you (I, we) must continue to learn is that there are no examples of what constitutes the highest good of your existence precisely because there are no other examples of your life. To live by example is to become, in Kant’s terms, heteronomous (that is, to locate the source of your actions outside of yourself) by reducing the moral law to that dogmatic moralism that fails to account for the individual conditions of our lives and that subsumes us under general rules that apply to no one’s (inter)personal existence. In short, to live by example is to forget that ethics is a creative act (a work of art).

But Kant and Jesus thereby show us that we can esteem them as exemplary models of the moral law so long as we do not extol (idolize) them as examples but, instead, hold their lives up to the infinite light of the highest good. Indeed, it is a mistake—of which we are all guilty when we do not attend carefully to Kant’s texts (never mind to Jesus’ parables)—to suggest that Kant ever provides an example of a universal law. He never issues a universal edict or statute. Rather, he provides us, in each of his formulations for what is famously known as the categorical imperative, with a principle by which to test our individual maxims (i.e., the general truths or rules we live by). Kant writes, in first formulating his imperative,

Since I have deprived the will of every impulse [i.e., of every finite, worldly incentive] that might arise for it from obeying any particular law, there is nothing left to serve the will as principle except the universal conformity of its actions to law as such, i.e., I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law. (*Grounding* 402)

Kant demands that our individual rules and actions be tested by the universality embedded in his instruction. But the universality of the moral law is found nowhere outside of its embodiment in our individual lives, in the unique ways in which we bear the standard (the principle) of ethical service in our particular relationships with others. His emphasis on the “unconditional” aspect of duty does not indicate, then, that to do our duty means to pay no heed to the conditions in which we live, but that within every set of conditions we have the opportunity to treat people as ends. His imperative does not instruct us to do anything in particular, but what is imperative is to test all of our actions and ideas according to what is categorical in our lives.²³ Indeed, Kant notes that we are not bound by any particular law, edict, or legal sanction. Whether we follow or do not follow the rules is a choice, rather, that we ought to ground upon another principle. Instead, all

that is needed for morality is “nothing more than that freedom [i.e., desire: the will] should not contradict itself” (*Critique of Pure Reason* Bxxix). What is demanded of you by the moral law is that your will does not become divided against itself. In all that I do, I ought to will for myself solely what I can will at the same time for all others, without exception.

Thus, Kant finds that it is desire or will that determines the good. As we shall see, Kant poses the same questions as Pascal in his *Pensées*: “What is it that feels pleasure within us? Is it our hand? Is it our arm? Is it our flesh? Is it our blood?” He answers, as does Kant, “You will see that it must be something immaterial” (#168). What determines what we judge to be pleasing or not is not reducible to the senses. Sexual arousal, we know, is not pleasurable in every case. Rather, what we judge pleasurable or painful is determined according to what we want, what we will, in life. In short, the good is human desire, for it is desire or freedom that describes that which cannot be possessed by any one of us in opposition to others but must be possessed by all of us simultaneously. If my freedom depends upon your constant oppression, then we are not living in the structure (the order) of freedom but that of hierarchy and subordination. It is no wonder that Kant never ceases to repeat that freedom and the moral law are identical (reciprocal) concepts.

However, the statement, Kant then reports, that we all desire the good—that to be rational is to desire the good—remains sloppy and indeterminate. For either it means that “we represent something to ourselves as good when and *because we desire (will) it*” or it means that “we desire something *because we represent it to ourselves as the good*” (5:60). Because, however, empirical objects do not determine the will without the will’s own assent, Kant insists (echoing Spinoza) that desire is the “determining ground” of the good (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:60).²⁴ The motivation for our actions is not determined by any set of prior conditions.²⁵ That is, as he then

puts it, “instead of the concept of the good as an object determining and making possible the moral law, it is on the contrary the moral law that first determines and makes possible the concept of the good, insofar as it deserves this name absolutely” (5:64). This remark, Kant notes, “is important” (5:64). For it explains “at once the occasioning ground of all the errors of philosophers with respect to the supreme principle of morals” (5:64). Insofar as philosophers interested in ethics fail to pose the question of whether it is the good that determines the will or the will that determines the good, they continue to seek an object of the will “in order to make it into the matter and ground of the law, whereas they should first have searched for a law that determined the will a priori and immediately, and only then determined the object conformable to the will” (5:64). While philosophers of ethics continue to study what to do in order to be good, Kant solves their unavoidable conflicts by showing that in order to determine what is truly ethical we must determine not *what* to do but *how* to go about doing all that we do. One does not will to be good, but one is good in willing the amplification of the freedom of one and all.

Kant is dogged in his insistence that desire is not reducible to our immediate feelings or inclinations. While he uses, at times, “inclination” as a shorthand for the act of seeking what is to our own private advantage—as Paul uses “the flesh” as a shorthand for our spirited enslavement to it—Kant also never flags in holding that “*Considered in themselves* natural inclinations are *good*, i.e., not reprehensible, and to want to extirpate them would not only be futile but harmful and blameworthy as well” (*Religion* 6:58).²⁶ Kant’s condemnation of inclination is a condemnation of the will that slavishly pursues worldly or finite objects as the highest good. Thus, he reports in the *Grounding* that, while man is not responsible for his natural inclinations from the point of view of the world of sense, “he does ascribe to his will any indulgence which he might extend to them if he allowed them any influence on his maxims to the detriment of the

rational [i.e., moral] laws of his will” (458). The difficulty, then, that shapes the issues that define our modern lives is that we become (freely) enslaved to our own will, that it is the will that is responsible for the enslavement of ourselves and others. Liberation is thus so difficult (both psychologically and socially) because, in willing freedom, it is also we ourselves who do not will to be liberated.

What we do, Kant explains, when we transgress our duty in favour of our inclinations is “only take the liberty of making an exception to the law for ourselves (or just for this one time) to the advantage of our inclination” at the expense of ourselves and others (424). That is, we find that “we actually do not will that our maxim,” through which we exempt ourselves from the dictate of practical reason, “should become a universal law,” for this is impossible for us (424). Instead, there arises a contradiction, a conflict, in our will, in which we say (will) one action and do (will) another. In other words, we embody hypocrisy (what the author of the Epistle of James calls double-mindedness).²⁷ In compromising our ethical duty in an attempt to secure, at another’s expense, those objects that we (falsely) believe to comprise the good of our lives, there arises “an opposition (*antagonismus*) of inclination to the precept of reason” (424). We do not will that others treat us as we treat others. Thus, the will becomes divided against itself in dividing itself against others. But what the subordination of reason to inclination, what the evil of hypocrisy demonstrates, then, is not that the moral law is invalid but that all of us, as Kant puts it, “actually acknowledge the validity of the categorical imperative and (with all respect for it) merely allow ourselves a few exceptions, which, as they seem to us, are unimportant and forced upon us” (424).

That the will becomes divided against itself in the war of all against all when it locates the good in objects of experience is also what Kant explains in the Appendix to his essay

“Toward Perpetual Peace.” After indicating that there is no conflict between morality and politics, he cites Jesus (without attribution) as an authority on this relationship. He notes, “Politics says: ‘*Be ye as prudent* [i.e., as wise] *as serpents,*’ and morality adds to this, as a limiting condition, ‘*and as innocent as doves*’” (8:370). He identifies innocence, following Jesus, not with ignorance of good and evil but with the wisdom of serpents, the knowledge of sin. The consciousness of sin is not aligned with those who, following the examples of others, subordinate duty (freedom) to inclination, but with those who will not to do harm and so who account for the harm done in our social lives (i.e., those whose will is *in-nocere*: not to do harm). In short, Kant reiterates Jesus’ instruction: Politics without ethics is blind, brute force and is comprised of strategies for its reinforcement. Ethics without politics is useless and empty, for it fails to put into practice or to enforce the moral law.

Thus, Kant proceeds to distinguish between the “divine guardian of morality,” i.e., reason (whose archetype is the God of the Bible) and “the divine guardian of violence,” i.e., Jupiter, “for the latter is still subject to Fate” (8:370). Indeed, he proceeds to report that those who serve prudence alone undertake to institute policies that seek to secure a theoretical state of universal happiness. But, as we know, “even if universal happiness were made the object [i.e., our end],” because this knowledge relies on data derived from experience, “each judgment about it depending very much upon the opinion of each which is itself very changeable, it can indeed give *general* rules but never *universal* rules” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:36). That is, while flying high under the banner of universal happiness, these prudent policies inevitably exclude the will of one, some, or many in favour of securing the happiness of others and, therefore, end up divorcing morality and politics in trying to identify ethics (right) with politics (might). The

underlying slogan of these political moralists, whom he opposes to moral politicians, is *Divide et impera*: “Divide and conquer!”

This is, sadly, Kant observes, the “way of the world,” in which men and women institute a state of war that serves happiness (fortune) and are thus bandied about by that which is naturally uncertain (8:371). But, in criticizing the one whose end is to rule without paying any heed to what end he is ruling, Kant is a positive Machiavellian. As Machiavelli observes, in judging the actions of all men (including the political legatee), *si guarda al fine*: Look to the end.²⁸ As Kant repeatedly states, one does not judge the rightness of actions by the results (according to the principle of happiness) but, instead, one judges the results according to the end, i.e., according to the moral law that commands us to treat each other always at the same time as ends and never merely as means. It is the ends, as both Kant and Machiavelli find, and not the means that determine the justice of any political or ethical action.

What Kant shows us in his Appendix to his late essay “Toward Perpetual Peace” is that the origin of civil society is not war but peace, the unity of the will of all (i.e., the doctrine of public right or publicity), “because it is precisely the general will (either within a people, or in the relation of various nations among each other) that is given *a priori* that determines what is right among human beings” (8:378). Kant is repeating his thematic material: what is right is not derived from experience but is dictated *a priori* by the moral law. But, as in any worthy fugue whose themes are historically repeated, we hear in Kant’s statements the resolution of Rousseau, who, together with his fellow social contract theorists Spinoza and Hobbes, undertakes to preserve the indivisible will of all individuals through his conception of the general will. In addition, we learn to anticipate the future themes of those whose resolutions resonate with Kant’s dictates, e.g., the speeches of Lincoln in which he declares, joining Kant in locating the origin of

nations in peace and not in war, that civil society rests on the will of all, by all, and for all—without exception. Finally, in determining that the origin of our ethical and political lives is peace and not war, we hear Kant deepening his demonstration that deception is founded on the benevolent promise of truth.

As Kant demonstrates in the *Grounding*, although lying is universal—everybody lies—lying cannot become a universal law. For, as he puts it, “I can indeed will the lie but can not at all will a universal law to lie.”

For by such a law there would really be no promises at all, since in vain would my willing future actions be professed to other people who would not believe what I professed, or if they over-hastily did believe, then they would pay me back in like coin. Therefore, my maxim [to lie in order to secure the objects of my inclination] would necessarily destroy itself just as soon as it was made a universal law. (403)

To lie I must presuppose that you believe that I am telling the truth. Thus, I actually will that truthfulness should be observed universally in order to except myself from this universal prescription (indeed, in order for my lie to work). In the absence of the categorical imperative to tell the truth, to be honest, to pledge allegiance to the freedom of ourselves and others, all promises—and so all lies—disappear. To will evil (e.g., sinful deception) is to will the good universally—with yourself as the exception to the rule, the law, that you will for others. To choose to do evil is to will that others do good to you. To choose evil (as your good) is to find yourself ever confronted (contradicted) by the law that instructs you to treat others as you want to be treated by them.

In concert, then, with the revelation that an abuse of force bespeaks a lack of power, so we realize here that any maxim or policy that seeks to secure finite advantages (favourable

results) at another's expense ends up destroying itself. True power—that power that is not self-contradictory or self-destructive—involves promoting the will of all, the will of both ourselves and others. Thus, Kant entitles the final section of the Appendix of “Toward Perpetual Peace,” “On the Agreement between Politics and Morality According to the Transcendental Concept of Public Right.” To read Kant's essay on peace is to learn how to unite wisdom and justice, ethics and politics, by judging all political action according to the end dictated by the moral law. But to read his essay, then, is to find ourselves on the peaceable mount of Isaiah, upon which doves and serpents are united in the perpetual fight against the state of war in which moral ends are subordinated to universal happiness. So we return to the thrust of Kant's magisterial critique of purely practical reason. That is, Kant provides us, in this Appendix, with another version of the ontological argument. Indeed, the ontological argument—which establishes the relationship, as we shall also see in Chapter 5, between the divine and the human, thought and existence, and self and other—is a metaphor for the work involved in founding our lives on the *a priori* grounds of peace. In turn, metaphor, as we shall discover, involves and expresses the argument that ontology is ethics.

It is when, however, we forget that the ontological argument is (a) metaphor, that metaphysics is ethics, that desire determines the good, or that ethics is creative that we enslave ourselves to the principle of happiness, the idol with which we all struggle, whether it is wrought in sacrosanct (divine) or hedonistic (human) terms. Thus, the opening section of the *Critique of Practical Reason* is devoted to showing that there are no empirical grounds for the determination of the faculty of desire. In a lengthy note in the Preface, Kant states that, if the feeling of pleasure were held to be the foundation for determining our will it would follow that the principle of all practical philosophy “would necessarily turn out to be *empirical*” (5:9). For, as he indicates in

initiating his analysis of human practice in Book I, pleasure depends on the conditions of the physical world. If it is hot outside, a cold drink might gratify my thirst: if cold, a warm cup of tea or coffee. But he then notes that all imperatives that seek to satisfy our immediate pleasures remain entirely hypothetical: if p then q . That is, these suggestions depend on empirical conditions and, therefore, cannot be known *a priori* as practical laws, however common or customary they appear to be.

He describes the attempt to generate a practical law from the experience of pleasure as subscribing to the principle of self-love or happiness. Because, however, it is the nature of the empirical world to be enjoyed (possessed) in part but never wholly or entirely, the principle of happiness, the desire to attain the sum total of all of our inclinations and to possess this condition without interruption, is empty and indeterminate. As Kant puts it in the *Grounding*,

the concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, yet he can never say definitively and consistently what it is he really wishes and wills. The reason for this is that all the elements belonging to the concept of happiness... must be borrowed from experience, while for the ideal of happiness there is required an absolute whole, a maximum of well-being in my present and in every future condition. (418)

Since, on empirical grounds, it is impossible to frame a determinate idea of what this maximum is, it remains empty and transcendent. That is, in biblical terms (which I shall discuss in detail in the next chapter), it is an idol.

Still, it is not the gratification of our pleasures that is the problem, but the act of making the principle of happiness “the supreme determining ground of choice” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:22). In other words, the problem involves conflating the highest good of existence with

(empirically conditioned) happiness or self-love. Kant performs his transcendental twist upon the concept of pleasure by indicating that even the representation to ourselves of immediate pleasure as the highest good is dependent upon our will, i.e., upon our independence from determination according to natural causes. Thus, what decides our true feelings is not the arm, the hand, or the flesh (to recall Pascal) but what we want and desire in life. The attempt to present the satisfaction of our immediate inclinations as the highest good is a product not of our empirical nature but of our self-love.

Yet, self-love is thereby heteronomous. As Kant points out, the principle of happiness locates the source, the cause, the law for our actions outside the self, in that which is other than the self: in objects (envisioned as things in themselves). Hence, the satisfaction of our inclinations is never able to satisfy the human condition. “For the inclinations change,” Kant observes, “grow with the indulgence one allows them, and always leave behind a still greater void than one had thought to fill. Hence... they wrest from [human beings] the wish to be rid of them” (5:118). Thus, Kant concludes, the desire for happiness is accompanied by an inevitable discontent with ourselves and our condition. That is, the principle of happiness, whose goal of total satisfaction is indeterminate, is identical with despair, the desire to be rid of all our inclinations so as to avoid the affliction caused by the lack of those parts of the empirical world that are not in our possession.

Because, however, we confuse the highest good (God) with happiness (fortune), the desire to be rid of the principle of happiness appears to transgress that principle of self-love by which we assess whether events are good or bad. Thus, this principle further impels us to double-down, torturously, on our self-loathing. But Kant is astonished, then, that “intelligent men could have thought of passing off the desire for happiness as a universal practical law” on the ground

that everyone (universally) desires happiness (5:28). For the worst conflict results, both socially and psychologically, when the principle of self-love is extended universally, given that the conditions for the satisfaction of our inclinations are relative to the conditions in which human beings find themselves at any given time. Thus, Kant concludes that the principle of happiness is “so far from being qualified for a universal law that in the form of a universal law it must instead destroy itself” (5:28).

Nonetheless, Kant never gives up on the concept of happiness. For the realization of the highest good, he states, “*happiness* is also required” (5:110). To promote human happiness is a duty incumbent upon us (*Grounding* 399). Still, as he indicated, there is no way to gain the sensible world or to be wholly satisfied in it—without which happiness remains unsatisfactory—on the grounds of the sensible world. It is only when we locate the existence of the highest good in the moral law (in the freedom of ourselves and others) and not in the agreeableness of our condition that there arises “an exact correspondence of happiness with morality” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:125). It is only through our commitment to the moral law—to showing respect for people and not to things—that we cut the Gordian knot that ties the highest good to the principle of happiness, which is also the source of our discontent. Still, Kant remains thoughtful: he notes that, nevertheless, happiness, when it follows from the moral law, is not complete independence from all need (5:118). Rather, the principle of freedom is that which provides us with the grounds for responding to (providing for, satisfying) the needs, both of the body and of the spirit, of the human community.

Thus, we see why Kant is so concerned to distinguish his position from that of the Epicureans and the Stoics. “Of the ancient Greek schools,” he notes, “there were, strictly speaking, only two, which in determining the concept of the highest good followed one and the

same method insofar as they did not let virtue and happiness hold as two different elements of the highest good,” but, instead, “sought the unity of the principle in accordance with the rule of identity,” another version of which is the law of contradiction (5:111). That is, Kant sees that the opposition between Epicureanism and Stoicism but reflects the contradictory opposition (engendered by the rule of identity) upon which each of these schools is founded. The Epicureans, Kant then observes, argue that the endeavor to avoid pain and to pursue pleasure leads to happiness and, thus, to a virtuous life. Epicurus holds that because all men desire happiness and so the absence of pain and fear, pleasure is the first (highest) good that men seek universally. But, to say that pleasure is the end of man is not to confuse it with luxury, lust, or profligate sensation. Rather, it denotes the absence of pain in body and trouble in mind. However, because whatever man does in his pursuit of pleasure meets with resistance from others, because the pleasure of man is determined *ad hominem*, because pleasure is pursued universally by all, it becomes relative to each and thus lands man in the war of all against all, whose fatal end is pain. Thus, Epicurus discovers that, when pleasure is man’s end, “independence of desire” and indifference to life or death become the highest good (“Letter to Menoeceus” 32). That is, Epicurus finds himself locating pure pleasure in tranquility (*ataraxia*) and thus in harmony with the Stoic advice to desire nothing.

But the Stoics, who argue that happiness is located in the virtuous disposition that, free of all desire, is thus utterly self-sufficient, find themselves, in the end, advocating for a frenzied pursuit of pleasure. Although, as Kant observes, the Stoics strained the capacity of man “far beyond the limits of his nature and assumed something that contradicts all cognition of the human being,” the sage, who, observing his Stoic precepts, undertakes to live according to nature, remains mortal (5:127). The sage undertakes to do whatever it is that is in his power to do

and nothing that is not. He desires tranquillity. Nonetheless, while—indeed, because—the sage presents a *likeness* to the immortal state of tranquility, he remains, as embodied, wholly *unlike* that state (which is free of all desire). Thus, the renowned Roman Stoic, Seneca, ends his essay “On Tranquility” with the observation that “only a mind that is excited is capable of great and transcendent utterance”:

When it has spurned the trite and the commonplace and has been impelled aloft by the demonic urge, then and only then can it sing a strain too grand for mortal lips. So long as it is under its own sway the mind cannot attain the sublime, cannot reach the treasure which reposes upon the pinnacle. It must tear itself from the trodden path, palpitate with frenzy, take the bit in its teeth and run away with its rider to reach the height it would fear to climb in its own strength. (106)

He ends his essay by advocating the Bacchic-like frenzy that, divinely inspired, represents the zenith of pleasure pursued by the Epicureans. That is, in advocating for *autarky* (self-sufficiency), he finds out that, on this ground, he is unable to close the gap between (divine) tranquility and (human) desire.²⁹

Thus, it is critical to see that the oppositions of the Stoics and Epicureans—and the opposition between Stoicism and Epicureanism—are identical to those advanced by Plato in his dialogues. Indeed, as Kant intimates, there are, strictly speaking, “only two” ancient Greek schools, which, he notes, are one in subscribing to the rule of identity (cited above). As noted, it is precisely the rule of identity that generates the comparisons that are readily available to the senses (i.e., the similes) that found and are founded upon the doctrine of opposites (which is ruled by the royal cousin of the law of identity: the law of contradiction). However, in demonstrating, then, that no two objects are wholly alike and that no two objects that are alike

share an identical fate, the rule of identity provides no grounds for establishing its own reality or for identifying the good: that which is wholly virtuous or happy. As the law of identity lapses into contradiction, then (in attempting to identify things as they are in themselves) so the law of contradiction (in showcasing the contradiction involved in all similes) consistently determines that no object is like any other object outside of itself. But, therefore, neither the law of contradiction nor the rule of identity can provide ancient Greek philosophy with any grounds for determining anything about things as they are in themselves. Thus, Kant notes that “the Greek schools could never solve their problem of the practical possibility of the highest good,” precisely because “they made the rule of the use which the human will makes of its freedom [i.e., the rule of identity] the sole and sufficient ground” of the possibility of supreme knowledge (5:126). That is, what the ancient schools lack is a concept of relationship whose archetype is the God of Abraham. As Kant observes in a subtle note on how synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible, it did not occur “to one of the ancients to even raise this question” (*Critique of Pure Reason* B25). What the ancients lacked was the category of synthetic *a priori* propositions: in short, metaphor. (As we shall see in Part 3, precisely because a metaphor prevents us from identifying the principle of identity embedded within it with the rule of identity that applies to experience [i.e., with simile], a metaphor presents us with a concept of identity that preserves the difference between the two objects that it compares. It reveals to those who engage it, then, that the identity of self and other, as the embrace of each other’s difference, is not founded upon any analogy with experience.)

Thus, because of his attention to the contradiction of the ancient Greek schools, Kant observes that it is the doctrine of the Bible that “gives us on this point a concept of the highest good (of the kingdom of God) which alone satisfies the strictest demand of practical reason”

(5:127-8). Kant sees that the kingdom of God is not a transcendent place without any problems. Rather, it is a metaphor for the highest good (the standard) that grounds the everlasting enterprise of critique, the end of which is the will of all: “everlasting” because every human interaction, whether with an old friend or with a momentary passerby, demands anew its instantiation. That is, consistent with Jesus’ observations that the kingdom of God is “in the midst of you,” i.e., within the *bathos* of human existence, and that God “is not the God of the dead, but of the living,” Kant sees that the kingdom of God is identical with the kingdom of ends (Luke 17.20; Matt. 22.32). Indeed, he observes that “such a commandment as *Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself* agrees” with his concept of duty “very well” (5:83). Whereas love as inclination (an immediate feeling) “cannot be commanded,” he notes, love as a practical law demands respect (*Grounding* 399).

Kant proceeds, then, to deconstruct this command by indicating that God and the neighbor are each the control for the love of the other. Love for God as an inner feeling or inclination, he observes, “is impossible, for God is not an object of the senses” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:83). Rather, love for God expresses faith in the highest good of existence, which is that for which we work for ourselves and others. Although love for others involves inclination, it is not our immediate feelings that ought to govern our love (or hatred) for our neighbor. Kant’s point, here, is not that we ought to eliminate our inclinations. Rather, we ought to reorganize our feelings upon another foundation or grounding, i.e., according to the “law of laws,” which, “like all the moral precepts of the Gospel, presents the moral disposition in its complete perfection” (5:83). His point is to provide us with the grounds for a critique of “moral enthusiasm,” which infects people whose relation to others and to God is guided by the pursuit of happiness, i.e., by immediate feelings of warm and fuzzy sympathy or muted indifference or

bitter distaste (5:84). Instead, we ought to be guided in all we do by a single principle—do all you do in the service of the autonomy of one another—and reorganize all of our feelings around its dictates.

Thus, Kant writes in the *Grounding*, “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price,” he continues, “can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity” (434). The end of the kingdom of ends is to show that there is no replica for—that there is no replacing—the individual. Thus, the worth and value of a human being is not reducible to the relative value (the price) of objects. To establish the kingdom of ends, then, is to promote equality by demonstrating that no one is equivalent to anyone else. Indeed, “By ‘kingdom,’” Kant notes, “I understand a systematic union of different rational beings through common laws” (433). For, he continues, “all rational beings stand under the law that each of them should treat himself and all others never merely as a means but always at the same time as an end in himself” (433). The end of existence is the freedom of ourselves and others, whose dignity, whose value as individuals, is irreducible to any amount of finite wealth. The king, therefore, of the kingdom of ends is—lo and behold!—the neighbor, the other, the self: each and every one of us.

Thus, we learn that what is systematic in the kingdom of ends is its democratic imperative to uphold the freedom and equality of all. In turn, we see that the principles that found our modern democracies are synthetic *a priori* propositions. For, as Kant notes in the *Grounding*, the categorical imperative, the law of freedom, is a synthetic *a priori* proposition (420). The synthetic *a priori*—the category with which Kant began his entire programme—is the oxymoron driving his philosophy, which he uses to describe the *a priori* law that governs our

human connectivity (synthesis). It is Kant's own metaphorical expression for the moral law. But what we learn, therefore, is that this categorical proposition is that which founds any proposal from one person to another. It is, in biblical parole, the word: the command to be truthful, to show fidelity, to love one another. A synthetic *a priori* proposition is, in short, a promise from one person to another. Moreover, because, as we saw above, even a lie depends on the will to truth, i.e., the will to validate the categorical imperative, it turns out that any word exchanged with another—that all communication—promises to be synthetic *a priori*.

In sum, practical reason is loving practice and loving practice is rational critique. What it means to be rational is to think critically about ourselves and others in relation to the highest good, whose archetypal metaphor, God, involves and expresses moral perfection. But to be perfect, then, as God is perfect, is to work tirelessly to ensure that everything you do is grounded in love. Thus, we see why Kant insists that we do not know the thing-in-itself. For, after showing that objects do not exist as things in themselves, he reveals that the thing-in-itself is not a thing at all. Rather, it is a metaphor for that which is categorically human: freedom. It is a metaphor for the absolute worth of the individual, which is never known but is thought according to the *a priori* rules that bond us (synthetically) to one another. The limit, then, that Kant sets out for human knowledge is an image for the ethical obligations that we set for ourselves in our relationships with others. As I intimated above and as I shall undertake to show in the next chapter, this rational practice of desire is also what Kant identifies as faith.

¹ In an effort to respond to the gender-bias inherent, not in the English language itself, but in the long-standing tradition of using the masculine “he” whenever one needs a pronoun to refer to an unidentified person, I have, at times, used “she” instead of the often cumbersome “he or she” in which the gender of the unidentified person remains without specification. While there are instances in which I have changed the singular noun to a plural in order to use “they” as my pronoun, which encompasses all gender-identities, on other occasions I have wanted to maintain a singular relationship to the reader, i.e., to address one individual as opposed to human beings in

general. It should also be noted that, as Martha Kolln and Robert Funk observe in *Understanding English Grammar*, in speech “we commonly use *they* for both singular and plural,” as in, for example, “Don’t let someone else tell you what you need—at least not if they happen to be selling it” (341). Kolln and Funk remark that eventually “perhaps, the singular *they* will become the accepted form in both speech and writing” (342). However, because language itself is historical, “such changes come slowly” (342). Given that orally we accept the usage of “they” as a singular pronoun, my reader may find it preferable or even useful to read “they” whenever I have used “he,” “she,” or “he or she” to refer to an unidentified individual.

² It is important to note that Kant uses the term “dialectic” in an utterly different way from the way in which we, following Hegel, generally use the term today in philosophical and academic circles. Kant does not refer, by this term, to the process by which we resolve what appears to be a contradiction between two disparate concepts, as Hegel does. Rather, Kant is clear that by “dialectic” he understands the attempt to use general logic (i.e., analytic principles: the law of contradiction) to expand what we know beyond the bounds of possible experience. He is taking up the critique of dialectic launched by Petrarch, who warns, to cite the title of one of his letters, against the “Unreasonable Use of the Discipline of Dialectic,” in which he continues his onslaught against those who attempt to base their knowledge of faithful concepts (e.g., God, creation, and immortality) upon the deductive logic of Aristotle. In A58/B82 Kant suggests that the question “**What is truth?**” is not a question that “one should reasonably ask,” for either it asks us to use our experience as the touchstone for assessing the truth of our propositions, which provides us with no necessary criterion for positing the truth, or the question asks us to provide a logical rule for the assessment of a truth-claim; however, while a proposition “may be in complete accord with logical form, i.e., not contradict itself, yet it can still always contradict the object” (A59/B84). These formal rules, therefore, do not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for assessing what is true. He then indicates that, while the ancients used the principle of general logic (the law of contradiction) to launch all of their investigations—asking, with Socrates: What is truth? What is virtue? What is justice? What is the good?—this logic “was nothing other than... a sophisticated art for giving to its ignorance... the air of truth.” “Such instruction,” Kant concludes, “by no means befits the dignity of philosophy” (A62/B86). It is evident that the ancient principles of general logic are not the principles of transcendental logic upon which Kant launches his own modern philosophy. Still, Kant does not say that reason (critique) is illogical, but that logic is not the source of reason in its practical (primary) application. Transcendental logic befits, rather, what he calls practical love (as we shall see). But it is, therefore, no accident that Hegel chooses to use the term “dialectic” for the concept upon which he founds his philosophical work. For Kant suggests that “it would be better to take this designation of ‘dialectic’ as a **critique of dialectical illusion**,” and, as we know, “no one can think a negation determinately without grounding it on the opposed affirmation” (A62/B86; A575/B603). The critique embedded in Kant’s concept of dialectic involves an affirmation of the true concept and content of that which is dialectically misunderstood (e.g., God, freedom, the soul). Thus, it is in noting the difference between Kant’s use of the term and Hegel’s that we are also able to see the historical relationship between their concepts.

³ See the *Critique of Pure Reason* A293/B249-A298/B355.

⁴ As Kant notes, “Thus we ourselves bring into the appearances that order and regularity that we call **nature**, and moreover we would not be able to find it there if we, or the nature of the mind, had not originally put it there” (A125). The laws of nature, he continues, “are not borrowed from

experience, but rather must provide the appearances with their lawfulness;" in other words, "without understanding there would not be any nature at all" (A127).

⁵ That the centre of human experience is located outside of the bounds of spatio-temporal phenomena is also what Kant reveals in his important section on the ground of the distinction between phenomena (the world of sense) and noumena (the intelligible world). His insight here is that the understanding, in upholding this distinction, must always already be beyond itself in order to limit itself to the appearances of the phenomenal world. We always already begin, as it were, off the island and upon the infinite seas of purely practical reason, to use the metaphor with which Kant opens this section (and upon which he expands in the second edition). That is, as Kant puts it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "besides the relation in which the *understanding* stands to object[s] (in theoretical cognition) it has also a relation to the faculty of desire, which is therefore called the will..." (5:55). Nature does not study itself. The scientific study of nature (that to which, for example, a medical doctor commits himself or herself) requires a will. In short, the "ground" of the distinction between phenomena and noumena is noumenal.

⁶ It is important to keep in mind the subtle distinction that Kant makes between "transcendent" ideals, which produce nothing but illusions, and "transcendental" idealism, which Kant aligns with practical freedom and which he renames "critical" idealism in the *Prolegomena*. See *Prolegomena* 288-294.

⁷ As Merleau-Ponty puts it in "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," "What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them..." (164). He continues, "he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at. As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision (as is so well indicated by the double meaning of the word) be doubled with a complimentary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without, such as another would see me..." (166). Thus, he writes, "we reach a second or figurative meaning of vision, which will be the *intuitus mentis* or idea" (173). Still, "the ideas we are speaking of would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility; it is then that they would be inaccessible to us...; they could not be given to us as ideas except in carnal experience"; for, "Thought is a relationship with oneself and with the world as well as a relationship with the other" (176, 173). Thought describes what he identifies as the "musical idea," "the literary idea," or the "dialectic of love" (175). Merleau-Ponty reveals that his phenomenology involves a study not of things in themselves but of the metaphysical ground of human experience. Thus, it is worth noting that what we today call phenomenology does not involve a study of what Kant calls phenomenal objects but a study of the way in which we experience those objects, i.e., a study of the human subject.

⁸ Kant does not use the term *Metapher*, however, but *Sinnbildes*, meaning symbol or sensible image (*sinn-bildes*) (*Kant's Schriften* vol. 4, 360).

⁹ When Kant returns to Plato later on in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the context of his entreaty to those "who take philosophy to heart... to take care to preserve the expression **idea**" as that which is not borrowed from the senses and that which reaches beyond the concepts of the understanding (the laws of nature), he tells us that it is advisable, at times, to preserve the terms of the ancients even when the ancient use of these terms is improper and unsteady (B376, B369). He then tells us that he "does not wish to go into any literary investigation" of Plato's texts or to examine how Plato himself understood ideas, of which Kant says, insofar as he used these ideas to extend speculative knowledge: "I cannot follow him..., just as little as I can in the mystical

deduction of these ideas or in the exaggerated way in which he hypostatized [i.e., reified] them” (A314/B370; A314/B371). It is evident that Kant is not concerned here with elucidating Plato’s text but, instead, with illuminating his own position for his readers. Still, there is no point in saving Kant’s statement that “Plato found his ideas pre-eminently in everything that is practical, i.e., in what rests on freedom,” for it is both misleading and contradicts Kant’s own claims with which he ends this short section. Indeed, after stating that he is not interested in a literary investigation of Plato, Kant does say that “I note only that when we compare the thoughts that an author expresses about a subject, in ordinary speech as well as in writings, it is not at all unusual to find that we understand him even better than he understood himself, since he may not have determined his concept sufficiently and hence sometimes spoke, or even thought, contrary to his own intention” (A314/B370). He then goes on to say, after his remark on Plato and freedom, that “The **Platonic republic** has become proverbial as a supposedly striking example of a dream of perfection that can have its place only in the idle thinker’s brain.... But we would do better to pursue this thought further, and (at those points where the excellent man [Plato] leaves us without help) to shed light on it through new endeavors, rather than setting it aside as useless under the very wretched and harmful pretext of its impracticality” (A 316). He notes, however, of this “philosopher’s spiritual flight,” by which he (Plato) attempts to derive archetypal ideas from experience, “in respect of that which pertains to principles of morality, [political] legislation, and religion where the ideas first make the experience (of the good) itself possible,” Plato did not recognize that these ideas and principles “perform a wholly unique service” (A318/B375). For “with respect to moral laws, experience is (alas!) the mother of all illusion, and it is most reprehensible to derive the laws concerning what I **ought to do** from what **is done**, or to want to limit it to that” (A318/B375). Thus, his conclusion here is consistent with his conclusion in the passage in which he compares Plato and the light dove.

¹⁰ Note that Kant is using the term “aesthetic” here in its root-meaning, i.e., to refer to the science of sensation and not, as we usually use the term today, to mean the study of the structures that underpin works of fine art. It is also worth noting, for our purposes, that the revolutionary invention of the concept of perspective in Renaissance art is as significant, in its own way, as the scientific revolution. The development of perspective represents an increasing awareness that the laws governing space (which operate in tandem with those of time) are *a priori*. Thus, as we increase our consciousness of those laws historically so too do we increase our human capacity to see the world in terms of spatio-temporal dimensions (i.e., in 3D!). Indeed, it is stunning to be reminded that we do not see or perceive perspective. Perspective is an idea brought to the appearances by the mind. What stuns the early viewers of this new way of painting is not, then, how “life-like” the paintings are but how these paintings actually defy one’s experience of flat (2D) surfaces. What viewers learn is that the distance that separates objects measured by space is separate (different) from the distance that separates our individual, yet equally human, points of view. Thus, the invention of perspective is not merely a change in technique (although there are awesome technical changes that go along with it). Rather, it involves a development in the human point of view, a change in the way in which we view the world and each other. The invention of perspective involves and expresses a historical revolution in human self-consciousness, for it increases our capacity to articulate and to embody the distinction between the simplicity of natural things and the compound nature of human subjects. Our unique perspectives do not divide us, we learn, but unite us—provided that we do not fail to see that perspective is not visible as an object of possible experience but, instead, is an idea, an invention of the human mind. In developing a concept of perspective, then, the artists of the Renaissance

visibly expose for us what is not visible in the scene: the contribution of the human mind or human self-consciousness as the countenance and the character involved in becoming other than oneself in and through one's relationships with others. For a detailed account of the development of the concept of perspective and its relationship to the scientific revolution, see S. Y. Edgerton's essay "Brunelleschi's Mirror, Alberti's Window, and Galileo's 'perspective tube'." Indeed, Edgerton reminds us that Galileo received his training not as a natural scientist but as an aesthete, trained in the arts of chiaroscuro and perspective. Owen Barfield also calls our attention to the significance of the historical development of aesthetic perspective when he poses the question: "how comes it that the device [of perspective] had never been discovered before [the Renaissance] – or, if discovered, never adopted? There were plenty of skilled artists," he observes, "and they would certainly have hit upon it soon enough if depth in space had characterized their collective representations...., as it characterizes ours" (*Saving the Appearances* 94). He thus concludes, "They did not need it. Before the scientific revolution the world was more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved. In such a world the convention of perspective was unnecessary" (94).

¹¹ Descartes is generally viewed by scholars as a dualist who opposes the mind and the body. But this ideology is blown to smithereens when we truly learn to appreciate what he understands by the relationship between thought and existence, which I outline in Chapter 5. I understand Kant's criticism of Descartes to be directed not, in principle, against Descartes' philosophy but against the dualisms put forward by those Cartesians who misunderstand the conclusions of his philosophical meditations.

¹² While I discuss the skeptical empiricism of Hume in what follows, it is worth noting that Kant also rejects the dogmatic empiricism of John Locke. He writes, "The famous Locke," failing to consider that it is the transcendental use of the faculties of the mind through which experience becomes possible in the first place "and because he encountered pure concepts of the understanding in experience, also derived them from this experience, and thus proceeded so **inconsistently** that he thereby dared to make cognitions that go far beyond the boundary of all experience" (A95/B127). In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke attempts to build what he calls compound or complex ideas by adding simple ideas (impressions received through the senses) to each other according to formal operations of the mind. But Kant is adamant, then, that what Locke calls "ideas" are not truly ideas at all. Locke challenges his readers to think of an "idea" that did not emerge from sense-experience or from our formal arrangement of (i.e., our "reflection" on) that experience. But we know, along with Kant, that Locke's challenge is answered absolutely by pointing to the idea of human freedom, or the idea that all persons are created equal, for which there is no source in the empirical world. In addition, we also learn, in attending to Kant's text, that the laws of natural science are not derived from our empirical experience of nature. It turns out that no ideas—whether scientific or practical—are actually derived from experience.

¹³ In the *Prolegomena* Kant writes, "I openly confess my recollection of David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction" (260). Although even then, he continues, "I was far from following him in the conclusions at which he arrived..." (260). In the *Critique of Practical Reason* he notes that it was David Hume "who can really be said to have begun all the assaults on the rights of pure reason which made a thorough investigation of them necessary" (5:50).

¹⁴ The thing-in-itself describes the concept of the complete or “thoroughgoing” determination of each and every thing—all things—and so contains, Kant argues (in his section on the ideal of pure reason), the “transcendental affirmation” of reality through which objects become “something” (A574/B602). Since, then, “the thoroughgoing determination [of all things] in our reason is grounded on a transcendental substratum, which contains as it were the entire storehouse of material from which all possible predicates of things can be taken, [] this substratum is nothing other than the idea of an All of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*)” (A576/B604). Through “this possession of all reality, however,” Kant notes, “there is also represented the concept of a **thing in itself** which is thoroughly determined, and the concept of the *ens realissimum* is the concept of an individual being,” for it is the one “thing” that is “necessarily encountered in everything existing” (A576/B604). Nevertheless, as the transcendental concept of reality brought to the appearances, “the highest reality” that engenders “the possibility of all things” serves “as a **ground** and not as a **sum total**” (A579/B607). In short, because the thing-in-itself describes the concept of the complete or “thoroughgoing” determination of all things, the concept of the thing-in-itself cannot be thoroughly determined by a complete description of all things. In showing how the concept of the thing-in-itself applies to the ideal of pure reason, Kant exposes the emptiness and vanity of the attempt to comprehend the concept of the thing-in-itself theoretically. Instead, as I shall continue to show, the thing-in-itself can be conceived only practically as the self-determining ground of human subjects.

¹⁵ Kant’s texts contain a number of passages, however, that identify the consciousness of human beings (or freedom) with the concept of the thing-in-itself. For example, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he notes that if the existence of things in themselves is ascribed to the natural chain of cause and effect, “then freedom would have to be rejected as a null and impossible concept. Consequently, if one still wants to save it, no other path remains than to ascribe the existence of a thing... *only to appearance, and to ascribe freedom to the same being as the thing in itself*” (5:95). He also reports that the human subject is “conscious of himself as a thing in itself” (5:97) Finally, see the *Grounding* 457-458 or 459 and the *Prolegomena* 343-344 for further passages in which he directly connects human being and the thing-in-itself.

¹⁶ I am consciously calling upon Kierkegaard’s title for one of his chief sections of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: “The subjective truth; inwardness; truth is subjectivity” (159).

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that the German term *aufheben*, translated here as “deny,” means to put down or to set down. Thus, it bears a double-meaning when in the context of setting down one’s position in, say, ethical or philosophical matters. It is also a term that Hegel adopts and that his English translators generally translate as “sublate,” which means both to reject (deny) and to affirm. As we shall see, it is not as if Kant moves from theoretical knowledge to faith. Rather, the “denial” of knowledge, setting out its limits, is a demonstration of his faithfulness to life.

¹⁸ At the conclusion of the section in which he distinguishes between mathematical and dynamic transcendental ideas, he notes that, of the claims that shape the dynamic antinomies, it is the idea that these rational propositions oppose each other that is dialectical (i.e., false or illusory). Thus, freedom and natural necessity (which shape the third antinomy), along with the existence of a necessary being and the causal chain of nature (which comprise the fourth and final antinomy), “may **both be true**” (A532/B560). In contrast, Kant nips in the bud the question of the beginning of the world in time (the resolution to which lands us in the first antinomy) and in space (the resolution to which founds the second antinomy). For, he notes, these questions ask us to comment on objects that do not exist at all, i.e., that are never given in experience and, thus, to

which no natural law ever applies. Thus, Kant writes, “no answer is an answer” to the question of the beginning of the world when that question presupposes the existence of an object that is never given in experience, for “the **question itself is nothing**” (A478/B506).

¹⁹ Kant puts the hoary argument between free will and determinism to rest. That is, Kant rejects both free will and determinism by showing that, because freedom is not that which is uncaused but the will to act in accordance with practical (moral) laws that govern our interactions with others, freedom neither contradicts nor is contradicted by natural causation. In addition, he shows us that natural causation (the law of cause and effect) is not a thing-in-itself but a rule generated by human understanding and, thus, that it demonstrates human freedom.

²⁰ Kant states time and again that freedom and nature are not simply compatible but that they necessarily imply each other. See, for example, B535, A537/B565, and A557/B585 of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and 343-344 of the *Prolegomena*, in which he states that “if natural necessity is referred merely to appearances and freedom merely to things in themselves, no contradiction arises if we at the same time assume or admit both kinds of causality.”

²¹ See A607/B635, A630/B658, and A638/B666. As Kant puts it at A625/B653, “the ontological proof... still contains the **only possible argument** (insofar as there is a merely speculative proof at all), which no human reason can bypass.”

²² At the end of the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant asks us to consider: Are we deists or theists? Deism, which he aligns with atheism and anthropomorphism, involves the dialectical idea of God, which one constructs through an analogy with our experience of natural objects. But deism results, therefore, in ignorance of the content that constitutes the existence of God, for which no object of experience is ever adequate. Theism, however, Kant reports, involves the belief “in a living **God**,” which “grounds itself on moral laws” (A632/B660). Thus, he associates theism with moral theology and notes that in “the future we will show about the moral laws that they not only presuppose the existence of a highest being, but also, since in a different respect they are absolutely necessary, they postulate this existence rightfully but, of course, only practically” (A634/B662). God is not a theoretical object but a concept of human practice.

²³ Nietzsche’s critique of the one who admires the categorical imperative for the feeling of “firmness” and self-satisfaction that it gives him is altogether correct (*The Gay Science* #335). For the categorical imperative, for all the confidence that it inspires, is not meant to put a stop to testing one’s moral actions but to command that test at every moment. Why is it that we consider a certain act “good” or “right”? Is it so? Nietzsche is, indeed, right: “it is selfish to experience one’s own judgment as a universal law” (#335). But what he is truly critical of, then, is not Kant’s imperative but the Kantian who reduces his own actions or those of others that accord with the categorical imperative to examples of actions for others to copy. No, as Nietzsche says, “there neither are nor can be actions that are the same” (#335). The one who truly knows himself or herself knows that what is good or right “can never be *proved true* by our actions because every action is unknowable; that our opinions, valuations, and tables of what is good certainly belong among the most powerful levers in the involved mechanism of our actions, but that in any particular case the law of their mechanism is indemonstrable” (#335). But does Nietzsche himself know that he is providing but a terse summary of Kant’s own demonstration: first, that there are no examples of the moral law and, therefore, second, that there is no proof or explanation for human freedom? Whether Nietzsche knows it or not, it is worth noting, for our purposes, that he shares a set of values with Kant, a set that is founded on the respect for human autonomy.

²⁴ See the Scholium of Prop. 9 of Part III of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

²⁵ Kant notes that the attempt to locate the ground of the will in pleasure (empirical experience) is akin to wanting to prove that “there can be no a priori cognition at all” (5:12) But, he continues, this attempt poses no threat to his arguments. For “It would be tantamount to someone’s wanting to prove by reason that there is no reason” (5:12). There is, however, no reason not to use reason.

²⁶ Kant repeats this claim in his essay on the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” in which he states that “the [natural] stimuli that precede vice, and which one blames in such a case” when one views these inclinations as the cause for one’s actions that benefit one’s own coffers at the expense of another, “are good in themselves...” (8:117).

²⁷ James 1:7-8. Thus, James instructs his hearers, “be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.... [For] he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing” (1.22-25).

²⁸ In Chapter XVIII of *The Prince* Machiavelli writes, “in the actions of all men, and most of all Princes, where there is no tribunal to which we can appeal, *si guarda al fine*,” which N. H. Thompson translates, in the Dover edition, as “we look to results.” Machiavelli then reports that “if a Prince succeeds in establishing and maintaining his authority, the means will always be judged honorable and be approved by everyone” (XVIII). It is important to keep in mind, however, that Machiavelli insists that the abuse of power (tyranny) inevitably results in the Prince’s removal from his chair. Thus, the only way for a Prince to maintain his power is by procuring the goodwill of the people.

²⁹ Indeed, Seneca finds himself uttering an ineluctable contradiction. For he states, in words, that the goal is to speak in divine words unknown to mortal lips. The rule of identity demonstrates that all speech is opposed to that of which it speaks. Greek myth—as contra-diction (as that which speaks against speech)—is the subject of the second section of Chapter 5 below.

Chapter 3

Critique—as Faithful Practice

Reason within the Boundaries of Religion Alone

In this chapter I shall examine Kant's two principal texts on religion—*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and *The Conflict of the Faculties*—in addition to key passages in the *Critique of Practical Reason* in which Kant explicitly addresses religious concepts (e.g., God, creation, and immortality). What a reading of these works demonstrates, I shall argue, is that reason is not found outside of the bounds of faithful practice, that reason is wholly faithful. Moreover, through a close analysis of the relationship between faith and reason, I want to show that both faith and reason—as exhibiting the practice of critique—are at once ethical (moral) and aesthetic (creative). For, as we shall see in the next chapter, a well-founded understanding of the relationship between faith and reason will be essential for comprehending both the history and the ontology of ethics and aesthetics, an understanding of which, as I continue to argue, is central to comprehending the true nature of the relationship between philosophy and poetry.

What Kant demonstrates, above all, in his works on religion is that faith is not a theory but a practice.¹ What he argued before his astonished readers—and the reason, no doubt, why the censors of Prussia prohibited Kant from publishing any further books on religion after he published *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* in 1793—was that the basic teachings of Christianity were not theoretical but practical. Kant concluded, therefore, that faith was wholly rational. But the implication of this argument and the reason, no doubt, why philosophy professors today often ignore Kant's works on religion is that he thereby shows us that practical reason, that reason as practice, is commensurate with faith.

In the Preface to *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant suggests that any attempt to use theoretical categories to understand the basic teachings of Christianity results in the death of religion.² However, he then tells us, tongue-in-cheek, that the “best and most lasting eulogy [for Christianity] is its harmony... with the purest moral belief of religion” (7:09). Thus, he is adamant that Christianity, “so often debased” by both its adherents and its detractors who reduce it to a theoretical enterprise, “has always been restored” by the recognition of those eulogists who see that the end of all religion is to “make human beings better” by confronting us with the command of the moral law: Be free!³ Kant thus voices the battle cry of biblical authors and figures from the authors of the story of Adam and Eve through the prophets (e.g., Isaiah and Hosea) to Jesus and St. Paul. As enslaved to the idols (transcendental illusions) of false prophets, false messiahs, or false Christs, religion is dead. For religion is not a theory of rite (used for procuring universal happiness) but a practice of right (used for working through and so overcoming evil).

Kant indicates that his purpose in writing on the conflict (*der Streit*) of philosophy and theology is “neither to put anything biblical into philosophy nor to draw anything philosophical out of the Bible” (7:8). He thus echoes Spinoza, who undertakes to separate philosophy and theology in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.⁴ But Kant does so (again, consistent with Spinoza) by demonstrating that the content of both reason and faith is the practical demonstration of the moral law. Indeed, to those who “still find themselves in a thoroughgoing conflict about interpreting the Bible,” he retorts, “I can suggest only this compromise: *If biblical theologians will stop using reason for their purposes, philosophical theologians will stop using the Bible to confirm their propositions*” (7:45). But, as Kant wryly notes, there is no risk of biblical theologians turning away reason. For to turn away reason would result either in holding that the

Bible is irrational (i.e., in relinquishing a defense of biblical teaching) or in agreeing that there is no reason not to use reason. There is also no reason for philosophers to give up the Bible. For to give up the Bible would only expose one's failure to see that reason is grounded on the free practice of observing the moral law: the command to love one another. Thus, to abandon faith would result in subordinating practical reason either to scientific truth or to immediate feelings, both of which are unable to provide any foundation for universal (*a priori*) principles of right. In short, to snub the Bible would be to give up any right to defend philosophy.

While Kant stresses the importance of interpreting the Bible rationally, he, consistent with Spinoza, does not support the subordination of theology to philosophy. Rather, he sees that any attempt to align the task of separating philosophy and theology either with philosophers or with theologians—any one-sided attempt to separate philosophy and theology—results in their hierarchal opposition in which philosophers attempt to theorize away the revelatory teachings of the Bible and in which theologians attempt to demote philosophy (reason) to a position below that of faith by appealing to the ecclesiastical dogmas of religion. Instead, Kant undertakes to separate philosophy and theology and thus to settle the conflict between them by showing that these two disciplines are united and dedicated to one cause: the principle of human dignity or practical love. He remains committed to showing that philosophy involves biblical interpretation and that biblical theology is engaged in rational critique. It is because Kant views the metaphysical proof for the existence of God as practical (i.e., moral) that he sees that the practice of interpretation, whether biblical or philosophical, involves and expresses the sovereign dignity of each and every individual. Who, Kant asks, is the royal authority of (biblical) interpretation? What is it, we ask, that renders an interpretation of Kant's texts or of Stevens' poems

authoritative? How can we discern the difference between an adequate and an inadequate interpretation of a text, whether religious (faithful) or secular (rational)?

In resolving the conflict between philosophy and theology by showing that the content of both reason and faith is practical love, Kant further demonstrates that reason is identical to biblical revelation. Indeed, the revelation of the Bible is that God *is*—ontologically speaking—the neighbor. The practice of reason is the revelation that the neighbor, each and every one of us, is the sovereign good of our individual lives. Thus, Kant notes, “It is in this way, according to the principle of morality which revelation has in view, that we must interpret the Scriptures...; otherwise our interpretations are either empty of practical content or even obstacles to the good” (7:48). Therefore, he continues:

Only a moral interpretation is really an authentic one—that is, one given by the God within us; for since we cannot understand anyone unless he speaks to us through our own understanding and reason, it is only by concepts of *our* reason, insofar as they are pure moral concepts and hence infallible, that we can recognize the divinity of a teaching promulgated to us. (7:48)

He unites, following his biblical forebears, the divine and the human in and through moral knowledge. Thus, while divinity is affirmed by (as) the moral (rational) content of our human practices, so reason (as moral practice) testifies to the divine or transcendental truth of the Bible. Kant locates reason and divinity, through moral knowledge, in both the reader and the Bible as he articulates the relationship that constitutes their mutual interpretation. The God “within us,” therefore, describes at once the point of view—of the self—from which to interpret the God of the Bible and the point of view—of the Bible—from which to interpret the moral nature of one’s own existence.

Kant holds that this method of biblical interpretation, engaging both the reader and the text simultaneously, is “infallible” precisely because the principle of this method bespeaks its content. He observes that, because the end of God’s word is the government of the people according to the moral law, practical reason acts as the “infallible interpreter” of the Bible (7:67). Although all human authors—and so all human texts, including the Bible—are liable to error, it is morality, as the standard of interpretation, that allows us to see both what is spurious (irrelevant) and what is specious (irrational) in the Bible and in the interpretations of its readers. What gives an interpretation of any text its authoritative truth is its grounding in practical love (as opposed to love founded on irresolute feelings, which shirk public critique). The Bible, therefore, is an enlightened text. For, as subject to the will of the people (practical reason: the moral law), it provides the standards of its own critique. That is, enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) involves the revelation that the rational grounds of our lives are not established theoretically but practically in light of the principles and values that are fundamental to the Bible. For it is the principle of practical love that illuminates those false notions of love that founder either by dashing the heart to pieces, in reducing love to the natural happiness of men and women, or by melting the heart into mysticism, in reducing love to oneness with a supernatural God. Practical love is infallible—as the rational standard for the interpretation of the Bible (divinity) and as the biblical standard for the interpretation of what is truly rational (humanity)—because any doubt that either the content of the Bible or the content of our lives is loving presupposes and so demonstrates a concept of love that is rooted in a single command, the expressions of which are infinite in variety: love your neighbor as yourself.

In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* Kant begins his work on Christianity by setting out his aim. He tells us that the task of his book is to test out the tenets of the Bible to

see whether a “morally practical point of view” suffices for genuine religion (6:13). Thus, he undertakes to test the limits of religion to see whether they align with the boundaries of theoretical and practical reason. Indeed, he sets out to examine the basic teachings of Christianity in order to show that faith does not entail a belief in anything that supervenes the laws of nature, i.e., the limits of theoretical reason. Rather, he contends that faith involves the commitment to the boundaries of reason, which, as we know, describe the ethical bonds that tie us to each other in relationship. “If this is the case,” he writes, “then between reason and Scripture there is, not only compatibility but also unity, so that whoever follows the one (under the guidance of moral concepts) will not fail to come across the other as well” (6:13).

As Kant indicates in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, he argues in his works on Christianity that religion outside of practical reason is spurious and empty, i.e., dead. But, we can ask, in light of his analysis of the relationship between faith and reason, do we not also learn that philosophy is spurious and empty outside of its commitment to the ethics of biblical religion? Is philosophy (reason) not dead if it confuses its own standard of truth with empirical certainty? Is ethics, then, as the basis for both philosophy and theology, as I shall continue to argue, rational or faithful? Is it (not) both? In addition, it is important for the purposes of this study to consider whether aesthetics is a rational or a faithful enterprise. Is art, as an ethical endeavor, also located within the limits of religion alone? Yet is aesthetics not a central mode of expression for those values that found our secular communities? The short answer to each of the above questions is: Yes—when it is understood that, as Kant will show us, reason is not natural to human beings but expresses a fidelity to the moral law (i.e., to the freedom of ourselves and others) and that faith does not bespeak supernatural inspiration but involves, instead, rational critique.

There is a dazzling trajectory and narrative arc to *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Kant structures his analysis through a series of distinctions and relationships. It is the relations among these various sets of distinctions that comprise the leaping arpeggios of Kant's text and that therefore drive its accumulative development as he introduces new terms and concepts. He opens Part 1 by musing on what he calls the "poetic fiction" that "the world lieth in evil" (6:19). There are two responses to this observation, he reports. The first response involves the cynical pessimism of those who see human history as naturally regressing from better to worse. The second is composed by those flabby optimists who see humanity as naturally progressing from bad to better, i.e., those moralists who view goodness as natural to man through an analogy with the health of the body. But Kant suspends (rejects) both stories, for he insists that man is not by nature good or evil. Good and evil are not natural inclinations. He then introduces the first in his series of critical distinctions. He argues that good and evil belong not to nature but to human nature. Still, he notes,

lest anyone be immediately scandalized by the expression *nature*, which would stand in direct contradiction to the predicates *morally* good and *morally* evil if taken to mean (as it usually does) the opposite of the ground of actions [arising] from *freedom*, let it be noted that by "the nature of a human being" we only understand here the subjective ground... of the exercise of the human being's freedom in general (under objective moral rules).
(6:21)

That is, Kant distinguishes between human nature and nature, consistent with his critical distinction between subjects and objects, spirit and flesh, necessitation (moral obligation) and necessity, and will (freedom) and natural causality.

How we understand the relationship between human nature and nature constitutes, Kant then tells us, how we understand the second set of concepts that he introduces: good and evil. He notes that evil is not a product of nature and so is unavailable to the senses. Thus, there is nothing that is “morally (i.e., imputably) evil but that which is our own deed” (6:31). He indicates, however, that by evil deeds he is not referring to acts that break legal codes. There are no cues in our experience of human actions that tell us whether an act is good or evil. The same experience can be good, at one time, and evil, at another. Actions that appear opposed to each other may both be good (or evil). Indeed, to look to experience—the facts of the world that are empirically available—to establish the difference between good and evil, Kant reports, is to “throw dust in our own eyes” by deceiving ourselves into thinking that the absence of bad consequences is what decides the goodness of our conduct and that the misfortune that others experience is indicative of the presence of vice (6:38).

But how, then, do we comprehend good and evil? How do we identify the difference between those actions that are evil and those that are good? For Kant then argues, in a flurry of comments: first, that good and evil are not opposites, although there is no middle ground or compromise between these concepts; second, that, although good and evil are not located in experience, there are no human experiences that are neither good nor evil, i.e., that are neutral or arbitrary; and third, that, although there is no one who does not know both good and evil, the individual is not in part good and in part evil. Kant blocks all of our attempts to reify these concepts. Thus, he tells us that good and evil depend upon how we understand the relationship between the two categories that comprise the incentives of all human actions: sensuality (fortune) and morality (freedom).

Still, although sensuality and freedom are critically distinct, it is not the difference between them that counts; rather, good and evil depend upon which of these two incentives man incorporates into his maxim as the priority of his action, that is, upon “*which of the two he makes the condition of the other*” (6:36). In short, we do not choose between sensuous nature and moral nature, for the two are not opposed and do not exclude each other. What counts is whether the will follows the flesh (enslaved to finite objects mistaken for things-in-themselves) or the flesh follows the will (as the determining ground of all of our actions). To do evil is to be mired in bad relationships, which are grounded upon what Kant describes in Part 3 of *Religion* as the ethics of the state of nature in which each of us pursues our own immediate (sensuous) advantage at whatever cost to ourselves and others. What counts, then, is whether we view the thing-in-itself as an object of unadulterated sensuous delight—which results (as we saw in the last chapter) in a discontent with fleshy existence and, thus, in opposing the good to bodily life—or we comprehend the category of the thing-in-itself as a metaphor for that which is unconditionally binding on human existence: the freedom of ourselves and others, which involves and expresses the true celebration of our sensuality.⁵

Kant then indicates that, when we subordinate our respect for persons to fortune, we demonstrate that human nature is capable of using good and evil inappropriately. We do not choose between good and evil, as though one excluded the other. To separate right and wrong along any theoretical lines, along any lines that are gleaned from and mirrored in appearances, is wrong. There are, therefore, both good and evil conceptions of good and evil. Thus, Kant undertakes to examine the origin of evil—what he calls “radical evil”—in light of his analysis of the two fundamental motivations (incentives) of human action.

Because good and evil are not objects that exclude each other and are not opposites, there is no one, Kant notes, not even the worst human being, who repudiates the moral law (6:36). Rather, the moral law (goodness: love) is irresistible. Kant asks us to consider, therefore, whether it is good or evil that we view as the condition of the other. For “radical evil” results when we pervert the relationship between them. Thus, he asks in Part 2 of *The Conflict of the Faculties*, “Why has a ruler,” in our modern times, “never dared openly to declare that he recognizes no right of the people opposed to him” (7:87)? The monarchy’s attempt to cloak in a show of legality those instances in which the authorities abuse their power demonstrates that the moral law or publicity is recognized by all as the absolute standard of right.

Indeed, no one, now, today, Kant indicates, does not claim to do right, to be just, to know and to be performing the good. The problem, we see, is not sensuous nature. The problem of the civil state is the good. For all people, now, today, lay claim to it. But, Kant is clear, what constitutes the highest good, the *summum bonum*, of human life is the pursuit of that good which is common to all. The highest good, the good by which we evaluate all claims to it, is that which constitutes the will: human freedom. Still, because it is the good that is the problem, there is also no person, not “even the best,” who is not responsible for confusing the good of human desire (freedom) with fortune and for excusing one’s actions by representing them as naturally necessary (*Religion* 6:32). Radical evil involves, therefore, cloaking one’s evil maxims (incentives) with a show of goodness by claiming that one’s actions are necessary, i.e., that the good is conditional upon the perpetration of evil.⁶

In exposing the contradictions of the claim that evil is (naturally) necessary, Kant determines that the origin of evil is the will. Evil is “radical” not because it is foreign to the general public but because it originates with each of us when we fail to see that the root, the

origin of our humanity, along with its end, is not natural but free. Radical evil is thus identical with original sin.⁷ As Kant observes, to locate evil in nature contradicts the grounds for holding each other accountable for any destructive harm that we do to ourselves or others (6:40). The attempt to reduce sin to natural impulses results in contradicting one's original claims (the premise that one committed a sin) by determining that moral evil or sin does not exist. However, as Kant is keenly aware, the diabolical position that seeks to eliminate evil (along, therefore, with the good) by reducing it to natural causes exposes—by presupposing—that no one is capable of shirking the concept of moral responsibility. Indeed, the proponent of this position presents himself as the good. Thus, Kant exposes the contradictions involved in the attempt to locate the origin of sin in the operations of nature for which we are not responsible.

As Roger Scruton observes in his study of Kant, even the question “Why be moral?” invokes a concept of reason and morality (*Kant* 76). There is no escape from reason, from morality, from responsibility (freedom). Good and evil, as Kant also notes, are ineradicable. Kant thereby concludes that “through no cause in the world can he [i.e., any human being] cease to be a free [and responsible] agent” (6:41). His voice is one with Paul's: No excuses! Hence, Kant notes, “we cannot inquire into the origin in time [i.e., in nature] of this [evil] deed but only into its origin in reason” (6:41) There is no first sin—in time. Rather, Kant argues that sin is original to us precisely because it originates with each of us every time that we shirk the command to treat human beings with dignity in pursuit of our own immediate advantage. Moreover, he indicates that this idea accords with the tenets of biblical faith and with the story of Adam and Eve, stating that, if we but change our names with those of Adam or Eve, we learn that the story about Adam and Eve is our own story (6:41-2).

Kant repeats this claim in his essay on the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” in which he concludes that, because “voluntary acts do not lead to hereditary features,” man is “not justified in attributing his own trespass to an original sin of his ancestors” (8:123). Rather, “he ought to acknowledge fully that which they [i.e., our original forebears] made happen as if he had done it himself” and “he ought to attribute completely the blame for all the ills that arise from the misuse of his reason to himself” (8:123). Those who believe, Kant argues, that sin is originally (naturally) transmitted through sexual reproduction, as if sin applied to what is natural to human beings, fail to understand the doctrine of original sin. Paradoxically, in both his essay on the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” and *Religion*, Kant shows us how to comprehend the doctrine of original sin by demonstrating that there is no original (first) sin, i.e., that it is only because sin is rooted in human freedom that it is ever truly original.

Still, because there is no first sin, because sin is first (and last) a concept of injustice for which each of us is responsible in our relationships, it is historical. Although Kant struggles with the concept of history—aligning history with the empirical facts of the past and not primarily with their interpretation—it is important for us to recognize that implicit in his claim that we are responsible for all of the ills that arise from the misuse of our reason is the recognition that sin is historically transmitted.⁸ Because existence does not begin with any one of us alone, the errors of others are rife within our lives. The mistakes, blunders, and injustices of the past are transmitted to us historically, then, unless and until we learn how to respond by denouncing them as errors. How we respond, however, to injustice in our social, political, domestic, and personal lives is a decision for which we alone are responsible. The error involved in the perpetuation of error is the failure to choose to respond to the past through one’s commitment to the idea that each of us is radically, originally, and constitutionally free. What is truly radical (and original) about sin is

that its transmission among us demonstrates that each of us is free and that we are responsible for the way in which we respond to the errors of the past (both our own and not our own).

Because no one is free from the responsibility of knowing good and evil, because what determines whether a person is good or evil is how he or she understands the relationship between good and evil, because sin is historically radical and radically historical, in short, because good and evil are categories of human practice, Kant proceeds to put this relationship in relational terms. That is, he introduces the third set of concepts in his series of critical distinctions: grace and sin. Because there is no first sin, there is also, we learn, no first sufferer. All evil, all sinful actions, are a return of bad for bad. However, because there is no first sufferer, there is also no last sufferer in this cycle, in which justice is confused with the right to revenge, which, were it willed as a universal law, would destroy itself, as Kant notes (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:19). Revenge, through which I punish others for the harm that they caused me (whether real or perceived), depends upon willing that others do not then do to me what I did to them in return. That is, in order for revenge to be “successful” it depends, in the end, upon receiving mercy from my enemy, before which the “successes” of my revenge dissolve into a string of repeated failures.

Indeed, Kant makes an interesting comment about what he calls “*infinite* punishment” in *Religion* (6:73). Although—or, rather, because—revenge is unjust, “punishment must be thought,” he writes, “as adequately executed in the situation of conversion itself,” which he describes as the work involved in repositioning one’s life upon the principles of love and justice (6:73). As the direct or finite result of a crime, vengeful punishment adds but another original crime onto the “first.” But infinite punishment, Kant notes, describes precisely the redemption of all crime by demanding mercy. We can say, then, that an act of mercy—any act that does not

merely reflect back onto others the ill-treatment that you have received from them—carries with it the only punishment that ever fits the crime, the pain of which is not lasting in its empirical effect but as the violation of one’s will. For it is solely the principle of mercy that is capable of providing a critique of all wrong-doing, the typical excuse for which is that it was done in retaliation for a wrong done to oneself. Only mercy can punish the will by demanding its utter conversion, which requires that the one who did wrong utterly disavow his will (as enslaved to his inclinations) in his effort “to undo whatever has happened as much as he can, through reparation...” (6:70). Thus, what we learn from Kant’s analysis of the punishment of sin is that, when it is truly understood as the idea that all persons suffer, sin is a call for mercy, which involves not the elimination of consequences for our actions but an understanding of the consequences as the opportunity for reparations.⁹ Each one of us is both the pardoner and the pardoned in the various relationships that comprise our lives. Sin is a call to recognize the other as a person who, wronged himself, ought to be treated in a way that does not do unto him what he did to you. The recognition of sin, in other words, is an invitation to be gracious.

The concept of grace that Kant introduces in *Religion* stumps so many of his modern commentators (when these commentators care to address it at all) because it appears—at least, initially—to oppose all reason.¹⁰ For Kant insists that, because there is no one who is not originally (freely) sinful, it is impossible that anyone should become a good or a better human being on one’s own. Instead, divine cooperation “is also needed for his becoming good or better, whether this cooperation only consist in the diminution of obstacles or be also a positive assistance” (6:44). Still, “the human being must nonetheless make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it [divine grace]; and he must accept this help (which is no small matter)” (6:44). In this way alone, Kant soberly reports, “is it possible... that he be acknowledged a good human

being” (6:44). But how is this possible, given that to become good requires divine (“supernatural”) assistance, which “surpasses every concept of ours” and “lies outside the boundaries of the competence of mere reason” (6:45, 6:44)? Kant nevertheless reiterates that to receive God’s grace by becoming worthy of it as a human being is possible. For, just as evil originates in freedom—in transgressing the moral law in favour of sensuous incentives—so the good results from an act of will. Thus, “in spite of that fall [into evil], the command that we *ought* to become better human beings still resounds unabated in our souls; consequently, we must also be capable of it, even if what we do is insufficient and, by virtue of it, we only make ourselves receptive to a higher assistance inscrutable to us” (6:44-5).

There are two notions of “possibility” at play here, as there are two notions of “supernatural” and of “higher” at work in Kant’s General Remarks in *Religion*. For Kant tells us at the end of his first General Remark that he does not mean to replicate the dogmatic faith that claims to know God either through inner experience (which Kant denounces as “enthusiasm”) or through outer experience (superstition). He also denounces the pious (blind) faith that involves empty contemplation (illumination) or the attempt to influence supernatural forces through the observation of rituals (thaumaturgy), both of which, he argues, are irrational and contradictory. Rather, reason counts on a faith that “we might call *reflective*” (6:52). Still, Kant goes on to state that, although a concept of supernatural assistance is needed to understand the effects of grace, “all use of reason ceases precisely” with this concept: “For it is impossible to make these effects *theoretically* cognizable... because our use of the concept of cause and effect cannot be extended beyond the objects of possible experience” (6:53). Thus, he indicates, subtly but surely, that he does not understand the effects of grace as categories of theoretical reason. There is, we see, a

critical difference between that which is theoretically possible (whether logically or empirically) and that which is practically possible (morally and absolutely).

Although in his later work on religion, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant distinguishes between the supersensible and the supernatural, in *Religion* he uses the term supernatural on both sides of this distinction. Indeed, in *The Conflict* he berates those “who think that the *supersensible* must also be *supernatural*,” i.e., those who employ theoretical categories of cognition as a means for comprehending the practical concepts of the Bible (7:54).¹¹ However, in *Religion*, he puts the burden of working out his conception of grace—in a way that is consistent with his own principles and critical distinctions—squarely on the shoulders of his readers. Indeed, he demands that we ask his text to answer the question that it raises for us: What does Kant mean by divine assistance, which, he argues, is a prerequisite for grace?

Kant’s text provides us with the resources for answering this question. In a key note in the Preface to the first edition of *Religion*, he tells us that the proposition, “‘There is a God, hence there is a highest good in the world,’ ... is a synthetic *a priori* proposition” (6:6). As we know, the synthetic *a priori* is Kant’s oxymoron for the human connectivity that is established by observing a practical rule, i.e., the moral law. Thus, although Kant holds that the belief in God exceeds our human duty, he also tells us that belief in God is “identical with the moral concept of duty in general” (6:6). It is in this notion of an excess that is provided by God and yet is identifiable with human morality that the paradox of grace resides. For Kant is clear that when we confuse the supersensible with the transcendent category of the supernatural we turn God into an idol. God is not a theoretical but a practical concept, a concept of human practice. Thus, God is not the end, the *telos*, whether first or final, of the great chain of being adopted by Neo-Platonists who, in using ancient Greek concepts to interpret biblical theology, confuse the God of

the Bible with Zeus, who tells his subordinates in the *Iliad* that he holds in his hands a gold cord attaching immortal Olympus to mortal earth so that “whenever I might strongly be minded to pull you, I could drag you up, earth and all and sea and all with you” back into a state of suspended animation (VIII 19-27). Indeed, Kant notes that any theoretical understanding of God betrays “a certain *admixture of paganism*,” for, he writes, religion is “the kind of faith that locates the *essence* of all divine worship in man’s morality; paganism is the kind that does not” (*The Conflict* 7:50, 7:49). Instead, the concept of God’s grace in the Bible describes an “excess”—that which we are unable to do for ourselves—that is located, nonetheless, within the practice of human interaction. God becomes an idol the instant that we forget that the divine represents a concept of (human) relationship.¹²

It is not a given, then, that we know what it means to believe in God, whether we identify as theists or as atheists. Whatever belief in God that we hold requires justification. Kant is adamant, therefore, that faith involves critique, i.e., that there is no true faith in God that does not involve a critique of a transcendent God. Thus, he insists that miracles—the belief in acts of God that contradict the laws of nature—do not produce faith. It is important, in order to comprehend Kant’s concept of divine assistance, to recognize that Kant holds that the miracles of the Bible must not be interpreted theoretically but practically. To ask for miracles that contravene nature as a sign of God’s presence belies a “moral *unbelief*,” a lack of faith in existence (*Religion* 6:63). Instead, Kant reports that “only faith” that is practical and “that lies in our reason has moral worth” (6:63). Indeed, he continues, “such a faith alone can validate miracles... as effects coming from the good principle; it cannot borrow its validation from them” (6:63). While “theoretical faith in miracles... is a senseless notion,” a resolute faith in people allows us to recognize the miraculous power of human freedom, for which there is no natural explanation

(6:88). Thus, faith is justified solely in its devotion to justice. As Kant states in the strictest of terms, human justice is “the one sacred thing in the world” (6:160).

Moreover, because Kant shows us that idolatry involves the attempt to comprehend a metaphysical idea through theoretical categories, he puts us on notice that any concept that is not available to the senses is prone to becoming an idol. Indeed, the idolatry surrounding the concepts of freedom and will is no less prevalent than that surrounding the concept of God, whether we find ourselves in philosophical or in theological circles. Freedom becomes an idol the instant that we forget that it represents a concept of (divine) relationship. So too does “the word,” which is synthetic *a priori*, become reified and lose all significance and meaning the moment that we forget that it is not a noun but a verb (*Fiat!*), a categorical instruction to do unto others as you would want them to do unto you. In short, Kant puts us on notice that any metaphysical idea becomes an idol whenever we confuse its term with its concept. To understand the conceptual weight given to any term requires that we ceaselessly work out its relationship to other (including opposing) terms and concepts; in short, it requires us to see that all of our ideas are concepts of relationship, consistent with Kant’s insight that all truly biblical concepts are practical and not theoretical.¹³

Indeed, it largely goes unnoticed (or, at least, unnoted) by commentators on Kant’s works on religion that he is adamant that freedom is no less inexplicable than grace. Let us not forget that Kant scandalized the philosophical world, and continues to do so today, when he concludes the *Grounding* by indicating that there is no explanation for freedom and that, therefore, his deduction (justification) of the necessity of freedom is correct. Yet, let us further note that, as Scruton observes, Kant’s comments here are utterly consistent. When we ask each other about the reasons for our actions, we are not asking for an explanation of the physical causes of an

event but about how to justify what we did. “Reasons,” Scruton observes, in practice, “are designed to justify action, and not primarily to explain it” (62). It is when we lose sight of Kant’s demonstration that freedom is relational (i.e., moral) that we end up opposing it to grace and so, in subordinating the divine to the human, confuse freedom with what is natural to man, forgetting that freedom is a gift that we mutually bestow upon one another through our recognition of the dignity of one and all. In turn, it is when we lose sight of Kant’s critical distinction between theoretical and practical reason that we end up opposing grace to freedom and so, in subordinating what is human to what is divine, turn our object of reverence into an idol, i.e., into “a being whom we may hope to please not through morally upright conduct in this world but through adoration and ingratiating: [thus] religion is turned into idolatry” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 6:185).

Kant’s philosophy, however wily, does not allow for the opposition between (divine) grace and (human) freedom to stand. Indeed, he remarkably points out that to set what is in our power (human freedom) against what is not in our power (divine grace) is a mark of enthusiasm and superstition (*Religion* 6:174). For although Kant indicates that grace as a practical concept is a contradiction—when we attempt to know its practice, let me add, through theoretical categories—and although he again insists that “in all things supernatural (to which morality, as *holiness*, belongs) reason is bereft of any information of the laws according to which it might occur,” he also knows that,

there is no other means (nor can there be any) [for man] by which to become worthy of heavenly assistance, except the earnest endeavor to improve his moral nature in all possible ways, thereby making himself capable of receiving a nature fully fit – as is not in his power – for divine approval, *since the expected divine assistance itself has only his*

morality for its aim. (my emphasis, 6:192)

The end of the practice of grace (divine assistance) is morality (human existence). Grace describes the will to deny knowledge in order to provide “room” for the other’s will in your life. To be gracious means to recognize that the other’s will is not in your own power or control and that your own will is not found outside of its relationship to the will of (all) others. Grace is the theological doppelganger of the philosophical notion of autonomy.

Thus, grace describes the rational practice of providing the infinite space in which we can share in each other’s thoughts, second thoughts, and even errors. While these errors do not go unnoticed (or unnoted), it is solely in the spirit of goodwill, in which we refrain from reducing each other to the sum of our errors, that we are able to produce the truly liberating effects of critique, which is the philosophical name, surely, for what Kant calls the “means” of grace. Grace involves the summons for you, the sinner, to be good to yourself, to be charitable in your response to your own blindness and errors. How gentle an order! The other prong on the fork that Kant uses to attune us to the concept of grace is sin. But when we attend to the way in which Kant analyzes sin in *Religion* we learn, as we have seen, that the concept of sin involves the recognition of human equality. Kant asks that one respond to sin not with vengeful punishment—not by excommunicating the sinner, not by excluding the sinner from one’s acts of communication—but with charity or grace.

Holding together grace and sin is therefore crucial to fostering human relationships that are not demoralizing but edifying (moral and creative). In addition, it is by working out a practical concept of grace (one that is not contradictory but paradoxical) that we realize what Kant means when he tells us, in both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Religion*, that we are not capable of becoming happy all on our own but that happiness requires another source. For,

although he indicates that it is entirely within our power to become worthy of happiness, he also holds that it is not within our power alone to grant it to ourselves. Happiness or true contentment is the work (effect) of grace. For, given that the self—my life—is not mine alone but is borne in the relationships that constitute it, given that the will is never located outside of relationship, to be happy in life is to be truly thankful for the metaphysical gifts, the practices, of yourself and of your neighbors that allow you to express your will and that foster your utmost desires. To be happy is the gift of relationship, for which each of us is wholly responsible, although none of us is capable of producing it on our own.

Thus, to recap the development of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* so far: Kant shows us that how we understand the relationship between sensuous nature and human nature determines how we understand good and evil; how we understand the relationship between good and evil determines how we comprehend the concepts of grace and sin; and an understanding of grace and sin shows us how to understand the relationship between morality and happiness. Finally, before returning to his thematic material on the relationship between faith (Christianity) and reason, he shows us that how we understand the relationship between morality and happiness determines what we mean by the creation of a better world, for which both morality and happiness are required, as we shall now see.

After indicating in the Preface to the first edition of *Religion* that it is the institution of the “highest good in the world” through the commitment to God, as a principle, that “can alone unite the two elements of this good,” i.e., morality and happiness, Kant states, “That which alone can make the world the object of divine decree and the end of creation is *Humanity... in its full moral perfection*” (6:5; 6:11; 6:60). It is no accident that Kant aligns here the loaded theological doctrine of creation with the effort of humanity to realize moral perfection. For Kant knows that

the story of creation does not describe a phenomenal event cognizable according to theoretical categories.

In order to comprehend what Kant means by the creation of a better world in *Religion*, it is truly instructive to analyze Kant's stunning, one-paragraph commentary on the concept of creation in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. He begins his analysis of the concept of creation by posing the question: How is it possible to be free if "one admits that *God* as universal original being is *the cause also of the existence*" of the world (5:100)? This difficulty, he notes,

is resolved briefly and clearly as follows. If existence *in time* is only a sensible way of representing things which belongs to thinking beings in the world and consequently does not apply to them as things in themselves, then the creation of these beings is a creation of things in themselves, since the concept of creation does not belong to the sensible way of representing existence or causality but can only be referred to noumena. (5:102)

Kant thus aligns thinking beings with things in themselves, things in themselves with creation, and creation with the noumenal world, which describes, as we know, the intelligible world of human practice—the work involved in instituting the kingdom of ends in which we treat each other with sovereign dignity. The thought of creation is tied to human action. Hence, Kant continues, "as it would thus be a contradiction to say that God is a creator of appearances, so it is also a contradiction to say that as creator he is the cause of actions in the sensible world and thus of actions as appearances, even though he is the cause of the existence of the acting beings as noumena"; consequently, "it cannot make the slightest difference that the acting beings are creatures, since creation has to do with their intelligible [and so practical] but not their sensible existence" (5:102).

Because Kant does not locate God within nature as its first cause or prime mover, he finds himself reiterating the doctrine of creation from nothing. There is no cause in nature from which an understanding of nature (as the structure of cause and effect) can emerge. Thus, it is important to see that the concept of creation from nothing that Kant discusses in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is utterly consistent with the scientific study of nature in modernity, which is based upon the elimination of mind (*nous*: the thing itself) from the natural world in order to investigate, instead, how nature operates. The scientific understanding of nature relies, that is, on a true conception of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which shows us that an understanding of the natural world (creatures) emerges from nothing but the thoughtful existence of human subjects, whose principle for viewing existence (creation) as good is not natural but divine. Kant transfers God, then, and God's act of creation from that which is sensible to that which is practical, as the point of view from which we can become acquainted with the reasons for the ways in which we appropriate the objects of the sensible world. The story of God's creative action becomes an image for the act of (rationally) justifying, as opposed to (empirically) explaining, existence.

Kant thus sets the standard by which to sound the depths of our understanding of the concept of creation. For he indicates that the concept of cause, when applied to things in themselves (whether God or persons), bears no analogy to the concept of cause and effect that applies to the natural world. As Kant de-deifies the natural world (resolving the contradiction that results from viewing God as a force of nature and nature as God's design), so he shows us that the concept of divine creation, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, applies to human practice, which is moral or free. Indeed, to view existence as good, not from the point of view of nature but in sharing the point of view of God, has ethical (as well as social and political) implications.

God is our cause as that cause for which we live in our socio-political lives. In short, creation is an ethical practice. It designates the action of the will, the model for which is not the causal connection of empirical objects but the image of God as the highest good that creates (wills, fosters, enlivens) human freedom. The will, we learn, is a notion of “cause” as that for which and by which we live, the principled stand that supports the absolute value of human life, for which nothing else is equivalent.

Not only, however, does our conception of creation have ethical implications. But it is also the case that how one views the creation of the world through the word of God in the Bible mirrors one’s understanding of the concept of artistic creativity in modernity and of the relation between art and science. Indeed, artistic creation does not—and cannot—transgress our scientific understanding of nature. Even when a metaphor appears to suspend the laws of nature (e.g., when a lion is reported to have lain with a lamb), that metaphor relies upon an understanding that natural law remains intact in order to transfer the application of the image from that which is sensible to that which is practical. The human creativity of modern art engages, that is, our moral or ethical practice. Art is recognized by us moderns as truly creative not because it imitates our sensory experience but because it reveals to us, in the tradition of the creation of the world as presented in the Bible, the *a priori* grounds of our humanity and thus a view of its (ethical) perfection.¹⁴

Indeed, learning that creation is not a theoretical but a practical or moral concept raises the question: What is it that *we* create *ex nihilo*, from nothing found in experience? What is it within our human practice that embodies this divine act? The creativity of the human will involves responding to existence with grace: responding to others in a way that does not merely reflect back onto them the way that you have been treated by them. In short, creation, in the

beginning, describes the constant human effort to create a better world from nothing that *is*— from nothing reflected in and amongst the empirical facts of the world. What I want to point out, then, is that faith in divine creation, as ethical, engages our modern concept of aesthetic creativity and, as aesthetic, simultaneously implicates our most fundamental ethical principles.

In learning, then, that creation is at once ethical and aesthetic, we can see why Kant chooses his analysis of what it means to create a better world *ex nihilo* from which to develop his concept of infinite progress or immortality. For, as Kant reports, “the law says: ‘Be ye holy [i.e., perfect] (in the conduct of your lives) as your Father in Heaven is holy [or perfect]’” (6:66, citing Matt. 5.48). Yet, he then notes that the “distance between the goodness which we ought to effect in ourselves and the evil from which we start is, however, infinite, and, so far as the deed is concerned – i.e., the conformity of the conduct of one’s life to the holiness of the law – it is not exhaustible in any time” (6:66). The distance involved in human progress is not a finite distance but infinite. There is no finite standard by which to take its measure. No amount of space or time, therefore, is sufficient for that which is infinite, and yet no amount of space and time (however small, be it but an inch or a second) separates us from it. Progress, indeed, is not finite. For the finite never progresses beyond that which is finite. All flesh is grass.

But how, then, do we progress, individually and socially? The future, evidently, is equally (infinitely) far from and equally (infinitely) near to every generation and every individual. What is it that is able to lead us, so to speak, into the future? The solution, Kant writes, rests on this: “a continuing advance *in infinitum* from a defective good to something better,” which, albeit, “always remains defective so that we are bound to consider the good as it appears in us, i.e., according to the *deed*, as *at each instant* inadequate to a holy law” (6:67). But, he continues, “because of the *disposition* from which it [i.e., our drive] derives and which

transcends the senses, we can think of the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law as being judged,” according to the holy law of God, “to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct)” (6:67). Progress involves and expresses the human effort, the will, to incorporate into our maxims those practical incentives that accord with the moral law and thus to forgo the principle of happiness. Progress is measured by the infinite standards of the categorical imperative upon which we found our lives and actions. Thus, Kant describes it as the endeavor of critique through which we “bring the kingdom of God [infinitely close] to us” as the kingdom of ends (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:130).

Still, progress remains a challenge, both individually and collectively, precisely because it is not finite but can be maintained solely through the infinite practice of critique. Thus, Kant describes the kingdom of ends in the *Grounding* as “certainly only an ideal,” for it (whose theological name is the kingdom of God) is inseparable from the continuous (infinite) human effort to treat each other as ends and never merely as means to another (finite) end, in opposition to the scientism or positivism that attempts to lump human subjects among all other natural objects to be used and manipulated for instrumental purposes. Kant knows that “one is never more easily deceived than in what promotes a good opinion of oneself” (6:68). Thus, he does not allow us to acquiesce, for example, in the passivity of Leibniz’ resigned conclusion that *this* is the best of all possible worlds. Still, he also resists our attempts to view the idea of the kingdom of ends as a theoretical utopia. Indeed, he notes that, while “we might say” of any idea, including that of the absolute whole, that it is “**only an idea**” because it remains devoid of all empirical content, from the practical point of view “we cannot likewise say disparagingly: **It is only an idea**; rather just because it is the idea of a necessary unity of all possible ends, it must serve as a rule, the original and at least limiting condition, for everything practical” (*Critique of Pure*

Reason A328/B385). In the unity of all possible ends, i.e., in the kingdom of ends, “practical reason even has the causality actually to bring forth what its concept contains,” the causality (freedom) actually to create the social, political, and domestic systems that embody human freedom for no other reason than that these avenues are created by free men and women (A328/B385).

Thus, it is critical to see that infinite progress does not bear the same structure as either Aristotelian teleology—in which life is viewed as that movement whose end (moving force) is outside of itself—or natural teleology—which explains what exists in the natural world (for example, through the theory of natural selection). Rather, endless progress, for Kant, involves and expresses the end (the perfection) of humanity. Indeed, he notes, human beings are holy or perfect according to a “principle and attitude of mind,” a disposition that is receptive to the good (6:48). A person “is a good human being only in incessant labouring and becoming” (6:48). In sum, the end, the aim, the goal is not to become a good person according to the social norms of our time but to become good at being a person, which involves accounting for the defects and inadequacies of both ourselves and others in and through an adequate (moral, gracious, merciful, loving) response. It is through activating the power of choice—an act of will—that we find ourselves on “the good (though narrow) path of constant *progress* from bad to better” (6:48). We find ourselves with the whole of humanity’s future open before us when we learn how to ground our lives, with increasing depth and insight, on the singular truth with which we began the enterprise of rational critique: the equal dignity of each and every person. Thus, the distance involved in progress is never surpassed or overcome, for it is the task of a lifetime to realize the end of our lives in each of our particular relationships with our neighbors. Still, that infinite

distance is traversed with the slightest touch or a look that expresses the transcendental effort to find the end of our lives in the other and the other as the end of our individual lives.

It is so important to note, therefore, that, while Kant invokes a concept of immortality, he does not mean to postulate the existence of an after-life. He notes, in no uncertain terms in *Religion*, that the dogma of eternity according to which human beings are promised bliss by repenting sin, although the conduct of their lives goes unchanged, “is warranted by neither rational insight nor scriptural exegesis” (6:70).¹⁵ Indeed, although Kant invokes the concept of the immortality of the soul in relation to his concept of infinite progress in order to elaborate upon the relationship between faith (theology) and reason (philosophy), we can say that, strictly speaking, there is no concept of the immortality of the soul in the Bible, whether Hebrew or Christian (although there are concepts of eternity and of that which does not perish).¹⁶

For Kant the immortality of the soul is not a theoretical idea but a concept of human practice. Thus, he persistently aligns his concept of immortality in both *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* with the steadfast resolution to progress “from the worse to the morally better” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:123). He sees, in other words, that we do not live immortally (in any form). Rather, immortality describes that for which we live: our cause, end, or deepest desire. Thus, it involves and expresses the transformation through which we recognize the defects still embedded in our notion of what constitutes the highest good of existence and through which we recognize and dispense with the deeds that issue from those maxims that incorporate sensuous incentives at the expense of real human concerns. Still, it is the perpetual recognition of our defects—i.e., critique—that demonstrates, as Kant argues, that reason is incorruptible (*Religion* 6:70). For the realization of our inadequacies (or even regressions) requires a rational concept of the highest good that is

irreducible to these defects and that implicates us, then, in the creation of a better world. Thus, through the concept of the highest good, we give mortality a meaning and a value that we are not capable of deriving from anything mortal about human nature.

So Kant joins Wordsworth in indicating that, because immortality requires intimation (foreknowledge here on earth), it is not transcendent but, instead, bespeaks a view of the foundations and of the implications of one's life and principles. The faith in immortality describes, as Wordsworth puts it, the strength involved "In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering; / In the faith that looks through death, / In the years that bring the philosophic mind" ("Intimations of Immortality" X). What, then, does the person see who looks with the eye that "keeps watch o'er man's mortality" (XI)? Indeed, the person with the faith to look through death is not looking at an after-life modelled on the habits of nature but at the promise of the future embodied in the "human heart by which we live" and that is revealed in one's loving response to human suffering (XI). The philosophic mind is not manifested by the one who, following Plato, seeks to demonstrate the immortality of the soul by appealing to the logic that, because nothing comes from nothing (*ex nihilo nihil fit*), so nothing returns to nothing. Instead, it is manifest in the one who, following the biblical prophets, meditates on that which binds our days each to each, the one who reveals that the child is the father of man. For Wordsworth's observation, which he includes as the epigram to his poem, gives us pause. The child is not naturally his own father. Rather, what bears us, as men and women, are the first principles, the foundations, the *a priori* moral grounds that we adopt, not as children but as men and women. That the child is the father of man reveals that every one of us begins freely from himself (or herself) alone charged with the task of linking our days, each to each, by establishing human bonds that bespeak our radical (original) freedom. Wordsworth demands, in other words,

that we reevaluate the principles by which we live and so re-affirm our faith in the undying heart of individuals to care for humanity and human freedom, for which the tears shed over human suffering are everlasting testaments.

As the infinite progress through which we grow into ourselves as free human beings, this critical faith is another expression for the transition involved in meta-phor. Indeed, Kant employs a touching metaphor to describe it. He notes that individual human progress requires “a change of heart” (*Religion* 6:47). For it is the heart that is “the ground of all the maxims of the power of choice” (6:48). He uses the image of the heart to describe that principle for which no (empirical) image of the heart is adequate and a change for which nothing antecedent in experience prepares us. The creation of a better world (change, progress) involves willing its realization for the mutual benefit of one another. No one can do your thinking, willing, loving, or acting for you. Still, no one can think, will, love or act on one’s own. Progress does not describe the gradual steps involved in changing our (finite) station or an improvement of our mores. Rather, progress is the (infinite) work of grace, the means of which are wholly within our power, and yet it is not within our power to effect it alone but requires the good graces (deeds) of the other. Thus, in accounting for human progress through the grace that follows from implementing a rational critique of one’s moral defects, Kant shows us that reason involves the creative (metaphoric) work of setting our relationships yet again upon the *a priori* grounds of freedom and equality by locating God in humankind.

In light of an analysis of Kant’s treatment of concepts that are found at the very core of Christian faith, we learn that both faith and reason are at once ethical (moral) and aesthetic (creative). Indeed, although Kant never develops a systematic concept of metaphor, he does provide an interesting comment on analogy in his work on religion. He tells us that “we always

need a certain analogy with natural being in order to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us” (*Religion* 6:65). Still, the schema of analogy does not provide us with a scheme for applying supersensible characteristics to our knowledge of objects, a leap which leads us straight into anthropomorphism. Rather, Kant holds that “between the relationship of a schema to its concept and the relationship of this very schema of the concept to the thing itself there is no analogy” (6:65). There is no analogy between the sensible nature that our analogies employ and the analogies that use sensible nature to reveal for us our moral (supersensible) characteristics. Analogies are not things in themselves—outside of their critical interpretation by their speakers and readers. But Kant gives us cause to see, then—although it remains a question whether he himself sees—that the schemes of our analogies (metaphors) are things in themselves. He thus notes that it is the “philosophical poet” (say, Wordsworth) who does as the authors of the Scriptures do and assigns to human beings “a higher rung on the moral ladder of beings than to the very inhabitants of heaven,” e.g., will-less angels (6:65). Kant is Stevens-esque. For his criticism of theoretical angels reveals that the image of an “angel” is a concept of human practice (as we shall see when we take up Stevens’ image of the absolute angel in the conclusion of this study). Still, Kant does not reverse the critical thrust of his presentation here but, instead, leaves it to his readers to show that Kant himself is, as a philosopher, a poet. Because he does not develop a systematic and comprehensive concept of metaphor, he makes it the task of his readers to demonstrate that his philosophic conceptions of the synthetic *a priori*, the thing-in-itself, the grounding of metaphysics, and the infinite distance involved in human progress are metaphors.

As I have undertaken to show, however, Kant sees with real insight that faith and reason share a commitment to the ethical and creative bonds of the human community. Thus, in a rondo

through which he returns to his main theme and thesis, he states, denying that anyone is saved vicariously through a belief in Christ: “The living faith in the prototype of humanity well-pleasing to God (the Son of God) refers, *in itself*, to a moral idea of reason...; it is therefore all the same whether I start out from it (as *rational* faith) or from the principle of a good life conduct,” i.e., from the categorical imperative (6:119). The incarnation is not a theoretical but a practical or moral idea. For “in the appearance of the God-man, the true object of the saving faith is not what in the God-man falls to the senses, or can be cognized through experience, but the prototype lying in reason which we put in him,” and thus, Kant continues, “such a faith is all the same as the principle” of reason (6:119). The incarnation expresses the act of incorporating the moral law into existence, the effort to embody the teaching of Scripture: love your neighbor as yourself and so do unto others as you would want them to do unto you. But the instruction expressed by the golden rule, Kant reminds us, is identical to the rational duty to promote human freedom. “Hence,” he notes, “we do not have two principles that differ in themselves, so that to start out from one or the other would be to enter on to opposite paths, but only one and the same practical idea from which we proceed” (6:119). Thus, he completes what he set out to do: to establish the unity between practical reason and (practical) faith.

Indeed, Kant does not deny that Jesus is infinitely different from other men and women, but he also shows us that this difference (as practical) is no different from the difference between any two human beings. Jesus, like any person, cannot be perceived (known) but must be conceived (thought)—as we saw in Chapter 2—according to the principle of human freedom or the moral law. Belief in the incarnation expresses the idea that the individual, in being wholly human, is wholly divine. In Kant’s terms, according to the doctrine of the incarnation, the human individual is irreplaceable. The unique and irreplaceable nature of the individual, however, is not

given in any of the facts of her life but in her effort to accord others a worth or value for which no finite thing is equivalent and so to become irreplaceable in the lives of others. The uniqueness of the God-man constitutes his universality as the idea that each and every individual is uniquely human, irreducible to the conditions of his or her natural birth. The universality of the God-man constitutes his uniqueness as the concept that each and every individual is called to be universally human, enjoined to the task of recognizing the divinity (the absolute worth) of all people.

Thus, Kant proves his thesis—that faith in Christ (Christianity) is wholly rational. For faith in the incarnation, as purely practical, expresses the task of fostering human dignity or worth (*dignitas*). But so too does Kant confirm his agreement with the thesis of this chapter (my thesis): that reason is wholly faithful. For he shows us that reason, as practice, involves the task of willing the kingdom of ends for one and all. The proof that Kant's doctrine is rational is that it is faithful to the moral teaching of the Bible. In turn, as Kant determines, the proof that the Bible is rational is that it faithfully employs a critique of purely practical reason through its prohibition against idols, i.e., by limiting knowledge to the objects of possible experience in its ethical devotion to the compact between that which is transcendentally good (the divine) and the action of freedom (the human).

In sum, what we learn from an analysis of Kant's two principal works on religion is that, although faith (theology) and reason (philosophy) occupy separate domains—as if parted by Moses as he crosses the Red Sea and leads his people out of bondage—they are one in holding that the individual is sovereign, autonomous, and free. That is, the relationship between faith and reason is a practical idea that involves and expresses the relationship between you and me. As the opposition between ourselves and others results in (and is the result of) heteronomy (as we

saw in the last chapter), so the opposition between faith and reason results in bondage. Set in opposition to reason, faith bespeaks the wilful abnegation of one's will before a supernatural power. In opposition to faith, reason belies the wilful abnegation of one's will before a natural power (sensible nature). To break free of the bondage involved in opposing reason and faith involves showing that both philosophy and theology share a commitment to the limits (i.e., the bonds) of the human community—to love, justice, freedom, grace, duty—which are at once moral (ethical) and creative (aesthetic). In addition, as we shall see in the next chapter, a well-founded understanding of the relationship between faith and reason will be essential for overcoming the dualisms that plague our understanding of the relationship between ethics and art. As Kant demonstrates his thesis on the relationship between Christianity (faith) and reason through his analysis of the belief in the incarnation, so we shall discover in the next chapter that it is through his analysis of the image of the God-man that Hegel determines that it is the principle of infinite subjectivity that provides the critical standard for all modern art.

¹ Kant's specific focus in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, in which he takes up the conflict between philosophy and theology, is Christianity. Indeed, he continues to harbor a dismissive view of both Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. After claiming in *Religion* that the Church "from the beginning bore within it the germ and the principles of the objective [i.e., moral] unity of the true and *universal* religious faith to which it is gradually being brought nearer," he states that "the *Jewish* faith," however, "stands in absolutely no essential connection, i.e. in no unity of concepts" with the faith of Christianity "even though it immediately preceded it and provided the physical occasion for the founding of this church (the Christian)" (6:125). He appears to take exception, in particular, to the idea that the Jews were chosen by God, which he views as evidence that Judaism "excluded the whole human race from its communion" and as the reason why the Jews were treated with hostility by other nations (6:127). But he fails to see, then, that what God requires of his chosen people is that they choose to love all others—whether neighbors or strangers—as themselves as the demonstration of their devotion to their Lord, who is also consistently represented in the Hebrew Bible as the God of all nations. Kant thus reiterates the ambivalent attitude toward Judaism that has been typically adopted within Christendom. On the one hand, he holds that Christianity involves the "total abandonment of the Judaism in which it originated" and that Christianity, "grounded on an entirely new principle, effected a total revolution in doctrines of faith" (6:127). On the other hand, Kant continues to argue that it was "from Judaism – but from a Judaism no longer

patriarchal and uncontaminated...; from a Judaism already mingled... with a religious faith of the moral doctrines which had gradually gained public acceptance within it... –” that Christianity suddenly “though not unprepared arose” (6:128). However, Kant is unable, on this basis, to provide any consistent account of how Christianity emerged from Judaism as a defective faith. For, as he repeatedly demonstrates both in *Religion* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, injustice (evil) cannot produce that which is good, perfect, or holy. Rather, it is justice (the moral law) that first allows us to identify what is unjust. Thus, in order for Christianity to have emerged out of Judaism—as the figures central to the New Testament, as well as the early Church fathers, all hold—Judaism must contain within itself a principle that has no defects but is, rather, good, perfect, and holy. Indeed, when Kant takes up the concept of creation and the story of Adam and Eve—both of which are central to the “Old Testament” (the Hebrew Bible)—he shows us (as we shall see) that the concept of creation and the myth of Adam and Eve are entirely consistent with practical reason. When, therefore, Kant expresses dismissive views regarding Judaism, he is inconsistent with his own demonstration, first, that injustice cannot find itself to be unjust upon its own grounds and, second, that the concepts and stories that are central to the Hebrew Bible are wholly rational. Although I shall focus in this chapter upon Christianity when I am reporting Kant’s own position in order to represent his point of view accurately, I want to put my analysis of religion in terms that focus, when I am presenting the point of view of this study, not upon Christianity in particular but upon faith and the theology of the Bible in order to continue to avoid the errors that follow from privileging one biblical tradition over another.

² Kant published *The Conflict of the Faculties* in 1798. After King Frederick William II died in 1797, Kant considered himself released from his pledge not to publish on the subject of religion, which he had made at the request of the Censorship Commission in Berlin in order to avoid the “unpleasant measures” with which he was threatened should he continue to “distort and disparage” the Christian religion (*The Conflict of the Faculties* 7:6).

³ *The Conflict of the Faculties* 7:9 and 7:53.

⁴ Spinoza’s purpose in separating philosophy and theology in the *Theological-Political Treatise* is twofold. First, he wants to be sure that his readers distinguish between ancient Greek philosophy and biblical theology in order to prevent the misunderstanding of theological concepts that results from using ancient Greek philosophy to interpret the Bible. After opposing religion to superstition, Spinoza writes fiercely against those who, in response to the fear from which superstition arises, undertake to squash the freedom of thought and expression of religious adherents. Indeed, he wonders that “the men who make a boast of professing the Christian religion, which is a religion of love, joy, peace, temperance and honest dealing with all men, should quarrel so fiercely... [and] persecute so bitterly those who do not share their views” (4). Of these supposedly religious men, Spinoza writes, “I grant that they have expressed boundless wonder at Scripture’s profound mysteries, yet I do not see that they have taught anything more than the speculations of Aristotelians or Platonists, and they have made Scripture conform to these so as to avoid appearing to be the followers of heathens” (5). “It was not enough,” he continues, “for them to share in the delusions of the Greeks: they have sought to represent the prophets as sharing in these same delusions” (5). Second, in separating philosophy and theology, Spinoza undertakes to show his readers that the concept of reason that they associate with the natural light of the mind bears the same structure of values that both Jews and Christians associate with faith. Thus, he contends that—when we learn that the dictates of reason, in modernity, are identical to the precepts of faith—we can recognize that neither is theology subordinate to philosophy nor is philosophy the handmaiden of theology. Although Kant, like

Spinoza, does not focus his analysis of religion on the difference between ancient Greek and biblical thought but, rather, on the relationship between the principles of faith and the dictates of practical reason, he does highlight in several key passages the difference between ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity.

⁵ In both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant repeatedly points out to his readers the crucial difference between Stoicism and Christianity. When we conflate Stoicism and Christianity, we fall into the confused position of reducing Christianity to that counterfeit service that I have referred to as Christendom (recalling Kierkegaard) and of projecting onto Stoicism the search for truth, although no ancient school of philosophy ever claimed to know the truth or the good in themselves. As we know, Christendom embodies the popular doctrine that separates heaven and earth, the divine and the human, the good and existence, free will and nature, and so religion and science. In a note, both dazzling and sobering, Kant observes that the Stoics elevate virtue above all delight in one's senses and thus idealize the sage who, so elevated, is sufficient unto himself (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:127). When we fail to distinguish between the Stoic system of virtue (which Kant also aligns in his note with Cynicism and Epicureanism) and Christianity (which he differentiates from the moral systems of Plato and Aristotle) we end up viewing morality and happiness, Kant argues, as opposites that exclude each other and, therefore, forgo the moral law (the perfection of existence) in seeking virtue as that which overwhelms the senses. It is no wonder, then, that the early Church fathers warned newly-minted Christians that the virtues of the ancients—e.g., justice, prudence, temperance, and courage—are glittering vices for those whose vocation it is to fulfill the moral law. For whenever we confuse biblical love with ancient virtue we fail to see that the distinction between good and evil in the Bible, as Kant observes in *Religion*, does *not* describe the difference between heaven and earth, both of which are created good (6:60).

⁶ In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* the Devil, who animates Ivan K.'s nightmare, argues that he is the cause of God's existence—that the existence of evil is necessary for, and so the reason behind, the existence of the good. The Devil, whom Ivan is struggling to distinguish from himself—as the apparition of his own torment—begins by indicating that where there is no evil there is no good. Thus, he argues that the good depends on evil. But it is important to note that it is not evil that allows us to distinguish between good and evil. The good or the truth does not emerge, first, from deception. Rather, it is the truth that allows one to identify the deception that confronts us, including that of the Devil's specious arguments. The arguments, however, of those who espouse the diabolical position that evil is the cause of salvation and, therefore, that evil is not evil but the good—as the cause of all that is good—crumble before the active love of Alexei K. and Zosima, which exposes the rebellious attitude that seeks to increase suffering in an attempt to solicit the good by returning existence back to nothingness (without good or evil). Indeed, the Devil's "earthly realism" is but a disguise for the nihilism that serves the nothingness of nature as the ideal good (638).

⁷ There is a play here within the term "radical," for the Latin root of the term is identical with that of "radish," meaning "root." So, what it means to be radical is to be truly rooted in the firm ground of one's human nature (i.e., in first principles). Thus, it bears the same paradoxical structure as the term "original," when this term is used as a double-entendre to refer to that which newly discovers its origins, i.e., its moral and ever creative foundation or ground.

⁸ Kant's struggle with the concept of history becomes evident in *Religion* when, on the one hand, he claims that the basic teachings of Christianity are universal and yet, on the other hand, he holds that these teachings can only be identified in other world religions from the point of view

of Christianity. In other words, Kant does not yet fully grasp the paradox of history. Though he wants to extend his conception of rational religion to include all people at all times, and although he indicates, on several occasions, that the concept of a moral religion that he develops from his analysis of Christianity must also be present in other world religions, he also notes that the unity of human history can be knit together only from the point of view of Christian (I would say, biblical) love (6:124). Although Kant does develop a concept of time in *Religion* that is evaluated on the basis of *a priori* principles, and although he notes in *The Conflict of the Faculties* that history depends *a priori* upon the position from which one narrates it, he continues to claim that rational religion applies universally to all people at all times of all religions. Still, as I have indicated, he repeatedly points out the important differences between ancient Greek and biblical thought. As we know, these tensions in Kant's texts can be resolved only when we truly comprehend the paradox of history as the task, at once old and new, of distinguishing between ancient and biblical concepts.

⁹ It is important to note, moreover, that the principle of *infinite* punishment or mercy is historically unique to the religions of the Bible. For although the ancient Greeks, e.g., the Stoics, have a concept of clemency or mercy, the principle behind its use is entirely different. As Seneca reports in his essay "On Clemency," it is good practice for rulers (such as his famous pupil, the Roman Emperor Nero) to show mercy on every occasion. He advises clemency, however, not because it involves the recognition that all of us, as sinners, are equal. Rather, what the act of clemency demonstrates for Seneca is that you, as ruler, are so superior to others that even their attempts to do you wrong do not move or affect you.

¹⁰ In *Grace and Law: St. Paul, Kant, and the Hebrew Prophets* Heinz W. Cassirer is thoughtful in his presentation of St. Paul's conversion, which Paul is unable to perform by his own strength, and of the paradoxical concept of agency present in the works of the Hebrew prophets, who preach the same message as that of Paul (although Cassirer does signal his preference for the Pauline version). Indeed, Cassirer is also acute in his presentation of Kant's concept of freedom or autonomy. But what is strange is that, while he discusses Kant's work on religion, he silently overlooks Kant's analysis of the concept of grace. Indeed, Cassirer never acknowledges, in any systematic way, that Kant developed a coherent concept of grace or divine assistance. Avoiding an analysis of Kant's concept of grace, Cassirer concludes that Kant's notion of freedom is not an acceptable solution for overcoming the obstinacy of the human heart (169). In indicating that he views the relationship between grace and law developed in the Bible as superior to the concept of freedom developed by Kant, however, he risks invalidating the paradoxical concept of agency that he exposed in the letters of Paul and in the message of the prophets. For, in opposing grace to freedom, he thereby calls into question his own understanding of the concept of grace in the Bible. In *For What May I Hope? Thinking with Kant and Kierkegaard* Gene Fendt thoughtfully engages the paradox of hope. For Kant and Kierkegaard, it is not possible to place one's hope for love either entirely in one's own strength or entirely in the hands of others. Fendt further sees that to hope, for Kant, is not a theoretical but a purely practical endeavor. Yet, he does not work through the paradox that he sets up—that to accomplish my hopes is impossible by my own strength and yet no one else is capable of helping me do it—in relation to Kant's critical commentary on the concept of divine assistance as a whole. That is, he continues to be stymied by Kant's concept of grace. He does not work through Kant's many comments on grace but, instead, gets stuck on what Kant himself emphasizes—that it is impossible to change one's heart without an act of God. Thus, Fendt sees Kant's hope in reason and freedom as hopeless (without superhuman assistance), while he sees Kierkegaard's critique of hope (when it is

directed toward the finite state of nature) as hopeful. Fendt's work is complex. For, while his analysis of Kierkegaard's position is correct and while he correctly advances the thesis that the "dissimilarity" between the views of Kant and Kierkegaard consists "in their essential similarity," he is incorrect to privilege Kierkegaard's position over that of Kant's (154). Finally, although Terry Eagleton is surely on the side of the angels in his fight against both the fundamentalism of religion and the scientism of Dawkins and Hitchens, even he risks misleading his readers when he introduces language that privileges faith (grace) over reason (autonomy) as the means to salvation in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. Still, Eagleton never wants to give in to irrationalism; thus, his text resists its own bias at every turn.¹¹ "For unless the supersensible (the thought of which is essential to anything called religion) is anchored to determinate concepts of reason, such as those of morality, fantasy inevitably gets lost in the transcendent, where religious matters are concerned, and leads to an illuminism in which everyone has his private, inner revelations, and there is no longer any public touchstone of truth" (*The Conflict* 7:46). Thus, because it is not supernatural, "the *supersensible* in us is inconceivable and yet practical" (7:59).

¹² Because Kant ties holiness to moral human practice, he also states that any ritual (any routine or habit) that is deemed a holy act in itself betrays "an almost more than pagan superstition" (6:199). Superstition is "almost pagan," for it is not so pagan as to be pagan (i.e., extra-biblical), although it results from the failure to distinguish one's own point of view from that of ancient mythology. But it is, therefore, "more" superstitious than paganism or any natural mythology. For, as we observed in the last chapter, the ancient view of nature is not founded on beliefs. The ancient Greeks do not believe in anything supernatural that is capable of abrogating the laws of nature. Their view of nature is wholly different from ours. The ancient Greeks' concept of nature, as garnered through experience, is divided between that which moves (all and is moved by none) and that which is moved (by all and moves none). Thus, even the atoms of Epicurus and Democritus, as Barfield reminds us, "were, of course, not atoms, as the word has been understood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were imagined as components of mind [*nous*] no less than of matter" (*Saving the Appearances* 45). Indeed, Epicurus never rejects the gods. He states, instead, that he believes "that god is a being immortal.... For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision" ("Letter to Menoeceus" 30). Although there are endless criticisms of how the gods are presented by mortal human beings, there is no one in ancient Greece who challenges the existence of the gods. The critique launched against God (what Nietzsche calls unconditional and honest atheism) emerges with the self-critical concept of God—the concept of divinity that demands a constant critique of one's conception of God (as an idol)—in the Bible.

¹³ It is worth pointing out, then, that idolatry is not a religious as opposed to a secular problem. There are, no doubt, secular versions of each of the idolatrous practices that Kant condemns. It is also worthwhile to note what Spinoza identifies as the source of all superstition (idolatry) in the Preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise*. After observing that it is "those who greedily covet fortune's favours who are the readiest victims of superstition of every kind," he notes that it is "fear, then, that engenders, preserves and fosters superstition" (2). It is the fear of losing one's status and fortune (whether perceived or real) that results in setting out idols—of "varied and unstable forms"—through which one attempts to suppress thinking about a concept by suggesting that one is capable of knowing this concept from its appearances (immediate terms) (2). Idolatry stems from viewing the thing-in-itself, in Kant's terms, as an object of fortune, the pursuit of which Kant describes, as we saw in Chapter 2, as abiding by the principle of happiness. The

origin of idolatry, then—the reason why it takes root and is maintained—is not theoretical but practical. That is, no theory can be criticized as idolatrous solely on the basis of its terms. A critique of idolatry can be launched only on the grounds of purely practical reason, through which we can point out the error involved in the idolatrous practice of shirking our responsibility to one another (i.e., to human equality) in favour of the false security that results from acting in accordance with the principle of happiness. Thus, Spinoza makes note that the “origin of superstition—in spite of the view of some who assign it to a confused idea of deity possessed by all mortals—” is fear, from which “it clearly follows that all men [and women] are by nature liable to superstition” (2).

¹⁴ In the Appendix of his essay “Toward Perpetual Peace” Kant indicates that it is the progressive realization of the pure principles of right that provides the justification (i.e., the deduction or demonstration) of “Creation itself” (8:380). Moreover, Kant notes in the concluding section of *The Conflict* that “the same goes for political creations as for the creation of the world; no human was present there, nor could he be present at such an event, since he must have been his own creator otherwise” (7:92). He thereby re-emphasizes that the creation of the world and the true republic are founded upon nothing found in experience but upon that which is *a priori*: the compact or covenant established between human beings in their categorical pledge to uphold the right to be free. That which is *a priori* is not prior to experience in any experiential way or in any way that could possibly be experienced by anyone. What holding together the story of creation and the progressive formation of the social covenant allows us to do, ultimately, is to show that creation describes an act that remains a task for the future no less than the past. As Paul notes in his letter to the Romans, creation must be aligned with the future liberation of all people (8.21). Just as creation describes the eternal practice of liberation, so liberty involves the work of enacting the historic story of creation *ex nihilo*.

¹⁵ The immortality of the soul does not become an official dogma of the Church until 1513 at the eighth session of the Fifth Lateran Council (c. 1512-1517) as the papal response to the “double-truth” advocated by philosophers and poets following Pompanazzi, who argues that, although natural reason demonstrates the mortality of the soul, faith obliges one to hold fast to the truth of the soul’s immortality. It is worth noting, however, that this double-truth embodies neither the twofold standpoint of Kant nor the relationship established by Paul between the mortal and the immortal. Rather, it reflects the failure of Pompanazzi to distinguish critically between ancient Greek philosophy and biblical thinking. (See the Introduction to *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* by Paul Kristeller and John Randall for an overview of Pompanazzi’s position.)

¹⁶ Paul does write, prior to citing the prophets on the victory over death and sin, that “this perishable nature must put on the imperishable and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53-4). But there is no mention here of life after death—except as the burden of our mortal nature. Indeed, the Bible opens by indicating that to return to a state of paradise in which we never die is not an option for us as human beings. In the story of Adam and Eve, after they have eaten of the tree of knowledge and have become “like” God knowing good and evil, the Lord expels them from the garden “lest” they should eat of the tree of life and live for ever (3.22). While the authors of the Bible do advance concepts of eternal life and of that which does not perish, they never suggests that the soul can be known as an object of experience separately from the body. See Chapter 5 for further discussion of the critical distinction between the concept of eternal life and an immortal state of happiness located after death.

Chapter 4

Critique—as Aesthetic Practice

Art and Subjectivity

Introduction

In this chapter I shall examine the theory of aesthetics that Kant outlines in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. As we shall see, in the “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment,”¹ Kant generates his concept of aesthetics through an analogy with the experience of objects. However, he is unable, as a result, to develop a principle by which to judge works of fine art or human creativity. Consequently, Kant not only fails to provide any determinate criteria for the critique of aesthetic judgment but he also betrays, as I shall show, the concept of the human subject that he advanced in the first two *Critiques*. Moreover, in Kant’s failure to grasp the ontology that underpins works of art, we see reflected the problems that result from failing to account for the history of European art in terms of the fundamental difference between ancient Greek and biblical imagery. By contrast, Hegel, in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, develops a comprehensive concept of modern aesthetics, which he views as rooted in Christianity and which he aligns with the principle of infinite subjectivity that is central to what he calls “romantic” art. Still, it is important to note that Hegel explicitly founds his concept of modern art upon the concept of the human subject that Kant developed through his critique of purely practical reason. Indeed, as I shall show in this chapter, Hegel overcomes the false and falsifying dualisms that compromise Kant’s theory of art precisely because he bases his aesthetic theory on the concept of metaphysics that Kant outlined in his first two *Critiques*.

Although I concentrate, then, on Hegel’s philosophy of art and his critique of Kant’s aesthetics, I want to avoid the inference that philosophy is the standard for the interpretation of

art, just as I want to eschew the idea that aesthetics or *belles-lettres* is the overarching category under which philosophy falls. Central to my study is the argument that, just as philosophy cannot be reduced to aesthetics (poetry), so poetry (works of art) must not be viewed as subordinate to transcendent, philosophical concepts. Thus, I want to begin this chapter by examining the concept of art that Tolstoy advances in his work on aesthetics (entitled *What is Art?*). What we shall discover is that, whether we undertake to analyze the concept of art as practicing artists (with Tolstoy) or as philosophers (with Hegel), we cannot develop a principle that serves as a basis for a critique of our aesthetic judgments unless and until we learn that, just as metaphysics is metaphorical, so aesthetics bears a metaphysical structure that both Tolstoy and Hegel align with absolute love (which, as we shall see, Hegel describes as the “general content” of the romantic [533]).

Tolstoy amplifies our understanding of and appreciation for the historical and ontological components embedded in Hegel’s conception of modern (or “romantic”) art. For he exposes the consequences of failing to account, with Hegel, for the history of modern art in terms of the fundamental difference between ancient Greek and biblical images and of falsifying the ontology (metaphysics) that is central to human creation. That is, an analysis of Tolstoy’s account of aesthetics shows us that, when we fail to appreciate the historical and ontological aspects of Hegel’s conception of art, we cannot avoid falling prey to the dualism between the good and the beautiful that undermines our concepts of both ethics and aesthetics. As we shall see, then, it is precisely this dualism that compromises Kant’s concept of aesthetics and that prevents him from developing a principle by which to judge works of modern art. Thus, in light of Tolstoy and Hegel, I want to continue to show in this chapter that central to the critical evaluation of both

philosophy and art (poetry) is the demonstration that ethics bears an aesthetic structure and that aesthetics has an ethical core.

i. Tolstoy

In *What is Art?* Tolstoy begins by reporting the answer that everyone provides, he tells us, in response to his question.² The stock answer that he receives to the question *what is art?* is that art is the exposition of the beautiful. Tolstoy then turns our attention to the relationship between “the good (or the sublime) and the beautiful” taken up by artists and aesthetic theorists alike. Indeed, he is careful to point out that how we conceive of the beauty of art reflects—embodies—what we view as significant and meaningful in life: “The appreciation,” he remarks, “of the merits of art – that is, of the feelings it conveys – depends on people’s understanding of the meaning of life, on what they see as good and evil in life” (42). Tolstoy indicates, therefore, that how we comprehend beauty involves and expresses how we understand the good. There is no escape, he argues, from the relationship between aesthetics (beauty) and ethics (the good): a false conception of one breeds, just as it issues from, a false conception of the other. But, Tolstoy then asks, how did beauty become (bound to) the good? That is, he asks us to consider how we conceive of the relationship between the good (ethics) and beauty (art). In short, what is beauty?

Tolstoy undertakes, then, a tremendous critique of all of the attempts to resolve these questions by leading aesthetic theorists up to (and including) his time.³ Still, he notes, “all the aesthetic definitions of beauty come down to two fundamental views:” the first, “that beauty is something existing in itself, a manifestation of the absolutely perfect – idea, spirit, will, God;” and the second, “that beauty is a certain pleasure we experience, which does not have personal advantage as its aim” (31). Tolstoy reveals that the contradictions that he exposes among the

various schools of aesthetic theory result from, and result in, the reduction of the beautiful to the good—as “something existing in itself”—or the reduction of the good to the beautiful—as the experience of immediate pleasure. In both cases, however, those who support these two concepts of beauty are incapable of providing any universal criteria or standards for judging works of fine art, which exposes the failure on the part of aesthetic theorists to understand the relationship between the spirit and the flesh.

As Tolstoy states, reflecting on these two fundamental (albeit, false) conceptions of beauty, since we are told that “the absolutely perfect” (e.g., God or the soul) exists “outside us,” those aesthetic theorists who are devoted to this ideal are unable to provide any definite criteria for evaluating the beauty of particular works of art. Thus, these theorists end up deferring to one’s immediate feelings or private tastes—to whether or not one experiences a “certain pleasure” from an object—as the touchstone for evaluating what one considers beautiful or not. However, “no attempts to define taste can lead anywhere,” Tolstoy remarks (32). For “there is not and cannot be any [critical] explanation of why something is pleasing to one man and not to another” (32-3). The consequence of reducing beauty to immediate (subjective) feelings is that, because what pleases each of us depends on empirical conditions that differ from person to person (and that are different for each of us at different times), a consistent understanding of art becomes “completely impossible” (36). Thus, according to these two views of aesthetics, the question “what is art?” is meaningless. In opposing the spirit (the concept of beauty) to the flesh (its content), neither of these views is able to provide us with any conception of what constitutes the concept and the content of art. The question of art, therefore, gets impugned and expunged—both explicitly and implicitly within these theories of art—and we are all left silently wondering: ?

In exposing the contradictory opposition that underlies the definitions of beauty articulated by previous aestheticians (and their endless iterations), Tolstoy puts us on notice that these two seemingly opposed views rely upon one and the same misunderstanding of human ontology or metaphysics, one that fails to demonstrate that the distinction between subjects (the spirit) and objects (the flesh) is not, to put it in the terms of this study, an empirical division between objects but a practical distinction—a metaphorical separation—employed in order to preserve the freedom and the dignity of human beings. Tolstoy rejects root and branch, therefore, the theory of art as a sacrifice unto the good (“absolute perfection”: what I am calling the theory of art as social utility) and the theory of art for art’s sake (in which the good is reduced to immediate pleasure), both of which obscure, as Tolstoy also indicates, the history of fine art. Indeed, the issues involved in working out a true conception of the good and the beautiful—one that does not rest on the blinding opposition between ethics and aesthetics—are at once ontological and historical.

I want to summarize, then, before proceeding to analyze the contradictions involved in Kant’s aesthetic theory, Tolstoy’s account of the history of fine art. Indeed, before Tolstoy undertakes to separate the good from the beautiful as his method for overcoming the contradictory opposition between the spirit and flesh that emerges as a result of the assimilation of beauty and the good, he asks us to consider *how* pleasure ever became the aim and vocation of art.

In concert with Kant’s repeated claims in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Tolstoy begins his assessment of the history of art by pointing out the fundamental difference between the concept of the highest good developed by Christians and the concept of the good maintained by the ancient Greeks.⁴

Although he glosses over the history of art and religion on a number of occasions and groups, in general terms, the ancient Greeks together with the ancient Hebrews and early Christians, Tolstoy remarks, in absolute terms, that the “highest perfection of the good,” the *summum bonum* of existence, within Christianity was “not only not coincident with beauty, but mainly opposed to it” (48). This concept of the highest good, he continues, “which the Jews already knew in the time of Isaiah... was completely unknown [however] to the Greeks” (48-9). Nonetheless, Tolstoy goes on to report, alongside the “wholesale conversion of nations to Christianity... there appeared a different, Church Christianity, closer to paganism than to the teaching of Christ” (44).

Notwithstanding the critique of heretical faith (e.g., Gnosticism) that was launched by early Church fathers such as Tertullian, Tolstoy recognizes that other leaders in the Church (particularly, in its intellectual and theological branches) continued to oppose the spirit to the flesh. Because these leaders failed (refused?) to recognize that what constituted the spirit of Christianity was the ethical practice of observing the moral law or the golden rule, the only way in which they could demonstrate their moral and spiritual (not to mention social) superiority was through the repression and the oppression of the flesh. In reading the Bible, however, the elite members of the Church quickly noticed that they could defend their view of the spirit (their interpretation of Christianity) solely by willfully ignoring the biblical message. They could not defend the hierarchal status of their spiritual positions on the basis of the “essential theses,” Tolstoy notes, of true Christianity: “the direct relation of each person to the Father [i.e., to God] and, following from that, the brotherhood and equality of all men, resulting in the replacement of all forms of violence by humility and love” (44). Thus, they turned to a view of nature based upon ancient Greek teleology in order to defend their rank and status. However, because this version of Christianity amalgamated the Greek notion of natural beauty with the biblical notion

of infinite goodness, there arose, Tolstoy observes, a deep-seated misunderstanding of the Christian religion, one that established a “heavenly hierarchy,” a great chain of being similar to that in pagan mythology that “set up blind faith in the Church” as the essence of Christian teaching (44). From the point of view, then, of Church Christianity, those works of art were considered good that reinforced the hierarchal chain of command within the Church, whose elite members, out of fear for the loss of their fortunate status, sought to blind adherents by impugning the question: What is Christian? Any poem or painting, for example, that presented a dualism between heaven and earth—as the blinding opposition that supported the prevailing hegemony—or that portrayed the goal of religion as the triumph of the spirit over the flesh “was considered good; art that was opposed to that was all considered bad” (45).

Tolstoy then explains that it was an easy transition for those who, given the perversion of this version of Christianity, “had already lost faith” in the Christian teaching to abandon religion and return “willy-nilly to that pagan worldview which locates the meaning of life in personal pleasure” (47). Tolstoy suggests that, given the lack of correspondence between the Church’s teaching and the teaching of Christ, educated Europeans soon became disenchanted with the Church. Nonetheless, the members of the upper-class who supported the arts could not accept the “moral, social teaching of Christ,” for such a teaching “would deny them the prerogatives,” the hierarchal status, “by which they lived” (48, 46). Thus, the means by which the art-world operated were redirected away from religious institutions. Because, then, artists and art-lovers were now deprived of religion—or so it would appear—as the source not only for their artistic subjects but also for the principles of their aesthetic critique, they and those who supported them became attached to immediate feelings of pleasure (or taste) as the basis from which to assess the quality of works of fine art.

But, as Tolstoy has already indicated and as I shall continue to show, taste invariably relies upon relativistic criteria that can provide no basis for a critique of anyone's aesthetic judgments. "Essentially," Tolstoy concludes, the majority of upper-class people "did not believe in anything.... And yet the power and wealth were in their hands, and it was they who encouraged art and supported it" (46-7). So art "was evaluated not by how well it expressed [true] feelings" resulting from the consciousness of human equality, "but only by how beautiful it was – in other words, by how much pleasure it afforded" (47). Thus, in supplanting religion and morality with the ideal of beauty (i.e., pleasure), the upper-classes threw the people into perplexity. For, noticing that patrons of the arts revered those artists and artworks that lacked any moral content, a person learning of the arts could reconcile the opposition between beauty and the good only by "lowering in [one's] consciousness the significance of morality" (143). The attitude that extolled pleasure (beauty) as the ultimate aim of life (the good) wound up, therefore, perverting the relationship between morality and the formal appearances of art such that morality became recognized "as a backward thing" that could have "no importance for people of a high degree of development" (143). Tolstoy's rejoinder to this attitude is sopping with bitter distaste. Indeed, he writes, "People who do not recognize Christianity in its true sense, who therefore invent various sorts of philosophical and aesthetic theories for themselves which conceal from them the meaninglessness and depravity of their lives, cannot think otherwise" (125).

The ironies, however, that follow from abjuring morality in favor of pleasure (immediate happiness: beauty, as it is conventionally understood) are manifold. First, it is crucial to point out that the ancients—e.g., the ancient Greeks—whom, Tolstoy observes, the aesthetic elite cite as the authoritative source for their aesthetic theory—never claimed to harbor any knowledge of the good or of the beautiful as they were in themselves (48). Thus, Tolstoy states, "in order to justify

this new [modern] science” of the aesthetics of immediate pleasure, “the ancient teaching on art” had to be “reinterpreted [by modern theorists] in such a fashion as to make it seem that this made-up science had also existed among the Greeks” (49). The claim of eighteenth century aestheticians (and their successors) that the ancient Greeks represent the highest ideal of mankind—revered as examples of the good and the beautiful life for modern man—contradicts the ancient Greeks’ own claim that, given the teleological nature of reality, they do not know these ideals as they are in themselves. Thus, modern aestheticians had to manipulate Greek texts in order to make them accord with their own inconsistent (contradictory) aesthetic positions. In other words, the ancient Greeks would never have claimed to locate the good and the beautiful in their own texts or culture; that claim can only be made by modern theorists. The first irony that arises, then, for those who wish to locate the standard for aesthetic judgments in immediate feelings of pleasure is that the texts that they proclaim to be the source for this point of view openly contradict their claims.

The second irony, however, that follows from reducing art to a subject of mere taste may be even more astonishing for those who hold the conventional view that art serves no other purpose than to add to the pleasures of its viewers. For it is surely acrimonious to those who support this view to point out to them that their apparently secular position mirrors the notion of art put forward within “Church Christianity.” In rejecting the efforts of the Church to project the thing-in-itself (the reality of God or the soul) outside the world as the *telos* of nature, the art-world, espousing private taste, wound up simply relocating the thing-in-itself in the world by identifying it with one’s immediate feelings. That is, in failing to distinguish between Greek notions of beauty and biblical notions of goodness, the art-world also failed to distinguish between the religious consciousness of true Christianity and the false consciousness of

Christendom, which embodies what Tolstoy calls a religious cult. Thus, he reports that people interested in the arts typically confused “the concept of religious cult with the concept of religious consciousness,” and thought that by rejecting the cult they were thereby also rejecting the consciousness that emerges out of the Bible (125). Knowing, then, that science could not provide any criteria for evaluating the quality of works of art (seeing clearly that the arts belonged to the realm of human subjects and not to that of empirical objects) and yet in being deprived of the morality of religion (which apparently had been discredited as authoritarian), artists and their patrons undertook to locate beauty in the worldly satisfaction that could be mirrored in any work that served to gratify the immediate interests of those viewing or experiencing it.

But the art-establishment thereby wound up reproducing the hierarchal structure of the Church that they had sought to replace. For, as Tolstoy observes, in touting leisure, listlessness, and bliss as the ideal of art, the aesthetic elite noticed that in order for them to enjoy these pleasures they must remain idle. Yet, in order for them to remain idle, they were beholden to labourers, who must not be idle. The aesthetic elite could maintain their social status, not to mention their sense of moral or spiritual superiority, only by maintaining the hierarchy between themselves and the uninitiated mob, who, because they agreed that the goal of life was universal pleasure, were prevented from ever universally enjoying works of art. Yet again the piercing clarity of Tolstoy’s response to this view of art—the aesthetic ideology that reduces beauty to immediate pleasure—is breathtaking: “I know,” he writes,

that according to an opinion widely spread in our time religion is a superstition which mankind has outlived, and it is therefore supposed that in our time there exists no religious consciousness common to all people according to which art could be

evaluated. (125)

But, he continues, “all these attacks on religion and the attempts to establish a world outlook opposed to the religious consciousness of our time”—which involves acknowledging that the good of our lives “consists in the brotherly love of all people” without exception—“are the most obvious proof of the presence of this religious consciousness, which exposes the life of people not in accord with it” (125). The bitterest irony of all for those who reduce art to private taste is that their very rejection of the Church (religion) as authoritarian demonstrates the impassable force of the religious, the consciousness of human equality, and exposes their own view of aesthetics to be shallow, empty, and false.

Thus, when Tolstoy undertakes to articulate the true basis for aesthetic judgment, he does so by distinguishing “the feeling produced by art from all other feelings” derived from what is naturally pleasing (119). That is, we can and must judge a work of art “according to whether the work conveys feelings coming from the love of God and one’s neighbor, or merely those simple feelings that unite all people” (138). Tolstoy indicates, in other words, that works of art reveal to us that we can test out our feelings—we can decide what we truly feel—only from the point of view of biblical love (which he aligns with the “simple feelings” that unite all human life). That is, we cannot and must not derive the motivation for our feelings from the empirical conditions in which we find ourselves. But it is important to see, then, that, in founding his concept of art upon the basis of feelings that emerge from the practice of love, Tolstoy reiterates Kant’s demonstration in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* that our feelings cannot be derived from alien causes (i.e., from nature) but, instead, must be founded upon the will to treat people as ends in themselves and never merely as means to an end.⁵ Tolstoy is able to overcome the dualisms that plague aesthetic theorists precisely because he founds his view of art upon the

metaphysics that he (like Kant) aligns with the moral teaching of the Bible. Thus, Tolstoy succeeds not only in placing aesthetics upon an ethical basis, but also in exposing the aesthetic feeling involved in the ethical consciousness for which he is arguing.

What Tolstoy's account of the history of fine art reveals to us, then, in summary, is that central to developing a comprehensive account of modern aesthetics is learning how to distinguish between ancient (Greek) teleology and biblical thought in order to form a proper understanding of the relationship between the spirit and the flesh. For, just as Church Christianity had failed to provide a principle for the evaluation of works of art by exalting those works that blindly praised the good of the soul (as opposed to the beauty of the flesh), so the art-world, whose secularization appeared to have mandated the opposition to religion, failed to provide a principle for aesthetic judgment, as we have seen, in blindly praising those works of art that highlighted the beauty of the flesh (as opposed to the good of the soul). What we shall now find, in light of an analysis of the failure of Kant's aesthetic theory and of the success of Hegel's account of fine art, is that, in order to provide oneself with a proper concept of subjectivity as well as aesthetics, one must identify the standard of modern art with the principle of absolute love, which both Tolstoy and Hegel align with Christian (I would say, biblical) morality.

ii. Kant

In the "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment" Kant fails to see that the content of art does not belong to—and cannot be derived from—the experience of objects but, instead, must be judged (viewed, identified) according to the principles of human practice. Because Kant fails to adhere to the very ontology that he presupposed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and that he demonstrated in the *Critique of Practical Reason*—and because he does not undertake to

position modern art in relation to the fundamental difference between ancient Greek and biblical thought—Kant’s account of both art and art criticism flounders in self-contradiction.

After Kant reiterates the distinction between the theoretical understanding of the objects that we know and the practical comprehension of the subjects that we love (i.e., rationally desire), he tells us in the Introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that, “although there is an incalculable gulf fixed between the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom,” as the intelligible, “so that from the former to the latter... no transition is possible”—though freedom, he reminds us, is realized through its practice “in the sensible world”—there nevertheless exists an intermediary between these two domains (5:176). This intermediary is the faculty of judgment, which is determined by feelings of pleasure and pain. He then refers to this faculty as a reflecting, as opposed to a determining, power of judgment. For, instead of proceeding by synthesizing human experience according to necessary, universal, and *a priori* concepts, the reflective power of aesthetic judgment proceeds by “ascending from the particular in nature to the universal” (5:180). Because, however, this type of judgement attempts to establish universal concepts by reflecting on the formal aspects of those objects that are agreeable to the senses, this power still belongs “to the faculty of cognition [i.e., to the knowledge of objects] alone” (5:169). In other words, Kant attempts to found the principles of aesthetic criticism on an analogy with sensible experience. However, because, as Kant then notes, whether we find an object agreeable or not depends on subjective conditions that vary from person to person and that are constantly changing within our own lives, he indicates that neither concepts of the understanding nor concepts of practical reason—the “only two sorts of concepts” that exist—belong to the domain of the power of judgment (5:171). He

argues that, in short, there are no concepts or principles governing this faculty. Thus, he defers to one's "taste" as that which determines one's faculty of aesthetic judgment.

"This embarrassment about a principle," Kant observes, "is found chiefly in those judgments [sic!] that are called aesthetic, which concern the beautiful and the sublime in nature and in art" (5:169). Although he laments this lack of principle, he proceeds, in his own aesthetic theory, to repeat the error that leads to it by founding his theory on an analogy with the senses through reflective judgments, which he later aligns with the power of the imagination as the faculty of comparison.⁶ It is critically important, then, before I continue with an analysis of Kant's account of fine art, to distinguish between how we today conceive of the power of the human imagination and the way in which Kant uses the term.

Kant uses the term "imagination," following the tradition of seventeenth century thinkers, including Descartes and Pascal, to refer to the ability to reproduce sensations (e.g., pictures) associated with material things, whether internally or externally. (Both Descartes and Pascal, however, castigate those who make this faculty the basis for their judgments.⁷) It is not until the early nineteenth century that the concept of imagination undergoes its historic revolution under the pen tips of Romantic poets (e.g., Wordsworth) who use the term "imagination" (alongside fancy and conceit) to express the power of men and women to create a better world from nothing found in their experience of it. Imagine!

Additionally, then, it is critically important for our purposes here to note that Kant's notion of the power of the imagination bears no relation to Stevens' concept of that power (as we shall see). Instead, what Stevens calls imagination Kant calls practical reason or thinking, the endeavor to evaluate the true worth or worthiness of existence on the basis of fundamental principles. For Kant, however, the power of the imagination reflects the ability to enlarge a

concept “which by itself stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept, hence which aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way” (5:315). Only “in this case,” Kant concludes, is the imagination “creative” (5:315).

That is, for Kant, the imagination is “very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it” and in accordance with analogous laws (5:314). But what does it mean, we ask, that the imagination “aesthetically enlarges” concepts through an analogy with material things? In endeavoring to resolve this question, we learn that the imagination, for Kant, does not create anything—from nothing—but involves increasing the measure of objects of possible experience beyond what is immediately sensible in an attempt to portray what he describes as the ideal of beauty, which, however, “rests on reason’s indeterminate idea of a maximum,” which “cannot be represented through concepts” (5:232). The ideal of beauty remains indeterminate and indeterminable precisely because it is founded upon an analogy with what is agreeable to the senses. As Kant observes—and as we saw him demonstrate in Chapter 1—there is no way to understand what represents the maximum state of pleasure or the ideal of happiness in any determinate way on an empirical basis. Because, then, our representations of this ideal remain analogies (similes) for beauty itself, they reveal that they are not in themselves beautiful, that they do not represent beauty as it is known in itself. Thus, the ideal of beauty describes, Kant notes, “something that we strive to produce in ourselves” and in our images “even if we are not in possession of it” (5:232). Kant appears, then, to embrace the contradiction. Because this maximized state of the feeling of pleasure—the ideal of beauty—remains indeterminate, the imagination is unable to produce any determinate presentation of it. According to Kant’s theory, the imagination’s power describes the contradictory ability to demonstrate its own impotence.

Because Kant does not see that art belongs to the domain of practical reason or that practical reason is an aesthetic venture, he proceeds to reduce aesthetic judgment to a subject of “taste” through a direct analogy with one of our physical senses.⁸ (Indeed, his use of “taste” to describe the faculty of aesthetic judgment reflects the exact contradiction involved in his concept of imagination. For “taste” describes, through an analogy, that which is not determined through concepts and so, as an analogy, it fails to determine anything specific about the faculty of judgment that it seeks to describe.) “The definition of taste,” Kant writes, “that is the basis here is that it is the faculty for judging the beautiful” (5:203). But, “in order to decide whether or not something is beautiful,” one must relate the aesthetic representation of the object “by means of the imagination... to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure,” i.e., its taste (5:203). Nevertheless, as we have seen and as Kant repeatedly points out, given that our feelings of pleasure or displeasure are determined by shifting empirical conditions, one’s immediate tastes cannot provide any universal standard for aesthetic judgment. According to this model, we do not judge an object to be beautiful by referring to a determinate concept of beauty but, instead, we establish our concept of aesthetics by reflecting on our feelings of pleasure or displeasure, “whose determining ground **cannot be other than subjective**” (5:203). These subjective conditions do not designate anything at all in the object. They describe, rather, what the subject feels in relation to how it is affected by the representation of the work of art. But, as we shall continue to see, Kant thereby finds himself caught betwixt a false (indeterminate) ideal of beauty and no concept of beauty at all.⁹

In other words, Kant supplies us with a sophisticated presentation of the theory of art for art’s sake. The objects of art, according to this theory, do not serve any function or purpose other than to elicit pleasure in the subjects experiencing them.¹⁰ But, to repeat, because the empirical

conditions that produce feelings of pleasure are constantly changing, on this basis there are no criteria by which to judge what one likes or dislikes. Instead, one's judgments are determined by internal feelings prompted as a response to those representations that agree with whatever provides us immediate pleasure. Thus, as we say, tastes change. Indeed, what is implied in Kant's model of aesthetics is the idea that the mind (human judgment) conforms to objects.

Not only is it stunning to observe, then, that Kant has here contradicted the basic principle from which he launched his revolutionary assessment of metaphysics (ontology). But it is also stunning to realize that, because Kant has not developed any criteria according to which one can decide what one truly likes or dislikes—i.e., according to which one can evaluate one's own tastes—there can be nothing at all about one's taste that is uniquely one's own. That is, there can be nothing truly individual about one's likes or dislikes, nothing truly unique to one's self or to one's life, when they are modelled upon internal feelings that are dictated by the objects of experience. In the absence of a concept or standard of beauty, we end up simply deferring, in deciding upon what is to our taste, to the common consensus, the popular judgments of whatever clique or clan in which we find ourselves, whether that is the Nazi party of fascist Germany or the Indie scene of modern day Toronto. In turn, the common consensus or status quo of any group is defined by whatever serves the pleasure of its members. Those, then, whose pleasures are served first and foremost become the leaders of these artistic milieus and, thus, are put in positions of authority, which serve to add to the means by which these leaders are able to feel pleasure, which, as in any vicious cycle, further serves to cement their authority in the eyes of laboring adherents to the movement. Nonetheless, because there is no determinate concept of the beautiful here, the hierarchal establishment is constantly restructured as the conditions of the group change. No one is exempt, indeed, from the power of a hegemonic structure to crush the

individuals within it, not even in the art-world. The theory of art for art's sake, in failing to provide a principle of aesthetic critique, simply lapses into a stratified view of existence in which the individual is nowhere to be found.

The embarrassment that Kant feels, he admits, over his failure to formulate a principle for aesthetic judgment solicits his attempt to link synthetic experience with *a priori* ideas in his account of the ideal of beauty. But he does not connect synthetic and *a priori* judgements according to any concept, here, whether theoretical or practical. He is adamant that the laws or rules that he aligns with *a priori* aesthetic judgments are not determinate or determining at all (5:191-2). Instead, these "*a priori*" rules are determined according to the consent of others who are in similar circumstances as oneself. That is, while he agrees that, according to what each of us finds agreeable to our senses, the statement, "**Everyone has his own** taste (of the senses) is valid" (5:212). He states, "With the beautiful it is entirely different." For,

It would be ridiculous if... someone who prided himself on his taste thought to justify himself thus: 'This object... is beautiful **for me**.' For he must not call it beautiful if it pleases merely him.... This would be as much to say that there is no taste at all, i.e., no aesthetic judgment that could make a rightful claim to the assent of everyone. (5:212-3)

Kant thereby vacillates between merely formal and conceptual criteria for evaluating beauty, unable to reconcile these two camps (the form and the concept) on the basis of the false ontology that he has heretofore introduced. We find ourselves, therefore, when reconstructing Kant's aesthetic theory, not in the life-preserving bonds of a paradox but in the life-threatening entanglements of a contradiction. While Kant claims that that there is no determinate concept of beauty, for it is tied to our immediate feelings, he also wants to claim that a concept of beauty can be formulated on the basis of what is "agreeable in general" (5:213). Thus, while he argues

that beauty is in the eye (or upon the palate) of its beholder with regards to what is agreeable to the senses such that no one is able to claim rightfully that one's judgments are universally valid, he does not appear to want to admit that, according to his theory, judgements of artistic beauty are no different.

Notwithstanding his insight that no determinate concept of beauty can be gleaned from an analogy with the senses, Kant continues to argue that we can claim universal validity for our aesthetic judgments based on the observation that if others found themselves in the very same situation they would take pleasure in the same objects and representations (artwork) that we do. Thus, Kant tells us that, in communicating our tastes, we demand universal assent when we decide that an object is beautiful or not. Yet, he then candidly reports that “those who make [aesthetic] judgments [according to their tastes] do not find themselves in conflict over the possibility of such a claim [to universal validity], but only find it impossible to agree on the correct application of this faculty in particular cases” (5:214). That is, because everyone agrees on the universal validity of taste, no one can agree upon what satisfies us universally. Although—indeed, because—all agree that the object of art is to elicit the feeling of pleasure in its subject, we are not able to agree upon what satisfies this objective. In sum, because what satisfies one, some, or many inevitably excludes others whose subjective conditions differ, what comprises the concept of beauty—the feeling of immediate pleasure—remains dependent on empirical conditions. Therefore, rather than unifying us, the concept of beauty that Kant develops gives rise to the total disagreement amongst ourselves about whether an object is beautiful or not.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant himself takes the animadversion to basing one's judgments upon immediate feelings a step further. For he notes that even if we could establish

complete unanimity amongst ourselves regarding those conditions that serve our immediate pleasure, “this unanimity itself would still be only contingent” upon the time and the place of our agreement (5:26). Because, then, in his work on aesthetics, Kant begins with immediate feelings of pleasure and pain from which to develop his ideal of beauty, as that indeterminate idea of a maximum state of bliss, he proceeds to argue, as we shall see, that the ideal of beauty is a spiritual idea that the flesh (as presented in a work of art) can never represent adequately. But what must be surprising to readers who have diligently worked through Kant’s first two *Critiques* is that, once again, he has contradicted the ontology of human judgment (with which he aligned the faculty of desire) that he previously set forth in these works. That is, in relegating aesthetics to the realm of experience, Kant appears to have forgotten his demonstration in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the attempt (the desire) to locate the root of our desires—our likes and our dislikes—in our immediate feelings cannot have its source in empirical nature but only in the human will.¹¹

It is additionally striking that, because Kant defers to the common consensus (*sensus communis*) as that according to which we can claim universal validity regarding our judgments of taste, he thereby gives up all grounds for public critique. Indeed, just as there is nothing truly individual about one’s “taste,” so there is nothing truly public about these popular judgments of beauty. What Kant is describing, then, when he defers to the common consent of others in order to generate a universal standard of taste, is what I am calling the theory of art as social utility, the theory that art serves the good by uniting us around what we can all agree generates universal harmony or happiness. As we have seen, however, this appeal, because it relies on empirical conditions, cannot account for all people in all circumstances. Thus, in aiming at unity, it serves, instead, to disunite us. In order for our aesthetic judgments to be truly public, i.e., for these

evaluations to withstand the test of publicity (to invoke Kant's own concept), they are required to take into account the dignity and worth of every individual, that is, to respect the absolute value of human existence. In other words, in order to ensure that the basis for our aesthetic judgments is adequate, we are required to test our judgments against that which can be made public by asking whether or not the maxim that underlies our judgment can be made into a universal law. Thus, Kant is not, in his treatment of aesthetics, equal to his own demonstration in his essay on the Enlightenment—*Was ist Aufklärung?*—that what is social is founded not upon the judgment of the many (the mob) or the few (the guardian-elite) but upon the principle that supports one and all, which, as the “touchstone of anything that can serve as a law over a people,” he writes, is decided by asking “whether a people could impose such a law on itself” (8:39).

What is inexplicable, then, is that Kant gives up any claim in the “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment” to rational, aesthetic criticism. Instead, his theory of art as a matter of mere taste prevents us from even raising the question regarding the legitimacy of our aesthetic judgments. Although Kant claims that the imagination, in judging what is beautiful, spans the gap between the understanding and reason, he does not provide his readers with any basis for deciphering what this means—except that upon which he began: the feeling of pleasure in accordance with a formal rule “with regard to which [one] expects confirmation not from concepts but from the consent of others” (5:216). But this consent, as we know, remains entirely subjective or relative—based upon an agreement of the object with the subjective conditions of those experiencing it. Kant finds himself mired, then, in self-contradiction. For, because he provides no universal standard for a critique of one's aesthetic judgments, he surrenders the right to claim here, as he does, that pleasure—that taste—is the right basis for the evaluation of works of fine art. To view taste as the foundation of aesthetics is, as Kant notes in regards to what is

agreeable to the senses, “as much to say” that there is no basis for our judgments of artistic beauty at all (cited above).

In developing my critique of Kant, I want to make sure to note, however, that the problem is not taste in itself. My aim in highlighting the multiple contradictions of Kant’s aesthetic theory is not to put forward the idea that one ought to have no tastes, inclinations, or preferences. The point that I am making here is that we cannot base our evaluations of good and bad art upon our likes and dislikes—i.e., upon our tastes—without eliminating the difference between good and bad art. What we like and dislike must, instead, be judged according to a principle by which we evaluate the true worth of an aesthetic work. Indeed, all of us want art to be entertaining. But what counts are the criteria according to which we decide what entertains us or bores us. That is, I want to show that we cannot judge the value of works of art according to what we find to be entertaining; rather, we must judge what we find to be entertaining or boring according to a determinate concept, a principle, of what constitutes the richness, fullness, depth, and integrity—the value—of a work of art.

Because Kant can provide no basis for a critique of one’s own tastes, he, unlike Tolstoy, ends up uncritically reproducing the dualisms involved in the theories of the beautiful and the sublime that had been outlined by prior aestheticians (e.g., Baumgarten). In the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” for example, Kant reiterates that to judge the beauty of an object involves relating the object to the subject by reflecting on whether or not the subject is satisfied. This satisfaction is determined, however, by contemplating the ends that serve to unify the empirical conditions of ourselves and others and so prompt a feeling of pleasure. What serves as the rule here is the “rule of approval” or custom, i.e., that which people in general—although not all people at all times—find to be satisfactory guidelines for attaining pleasure (5:237). An art-object thereby pleases

“for itself” and not to satisfy the interests of our physical needs. Nevertheless, the pleasure derived from our experience of works of art, as founded upon a simile with our natural appetites, is elicited, Kant tells us, from the excitation of a desire in us (i.e., an appetite) for natural objects of the same sort.

When Kant turns, then, to the ideal of beauty—what he calls the “highest model” and “archetype of taste”—he finds that, as indeterminate, his ideal requires that the form of the object go beyond what is normal or average and that the representation of this ideal be felt to be in harmony with the “highest purposiveness” of the human subject (5:232-5). Thus, the ideal of beauty is particular to the human form, the highest purpose of which, we are told, is moral. Kant describes this purpose as the “goodness of soul, or purity, or strength, or repose, etc.” (5:235). However, because the visible expression for this goodness—the representation of these virtues in works of art—is drawn from experience, it is not possible for art to embody these ideals. That is, because these virtues are founded upon the indeterminate idea of a maximum state of pleasure, these ideas exist outside human experience altogether. The contradiction, then, involved in Kant’s analytic of the beautiful is that the ideal—by which, above all, we judge artistic beauty—is not aesthetic. The grounds of all aesthetic judgment, we learn, are not aesthetic at all, not judgments of pure taste.¹²

The full implications of this contradiction are demonstrated when Kant turns to his “Analytic of the Sublime.” He begins this section by attempting to distinguish the sublime from the beautiful. The sublime, we are told, represents that which is “absolutely great” and limitless (5:250). Thus, the sublime represents that which goes beyond any conception of a finite maximum. The sublime ideal presents us with that which knows no comparison and that before which, therefore, everything beautiful in life appears ugly. Nonetheless, he proceeds to construct

his idea of the sublime on the grounds of a comparison with the finite, i.e., through an analogy with physical magnitude. “**That is sublime,**” he writes, “**in comparison with which everything else is small**” (5:250). Kant conceives of the greatness of the sublime not according to any infinite (practical or moral) standard, but according to an analogy with the ends of nature. Thus, Kant’s notion of the sublime ends up representing a state of total and limitless satisfaction. However, what we find in seeking this sublime state of total satisfaction is that it cannot exist within the sensible conditions of life. Thus, we discover, in light of this ideal, that we lack what we seek. Because to desire is to lack what you desire, in order to continue to desire an object we must continue to lack it. Thus, we must, in self-contradiction, desire to lack what we desire in order to continue to desire the sublime.

Kant discovers, therefore, that “the superiority” of an object, that is, its sublimity, “can only be judged in accordance with the magnitude of the resistance” that it provides its subjects (5:260). What we take pleasure in, when confronted with the sublime, is how an object demonstrates the inadequacy of life and our pleasure in it. What pleases us is whatever resists the determination or representation of the idea (of sublime enjoyment). Thus, Kant writes, the feeling of the sublime “is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers” of life (5:245). The sublime, we are told, deserves to be called a “negative pleasure” (5:245). For “an object is taken up as sublime with a pleasure only by means of a displeasure” (5:260). According to Kant, because life remains forever unsatisfactory before the sublime, sublime art involves revelling in the lack of pleasure experienced in life. Thus, one takes pleasure in those objects that cause us no pleasure at all, indeed, that cause us displeasure or pain. Hence, the sublime involves “a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object” (5:258). One is repulsed by one’s

attraction to it, and yet that very repulsion is the cause of one's continued attraction to the object. In sum, the vicious contradiction involved in Kant's notion of the sublime is that, according to this concept, the ultimate pleasure in life—to realize the sublime—is to be rid of all pleasure in life, i.e., to be dead to existence. The sublime attitude to life, Kant observes, expresses “our power... to regard those things about which we are concerned (goods, health and life) as trivial” (5:262).

What we learn, in analyzing Kant's concepts of the beautiful and the sublime, is that, when our notion of art is modelled on mere taste, aesthetics becomes self-contradictory. Because the ideas of beauty and the sublime—through which, Kant writes, the “mind is incited to abandon sensibility and to occupy itself with a higher purposiveness”—are not sensible and because art is “after all, always restricted to the conditions of agreement with [sensible] nature,” artists are unable to present us with any images for what comprises the aesthetic ideal (5:246; 5:254). What can only satisfy us about art is the consciousness of its own inadequacy. What we come to love in art, according to this theory, is the demonstration that there is nothing at all worthy of love in life (or in art!). Thus, Kant has provided us, in his notion of the aesthetic ideal, simply with another version of the contradiction that the imagination is creative only insofar as it can showcase the inadequacy of all human images.

Although Kant holds that “the **art of poetry**... claims the highest rank of all,” for it is through the poetic word that “the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure,” he also reports, not two paragraphs later, that the imagination involved in poetry lets “one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words” (5:326; 5:314-5). Kant's concept of the power of the imagination typifies his contradictory conception of aesthetics. For the imagination involves ideas that “no language fully attains or can make intelligible” (5:314). But

these very words, then, in which words are said to be inadequate for communicating one's point, are meaningless. The paradoxical irony of Kant's statement that words are incapable of expressing true (or sublime) meaning is that his words, in meaningfully communicating his contradictory point, show his own statement to be untrue.

Indeed, Kant gets into trouble, in formulating his aesthetic theory, even prior to writing one word of the first edition of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* when, instead of analyzing the history of art in terms of the distinction between ancient Greek and biblical images, he tacitly accepts Baumgarten's understanding of the concept of "aesthetic" as defining the study of fine art. In short, like Baumgarten, Kant confuses the term "aesthetics" (which refers to the science of sensation and relates to immediate perception) with the concept of art.¹³ Thus, consistent with the leading aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century, Kant relegates aesthetic criticism to the thoughtless domain of subjective feelings. Because, therefore, he remains stranded betwixt a false (vague, indeterminate) ideal of aesthetic beauty and no concept of beauty at all, that is, because he introduces a gulf between the appearance (the form) and the concept of beauty, his work on aesthetics sets a rather beguiling trap for his readers and for Kant scholars.

For example, in *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, Andrew Bowie suggests that Kant's work on aesthetics "lies in establishing how the deterministic natural world... relates to the world in which we understand ourselves as autonomous beings. The third Critique," Bowie continues, "tries to suggest ways of bridging the divide between these apparently separate worlds" (16). However, this work thereby threatens, we are told, "to undermine the essential tenets of the first two Critiques" in attempting to avoid foundering "on the problems that become apparent" in these earlier works (16). Thus, Bowie aims to show how Kant, in his project on aesthetics, undertakes to resolve what he calls the "dualisms of appearances and things in themselves, of

sensuous and intelligible, [and of] nature and freedom” that result, he holds, from the arguments involved in Kant’s first two *Critiques* (46).

But Bowie thereby exposes the shortcomings not of Kant’s critique of pure reason but of his own understanding of the twofold standpoint. There is no imaginable gap or division between nature and freedom in Kant’s philosophy (as we know). To suggest that Kant’s work in aesthetics threatens the legitimacy of his twofold position—his ontology or metaphysics—does not suggest an inadequacy in Kant’s first two *Critiques*; rather, it exposes the inadequacy of one’s own understanding of the relationship between freedom and nature that Kant had established in his critical philosophy.¹⁴ The irony here is that the supposed gap that commentators, like Bowie, attempt to close using Kant’s aesthetic theory is irreconcilably introduced not in the first two *Critiques* but in the First Part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. The irony of this position expands, moreover, when we see that the apparent alternative—the attempt on the part of scholars to reduce Kant’s critique of pure reason to an exercise in legitimating the natural sciences and so to ignore Kant’s aesthetic theory altogether—only serves to lay bare the same dualistic and false understanding of the relationship between nature and freedom that underpins the work of these scholars and commentators. The trap set by Kant’s aesthetic theory lies waiting to ensnare both those Kantians who enthusiastically praise and those Kantians who uncritically dismiss (ignore) his work on aesthetics. Paradoxically, then, Kant’s aesthetic theory remains ever so important for Kant scholars. For, in order to avoid these traps, it remains critically important to distinguish between the true ontology (metaphysics) of Kant’s rational critique, in which objects conform to the mind (as set forth in his critique of purely practical reason) and the false dualism presupposed by his aesthetic theory, in which the mind (i.e., human desire and judgment) is dictated by objects.¹⁵

Yes, Kant does hold in the “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment,” as we have already seen, that aesthetics engages morality. Indeed, he entitles the penultimate section of the First Part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, “On beauty as a symbol of morality.” It would appear, then, that the goal of Kant’s theory of aesthetics is in agreement with the aim of this study: to establish the relationship between ethics and art. But, as Hegel reminds us in his *Lectures on Fine art* (to which I shall turn momentarily), in taking up the view that the end or aim of art is moral perfection, “we must [ever, eternally] ask what specific standpoint of morality this view professes” (52). If art involves seeking a *telos* of which human beings, whether individually or socially, are forever incapable and thus of which art is incapable of ever adequately representing, then works of art become entangled in the contradiction of representing the insignificance of their own representations. For Kant, as we have now seen, the concept of morality that arises from his treatment of aesthetics falls prey to the indeterminate illusion of (finite) happiness. Thus, in reducing art to a utilitarian ideal (i.e., to divine harmony or universal pleasure)—in failing to see that engaging a work of art is an ethical venture—Kant is unable to articulate in his work on aesthetics an adequate conception of what constitutes the end, the goal, the good not only of art but also of social or ethical practice.¹⁶

In the judgment of this reader, Kant’s aesthetics does not threaten the legitimacy of his work on theoretical and practical reason. The threat arises from the failure of his readers—our failure—to work out for ourselves the necessary relationship between thought and existence, the spirit and the flesh, the concept and the content that is presupposed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and demonstrated in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant himself is careful to distinguish his critique of theoretical and practical reason, on the one hand, from his theory of aesthetics, on the other. Indeed, in concluding his Preface to the *Critique of the Power of*

Judgment, Kant makes it clear that he does not consider his aesthetic theory to be fundamental to his philosophical doctrine, which rests upon the metaphysical (and moral) distinction between theoretical and practical reason (5:171). Thus, Kant's theory of aesthetics challenges readers to distinguish—at once rationally and ardently—between Kant's twofold standpoint, on the one hand, and dualism, on the other, in order to avoid becoming divided against themselves in their commentary on his transcendental philosophy.

In summary, what we learn from an analysis of Kant's concept of aesthetics is that art becomes a parody of itself—in its self-contradictory recognition of its own inadequacy—unless it enacts the very ideas that it espouses. Unless a work of art not only names certain values but also enacts them for its viewers—and so displays for them what it means to embody those values in their own lives—it will continue to serve a notion of the good modelled on universal happiness that, because it is incapable of any determinate representation, only serves to exhibit the ridiculousness of both art and life. In addition, we discover that in order to continue to appreciate the revolutionary insight of Kant's metaphysical critique we must reject the very basis—the chasm between the appearances of artistic form and the soul of artistic content—upon which he launches his aesthetic theory. To read the “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment” is to discover that we cannot formulate either a consistent account of aesthetics (art) or a proper concept of human subjectivity (ethics) unless and until we realize that, just as metaphysics is metaphorical, so the content of art bears a metaphysical structure that testifies to the existence of human freedom.

iii. Hegel

In the *Lectures on Fine Art* Hegel begins by pointing out the errors—indeed, the one-sidedness—involved in the two ways in which students are typically introduced to a study of the arts. Before turning to an analysis of Hegel’s commentary on Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself, I want to begin by recounting these two ways in which, Hegel reports, the arts are generally (albeit, falsely) treated. For the two ways of presenting a study of the arts that Hegel highlights embody the two theories of art that I am working to deconstruct and to overcome: the theory of art for art’s sake and the theory of art as a social instrument, both of which, as we saw, are embedded within Kant’s presentation of aesthetics and aesthetic judgment. As we shall see, Hegel is able to advance, in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, both a consistent (non-contradictory) concept of human subjectivity and a non-contradictory (paradoxical) concept of aesthetics precisely because he remains committed to the ontology of human freedom that Kant put forward in his first two *Critiques*.

The first way in which students are typically introduced to a study of fine art, Hegel reports, is through a survey of various artistic movements. These movements are differentiated, we are told, by attending to the form and technique (in addition to the place and the time) of the artist. Thus, this survey “has the *empirical* for its starting-point” (14). Although, Hegel observes, an appreciation of form and technique (and so a knowledge of the infinite variety of artistic movements, genres, and sub-genres) is necessary for an evaluation of fine art, he points out that this method does not provide its students with any grounds or foundation from which to assess the point of view (the concept and the content) presented in works of art. That is, consistent with the theory of art for art’s sake, a survey of art’s sensuous or formal appearances is unable to provide any insight into, any universal criteria for evaluating, what a work of art means for us,

except by appealing to the feelings that it evokes, which differ from person to person. This “reflection on feeling is satisfied [then],” Hegel argues, “with observing the subjective emotional reaction in its particular character, instead of immersing itself in the thing at issue, i.e. in the work of art, plumbing its depths, and in addition relinquishing mere subjectivity and its states” (33).

Alternatively, however, Hegel continues, studies of art, in giving up on developing a historical perspective, become submersed in abstract contemplation of the universal concept of beauty, putting aside an analysis of particular works of art altogether. That is, the second way in which students typically encounter an evaluation of fine art is through a study of the numerous apologists for the idea of beauty “*in general*” (22). “But this treatment of the beautiful by itself,” Hegel contends, “in its idea may itself turn again into an abstract metaphysics,” a metaphysics without any determinate concept or content, a metaphysics that “can satisfy us no longer” (22). For contained in this notion of aesthetics, consistent with the theory of art as an instrument unto the good (i.e., the theory of art as social utility), is the dualism between the spirit (the idea) and the flesh (the appearance), which results not in the reconciliation of the concept with the content of a work of art but in a reciprocal battle of one against the other. “In this opposition,” Hegel notes, “one side is regarded as cancelling the other and since both are present in the subject as opposites, he [apparently] has a choice” (53). To be good or moral, then, according to this idea, is to choose the spirit in opposition to the flesh. But what this spiritual uplifting involves, “because [the human subject] now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another,” is demonstrating one’s moral (beautiful, aesthetic) superiority by retaliating “on nature the distress and violence which it [one’s moral superiority] has suffered from itself” (54).

Although I shall not undertake to provide here a comprehensive overview of Hegel's philosophy of aesthetics, I do want to highlight what I understand to be the key moments, the critical concepts and distinctions, that underlie the ontological and historical components of his concept of art as I continue to explore and to expose the implications, both philosophical and poetic, of seeing that the thing-in-itself is a metaphor. In addition, I want to underscore Hegel's true grasp of Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself, which he develops in Part 1 of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. What we shall discover is that Hegel is able to overcome both of the conventional (yet false) ways of studying fine art—and to deconstruct the dualisms that underpin the theory of art for art's sake and the theory of art as social utility—precisely because he remains committed to showing, with Kant, that the very possibility of dualism (including the dualism inherent in Kant's concept of aesthetic judgment) demonstrates the justice of Kant's transcendental philosophy of will, desire, reason, and freedom.

Indeed, Hegel showcases, in the *Encyclopedia*, his thorough comprehension of the revolutionary metaphysics that underlies Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself. After highlighting Kant's subtle but sure distinction between that which is “transcendent” and that which is “transcendental,” Hegel notes, consistent with Kant, that when reason attempts to use the categories through which we understand natural processes “for its determination of the *thing-in-itself*, or the infinite... it *flies off* (and becomes ‘transcendent’)” (§46). The categories, he writes, “are [thus] unfit to be determinations of the Absolute, which is not given in perception; hence the understanding, or cognition through the categories, cannot become cognizant of *things-in-themselves*” (§44). From the point of view of the understanding, then, the content of thinking appears empty. Yet, as Hegel notes, even this *caput mortuum*, this dead end, this nothingness “is itself only *the product* of thinking” (§44). That is, the emptiness of the thing-in-itself—the

recognition of the emptiness of all those seductive illusions that pretend to present us with knowledge of things as they are in themselves—presupposes (exposes) that all of us think. Indeed, even “emptiness” here is an image, one that cannot be conceived on the basis of categories that apply to sensible objects. The limit to what we can know of an object—the idea that we must eschew all knowledge of things as they are in themselves in favour of what appears before us—demonstrates the very necessity of thinking as a human subject.

Thus, Hegel states, “we ought not to stop at this negative result, or to reduce the unconditioned character of reason to the merely abstract identity that excludes distinction” (§45). For, on this view,

reason is regarded as simply going beyond the finite and conditioned character of the understanding, it is thereby itself degraded into something finite and conditioned, for the genuine infinite [the thing-in-itself] is not merely a realm beyond the finite; on the contrary, it contains the finite sublated within itself. (§45)

Although knowledge of the thing-in-itself cannot be derived from the appearances (the finite), Hegel points out that that the thing-in-itself can be known only in those appearances. There is a difference, we learn, between the recognition of the appearances as the result of natural causes and the interpretation of the appearances as the revelation (embodiment) of the thing-in-itself. Still, that “difference” cannot be known in light of the appearances but, instead, can only be thought by adopting another point of view. For, as Hegel points out, if we project the thing-in-itself beyond the appearances in a way that reflects how objects succeed one another, we will continue to reduce the thing-in-itself to finite categories. The infinite is not that which is beyond the finite in a spatial or temporal way. Rather, it describes the point of view from which we analyze, probe, justify, redeem, mediate, or sublata—both deny (limit) and affirm—the

appearances. In other words, “beyond” here is an image that will continue to remain contradictory and impenetrable to us unless and until it is revealed as a metaphor for the limits of human knowledge and understanding. The only way to overcome the “old metaphysics” in which the thing-in-itself is conceived according to categories that apply to what we perceive through the senses is, Hegel points out, by limiting, together with Kant, all knowledge to the appearances. Yet, as both Kant and Hegel demonstrate, limiting the understanding to the objects of space and time (to nature) involves demonstrating, at one and the same time, that one is beyond understanding as a “thing” that thinks. That is, one never goes beyond the appearances. Rather, to go “beyond” involves overcoming the conventional ways in which we think, the conventional practice of founding our judgments upon the appearances by rethinking the foundation, the point of view, from which we judge what appears before us. To go “beyond,” we learn, involves overcoming the conventional ways of thinking about that which is “beyond” us.

To think, then, of the thing-in-itself—“and here ‘thing,’” Hegel notes, “embraces God, or the spirit, as well”—is to enact, to embody, the very image of the *Ding an sich* (§44). To think about the appearances—the images of Hegel’s own text, for example—is to prove that the basis for human existence is not finite but infinite. What Hegel calls “sublation” in the philosophical terms of the *Encyclopedia* he describes in his *Lectures on Fine Art* (as we shall soon see) as the “transition” to Christianity, to infinite spirit or consciousness, the more common name for which is human activity: the act of appropriating the sensible conditions of our lives according to—of making them accord with—our principles and values. Hegel shows us, in other words, that the thing-in-itself, as infinite, describes the point of view from which we judge the appearances as the expressions of human will, thinking, desire, or freedom, all of which (as we know) involve the moral imperative to treat human beings as ends (persons) and never merely as means

(things). Thus, Hegel concludes his overview of Kant's metaphysics—in which he is careful, it is true, to distance himself from what he views as the skepticism of those devout Kantians who misunderstand the implications of the “Kantian philosophy”—by stating that philosophy owes Kant an infinite debt. For, while “theoretical reason is for Kant merely the negative faculty of the infinite, and... ought to be restricted to insight into the finite aspect of empirical cognition; in contrast with this restriction, [Kant] expressly recognised the positive infinity of practical reason, specifically by ascribing through *willing* the faculty of determining itself in a universal manner, that is to say, through *thinking*” (§54).

It is because Hegel remains committed, then, to the ontology that Kant establishes in the first two *Critiques* that he is able to avoid the snares, in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, that entrap so many of Kant's commentators. As Hegel observes, Kant's appeal to a common consensus in his attempt to establish a universal standard for the concept of beauty remains entirely subjective and relativistic. As Hegel puts it, the relation between the concept and the sensuous intuition (the form) of a work of art in Kant's theory of aesthetics does not overcome but reiterates the opposition between the spirit (the concept) and the flesh (the content), albeit in new terms that solicit a contradiction between subjective tastes (immediate moods, feelings, inclinations) and objective criteria (e.g., the indeterminate idea of beauty). Hegel sees, in other words, that Kant's theory cannot provide any basis for a critique of aesthetic judgments. Still, he notes, we can “recognize Kant's philosophy [of aesthetics] to be inadequate” only on the basis of Kant's revolutionary insight that reason, freedom, and self-consciousness are infinite, i.e., only on the basis of Kant's own demonstration that it is the ethical practice of human beings that constitutes metaphysics (56). Indeed, he writes, “this feature [of Kant's philosophy] is not to be refuted,” for it is the “recognition of the absoluteness of reason in itself,” the recognition that reason is its own

(ethical) standard of critique, that “has occasioned philosophy’s turning-point in modern times” and thus must serve as one’s “absolute starting-point” (56). It is in light of the ontology that underpins Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself, therefore, that Hegel proceeds to show that modern art involves the affirmation of the infinite, individual subjectivity of each and every human being, which he sees as originating with Christianity (i.e., with the image of the God-man) and not within the structure of what he calls the classical art of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Indeed, Hegel clears up Kant’s mistake right from the outset of his *Lectures on Fine Art*. Rather than claim, with Kant, that aesthetic criticism is derived from one’s experience of pleasure (the domain of objects), Hegel observes that “the beauty of art is *higher* than nature. The beauty of art,” he writes, invoking the biblical concept of rebirth, “is beauty *born of the spirit and born again*” (2). Nevertheless, he notes, “what is *higher* about the spirit and its artistic beauty is not something merely relative in comparison with nature” (2). Thus, he puts us on notice that the spirit is not “higher” in any spatio-temporal way. Yet, he remains adamant that the beauty of nature and the beauty of spirit are distinct, that nature and spirit do not share the same ontological status. Indeed, he tells us that because of its “purely sensuous immediacy, the living beauty of nature is produced neither *for* nor *out of itself as beautiful*” (123). That is, nature does not describe its own organization as beautiful. *We* do. Thus, “The beauty of nature is beautiful only for another, i.e., *for us*, for the mind which apprehends beauty” (123). The paradox of the beauty of the natural world is that it can be recognized as beautiful only by a nature—only from a point of view—other than its own.¹⁷

The beauty of nature, therefore—the description of nature as beautiful—demonstrates that human subjectivity possesses a different ontological structure than that of nature; that is, as

Hegel proceeds to point out, the recognition of nature's beauty involves us in self-conscious reflection such that "man draws out of himself and puts *before himself* what he is" (31). In contemplating the wonders of nature, "man" sees that "he *is* as things in nature are" and yet that "he is just as much *for* himself; he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the strength of this active placing himself before himself is he spirit" (31). Thus, while things "in nature are only *immediate* and *single*," human beings are duplex, compound, twofold: both themselves and other than themselves. "The universal need for art," Hegel continues, "is man's rational need" to place himself before himself, to view himself in and through his own opposite or other: in sum, "to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self," which man accomplishes, Hegel notes, through "*practical* activity" (31). But what does that mean or entail? What does it mean that art, as Hegel puts it, reconciles the spiritual and the sensual, the universal and the particular, the (sublime) concept and the (everyday) content by embodying the spirit of human practice? In short, if not nature, "what, then, is the *content* of art and why [or how] is this content to be portrayed?" (46) For Hegel points out that distinguishing between nature and spirit is no guarantee that one truly understands the "nature" of this distinction.

Embedded within Hegel's question about the content of art is the recognition that, because the "difference" between the spirit and the flesh cannot be conceived on the basis of categories that apply to natural objects, no work of art can be produced without natural images. The meaning of a work of art—the work of art (the thing) itself—cannot be communicated outside of its similes with nature (the appearances of the flesh). "But nevertheless," Hegel states, "the work of art, as a sensuous object, is not merely for sensuous apprehension; its standing [i.e., its structure and status] is of such a kind that, though sensuous, it is essentially at the same time

for *spiritual* apprehension;” therefore, “the spirit is meant to be affected by it and to find some satisfaction in it” (35). To view a work of art—as the creative product of man’s duplex (thoughtful) human nature—is to be engaged in one and the same process as that involved in thinking through (in re-viewing) the concept of the thing-in-itself, which is known, as we have seen, only in the appearances. To engage a work of art involves interpreting the appearances from a point of view that is other than, that is not contained in, the appearances, one that upholds, therefore, the difference between persons (infinite human subjects) and things (unthinking natural objects).¹⁸

Indeed, Hegel shows us that unless we formulate for ourselves a principle for our aesthetic judgments, one that encapsulates the relationship between the spirit and the flesh, we shall continue to misunderstand both the concept and the content of art by imposing a contradictory (natural) opposition between them. The sole way that we can reconcile, we learn, the concept and the content—the spirit and the flesh, thought and existence—is in seeing that the spirit (the meaning) of a work of art, although known only in the appearances, cannot be apprehended on the basis of those appearances, but that those appearances must be comprehended, paradoxically, on the basis of an ethical structure of values. Thus, Hegel states that “art’s vocation is to unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition” between the (universal) spirit and the (individual) flesh, “and so to have its end and aim in itself in this very setting forth and unveiling” (55). Indeed, sharing this vocation with philosophy, art shows us, he writes, “how truth is just this dissolving of opposition and, at that, not in the sense, as may be supposed, that the opposition and its two sides *do not exist at all*, but that they exist reconciled” (55). The images of works of art thus operate not according to the rule of identity or the law of contradiction but, instead, according to a

conception of identity that preserves the individual integrity of the two “sides” that they are comparing. In other words, images—those images true to the metaphoric spirit of modern art—must embrace the transcendental logic of “dialectic,” in Hegel’s terms.

As Hegel points out in the *Encyclopedia*, what it means to think about the process of cognition—what it means to think about thinking—is to investigate and to determine both the limits of what we can know and the defects that result from transgressing these limits, which, he notes, “is the same activity of thinking” that he will take into particular consideration “under the name ‘dialectic’” (82). Yet, as we know, even the “limit” of knowledge must be understood as a metaphor that embraces its dialectical opposite. The limit doubles, metaphorically, as the passage through which we demonstrate our commitment to thinking through the distinction between the absolute value of persons and the relative value of things. The concept of dialectic or dialectical truth that Hegel advances is so powerful and so empowering precisely because, as we see, it must be understood in and through a dialectic. Moreover, Hegel’s conception of art—as the unveiling of the truth of dialectic, the revelation of dialectical truth—is invaluable to a study of art and philosophy for the very reason that we learn, through Hegel, that the dialectic of (philosophical) truth is identical with the structure of (poetic) metaphor.

What Hegel shows us, then, in his Introduction to the study of fine art is that works of art join philosophy in exposing the language, perspectives, and assumptions with which we view them and the world about us. They teach us not only to see but to see how we see. In embodying the dialectic of truth—the truth of dialectic—works of art do not provide a vision of what is absolute, Hegel notes, “by means of particular natural objects as such, for example, the moon, the earth, the stars, etc.”; for such things, “are isolated and, taken by themselves, cannot provide a vision of the spiritual” (102). Rather, a good work of art, in bringing into existence a set of

relationships that are not immediately natural, allows “for no purely sensuous relationship” to it (39). Thus, Hegel writes, explicitly contradicting Kant’s aesthetic theory, “what is agreeable for [the] senses is not the beauty of art” (39). Instead, the beauty of art is that it contradicts (transgresses) nature; thus, works of art show us that the relations inherent within them cannot be comprehended, without contradiction, through an analogy with natural objects or processes. “In this way,” Hegel continues, “the sensuous aspect of art is *spiritualized*, since the spirit appears in art as made *sensuous*” (39). But, as we know, what is “made” flesh or “made” sensuous is not purely or immediately sensuous. Instead, to recall the metaphor with which Hegel began, works of art embody the rebirth of the spirit by transgressing the laws of nature in identifying natural opposites with one another.

Yet therein lies the rub. Because works of art show us that the attempt to apprehend their content on the basis of the appearances transgresses (contradicts) the appearances of nature, even this “transgression”—this fall from the natural state of immediate identity with nature—cannot and must not be understood in any natural or finite way. The images of art—metaphors—are limited and limiting. Metaphors set their own limits by revealing that they cannot be known as they are in themselves. Any attempt to know a metaphor in itself—its meaning or spirit—through the appearances of nature (through the very appearances involved in a metaphor) results in transgressing the limits of human knowledge and producing what Kant called the dialectical illusions that are, and forever remain, the responsibility of transcendental reason. That is, a metaphor, in capturing the truth of dialectic, shows us that it is responsible for its own transgressions, that it is responsible for showing us how to comprehend its own “transgression” as the product (responsibility) not of finite nature but of the infinite nature of human beings.

In other words, an analysis of Hegel's concept of art shows that, in using natural elements, works of art expose for us what is not natural or sensuous in the scene. For what works of art demonstrate (ineluctably) is that it is impossible to present nature as independent of man or man's images. Engaging a work of art, then—e.g., interpreting a metaphor—involves asking not only how we see it but also how it sees us: what is the idea of the human expressed in and through the relations, the two sides or objects, brought together within it? Through engaging a great work of modern art, one becomes aware that the relations inherent in it do not describe the relations between natural objects but those between and among human subjects. We can and must only judge the appearances, but we cannot and must not judge a work of art based on those appearances. Instead, works of art can and must be comprehended only on the basis of the dialectical truth of human subjectivity.

Not only do great works of art expose for us, then, the non-contradictory (dialectical) relationship between the sensuous (nature) and the spiritual (freedom). But also they show us that we and we alone are responsible for the false images (in biblical terms, the graven images or idols) that we construct whenever we mistake an image for the thing-in-itself or reduce the spirit (meaning) of a metaphor to its appearances. To repeat, a metaphor takes responsibility, we can say, for its own transgressions by showing us that these "transgressions" can only be understood metaphorically. To transgress the limits of metaphor, the limits of human knowledge, involves reducing the creative (thoughtful, willing) foundations of the existence of human subjects to nothing (creative) by imagining human beings in and through a simile with nature. But the paradox of these false images is that they can only be known in and through (as revealing) the dialectic of truth and the truth of dialectic—they can only be known in and through (as) the process involved in the reconciliation of natural opposites. The paradox of idolatry or sin—the

radical root of evil, as we know—is that it continually bears witness to the truth that human subjectivity is (created from) nothing natural—from nothing that is not thoughtful or creative—and that nothing natural provides us with an image of human subjectivity. The contradiction, however, of sin or idolatry (the contradiction embedded, in modern terms, in the sincere belief in one’s own propaganda) is that, in suppressing this paradox, one claims not to have sinned and so takes no responsibility for one’s own transgressions.

In revealing our finitude—the sensuous; the flesh—as our own responsibility, works of art thus show us that it is we human beings who are wholly responsible for the contradiction, the suffering, that results from reducing life to an image of, through a comparison with, the finite. For what a valuable work of modern art shows us—as nothing finite; as that which transgresses all comparisons with the finite; as that whose finite comparisons are revealed to be transgressive—is that the finite is unworthy to serve as the principle (the incentive or the goal) of our actions or creations. In other words, the critical distinction between the spirit and the flesh (freedom and nature) that both Kant and Hegel eternally uphold will forever run the risk of becoming a dualism in which the separation between spirit and flesh is viewed according to an analogy with natural differences precisely because their distinction is not natural but practical (the product of human thought and existence). Thus, Hegel is ever so careful to note that the reconciliatory practice of art does not eliminate grief and suffering. Rather, it demands that we become responsible for that over which we grieve. The beauty of art can only be apprehended through its creative response to its other—its dialectical embrace of the truth of human suffering (ultimately, death and sin). Thus, art is truly beautiful, Hegel notes, when it involves the “transfiguration of grief” by exposing its ground in the human subject (158). What the need for art involves and expresses, we learn, is the necessity to reconcile ourselves with existence by

rejecting the attempt to fulfill life through natural means—which, mistaken for things in themselves, cannot be conceived without contradiction—and by relocating the end of our lives in our fellow human beings.

It is, moreover, because Hegel does not view the relation between the spirit and the flesh in natural terms but, instead, sees that the spirit describes a way of living (in) our relationships with others—because he remains committed to the Kantian revolution in metaphysics instituted through the critique of purely practical reason—that he properly makes the distinction between natural myth (e.g., ancient Greek aesthetics) and modern art. In articulating this difference, however, Hegel disrupts our typical (improper) understanding of what natural mythology entails. After outlining, in his Introduction, the “tremendous difference” between Christian (I would say, biblical) works of art and ancient Greek aesthetics and after indicating that there is no structural difference between the old gods and the new within the ancient Greek pantheon, Hegel warns us that “people have often been deceived into interpreting the Greek gods in their human shape and form as mere *allegories* of the elements of nature,” e.g., when we hear people speaking of Apollo as the god *of* the sun or of Poseidon as the god *of* the sea (80, 471). “This they are not,” he continues. For, such separation “of the natural element, as content, from the humanly shaped personification [of the god], as form... is quite inapplicable to Greek ideas, because nowhere in the Greeks do we find the expression [the god *of* the sun, of the sea, etc.]” (471-2). Hegel is pointing out that there is no distinction, except rhetorically, between nature and soul (*nous*, *anima*) in ancient Greek texts.¹⁹ Apollo (Helios) *is* the sun. There is no “science” to Greek images (as there is embedded, as we have seen, in the execution of a modern metaphor). The gods *are* natural powers. The powers of nature *are* divine. Or, as Hegel puts it elsewhere, for the

ancients (with specific reference to the ancient Egyptians), the activity of spirit is perceived, not thought (354).

Still, it is also important to point out, with Hegel, that the immediate unity between spirit and nature present in ancient Greek art (for example, Greek poetry) results in, and reflects, an irreconcilable opposition within their teleological view of nature. As the immortal spirit of Apollo's divine power, the sun is also *not* what it appears to be. According to the classical ideal, in which divinity is self-contained (represented by an ideal state of self-repose and self-security), the gods, Hegel observes, "appear therefore raised above their own corporeality, and thus there arises a divergence between their blessed loftiness, which is a spiritual inwardness, and their beauty, which is external and corporeal" (483). In reflecting (upon) the good of the soul or immortal beauty, works of art show themselves not to be contemplating, in Aristotle's terms, the good as it is known in itself but to be imitating the appearances, which, in constantly metamorphosing into their opposites, show mortal human beings to be ignorant of things as they are in themselves. Within ancient Greek mythology, therefore, nature remains completely unknown in itself. The ancient myths do not explain nature, as we typically suppose; rather, they showcase its inexplicability. (I shall discuss the contradictory implications of the appearances of ancient Greek myth further in the next chapter when I take up the status of images in the texts of Homer and Plato.)

What is important here is to recognize that no ancient Greek poet or commentator ever uses the concept of "natural mythology" to describe poetry. This idea is wholly our own. Thus, that ancient Greek aesthetics does not embody the act of reconciliation that comprises the subject of modern (or romantic) art is not due to any lack of skill or technology on their part (though it must be acknowledged that the sophistication of their skills and technology is circumscribed

within a certain view of the world that is wholly different from our own). Rather, the complete absence of the practice of reconciliation (metaphor, dialectic) in ancient Greek imagery speaks to a wholly different—and, indeed, contradictory—concept of identity inherent in ancient aesthetics. That art, as the imitation of nature, reflects the contradictory conception of nature (reality) articulated in ancient Greek philosophy is consistent, then, with Hegel’s demonstration that, as depicted in ancient Greek poetry, when divine harmony enters human life and action it appears as an opposition between two parties, whose harmonious pleasure, and thus honor, depend on the dishonoring and so the displeasure of the other. Thus, Hegel concludes, “For all these reasons we need not bring any superstition with us to the enjoyment of [the] poetic portrayal of the gods” in ancient Greek texts (499).

The reason that I continue to insist, in light of Kant (in Chapters 2 and 3) and now Hegel, that there is no science (whether natural or artistic) and so no superstition involved in ancient Greek myth is at once ethical and aesthetic. Importing superstition—as the contradiction of the scientific understanding of nature—into one’s reading of ancient Greek texts exposes a failure on our part to distinguish between biblical imagery (the content of which is moral) and ancient myth, the content of which reflects and is reflected by the contradiction of natural reality. To falsely identify the truth (the meaning or spirit) with its images (terms, appearances, political factions)—transgressing, therefore, both the ethical concept and the aesthetic structure of modern art—involves committing the very error of which the ancients, for whom images never embody the truth as it is known in itself but solely its likeness, are never guilty. Thus, viewing ancient Greek myth as a superstitious explanation of natural events suggests a failure on the part of us moderns to account for our own superstition or idolatry, which is manifest today not in the appearances but in the practice of reducing what is human to what is natural and of projecting

categories that apply to nature onto transcendental concepts (e.g., God or spirit). In other words, it is important not to confuse ancient (pagan, extra-biblical) images and idolatry (false images or propaganda). The Bible is not pitted against extra-biblical culture or its images. Rather, the Bible embraces—it views its own doctrines as enveloping—all nations. As we saw in our treatment of Paul’s letter to the Romans, the Bible views itself as the realization (revelation) of paganism’s secret basis in thought and existence (the image of man revealed in the image of God) unknown in the ancient or pagan world. The Bible is utterly opposed, however, from beginning to end, to the endeavor to become pagan: for example, the attempt to become naturally connected with everything in nature, which at once exalts and humiliates extra-biblical culture. Thus, it is worth repeating that, as we saw in Chapter 1, the only way in which we can and must continue to respect (indeed, to celebrate) ancient culture and images is from a standpoint that is other than—and that does not want to become—pagan. It is ever so important, then, to uphold the distinction between the structure (ontology) of modern images (which can become superstitious or idolatrous by being reduced to a reflection of nature) and ancient images (which, embedded within the teleology of nature, involve a concept of nature that is wholly foreign to our own).

It is equally important, in order to develop a coherent and consistent account of Hegel’s *Lectures on Fine Art*, to recognize that, although Hegel insists that the classical art of the ancient Greeks surpasses what he calls the symbolic art of the ancient East (that of ancient Egyptian and Indian religions), he demonstrates that these two categories share one and the same ontological structure. While Hegel begins his analysis of ancient aesthetics by observing that there is an impasse (opposition) inherent in the symbolism of ancient Eastern art, which draws a simile between the soul and the appearances of the body, he ends his treatment of extra-biblical art by observing that the unity between nature and spirit reflected in the classical art of the ancient

Greeks produces a contradictory opposition between the soul and the appearances from which there is no (known) exit.²⁰ An analysis of Hegel's treatment of symbolic and classical art reveals, therefore, that there is no essential, critical, or historical difference between the symbolic (Eastern) and the classical (ancient Greek) forms of art, both of which rely upon similes whose truth—what nature is in itself: the soul or the mind—eclipses the appearances of its own images. In other words, to read Hegel's lectures on the history of aesthetics consistently involves recalling that the ancient Greeks themselves do not distinguish, either critically or historically, between their own portrait of the soul (as the moving principle of all life) and that of other ancient civilizations. Thus, the exaltation of ancient Greek thought above that of ancient Eastern cultures merely highlights the bias, and, most often, the ontological shallowness, of modern historians. Indeed, this distinction is unknown and unknowable to the Greeks who can recognize their differences from other "Eastern" cultures only by attending to the similarities (similes) between them.

Thus, although Hegel repeatedly states that the ancient Greeks represent the highest rung of artistic achievement, we can recognize these statements as meaningless within a context in which he also demonstrates, first, that the structure of ancient Greek art is identical to that of all other ancient (symbolic) art forms and, second, that within the ancient Greek world "spirit is not in fact represented in its *true nature*" (79). All that his enthusiasm for Greek art shows us, then, is how highly he appreciates the art of classical antiquity. Thus, his praise for ancient Greek art demands, paradoxically, that we take seriously his claim that the artwork of the ancient Greeks does not evince any understanding of what we today mean by spirit. For the ancient Greeks, the sensuous is the model for and mode of union with the spiritual. As Hegel puts it, in classical art the unity between divine nature and human nature, "just because it is only immediate and

implicit, is adequately manifested in an immediate and sensuous way” (79). Abandoning this principle (the rule of identity: simile), Hegel observes, “the romantic form of art cancels the undivided unity of classical art because it has won a content which goes beyond and above the classical form of art and its mode of expression” (79). This content, he continues, “coincides [instead] with what Christianity asserts of God as a spirit, in distinction from the Greek religion...” (79).

Thus, Hegel continues to show in the body of his *Lectures* that modern (what he also calls “romantic”) art did not originate within the structure of ancient Greek aesthetics. That is, as he puts it in the title for one of his early sections on modern imagery: “The Transition to Christianity is only a Topic for Modern Art.” I want to be sure to note, however, the paradox involved in this title. Because Hegel shows that the act of reconciliation involved in modern art (what I am describing, generally, as metaphor) does not arise from the ancient Greek notion of aesthetics, because he insists, in other words, that the transition to Christianity is not a topic found within the ambit of ancient Greek art but only within the imagery of modern art, he equally demonstrates for us that there is no transition from natural mythology to modern metaphor. That is, consistent with his repeated claim throughout his mature works that there is no transition from the finite to the infinite, Hegel shows us that in order to characterize ancient similes as natural myth—as the mythology of nature—we must already be beyond the immediate unity of the soul and nature. Thus, “transition” here cannot be conceived on the basis of an analogy (a simile) with natural processes in space and time. Rather, this “transition” is a metaphor for the practical effort on the part of modern human beings to render natural myth—the similes of nature—creative by showing that human thought and existence are created from nothing natural, from nothing found in natural mythology. “Transition” bespeaks the creative

human practice of overcoming the contradictions that arise from viewing human thought and existence—from viewing modern art—through the lens of natural opposition. Modern art, as we know, effects this transition by revealing that even the transgressions through which we reduce the images of modern art to their immediate similes with nature bear witness to the infinite status of human existence. Modern art, we can say, is both the beginning and the end (as embodying the “transition” involved in Christian or biblical imagery) through its paradoxical relation with natural mythology. But modern art is thus equally biblical (Hegel calls it Christian) in both its concept and its content. In other words, biblical imagery—the Bible itself—is fundamentally modern from the very beginning, as we shall now see.

In light of the paradox involved in this “transition,” the paradox embedded, as I have shown, in the dialectical structure of metaphor, it is little wonder that Hegel is particularly concerned to point out that the content of romantic art originates with the “history of God made flesh” (506). Thus, Hegel proceeds to describe the “transition” through which modern (romantic) art becomes what it is—the expression of infinite, human subjectivity—as the “self-transcendence” of aesthetics. For, as we have already seen, Hegel indicates, in his Introduction, that the point of view from which we can and must interpret the content of works of modern art—in their dialectical truth—cannot be derived from their immediate appearances. We can only understand art—e.g., metaphor—as “infinite negativity”; in other words, works of art reveal the finite to be nothing in itself by involving us in a contradiction when we try to interpret the meaning of their images (what they are in themselves) through their appearances (109). Nonetheless, as Hegel reminds us, the dialectical truth of art, “in the being of its other with itself,” is still “a unity with itself and therefore is the freedom for which all negation is only self-determination and not an alien restriction imposed by something else” (109). A work of art

reveals, in transgressing nature, that the transgressions through which it serves to expose the nothingness of the finite are not the products of nature but of self-determined and self-determining (free) human subjects. The point of view of a great work of art—in which the lion and the lamb lie creatively with their natural born enemy—can only be comprehended as (exposing) the content of human freedom through which the flesh is made good, through which nature is rendered creative.

Although Hegel focuses on Christianity, he indicates that the history of God “made” flesh begins (ontologically) with the opening of Genesis in the Bible. That is, he discovers that he can explain the beginning of Christianity only by way of reference to its history, its beginning, in Judaism. Because, he writes, “the anthropomorphism of the Greek gods” remained sensuous, their portrayal in Greek art “lacked actual human existence, whether spiritual or corporeal” (505). Thus, “Christianity alone [sic!] introduces this actuality in flesh and spirit as the determinate existence, life, and effectiveness of God” (505). Not only do the ancients lack, Hegel indicates, a true concept of the spirit, but they also lack a concept of what we mean by the flesh or existence, as embodied in modern works of art. Hegel then turns immediately—in order to introduce what it means that actual human existence was revealed in and by Christ—to the concept of creation that opens the Bible. Although Hegel does not see the historical implications of the paradox involved in his own double-beginning for the relationship between Judaism and Christianity—for one to be true the other must be true; the truth of the one can only be known in and through the truth of the other—his insight into the ontological structure of creation is profound.²¹ For, he writes, “Just as man was originally the image of God,” citing Genesis 1.26-7, “God is the image of man” (505). The profundity of the beginning of the Bible—both Jewish and Christian—is that it shows us that we cannot begin with God without beginning at one and the

same time with human beings, without being a human being engaged in working out one's origins, the foundations and grounds, the beginning, of one's life. The profundity of being human, however, is that, because we do not begin outside of a history of beginnings, we cannot begin to work out or to conceive of this history without positing an origin that is prior to all experience of natural beginnings, all beginnings in nature that can be known only relative to preceding and succeeding events. The beginning of God cannot be conceived, thought, revealed, believed... without presupposing a relationship with human beings, in the beginning. The beginning of human beings, which remains hidden from view within the endless chain of causes and effects, cannot be conceived, loved, willed, desired... without presupposing a relationship with divine existence.

In other words, the image of beginning with which the Bible opens, and that at once implicates both divine and human existence, cannot be imagined on the basis of an analogy with natural space and time. The image of God's creation can only be conceived, instead, in and through the image of human creativity, just as the image of human creativity (authorship, responsibility, work) can be conceived only in and through the concept of a divine relationship that abjures all comparisons with natural relations. The beginning of both God and human beings must be conceived as nothing natural—as nothing found in or reducible to the nature of space and time. The beginning of nature remains an eternal secret buried in the *omphalos* of its endless cycles—unless and until we resolve, with Copernicus (as Kant indicated), to look for its locus not in things themselves but in the thought (will, motivation, creativity) of the human subject. But we see, then, why Hegel began his exploration of the history of the incarnation with the concept of creation. For what the concept of creation reveals is that the individual, human being begins from nothing natural, that the beginning (human conception) is not natural but divine.

The concept of beginning that is made central both to the story of creation and to the story of the incarnation is dialectical, in Hegel's terms. For these narratives show us that the truth of divine being can be known only in and through (as) the truth of human existence and that the truth of human being can be known only in and through (as) the truth of divine existence. The image of the God-man, then, like the image of creation, involves us in working out the dialectical truth of both the flesh and the spirit. Indeed, as the Christian exegete Tertullian is so concerned to point out in his work *On the Flesh of Christ*—written as a direct rebuttal of the theology of Marcion, who viewed Christ's flesh (his birth and death) as unbecoming to God—the being of God cannot be known outside of its human appearances. In other words, as Hegel also notes, God cannot be known outside of the litany of human experiences, at once unique and universal: birth, family relations (i.e., relations with parents, siblings, and/or others in charge of one's care), education (including the task of paying for it), relations with one's neighbors, individual desires (the responsibility that follows from being conscious of one's appetites), suffering (both physical and existential), and death. The truth of human being, however, can only be lived insofar as we become responsible for these experiences as human practices, as experiences that engage us in the demand to distinguish between persons (with a dignity) and things (with a price). The truth of human being can only be conceived, that is, in and through (as) divine being. But it is equally true that the truth of divine being can only be known in and through (lived as) human existence—as the practice of founding one's life upon the principle that is brought into existence through the revelation that God and human beings begin from nothing but a concept of relationship in which neither one is either relatively (naturally) primary or relatively (naturally) secondary.²²

Thus, Hegel writes, “the determinate being of God is not the natural and sensuous as such but the sensuous elevated to non-sensuousness, to spiritual subjectivity” (520). The flesh is comprehended, we learn, not in and through itself but only as the expression of “self-aware subjectivity,” as the responsibility of the “knowing and willing” human subject (520). The image of the God-man thus bears the very structure of (what I am calling) metaphor, just as the metaphorical image can and must be understood as at once divine and human. The human and the divine, united in and through their metaphorical image, are not two halves of a whole. Rather, built into the structure of creation and incarnation is the idea that we can maintain the wholeness or integrity of both divine and human nature only by recognizing that each can be known as true only in and through the other. Since, Hegel continues,

the actual individual man is the appearance of God, art now wins for the first time the higher right of turning the human form, and the mode of externality in general, into an expression of the Absolute.... The different moments which constitute the totality of this world view as the totality of truth itself now therefore find their appearance in man in such a way that content and form are not afforded either by the natural as such, as sun, sky, stars, etc., or by the beautiful group of Greek gods...; on the contrary, it is the actual individual person in his inner life who acquires infinite worth, since in him do the eternal moments of absolute truth, which is actual only as spirit, unfold into existence and collect together again. (520)

Thus, Hegel formulates the ontological and historical basis for what he calls the principle of infinite subjectivity. The everyday experiences of man—birth, labour, and death—become the sublime appearances (the flesh) of God when we view them from the perspective that recognizes the absolute or infinite worth of each of the individuals present in them and witness to them. The

content of a work of art can only be known by attending to its form. But its form, the structure of which transgresses nature, can be seen to bear its content only insofar as we recognize that this content must be of same nature, at once divine and human, of its creator or author. That is, the content of a work of art can be assessed—its defects and successes can be truly accounted for—only from a point of view that upholds the ethical principle of infinite, human subjectivity.

In working out the dialectical truth of the image of Christ, Hegel is fully prepared, then, to reconcile the religious (concept) and the secular (content) that is embraced in true works of romantic art. Indeed, because of his commitment to the truth of dialectic, to the dialectic of truth, Hegel indicates, consistent with his account of creation in which the truth of God can only be revealed in and through the image of man and the truth of man can and must be revealed in and through the image of God, that the truth of the religious can only be known in and through the secular. He writes that, because “the Divine had to objectify itself, determine itself, and therefore proceed out of itself into the secular content of subjective personality,” this process of “self-transcendence” involves modern art in stripping away “from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus* its new holy of holies: i.e., the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows” become both the concept and the content of art (607). But Hegel also continues to hold, then, as he says explicitly in his lectures on the philosophy of history, that the truth of the secular, the truth of what constitutes our humanity, can only be known in and through (as) the religious principle, which he articulates, in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, as the principle of infinite subjectivity.²³ Both the religious and the secular can be known to be complete, in other words—their wholeness and integrity can be truly maintained—solely insofar as we continue to recognize that just as the true content of the religious is secular so the true concept of the secular is religious.

Hegel thus weaves, out of the thread of creation, a web of interconnections between and among the religious and the secular, the divine and the human, the sublime and the everyday, the spiritual and the sensuous, the content and the form, and the absolute and the moment (united as the fulfillment of one's time in and through the absolute knowledge of the infinite worth of individual human subjects). I shall leave to my reader, for reasons of economy, the task of working out the relational truth of these dialectical pairs, all of which Hegel reconciles in and through the principle of infinite subjectivity. Still, it is important for me to point out, in order to ensure that each of us fully grasps the dialectical truth of this principle, that subjectivity, as Hegel conceives it, is both a social (communal) and an individual enterprise. Subjectivity is not given in any of the facts of one's life, whether physical or cognitive: for example, the time and date of one's birth, one's age, appearance, sex, sexuality, genetic inheritance, experience, I.Q., etc.. Rather, the subject is a concept of relationship. Subjectivity describes the way in which each of us embodies the idea that the individual—that every individual—is of infinite worth within the particular set of relationships and circumstances in which we find ourselves (when it does not signal our failure to do so). Indeed, subjectivity marries both what is unique and what is universal about human existence—and thereby eschews the Janus-faced contradiction involved in both dogmatic and skeptical views of the human subject (not to mention both positivistic [objectivist] and relativistic [subjectivist] concepts of art). The practices that are unique to each of us and for which each of us is uniquely responsible—birth, labour, death—are universally human. Yet, precisely because these tasks belong to everyone universally, they can be known in their uniqueness (separately from their natural contingencies) only insofar as they are lived on the basis of a universal principle that accords all people an infinite worth.

It is equally important for me to point out, in order to show how an analysis of Hegel's principle of aesthetics divulges the very thesis of this study (the dialectical relationship between ethics and art), that Hegel's conception of the dialectical truth that comprises at once the concept and the content of a work of art bears the very structure of ethics, as Hegel himself indicates. The spirit, he notes, the absolute content of art, can become conscious of itself only in and through "its opposite, i.e. its existence" (518). Yet, as we know, the shape and structure of what Hegel calls the "new form" of romantic (as opposed to classical or symbolic) art prevents us from drawing an analogy between its content (existence: the flesh) and its natural or immediate appearances. In romantic art, Hegel writes,

infinite subjectivity is not lonely in itself like a Grecian god who lives in himself absolutely perfect in the blessedness of his isolation; on the contrary, it emerges from itself into a relation with something else which, however, is its own, and in which it finds itself again and remains communing and in unity with itself. (533)

Because we cannot conceive of the spirit in its relationship with existence through any similes with nature, because the spirit's task is to know itself, to find *itself*, in and through its dialectical opposite, the existence with which the spirited subject is constantly engaged can only be conceived as that of another human being (another human subject). The existence in and through which the human subject finds its own uniqueness and integrity is the existence of the other. Thus, Hegel writes, "We may therefore name *love* as the general content of the romantic" (533). For, in love, "the spirit's opposite is not nature but itself a spiritual consciousness, another person, and the spirit is therefore realized for itself in what it itself owns, in its very own element" (541). Love, then, as the dialectical process involved in reconciling the appearances of contradiction (the contradiction that emerges from founding one's view of the self or of others

upon the appearances), becomes both the material and the ground, both the concept and the content, of modern art. From the point of view of absolute love (the love of what is absolute about being human), we learn that the concept of modern art is its own content, just as the content of love is its own concept (that which it thinks as its very own). Love—as the principle of infinite subjectivity—can and must be known only in its appearances, yet it cannot and must not be judged on the basis of those appearances. Rather, its appearances must be judged, tested, probed, redeemed... such that they are shown to bear witness to their own dialectical ground, their foundation in a relationship that begins with neither one outside of the other. In order for one to be loving, one must want to be loved—eternally, abidingly, creatively—by others. For one's actions to be loving, one must treat others as one would want to be treated (loved) by others.

It is evident, then, why I make Hegel's characterization of art—as the dialectical process that I have aligned with metaphor—central to my presentation of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, in which I am arguing that for one to be true the other must be true, that the truth of the one can only be known (shown, developed, demonstrated) in and through the other. For just as Hegel has explicitly shown that the very structure of art is ethical, so he has also implicitly revealed that the very nature of ethics is aesthetic. For the good to exist it must appear. But it can only appear in and through the aesthetic (creative) structure of metaphor, which reveals that the appearances are not good in themselves but must be made good through the dialectical relationship that transforms those appearances into the expressions of love. In other words, ethics, as a practice, involves working out the nature of our feelings. While our feelings can be experienced only in a sensuous way, they can and must be worked out—we can and must suss out our “true feelings”—only by marrying our own feelings with the feelings of others on

the basis of the collective feeling of our individual worth or dignity. A great work of modern art—whether famously celebrated or relatively unknown—does not, we learn, merely evoke feelings in us but changes our feelings toward existence and toward the particular issues that confront us in it. The “change” or “transition” through which works of art are brought to life is effected, then, in and through what Hegel (echoing Kant) calls a “change of heart” (548). This “change,” however, does not describe a change of form (modelling the changes of nature) but involves the revelation that we can maintain our form as human beings—our integrity—only insofar as we come to realize the sin involved in reducing the products of men and women to the products of nature and therein take ownership of our transgressions as our responsibility.

Thus, an account of Hegel’s *Lectures of Fine Art* provides me with a fitting end both to this chapter and to Part 2 of my study. For an analysis of Hegel’s concept of aesthetics shows us that, just as ethical practice must be made beautiful (creative) in order to be truly ethical, so artistic practice must engage our most fundamental human values (the ethics of sin and redemption) in order to be truly beautiful. The paradox embedded in the principle of infinite subjectivity is that it provides us with a normative standard for which there are no behavioural norms. Rather, subjectivity is its own (ethical) standard, the standard for discerning what is true to human subjects and what falsely reduces human existence to objective (finite, natural, hypostatic) categories. Hegel provides us with a principle in light of which we can avoid either collapsing beauty into the good (consistent with the theory of art as social utility) or absorbing the good into beauty (in league with the theory of art for art’s sake).

Not only, however, does Hegel resolve the dualistic opposition between the good and the beautiful with which (in light of Tolstoy) we began. But Hegel also shows us that it is only by becoming other than mere Kantians that we can maintain our commitment to the revolution in

metaphysics that Kant advances in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. As Hegel argues, Kant's philosophy constitutes the starting-point for the true comprehension of aesthetics, "yet only by overcoming Kant's deficiencies [in his theory of art] could this comprehension assert itself as the higher grasp of the true unity of necessity and freedom, particular and universal, sense and reason": flesh and spirit (61). As we saw in our analysis of Kant's concept of aesthetics, Kant is unable to provide any principle or standard for judging the beauty of art precisely because he bases all aesthetic judgment upon feelings of immediate pleasure. Thus, Kant introduces in his aesthetic theory an irremediable gulf between the immediately formal content and the immediately transcendent concept of a work of art. Still, it remains forever important for those interested in going no further than Kant's critique of purely practical reason to distinguish his philosophical demonstration that metaphysics *is* ethics from the dualisms that plague his "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment." For, as I have shown, it is only by distinguishing between Kant's critical philosophy and his aesthetics—only by becoming other than mere Kantians—that we can both liberate aesthetics from self-contradiction and, at the same time, save the principle of ethics from becoming confused with the principle of happiness.

In sum, what we learn from Hegel's *Lectures* is that we must not pretend, in dogmatic fashion, that we can ever stop asking the question, with Tolstoy: *What is art?* For the apparent contradictions involved in works of modern art reveal that we cannot answer the question of art by pointing to the immediate appearances of any particular work. Thus, every work of art worthy of being a human product raises the very question of how we conceive of its content: *What is art?* But we also learn, with Tolstoy behind us, that we must not pretend, in skeptical fashion, that there can be no answer to this question. The question of art can be asked meaningfully only

by those who see that probing the content of modern art demands that they work out, at the same time, a conception of themselves as human subjects (as opposed to natural objects). What great works of art show us is that we can liberate ourselves from our enslavement to our immediate feelings or inclinations (the subjectivism of taste) solely by discovering, with the eyes and ears of metaphor, how these works expose for us the principle of infinite subjectivity (or absolute love). In other words, we can develop a true conception of the content of both art and the human subject (ourselves) only by remaining committed to the dialectical or metaphoric truth central to both aesthetics and ethics.

Thus, although Hegel claims to find a hierarchal order of rank among philosophy, theology, and art (with philosophy taking first, theology second, and aesthetics third place on the podium), he also holds that because the “realm of fine art is the realm of *absolute spirit*,” whose destiny is freedom, “art belongs to the same province as religion and philosophy” (94).²⁴ Thus, he writes, “in its content, art stands on one and the same ground as religion (in the stricter sense of the word [i.e., as the divine act of serving our fellow men and women]) and philosophy” (101).

As we have seen in Part 2 of this study, while our humanity can be truly realized along philosophical, religious, or artistic avenues, it cannot be realized without critique—as the practice, at once historical and ontological, of liberating ourselves from the illusions that result from reducing the thing-in-itself (i.e., the content of philosophy, religion, or art) to a category of nature. Yet, as we have also discovered, we cannot be critical in any meaningful way—either historically or ontologically—without demonstrating our resolution to treat all human beings as ends in themselves and never merely as a means to an end. In Part 3 of this study, I shall continue to show, within the context of an investigation of Stevens’ poetry, that we can become

true critics of both philosophy and poetry only insofar as we remain committed to showing that, just as the concept of ethics is aesthetic in its structure, so the content of art is ethical from its very conception.

¹ The First Part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (first published in 1790 and then republished, with additions and revisions, in 1792) is entitled “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment.” Given the focus of this study, I do not discuss the Second Part of this *Critique*, in which Kant concentrates on the teleology of nature.

² For my purposes in this chapter (above all, to expose the relationship between ethics and aesthetics), I shall limit my discussion of Tolstoy to an examination of his late work *What Is Art?* In focusing on *What Is Art?*—the sole work in which Tolstoy undertakes a systematic presentation of his concept of aesthetics—I am concerned with the general conception of art that Tolstoy puts forward. Consequently, I shall not undertake to examine his views on particular artists or artistic creations (including his own).

³ After eschewing the glosses that modern aestheticians compose of ancient Greek aesthetic theory—noting that in “transferring ancient judgments of beauty to our own concept of beauty, as is usually done” by modern aesthetic theorists, one gives “their words a meaning they did not have”—Tolstoy recounts not only the theories of Baumgarten, Edmund Burke, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer but also the theories of many lesser-known French, English, and German aesthetic theorists (16). For my assessment of Tolstoy’s commentary on the “new aesthetic teaching of Hegel,” see note 16 below (23).

⁴ In *What is Art?* Tolstoy focuses his analysis of religion on Christianity. Like Kant, Tolstoy’s account of Judaism is deeply ambivalent. Indeed, although Tolstoy acknowledges that the “highest perfection of the good” (the one true God) was already known in the time of Isaiah (as we shall see), he also repeatedly lumps the ideals of the Jewish faith together with the virtues of ancient (extra-biblical) cultures, e.g., the ancient Greeks, Persians, and Egyptians (48). For my critique of the dismissive view of Judaism commonly held by Christians, which Kant articulates in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, see note 1 of Chapter 3.

⁵ See *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* 460. (I take up this passage in detail in my concluding chapter.)

⁶ Kant describes the imagination, in outlining his notion of the ideal of beauty, as a faculty of the mind “set on making comparisons” between the subjects that we think (create, portray, produce—for example, in works of fine art) and finite objects (5:234).

⁷ In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes writes, “what brings it about that there are many people who are persuaded that it is difficult to know this [that existence is contained in the concept of God] and also even to know what their soul is is that they never lift their minds above sensible things and that they are so accustomed to consider nothing except by imagining it (which is a way of thinking appropriate for material things), that everything unimaginable seems to them unintelligible” (22). In his *Pensées* Pascal indicates that, because imagination—as an appropriate way of thinking about material things—allows us to conjure up fantasies about the nature of existence that cannot be proven either true or false, the attempt to base our judgments of existence upon this faculty is all the more dangerous and illusive (#46). Both Descartes and Pascal point out, in other words, that there can be no decision about existence—no decisive

judgment about what must exist necessarily—if we continue to base our judgment upon images drawn from the sensible world. We can make a decision (a judgment) about existence only insofar as we see that existence cannot be conceived by human beings without human beings existing in—living on the basis of—their conception of existence, which involves and expresses how we conceive of both God (the divine) and the soul (the human).

⁸ Because there are no concepts (and so no arguments: true or false) that allow us to determine the aptitude of our aesthetic judgments according to Kant's theory, he notes that it is fitting that the "faculty of aesthetic judging has been given the very name of 'taste.' For someone might list all the ingredients of a dish to me, and remark about each one that it is otherwise agreeable to me...; yet I am deaf to all these grounds, I try the dish with **my** tongue and my palate, and on that basis (not on the basis of general principles) do I make my judgment" (5:285).

⁹ It is important to note how Kant uses the terms "subjective" and "objective" in his works. As Hegel correctly states in Part 1 of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, though Kant shows us that the thought-determinations, the categories, through which we understand objects belong only to human subjects, "Kant calls the thought-product—and, to be precise, the universal and the necessary—'objective,' and what is only sensed he calls 'subjective'" (§41). Although we ordinarily want to assume that it is what we perceive through the senses that is objectively known, Hegel indicates, utterly consistent with Kant, that, in fact, "what can be perceived through the senses is really secondary and not self-standing, while thoughts, on the contrary, are what is genuinely independent and primitive. It is in this sense," Hegel continues, "that Kant called what measures up to thought (the universal and the necessary) 'objective'; and he was certainly quite right to do this. On the other hand, what is sensibly perceptible is certainly 'subjective,' in that it does not have its footing within itself [i.e., in the human subject] and is as fleeting and transient as thought is enduring and stable" (§41). In other words, it is important not to confuse what Kant calls our "subjective" feelings, from which no determinate principle for one's judgment can emerge, with what Hegel will call our infinite subjectivity, which provides us with an absolute principle for aesthetic judgment (as we shall see).

¹⁰ A key feature of the theory of art for art's sake is that, as Kant points out, these aesthetic objects, because they are not the objects themselves that satisfy our appetites (e.g., hunger, thirst, etc.) but are simply representations of them, produce a disinterested satisfaction in their viewers (5:205). The interest in art becomes, then, according to this theory, merely contemplative—reflecting the state of delayed gratification that will give rise, as we shall see, to the desire to lack that which we desire as the (contradictory) means for maintaining one's desire.

¹¹ As we know, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant exposes the errors of those who hold that one's desires (moral ends) are based on immediate feelings—those who hold that the cause of our desires or will is located in empirical sensation—by simply asking them: Why? Why do they desire to locate the source of their desires in immediate feelings or sensations? Indeed, his question reveals that there is no good reason—that there is no other reason for locating the beginning of our will in sensory experience than that our will or desire is not derived from, it does not begin with, sensory experience. The will is its own cause, the cause of itself, in Spinoza's terms, or self-determining, in Kant's own terms. It is surprising, then, that Kant reduces aesthetic desires to mere taste (private sensations) when we read his riposte to those who claim that, given that mere wishes do not result in the attainment of their objects, desire cannot be viewed as the source of its own fulfillment (i.e., as the cause of our acting in the world). In a note in the Introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant observes that these unfulfilled wishes simply demonstrate the power of the faculty of desire (the will) to contradict

itself by locating the source of its desires outside of itself, whether in empirical objects or rationalistic subjects (false ideals, utopic dreams, or hedonist fantasies). Exposing the will, then, as the very source (the power) of even these “vain desires,” Kant concludes that the “illusion in empty wishes is therefore only the consequence of a beneficent arrangement in our nature” (5:178). The power to remain impotent and ineffectual demonstrates—as the consequence of—the power of human freedom to shape (to create) our experience of the world from nothing.

¹² See 5:236, the last sentence of §17.

¹³ In his *Aesthetica* (1750) Baumgarten is the first critic to use the term “aesthetics” (the etymology of which relates to perception through the senses) to describe one’s taste or sense of beauty. As Tolstoy observes, Baumgarten distinguishes between the objects of logical knowledge (truth) and the objects of sensuous knowledge (beauty). The order and harmony of sensuous objects in nature, Tolstoy reports, is the “highest manifestation of beauty” for Baumgarten and thus the imitation of nature, which arouses our pleasure, is the “highest task of art” according to Baumgarten’s theory (*What is Art?* 17). But because Baumgarten locates beauty in the mimetic imitation of empirical experience and truth outside of this sphere altogether, he is unable to formulate any principle—other than purely formal rules—for our evaluation of works of art.

¹⁴ In his essay “Bridging the Gulf: Kant’s Project in the Third *Critique*” Paul Guyer suggests, similar to Bowie, that Kant sets out, in his aesthetic theory, to “provide sensuous confirmation of what we already know in an abstract way, but also need to *feel* or make *palpable* to ourselves, namely the efficacy of our free choice of the fundamental principle of morality” (425). Guyer correctly identifies the task of aesthetics as the effort to “make” sensible or to imagine (embody) the principle of morality. However, Guyer does not see that the attempt to provide “sensible evidence” for the realization of human freedom obscures both the principle of morality (ethics) and the subject of art (aesthetics) by reducing morality to disinterested love and by reducing aesthetic experience to an empirical experience in his account of beauty (426). (Kant’s notion of practical love, which he developed in the *Grounding* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, bears no relation to the notion of love—which takes no interest in life—that he advances in his aesthetics. Practical love, instead, serves as the very basis from which all of life’s appearances become the subject of our eternal interest.) In other words, Guyer’s essay, in which he demonstrates a real command of the terms and of the arguments of Kant’s third *Critique*, exposes for us the implications of failing to see that the “gulf” or distinction between nature and freedom cannot be conceived on the basis of an analogy with sensible objects. Indeed, it is precisely in showing that there is no sensible distance or division between nature and freedom that Kant determined, we recall, that there is no experience of nature that does not serve to demonstrate the freedom of human existence. In concluding his essay, Guyer indicates, before outlining what he views as the limits of Kant’s third *Critique*, that Kant’s critique of pure reason might need no defense. He argues that “we might well think, especially in view of the overwhelming importance of striving to reach our moral objectives, that a reasonable belief simply in the absence of any evidence for the impossibility of realizing this goal would suffice to make our efforts rational” (438). But it is precisely in identifying the limits of the “success” of Kant’s attempt in the third *Critique* to “bridge the gap between nature and freedom” that Guyer reveals, despite himself, the necessity for a defense of freedom, as Kant had argued (438). What we learn, then, from Guyer’s essay is how important it is to understand the failure of Kant’s aesthetic theory in order to defend Kant’s critical demonstration of the practical efficacy of freedom in the world.

¹⁵ Even Scruton is puzzled by Kant's aesthetic theory. While he opens his analysis of Kant's notion of beauty by suggesting that the *Critique of Judgment* is a "disorganized and repetitious work" in which Kant struggles to work out the implications of his transcendental philosophy for aesthetics, he does not proceed to indicate that Kant's aesthetic theory must be rejected in order to compose for ourselves a true understanding of modern art (*Kant* 79). Scruton sees, on the one hand, that, for Kant, the "moral world" is the divine world "described as the 'realm of grace'" (78-9). However, he does not appear to see that the world of divine grace in the Bible doubles, according to its own authors and figures, as the moral world of human beings. In failing to demonstrate the relationship, then, between religion as it is presented in the Bible and religion as it is conceived on the basis of practical reason, he ends his book by suggesting, following Kant, that aesthetics can provide us with a sense of divine harmony through an analogy with one's experience of the harmony of nature. Aesthetic judgment, he writes, thereby "directs us towards the apprehension of a transcendent world" (90). The hard lesson that we must learn and ever relearn, as we realize when reading Scruton's comments on Kant's notion of beauty, is that whenever we subordinate the religious to the secular (modern thought) by reducing religion to the superstitious belief in a transcendent God, superstition—the belief in a transcendent world, in which a hierarchal social structure is embedded (as we have seen)—returns with a vengeance to dominate our aesthetic theories.

¹⁶ Although it is correct to say, as Kant does, that "[b]y right, only production through freedom, i.e., through the capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art," we need to recognize that Kant's own theory of art cannot account for its basis in freedom (5:303). That is, because art begins, for Kant, with the experience of objects, his own theory of art cannot account for what he claims is the source of artistic production: freedom. In other words, we must remain vigilant in asking ourselves what freedom can mean in the context of Kant's aesthetic theory. For Kant also claims in this work that it is the natural gift of a genius "that gives the rule to art" (5:307). Indeed, because Kant cannot formulate a principle for the production or for the reception of art, he has no other recourse but to resort to "genius"—the natural talent for imitating nature—as that which provides the normative standard for aesthetic criticism (5:307-10). But how can the public, then, ever recognize a genius given that they do not share his "natural gift" or aesthetic sense? Because Kant denies any determinate concept for aesthetic judgment, the only way in which the talent of a genius can ever be recognized is by comparing his artistic products to the current artistic trends. The irony, in other words, of typical portraits of the artistic genius (including Kant's) is that the products of this artist are nothing new. Rather, his reported genius but serves to buttress the aesthetic inclinations or conventions of the status quo. It is unclear, therefore, how Kant distinguishes acts of artistic freedom—which originate with the natural gifts or talents of the artist—from natural events, given that he founds his idea of artistic freedom on an analogy with natural processes. Surely, freedom does not describe the mere execution of one's intentions (as Kant knows). It is worth observing, then, that Kant's concept of "free play"—through which, he argues, works of art are produced—simply reiterates the relativistic claim with which he began: that art is merely a matter of taste.

¹⁷ It is precisely because, however, natural life engages our subjectivity (i.e., because our engagement with nature presupposes a system of values generated by human beings) that the riches of nature—its milk and honey—run the risk of becoming the instruments of death and sin, the "Black milk" that is drunk morning, noon, and evening by those interred in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, to recall one of the startling images of Paul Celan's "Death Fugue." Nonetheless, in concert with Hegel, Celan's *Todesfugue* remains an infinite affirmation of life.

For the poem's mournful tone points out the horror of divorcing the good from existence. From the perspective of his Nazi taskmaster, existence is not good when shared with the other (e.g., the Jews): the act of sharing existence is not good. In and through its critical stance, however, Celan's poem presupposes—and so exposes—the affirmation that existence (shared in the structure of human relationship) is good.

¹⁸ In his account of the “new aesthetic teaching of Hegel,” Tolstoy accurately notes that, for Hegel, art is the realization of the idea in the appearances and serves, therefore, as “a means, together with religion and philosophy, of bringing to consciousness and giving utterance to the profoundest tasks of man and the highest truths of the spirit” (23). However, Tolstoy does not then see—at least, he gives us no indication that he sees—that Hegel's conception of art is identical with his own. For, as we shall discover, Hegel conceives of the truth of the spirit as absolute love, the love of what is absolute in life (God and human beings). Thus, his conception of aesthetics is identical to Tolstoy's account of fine art, in which Tolstoy describes art as the act of communion involved in communicating the truth of the human community and thus conveys “feelings of the love of God and one's neighbor,” alongside the feelings of indignation and horror “at the violation of this love” (131-2). In short, I read Tolstoy's critique of the “foggy and mystical” teaching of art that Hegel's followers advanced as a criticism not of Hegel's own philosophy of aesthetics but of Hegelians who fail to see that, for Hegel, the spirit of works of art is communicated in and through (as) ethical, moral, loving, romantic human activity (23).

¹⁹ Aristotle opens his work *On the Soul (De Anima)* by stating, “The knowledge of the soul admittedly contributes greatly to the advance of truth in general, and, above all, to our understanding of Nature, for the soul is in some sense the principle of animal life” (bk. I, ch. 1).

²⁰ See the *Lectures on Fine Art* Vol. 1 485 and 492.

²¹ In his *Lectures on Fine Art* Hegel continues, like Tolstoy, to lump Judaism together with what he calls, in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, the determinate religions of extra-biblical cultures. Still, when he takes up the content of Judaism (the Hebrew Bible) in each lecture series, he demonstrates that the Jewish faith is unlike any other ancient religion and that it contains, instead, the true concept, at once divine and human, of both the spirit and the flesh realized in (as) the justice of the human community (see *Lectures on Fine Art* 373-74 and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* 357-74).

²² See Polka, *Truth and Interpretation* 154-169.

²³ In *The Philosophy of History* Hegel notes, “Freedom in the State is preserved and established by Religion, since moral rectitude constitutes the fundamental principle of Religion. The process displayed,” therefore, “in History is only the manifestation of Religion as Human Reason—the production of the religious principle which dwells in the heart of man, under the form of Secular Freedom” (335).

²⁴ Hegel appears, in concluding his Introduction to the *Lectures on Fine Art*, to want to separate the concept from its sensuous content and to establish, thereby, an order of rank among the forms (although not the contents) of art, religion, and philosophy (101-5). However, the concept and the content of his own text does not allow this ranking to stand. In order to distinguish Hegel's account of fine art from the false positions of those aestheticians whom he deconstructs, and in order to preserve the relationship between the content and the form that Hegel advances in his account of modern (romantic) art, we must not allow ourselves to give any weight to Hegel's suggestion that philosophy occupies a superlative place (in its form) above that of religion and art.

PART 3

Wallace Stevens and Metaphor as the Thing Itself

Chapter 5

Of Modern Poetry

Introduction

In “Of Modern Poetry” Stevens articulates his concept of metaphysics in arresting, hermeneutical terms. For the speaker of the poem notes that the “invisible audience” of modern poetry, which he stages as a “theatre” in which the poet displays acts of the mind, listens,

Not to the play, but to itself, expressed

In an emotion as of two people, as of two

Emotions becoming one.

That two people become (as) one through the union of two emotions articulates the paradox of the audience members who, in mirroring us readers, see and hear themselves expressed in and through what is other than themselves: the words of another. It is this metaphysical (inter-)play, which describes both the interpretive method and the equally interpretive content of modern poetry, that is poetically inscribed in terms, and as the practice, of metaphor, as we saw in our analysis of Stevens’ “The Motive for Metaphor” in Chapter 1 and as I shall now show throughout my study of Stevens’ strongest poems. That the metaphysics of metaphor, however, is revealed by adopting a hermeneutical practice in which both the text (poem) and the reader (audience) seek to interpret the other as “itself” introduces a concept of self-reflexivity that engages a notion of history, a conception, that is, of the history of modern poetry (as embodying the mind “in the act of finding / What will suffice”). For, as the speaker of the poem notes, in introducing the subject of (modern) poetry,

It has not always had

To find: the scene was set; it repeated what

Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed

To something else. Its past was a souvenir. (“Of Modern Poetry”)

In this chapter, I shall undertake to show that, in order to comprehend the significance of distinguishing, with Stevens, between two ages of poetry, we must understand this distinction as articulating the precise difference between ancient Greek texts, on the one hand, and the drama of biblical myth, on the other. The “something else,” which Stevens does not name, describes the change of scene (the fall, in other words) of biblical scripture. There are five keys to demonstrating this thesis:

1. If we are to remain true to the principle that Stevens articulates as at once the interpretive method and the interpretive content of modern poetry—if we are to read Stevens’ poems and to listen to ourselves—then we must see, with Stevens, that modern poetry, in engaging the dialectic of what he calls the image’s truth, does not begin with nature or natural mythology.
2. We must then show that Greek mythology, in naturally mirroring what appears in nature, is not critically distinct from ancient Greek philosophy. That is, we must overcome the attempt to privilege Greek literature over Greek philosophy (or *vice versa*) by demonstrating that both Greek mythology and Greek philosophy—that ancient Greek texts—are constituted by the contradictory opposition between images and their truth.
3. In showing, then, that the metaphysics of modern poetry does not originate in ancient Greek texts—i.e., that Greek texts are unreadable according to the standards of modern poetry—it is important to indicate that the paradox of beginning—from nothing natural—

in the Bible is identical to the paradox of beginning with the concept of self-reflexivity—of beginning with itself—in modern poetry.

4. The consequence of seeing that the construction of modern poetry—in embracing the dialectical truth of its images—is identical to the structure of biblical imagery (at once divine and human) is the discovery that modern poetry is no less (or more) religious than it is secular. That is, in order to understand the significance of distinguishing between ancient Greek texts and modern poetry, we must understand any poem worthy of its modern readers as at once religious and secular.
5. Finally, then, we must learn how to overcome the false and falsifying dualism between the religious and the secular with which modern poetry is beset, including the dualism introduced by the woman in Stevens' "Sunday Morning" who, in positioning herself in opposition to the binary oppositions of conventional religious dogma, ends up reproducing the opposition (contradiction) between heaven (the divine) and earth (the human) that she claims to oppose.

The five sections that comprise this chapter are devoted to working out each of these interrelated issues.

Thus, in analyzing a number of key poems by Stevens, in addition to "Of Modern Poetry," I intend to show that, just as providing a consistent commentary on Kant's metaphysical philosophy required that we overcome the dualism introduced in his aesthetics, so reading Stevens' poetry on the basis of the hermeneutics that he articulates requires that we learn how to distinguish historically between two ages of poetry (i.e., between ancient Greek and biblical myth) and so overcome the dualism between the religious and the secular that is set out by the woman in "Sunday Morning." The reason why it is so important, for my purposes in this study,

to overcome the dualism between the religious and the secular, with which modern commentators on Stevens (not to mention modern poets) are riven, is that this dualism, in corrupting the metaphysics that is true to modernity, provides us, as we shall see, with no basis for comprehending either aesthetics or ethics except in terms of their fundamental opposition. It is only insofar as we overcome this dualism, then, that we shall be capable of truly comprehending the relationship between philosophy and poetry, between Kant and Stevens, and between ethics and art.

i. “Of Modern Poetry”

Following his opening remarks in “Of Modern Poetry,” Stevens notes, as he contemplates what suffices for modern poetry, that

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one.

Modern poetry, we learn, must address the place and the time of men and women (its authors and readers). Indeed, we are told that the words of the poem “repeat” what “it”—the “ear of the mind”—wants to hear. But Stevens’ poem thereby becomes self-reflexive. For the “ear” represents both the ear of the actor (poet) on stage and the ear of the audience (the reader). The poem becomes self-reflexive by dialectically repeating “itself” in expressing the desires of the men and the women of the time (including the poet).

The other key image that embodies the dialectical (dialogical, relational) structure involved in the constructions of modern poetry is the image of the theatre, which is doubly-reflexive. For the stage represents both that of which modern poetry is constructed—the theatre of trope—and that on which modern poetry is constructed.¹ The theatre of trope, the stage of modern poetry, in other words, serves as its own foundation. That the actor, who illustrates what it means to construct the stage of poetry on which he acts, is “insatiable” puts us on notice, moreover, that to find what suffices for the act of modern poetry—for the poetry of human action—bears no relation to what satiates our natural appetites. For to find what suffices for modern poetry is to find oneself burdened with an eternal task, the task of finding under all conditions of time and place that which consummates the mind. What satisfies the mind, consequently, is precisely that which the poet shares with his (her) readers: the desire contained in the act of finding one’s own self-expression. The paradox of desire, however, which founds Stevens’ poem, is that desire here involves not seeking (in ignorance of what suffices) but finding. Not to find is not to seek. Not to find is not to desire to find anything (“new”). Not to find is to desire not to find anything that truly fulfills the desire to be (alive) in modern poetry.

As self-reflexive (and, therefore, dialectical), the image of the theatre satisfies the desire (for relationship) of the two people who constitute the subject of the poem—the author and the

reader. But the image also re-enacts this relationship. The author, like the actor on stage, cannot perceive the presence of his reader. The audience remains “invisible.” The reader, in turn, cannot perceive the meaning presented in the author’s words. For what the poem expresses, as noted above, embodies—and is embodied by—the act of two emotions of two people becoming one. As we know, there are no two things in nature that share one and the same place and time. There is no one thing—there is nothing—in nature that can be shared at the same time and in the same place by two people. Because, therefore, the relationship that Stevens constructs and that he enacts in his image of the theatre transcends space and time, we learn that we cannot conceive of the construction of his images according to those categories. Thus, consistent with Hegel, Stevens shows us, his readers, that we cannot be truly satisfied by anything less than those images that embody a concept of relationship that serves as the principle of modern art (e.g., poetry).

What is so empowering about Stevens’ conception of modern poetry is that, in constructing his images on the basis of a concept of relationship in which two become (dialogically or dialectically) one, he also provides his readers with the very principle by which to interpret his poems. But what is even more stunning about his image of the theatre is that he hereby shows us that the self-reflexivity involved in reading modern poetry (according to the principle of interpretation that he advances) describes our own practice of self-discovery (interpretation) as we work out the meaning of the image: the invisible audience, we are told, listens not to the play, “but to itself.” Because no natural image is—in itself—fit to contain the mind, modern poetry requires active interpretation. However, the act of interpretation relies on the willingness of the reader to see—to hear: to interpret—the content of the poem as expressing

the concept of her own mind and to hear—to see: to interpret—the content of her own mind embraced as the concept of the poem.

As one scholar notes, through Stevens' use of imagery in "Of Modern Poetry" both the poem in its self-meditation and the audience who listens "to itself" become other than themselves and so, in becoming one, also become two.² What one discovers in meditating on one's life, we realize, is that one is not one alone. What one finds in reading Stevens' poem—in which he re-enacts the self-reflexivity involved in becoming conscious of oneself as other than oneself in and through one's relationships with others—is none other than oneself in and through a renewed understanding of one's relations. That is, in becoming two, in becoming other to itself in its self-meditation, Stevens' poem embraces the other, the reader, the audience member who meditates on her own life in reading poetry and so learns what it means to become herself in becoming other than herself by re-engaging her relationships with others, not on the grounds of what satiates her natural appetites, but on the infinite grounds of what suffices for the dialectic of the act of the mind.

That we can find our own desires expressed in and through the poetic words of another only insofar as we base our desires not upon the natural conditions of time and place but upon the metaphysical conditions staged in modern poetry is also what Stevens demonstrates in his poem "Re-statement of Romance." Before returning, then, to the end of the poem "Of Modern Poetry," I want to examine the argument contained in his "Re-statement of Romance." For it is precisely here, in addition to "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and "The Sail of Ulysses" (as we shall see), that Stevens is utterly clear that, because the structure of modern poetry cannot be conceived according the categories that apply to nature, it can only be conceived as

communicating (revealing) the ethics of human interaction (including the dialogue involved in writing and reading poetry).

In "Re-statement of Romance," Stevens notes,
The night knows nothing of the chants of night.
It is what it is as I am what I am:
And in perceiving this I best perceive myself

And you.

The speaker underscores the distinction between the night and that which chants of it (the distinction between that which is natural and the subjects who speak or sing of it). But he does so through a comparison between the two: "It is what it is as I am what I am." What I am, however, and what you are bears no relation to what (it) is, which knows nothing about what (it) is. We realize, therefore, that we must comprehend the poetic comparison between human activity (as intelligent or self-conscious) and nature as hereby maintaining the distinction between them. Thus, Stevens' perceptions of the night become the medium for his self-reflections on his own act of perceiving. That is, he perceives himself (and "you": his reader) as that which perceives its own perceiving.³ But therefore he notes that,

Only we two may interchange
Each in the other what each has to give.
Only we two are one, not you and night.

Nor night and I, but you and I, alone.
So much alone, so deeply by ourselves,
So far beyond the casual solitudes....

This interchange describes the dialectical act in which we find ourselves in and through (as) the gift of the other, the infinite recognition of one another as above all price (to recall Kant). The self and nature are not one, but in and through our knowledge of nature we join one another, “so deeply by ourselves” and yet “so far beyond the casual solitudes.” To be autonomous or free is not found in casual solitude but in a relationship in which each gives to and receives from the other the dignity of what it means to be a self-conscious person.

Thus, Stevens concludes his poem by suggesting,
That night is only the background of our selves,
Supremely true each to its separate self,
In the pale light that each upon the other throws.

To find ourselves, then, in the pale light that the other throws upon us is to reinstate romance not by comparing our relations to those of nature but by showing that all true comparisons between ourselves and nature serve to expose the gift of self-consciousness that each of us bestows upon the other.

The end of Stevens’ “Re-statement” thus throws us back into the midst of its beginning. For the pale light of romance reveals the darkness of the chants in the night that nature (the night) knows not of. The darkness, then, that hails in the night, in its simile with nature, is nothing natural. The dark simile at the beginning of the poem captures, instead, the false idea of romance or love that reflects the changes in nature and so fluctuates between icy and heated expressions, depending on which it sees as to its own immediate advantage. Stevens’ “Re-statement” issues, therefore, a self-conscious, self-reflexive critique of any “romantic” poem that attempts an interchange, a comparison, between the beloved (myself and others) and nature. Yet he is able to accomplish this critique, to escape the cants of falsely romantic poets, because his

poem is betrothed to a concept of romance that embodies, through its relation to nature, the true romance of love in which each sees the other as one's own separate self.

As we have seen, the idea that the images of modern poetry embody the spirit of love (or "romance") is also what Stevens advances (again, in concert with Hegel) in "Of Modern Poetry." In bringing his meditation on modern poetry to a close, Stevens gives us further indication that what he understands to be the metaphysics of modern poetry involves and expresses the romance in which two people (each of whom express two, distinct feelings) become one. "The actor," he writes, whose words constitute the construction of the poem and who, therefore, serves as an image for the poet, is

A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

It must

Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

Because, as Stevens has given us occasion to see, modern images cannot be understood through an analogy with nature, we discover that "the dark" here, in which the metaphysical poet composes, is an image that expresses not the natural absence of light but the very idea that nothing in nature suffices to illuminate the poet's imagination. Thus, when Stevens notes that to author modern poetry is take the position of a "metaphysician in the dark," he reminds us that the

metaphysical structure of his poems cannot be revealed in the natural light of the sun or in the artificial light of one's desk lamp. The metaphysics of modern poetry can be revealed only through the "sudden rightnesses" that capture the relationships that comprise both the metaphoric subject of the poem and the lives of its audience. Thus, in conceiving of metaphysics through his poetic images—i.e., through the interpretive relation between the actor and his audience—Stevens makes us aware that, just as poetic actions have metaphysical (i.e., free) authors, so a metaphysical study of modern poetry engages the ethical dimensions of human activity.

It is through his use of images that embody the hermeneutics of modern poetry—in which he captures the moral interaction that reflects and is reflected by the golden rule of the Bible—that Stevens proceeds, then, to set the limits, the dynamic parameters, for modern poetry. That human beings "cannot descend" below the expression of the mind means that poetry, on the one hand, cannot be explained on the basis of the categories of nature. That we possess "no will to rise," however, above those images that suddenly—out of nowhere: according to nothing natural or unnatural about them—embody the mind means, on the other hand, that what satisfies the mind—what suffices for modern poetry—cannot be found outside of its images. Both metaphysics and its instrument, the transcendental and the immanent, the symbol (meaning) and form—i.e., the spirit and the letter—come into existence at once as the dialectical limit—and so the revelation—of the other.

It is important to meditate on the limits that Stevens sets out for modern poetry in order to see, then, that he ends where he began. As we saw, Stevens begins "Of Modern Poetry" by noting the fundamental difference between the poetry of a bygone age that, in imitating what appeared in the natural scene, did not have to find what was sufficient to represent the mind and the poetry of our modern age that is engaged in an act of finding the mind embodied in its

images. The stage of modern poetry does not begin—cannot begin—with the natural repetition of what we perceive in nature precisely because, as we discover at the end of Stevens’ poem, both the image and its truth (rightness) begin simultaneously in and through their dialectical relationship. It is thus ever so important for thinking through the beginning of modern poetry (and the opening of Stevens’ poem by that name) to attend to the paradox involved in his late poem “A Mythology Reflects Its Region.”

In “A Mythology Reflects Its Region” (first published posthumously in 1957), Stevens writes,

A mythology reflects its region. Here
In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
When mythology was possible—But if we had—
That raises the question of the image’s truth.

Stevens goes on to provide us with a standard by which to test out the truth of the image:

The image must be of the nature of its creator,
It is the nature of its creator increased,
Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region
Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
Or from under his mountains.

Because, as we learn in the opening lines, we do not live in a time when mythology—which reflects its natural region—is possible, it is not possible that the truth that informs the images that we create is reducible to nature. Stevens alerts us, therefore, to the difference between a mythology that reflects its natural region and a mythology that bears the image’s truth.

In the rich ambiguity of Stevens' description of modern poetic images, he reminds us of the dialectical structure of images that, as we saw in Chapter 4, is advanced in the beginning of Genesis. His allusion to the myth of creation in which human beings are created not in the image of nature but in the image of God is telling. For, in eliding all reference either to God (as creator or image) or man (as image or creator), his poem reminds us not that we cannot decide whether the truth is divine or human but that, in order for our images to capture the truth of either divine or human nature, we must decide on both. The divine word—God—has no other flesh, we recall, than that of human experience. Still, who I am as a person—the “substance” of my region: my very flesh—is not the consequence of the circumstances of my natural birth but of how deeply, how intensely, how amply I can incorporate the divine word into my life: the command to love my neighbor as myself. So we learn here that who I am as a poet—the images that I compose—can be truly representative of both human and divine nature only insofar as they capture the dialectic between them. In other words, no modern image can be truly composed (created) outside of the structure of dialectical relation through which we discover that, just as the truth is not supernatural but the product of our supreme fictions (images), so our images are not natural but bear the mark of their creator (at once divine and human).

Thus, we—here, in southern Ontario—never lived in a time when natural mythology was possible. For all possibility or potential—the power of human imagination—relies, in modernity, on our comprehension of the image's truth. To pretend that natural mythology is an option for us, to imagine ourselves as reflections of nature, involves reducing the concept and the content of modern poetry to its immediate images. But to pretend that the correlation between nature and human existence (imagination) is immediately true engages the very question that the author of these images seeks to evade. What we discover, in other words, is that it is not possible for us to

shirk the question of the image's truth (or to evade the responsibility of distinguishing between true and false images). The paradox involved in raising the question of the image's truth gains in complexity when we realize that natural mythology (the mythology that reflects its region) is not known as a category, therefore, by its ancient authors. Natural (or what has traditionally been called pagan) mythology is not known as an option outside of the texts—both biblical and modern—that embody a consciousness of the image's truth. Yet it is also not an option, as we have now seen, for those who possess this consciousness (what Hegel calls the infinite self-consciousness of spirit engaged in the process of mutual recognition). Natural mythology was never an option—either for biblical (no less than modern) peoples or for ancient (pagan) people. What it means, then, that natural mythology was never an option, following the argument of Stevens' late poem, is that we cannot choose between biblical images and natural myth. There is no choice, rather, but to choose to distinguish between biblical myth and natural mythology or else to flounder, as we shall see, in our failure to do so.

In "A Mythology Reflects Its Region" we find Stevens probing the origins of modern poetic practice. The paradox, we learn, is that the image's truth must be known (revealed) in the beginning in order to become aware of the long ages of the past in which poetry reflected its natural region—and in which the image's truth remained unknown. An analysis of Stevens' poem alerts us, therefore, to the difference between two ages (stages) of myth, which, as I shall now show, must be understood as articulating the fundamental difference, within the Western tradition, between ancient Greek mythology and biblical images.

ii. Greek Myth—as Contra-Diction

In this section I shall examine key passages in Homer's myths and Plato's dialogues (in addition to Plato's Seventh Epistle) in order to focus on the contradictory opposition that founds

ethics (justice) and aesthetics (simile) in ancient Greek poetry and philosophy. What we shall discover is that the apparent opposition between ancient Greek philosophy and ancient Greek poetry but reflects the contradictory oppositions—for example, between the one and the many, the soul and the body, and the immortal and the mortal—that structure both Platonic dialogue and Homeric myth. Thus, in identifying the contradiction that founds ancient Greek texts, we shall see why it is that, as I argue, the beginning and the end of modernity—in embracing the dialectic of the image’s truth—do not begin or end in ancient Greek thought.

Plato is famous for expelling Homer and the tragedians from what he imagines as the truly just city. The poets would hold no place here, Socrates insists in Books III and X of the *Republic*. For, he argues, the poets do not speak rightly of the gods or of the ancient heroes. That is, the poets do not speak rightly of what it is that comprises justice or the good, and anything that does not do justice to the good—that does not serve for the benefit of the soul—does not belong in the truly just city. In Book X Socrates notes that poetry imitates the actions of fate, of which the gods are stewards. But, he then asks, what is it that the poets know? He uses the image of a mirror to describe the poetic act of imitation (596d). In holding a mirror up to things, he states, “I could make them appear, but I couldn’t make the things themselves as they truly are” (596e). The poets are analogous to painters, who, we are told, in imitating what appears, present us with an image that is at third remove from what *is* (the Forms). These artists present us with “something which is like that which is, but is not it” (597a). Nonetheless, Socrates observes, a painter is acquainted, at least, with what it is he is imitating, while a poet, in imagining what is truly just, is wholly ignorant of what justice *is*.

Indeed, in his account of the images of the poets, Socrates alerts his ancient audience to the contradictory structure of simile. The images of the poets, in describing “something which is

like” virtue or justice, prove, Socrates argues, to be utterly unlike that which these images describe. But he also thereby shows that his own similes are as contradictory as the images of Homer (not to mention the tragedians). For every simile, he notes, involves describing what an objects *is* by referring to what it is *like* but *is* not. But similes thereby expose a contrast between what a thing is said to be *like*—what it appears to be—and what it *is*—in itself. As Plato states in his Seventh Epistle, there are “two things which must be distinguished; what a thing is like and its essential being” (139). Similes allow one to identify in what way(s) two objects are one, but they also thereby reveal that these objects are not one but two. Thus, no simile can ever truly capture the “essential being” of the objects of which it speaks, as Socrates points out. Similes can be used to demonstrate, then, both everything and nothing. For, in demonstrating everything that can be known about things—relative to other things—they also show that they can demonstrate nothing about things—as they are in themselves.

But it is important to see that the structure of a simile is identical, therefore, to that of the law of contradiction, which Socrates never tires of invoking. Indeed, the law of contradiction is the simile *par excellence*. The law of contradiction reflects (articulates) the contradictory law of natural space and time—when space and time are viewed as things in themselves. As Socrates repeatedly points out in the *Republic*, it is obvious, according to the natural law of space and time, “that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time” without contradiction (IV, 436b). The same thing cannot both be and not be in the same space at the same time. Opposites cannot combine. But what the law of contradiction reveals, then, is that nothing in the appearances can be shown to adhere to this law. In other words, as Socrates points out in subtle fashion and as Aristotle masterfully indicates, the law of contradiction—like simile—demonstrates that there is no proof,

no demonstration, for the law of contradiction.⁴ The law of contradiction, as the principle from which all demonstration begins, can be used to describe everything that appears. But, in demonstrating that nothing can be known—in itself—in the appearances, the law proves that nothing can be known outside of contradiction. Because nothing in the appearances adheres to the law of contradiction, everything that is known can be known only relative to other things that contradict them. In short, the law of contradiction proves that nothing can be known according to the law of contradiction.

I highlight here the contradiction that follows from undertaking to base one's knowledge (with the poets) upon a simile or to base one's arguments (with the philosophers) upon the law of contradiction in order to provide an initial indication of the contradictory structure that Plato's dialogues no less than Homer's myths take on. Because, as we have seen, both simile and the law of contradiction demonstrate that the truth cannot be known in or through its images—that no one can imagine the truth—neither the truth nor images can be known outside of their contradictory opposition in ancient Greek philosophy or poetry. On the grounds of simile and the law of contradiction, the question of the image's truth is unthinkable and unimaginable for ancient Greek poets and philosophers (e.g., Homer and Plato).

Indeed, Stevens himself is taken aback by his realization, in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," that Plato's image of the horses guiding the winged charioteer in the *Phaedrus*—through which Socrates undertakes to describe the division between the soul, in its purity, and the soul, corrupted in its connection with the body—"has not the slightest meaning for us," however noble it appears to be (645). For, Stevens notes, "In Plato's figure, his imagination does not adhere to what is real" (645). Thus, Stevens sets out to survey "what it is that stands between Plato's figure and ourselves" (645). Though he does not take up, in the

remainder of his essay, the contradictory opposition between images and reality in Greek myth, he does alert us to what he describes as the “diffidence” of modern poets and readers towards Plato’s figure (645). He alerts us, therefore, to the difference between the interdependence of imagination and reality in modern poetry and the opposition between reality and imagination in Plato’s texts. It is the implications of this opposition in Plato’s dialogues that I now want to examine before providing an analysis of the same opposition in Homer’s myths.

In the *Phaedrus* Socrates sets out to speak justly of love—as the good and beautiful life of the soul—by correcting the previous unjust versions of the speeches in praise of love delivered by him and his interlocutor, Phaedrus. To do so, he divides the “abode of the reality with which true knowledge (*episteme*) is concerned” from the “things which come into being [i.e., appear]” and the knowledge (*doxa*) of these appearances (247). That is, Socrates opposes the intangible reality of the soul to the tangible appearances of the body, together with the true knowledge of intangible objects (the Forms) to the opinion formed of what it is that one perceives through the senses. He thus proceeds, consistent with his proposed expulsion of the poets from the true republic, to denounce the images that mortals form of the immortal gods or the soul as ignorant of what it is that these images pretend to imitate. There is no trace of reality in its imitations or images. But what Socrates shows us, then, is that his own image for the reality of the soul—his image of the winged charioteer who viciously bridles his lustful horse and so frees his pure (chaste) horse to fly him to the nether regions of the cosmos—is not real. The reality of his image eclipses its own content. For the real image of the soul, as his image contradictorily indicates, is not an image at all.

As we discover throughout Plato’s dialogues, there are no words or images that truly describe the soul’s reality. As the charioteer sits triumphant upon the edge of the universe in the

Phaedrus, what he sees is that the reality of the flight from the body to the soul, from opinion (*doxa*) to knowledge, is unimaginable. Socrates discovers that his own image proves to him that he did not move a step towards that which *is*. He finds that neither he nor his images ever escape the realm of the appearances. Thus, Socrates concludes his dialogue with *Phaedrus* by stating that “nothing worth serious attention has ever been written in prose or verse – or spoken for that matter;” rather, true instruction is “written on the soul of the hearer to enable him to learn about the right, the beautiful and the good” (278). The *Phaedrus* ends with the claim that its own dialogue is other than and opposed to the truth. For true words are reserved for those of the soul that, therefore, remain unspoken and unwritten (and so are neither taught nor learned by mortal men and women). The dialogue ends by showing that its own content is ignorant of that which it speaks. Thus, Plato further notes in his Seventh Letter (on the subject of the rule of Dionysus in Syracuse) that no treatise has ever been written on the true subjects of philosophy: the “essential being” of justice or the good (136). In writing that his own words are not true words, that the truth of philosophy is reserved for the unspoken words of the soul, Plato, together with his muse, Socrates, articulates the contradiction from which Greek philosophy, founded upon the doctrine of opposites, knows no exit: diction is *contra* diction, which, as I shall now show through an analysis of key passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is also the conclusion of Homeric myth.

In the *Iliad* Homer opens his epic portrait of the ancient Greek heroes (which he ends by describing the return home of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*) with the dispute between Agamemnon and his patriot in arms Achilles. Apollo has put a plague (“foul pestilence”) upon the Greek army, from which many men are dying (1.10). The reason, we are told, for the god’s unhappiness with the Greeks is Agamemnon’s failure to return the daughter of Chryses (a priest of Apollo) after Chryses had supplicated Agamemnon with prizes “beyond count and holding” (1.13).

Agamemnon is then forced, by his fellows in arms, to give up his prize to his own dissatisfaction and dishonour. In compensation for this loss, he then storms the encampment of Achilles (whose anger is stayed by the goddess Athena) and steals the young woman Briseis, whom Achilles had received as his reward for sacking, alongside Agamemnon and the other Greek heroes, the city of Thebes (allied with Troy). Achilles subsequently asks the goddess Thetis, his mother, to persuade Zeus to fight on the side of the Trojans against the Greek army while he, Achilles, remains on the sidelines of the battle in revenge for the dishonour that he had received at the hands of Agamemnon. Thetis is successful, and the Greek armies suffer many defeats in their battle against Hector and the Trojan forces.

The situation in which the Greek camp is embroiled at the beginning of Homer's epic is identical, then, to the situation in which the Greek and Trojan armies are enmeshed. For, as we know, the Greeks sail to Troy and, over ten years after arriving on the shores of Ileum, sack the city—killing all the men, raping the women, and enslaving the women and children—in revenge for the “abduction” of Helen by Paris.⁵ Achilles offers a key comment on the similarity—the simile—between the situation of Agamemnon and his own. He notes that Agamemnon has taken “the bride” of his heart. “Let him,” he states, “lie beside her and be happy”:

Yet why must the Argives fight with the Trojans?

And why was it the son of Atreus assembled and led here

These people? Was it not for the sake of lovely-haired Helen?

Are the sons of Atreus [i.e., Agamemnon and Menelaus: Helen's husband] alone

among mortal men the ones

Who love their wives? Since any who is a good man, and careful,

Loves her who is his own and cares for her, even as I now

Loved this one from my heart, though it was my spear that won her. (9.336-43)

That is, Achilles argues that, since it is wrong, as the sons of Atreus hold, for Paris to steal away with Helen, it is also wrong, by that logic, for Agamemnon to steal Briseis, his own prize of honour whom, he states, he loves. First, it is important to note that Achilles' love is not for Briseis as a person (not for who she is as a person) but is bound to her because of what she means for his honour. Indeed, when Agamemnon offers to return Briseis and to shower Achilles with gifts and prizes (including women) if Achilles rejoins the fighting, Achilles declines. According to the ancient code of honour, Achilles is incapable of accepting Agamemnon's offer without becoming his subordinate; for, in taking and giving according to his own wishes, it is Agamemnon who remains "the kinglier" of the two (9.160). Thus, it is also crucial to note that Achilles does not suggest that any dishonour (indignity) lies in the act of stealing women as slaves or prizes. There is no indignity or dishonour in it; rather, he is dishonoured because his prize of honour is taken from him.

By drawing a comparison, then, between the dishonour of the sons of Atreus and his own, Achilles argues that, if the one is wrong, so is the other. If it is just for the sons of Atreus to battle with Troy over Helen, then it is also just for Achilles to fight with Agamemnon. But Achilles does not see that, by that same logic, his own taking of Briseis in the first place, to the dishonour of Thebes, was unjust, or that, if just, the actions of Agamemnon are also just. He does not see that his argument, identical with that of the sons of Atreus, reflects back upon himself and shows that his own actions are as unjust as they are just. Both actions are right and, therefore, both are also wrong.

I raise this passage to demonstrate, then, the contradictory conception of justice (ethics) espoused by the ancient Greek heroes. For the simile that Achilles draws between himself and

Agamemnon serves to exhibit not only their blind opposition to each other, as we have seen, but also to themselves. The very structure of simile is such that, in drawing a comparison between two objects or people, the image demonstrates, as we have seen, that one is unable to know anything about them in themselves. Achilles' comparison between his own just cause and that of the sons of Atreus serves to show that neither he nor Agamemnon knows what is just—in itself. Rather, one's actions can be understood as just (or unjust) only by comparing them with those of others. Thus, his reflections demonstrate not that he knows what is right—in itself—but that he can determine the justice of his actions only relative to the actions of others. Yet, relative to others, his actions are both just (relative to the actions of Agamemnon) and unjust (relative to the perspective of the people of the city of Thebes). As both just and unjust, then, as his simile with Agamemnon reveals, he is incapable of knowing whether his own acts are just or not. Homer puts on vivid display here the contradiction of the ethical knowledge of human beings who are ignorant of justice—as it is known in itself. To speak—of justice—is to speak against (both oneself and others). To speak is to speak in contradiction of one's speech.

It is also important to recognize, in taking up ancient Greek myth, that the focus of the plot is not on the individual (as a person) but on the change in the state of affairs of the heroes, as John Jones demonstrates so expertly in his study *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*. That is, the Greek poets do not describe a change in the hero's fortune (as if the hero possessed any responsibility for the changes that befell him) but in the fortune to which the hero is subject. As Aristotle writes in his poetics, "Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons [human beings] but of action and life" (1450a 16). Although Aristotle is describing ancient Greek tragedy, the epic poetry of Homer is no different. The plot (*muthos*) is not focused on the particular character that it features but on imitating the action of fate. A "character" here does not denote an

individual person who is responsible for his or her actions but a type of figure that one represents (e.g., whether king, slave, citizen, warrior, hero, etc.). Thus, Aristotle notes that “character” adds to Greek tragedy and poetry in the same way that colour adds to a painting (1450a 39-b3). While Plato (as we have seen) uses the image of a painting to denounce the poets, Aristotle uses the same image to describe poetry in his praise of the poets for capturing the two elements of Greek life: recognition (*anagnorisis*) and reversal (*peripeteia*). What the inclusion of characters adds is a tint to the plot by showing from what point of view the action to which the characters are prompted is good or bad. The characters, however, are not responsible for the action that takes place. The action that Homer’s epic relates is not effected by its figures (by any of the ancient Greek heroes, for example). The Homeric heroes are the toys, the actors, of fate (the force of the action). Although the action of the epic is performed through these actors, none of it is done by these men and women.

It is when we see, then, with Jones, that the focus of ancient Greek poetry is not on the individual (as a person) but on the change in fortune to which men and women are subject that we also see why the figures of myth are considered both to blame and not to blame for what is done. As Agamemnon notes, in lamenting his action (the taking of Briseis), he did it; and yet, it was done by the gods. He is to blame and yet he is not to blame. The problem that we seem to run into here is our problem alone when we impose our notion of responsibility (freedom) onto the text. When we learn, rather, that the cause for the action is located not with the actors but with the gods (in concert with fatal necessity), we recognize that this contradictory explanation of one’s deeds is consistent with the mutability of fate. The deeds of the actors are not actions that one does, but that one suffers. The deeds of the heroes portray not actions of people who are responsible for deciding what to think or what to do; rather, the deeds that are related by Homer

are those of suffering and by which the actors suffer at the hands of fate.⁶ (Indeed, the stage of Homeric myth is not the theatre of modern poetry.)

Thus, when Achilles reflects on the two alternatives that destiny sets before him in the *Iliad*, it is worth noting that he is not caught wavering between two alternative courses of action. There is no hesitation or indecision here; for it is not up to him to decide the course of his fate. It is decided for him. The Gordian knot in which his life is wrapped up is cut by the gods (in the service of fate). Achilles observes,

[...] my mother Thetis the goddess of the silver feet tells me
I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death. Either,
If I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,
My return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting;
But if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,
The excellence of my glory is gone[.] (IX 410-15)

Achilles' reflections on the two destinies of man follow from his reflections on honour (i.e., on his comparison between the honour of Agamemnon and his own) with an impeccable logic (which, although it is concentrated, is never surpassed by the Greek philosophers). In life, there are but two alternative courses for man, although he chooses neither. Either Achilles achieves glory at the cost of his life or he lives—returning home dishonored by Agamemnon—at the cost of his honour and glory. Because he is a warrior, Achilles can achieve glory only by excelling in battle, only by excelling, in other words, as the type of figure that he is. Yet, to achieve glory in battle is to find oneself fatally subject to death at the hands of others. Achilles is at once friend and foe to Achilles (himself). For, in the same way that his honour is dependent on his capacity to dishonour others, so the Trojans are compelled, when dishonored, to seek to

restore honour to their city by dishonouring him. Thus, after Achilles kills Hector, he is then killed in battle prior to the sieging of Troy. (The *Iliad* ends, however, neither with the death of Achilles nor with the sacking of Troy but with the funeral of Hector, highlighting both the reversal of the Trojan war efforts and Achilles' status on top of the wheel of fortune—for now.)

It is also the contradictions that issue from the ancient code of honour upon which Achilles is meditating when Odysseus confronts him in the underworld in the *Odyssey*. In Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, the wandering Odysseus is asked by the shade of Achilles, “how could you endure to come down here to Hades' place,” where the senseless dead dwell as “mere imitations” of perished mortals (474-76). Odysseus proceeds to tell the honored and glorified hero to buck up, to which Achilles responds:

O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.

I would rather follow the plow as thrall [i.e., as slave] to another

Man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,

Than be king over all the perished dead. (488-91)

Before we encounter these lines, the soul of the Queen (Odysseus' mother) tells Odysseus that, when dead, “the sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together, and once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest of the body is made subject to the fire's strong fury, but the soul flitters out like a dream and flies away” (215-220). It is important to recall that the soul, in Greek texts, is not attached to the person as an individual. As I indicated in Chapter 1, the soul is not individual, but is suffused among all the items of the universe (above all, the heavenly bodies orbiting the skies). Thus, whenever the soul is to appear in the body of words and images (in myth) it appears as the “mere imitation,” the contradictory image and imagining, of mortals. Moreover, the Queen sets out an opposition between body and soul that is altogether different

from the relationship between spirit and flesh that is found in the Bible. Instead, in his epic, Homer sets forth the same opposition between the polluted life of the body and the pure life of the soul, between life in the appearances and life when it is detached from the body after death (i.e., as it is in reality), that underpins the texts of Plato and Aristotle.

Although the retort by Achilles to Odysseus is regularly cited by academics today as a demonstration of what Achilles learned from the Trojan War, of what Odysseus learned from his passage into Hades, and so of what we learn from Homer—that peace trumps war and that life trumps death—it is seldom asked what constitutes peace and life here. Look at the focus of Achilles' comment. The focus of the contrast or comparison is not, as we suppose, that between life and death or between existence and non-existence. Rather, the focus of the comparison—the contrast of Achilles' remark—is between ruler (king) and thrall (slave). He is contemplating, yet again, the destinies that he outlined in the *Iliad*: live (and die) unknown as slave to a farmhand or die (and live on) as a famed warrior-hero. Peace, as Achilles conceives it, reflecting nature, is constituted by indomitable hierarchy, the ineluctable domination of one party over another, master over slave. To live—peacefully—is to be mastered by others in life. To be one's own master—heroically—is to die, mastering one's own life in refusing to be mastered by others. But each of these alternatives, therefore, merges into the other. To live is to be dead to oneself. To be oneself, to know oneself, is to be dead to life. The instruction of Achilles is not, as Moses commands his nomadic people, to choose life by loving your neighbor as yourself.⁷ Rather, he is reiterating the apparent alternatives in life that fatally condemn one to death—the death of one's self in life or the life of one's self in death—at the hands of master-slave or ruler-ruled relations. Although his comment dazzles his listeners, for it is the one time (of which I am aware) in which

Homer reverses the heroic dictum that it is (relatively) better to rule than to be ruled, it does not transform, but, rather, relies upon, the structure of master-slave relations.⁸

That Achilles is reflecting here upon the fatal alternatives involved in master-slave relations is further evinced by what immediately follows this comment. For Achilles then asks Odysseus, after delivering the above lines, about the honor of his sons. Although he is not told of his son Peleus, he is told of the heroic Neoptolemos (i.e., Pyrrhus) who killed the aged King of Troy, Priam, after bursting forth from the belly of the wooden horse that the Trojans received as a gift of the gods. Achilles then stalks off happily after hearing of the glory of his warring progeny. He stalks off happily because half of his legacy remains fortunate—at least, for now. But what of his previous advice to Odysseus—that it is better to be ruled than to rule? The immediate reversal of Achilles' position shows us that he is not, as we suppose when we impose our own worldview onto the passages cited above, contemplating a “bad decision” on his part or advocating for peace over war but commenting, instead, on the reversals of fortune to which all men are subject who live within this ruler-ruled structure.

The contradictory reversals, then, embedded in the content of Homer's myths exactly reflect the contradictory reversal through which he celebrates, in contradictory fashion, the immolation of his own narrative at the end of the *Odyssey*. As the families of the suitors prepare to go to war against Odysseus and his son, in revenge for the slaughter of their sons and brothers by Odysseus and Telemachus, Zeus steps in (at the behest of Athena). “Now that noble Odysseus has punished the suitors,” he states, let them,

Make their oaths of faith and friendship, and let him be king

Always; and let us make them forget the death of their brothers

And sons, and let them be friends with each other, as in the time past,

And let them have prosperity and peace in abundance. (24.482-86)

A brief battle ensues before Athena and Zeus break up the fight, at which point we are told that “pledges for days to come, sworn by both sides, were settled by Athene” (546-7). It is important to note, however, that the peace that is established by Zeus and Athena involves the ineluctable subordination of the brood of the suitors (the Kephallenians) to Odysseus, as king of Ithaca. Thus, the state of Ithaca is, in the end, returned to its beginning, prior to Odysseus leaving for Troy. But the return to the beginning, as the end, wipes out (it eliminates) the events of the poem. The end of the poem contradicts its beginning. The end of the poem, in restoring the state of Ithaca to its beginning and thereby wiping out the events celebrated in the poem (not to mention all that is celebrated about Odysseus in the Trojan war in the *Iliad*), shows that the myth never began. The myth, in celebrating the forgetting of the events of the past (which it relates), participates in the elimination of its own narrative. It is key to point out, then, that the attempt, on the part of Zeus, to compel the families of the suitors to forget the slaughter of “their brothers and sons” parallels the contradictory attempt, on the part of Homer, to wipe the minds of the myth’s audience. The myth ends where it began—in ignorance of its end. The end to all myth is the erasure of all knowledge of its beginning or origin. The myth, in ending by narrating the forgetting of its own events, shows that all beginnings and endings are ignorant of the beginning and the end.

Thus, Homer vividly captures the contradiction of beginning and ending in Greek life and narrative. To begin, on the side of the mortal appearances, is to seek one’s end in ignorance of that which one seeks. To end is to eliminate all memory of one’s beginning. But what one finds, therefore, is that to begin at all by seeking (and so in ignorance of) one’s end is to discover, in the end, that one never began in the first place. To end—truly—is to exit the cycle of mortal

beginnings and ends, the cycle of ruler-ruled relations. But the immortal end, which is without beginning or end, is never met, therefore, in the cyclical sequence of mortal beginnings and ends. Homer reveals, in the end, that all myths of immortal nature are spoken in ignorance in and from the beginning. He shows his audience that his own poem, that all poetry within the *polis*, is composed in ignorance of that which it speaks. But he also reveals, then, that any citizen of the *polis* is ignorant of the immortal truth that his myths relate. In narrating the elimination of the memory of its own events, his poem contradictorily fails to eliminate the memory of past events from the minds of his audience. But Homer thereby succeeds in showing his audience members that there are no grounds, therefore, upon which to reject his myth as untrue. He succeeds in showing them that, in recollecting the constant reversals of the past (as reflected in the events of the poem), they participate in wiping their own minds of any knowledge of the truth.

Thus, Aristotle notes in the *Poetics*, in his contradictory celebration of Homer, that “Homer more than any other has taught the rest of us the art of framing lies in the right way” (1460a 19-20). Homer tells the truth that his myths are ignorant lies. His own stories lie that his myths (images) bespeak the truth. But are Homer’s myths, then, the truth or lies? There is no way to answer that question—without replicating the contradiction and so re-opening the question. Aristotle recognizes, therefore, that, as Homer teaches all of his Greek listeners (including Aristotle himself), the only way to be unimpeachable in one’s arguments, to remain unmoved and unpersuaded, is to compose one’s images in such a way that they show that they are ignorant of that which they speak and speak of that which they are ignorant. Homer teaches his Athenian audience the same lesson as that of Socrates—that he teaches them nothing, for all human knowledge, ignorant of things as they are in themselves, is worthless, from beginning to end.

Finally, before concluding this section, I want to note that, although Socrates appears to deliver the *coup de grâce* against the heroic concept of justice in the *Crito*, there can be no critique of ruler-ruled relations on the basis of Socrates' argument. The heroic position is, as we have seen, that every wrong requires (issues, demands) that one do wrong in return, in order to uphold one's heroic status. The Socratic position, however, is that, because the soul is immortal, one must never do wrong. As Plato puts it in his Seventh Epistle,

Now we must hold fast to the sacred truth declared of old that the soul is immortal, and when it is separated from the body must submit to judgment and be severely punished; that is why we must believe it is a lesser evil to suffer even great wrongs and injuries than to inflict them. (127)

Because all wrong harms the soul, which is rewarded or punished in the next life for one's deeds (for which one is not responsible) on earth, one must not, "when wronged, inflict wrong in return, as the majority believe," as Socrates puts it in the *Crito* (49b). Thus, Socrates reports that there is "no common ground" between those who hold his view and those who support the heroic position that it is better to do wrong to others than to suffer wrong done to you by others (49c).

In defense of his position, Socrates imagines a scene in which he is forced to respond to questions posed by the Laws of the city to which he belongs (*Crito* 50a-54d). The personified Laws indicate to Socrates that he would harm the city, along with its laws, if he should attempt to escape from prison and avoid his death sentence. Socrates pretends to respond by protesting, "The city wronged me, and its decision was not right." The Laws reply by asking him, "Was that the agreement between us, Socrates, or was it to respect the judgments that the city came to?" The city then asks,

do you think... that we are on an equal footing as regards the right, and that whatever we

do to you it is right for you to do to us? You were not on an equal footing with your father as regards the right, nor with your master if you had one, so as to retaliate for anything they did to you.... Do you think you have this right to retaliation against your own country and its laws? (50e-51a)

Socrates replies, with the agreement of Crito: no. But it is important to note three aspects of the argument to which Socrates submits. First, in arguing that one must not return a wrong for a wrong, Socrates makes no suggestion that one can (or must) do right by one's neighbor. In stark contrast to the ethical imperative of Kant to treat each other as ends and never merely as means, there is no suggestion by Socrates of an exchange of equal rights or of the mutual recognition of each other's dignity. Second, although Plato argues that it is a lesser evil—it is better—to suffer wrong done to you by others than to do wrong to others—he does not escape, but rearticulates, the contradiction between right and wrong in which the Homeric (heroic) position is entangled. To be right is to suffer wrong. The same act—e.g., the execution of Socrates' death sentence—is both right (from the point of view of the Laws of the city) and wrong (from the point of view of Socrates). To suffer wrong is both right (from Socrates' point of view) and wrong (from the point of view of the Laws: the city of Athens). To suffer wrong and to do wrong are both right and wrong—relative to one's point of view, which contradicts and is contradicted by the point of view of the other.

Indeed, the contradiction between right and wrong here traces the contradiction between the ruler (the Laws) and the ruled (Socrates). Because there must be a ruler who does wrong—in order for one to suffer wrong and thereby, according to Socrates, to be in the “better” situation—Socrates's argument depends upon the legitimacy of the ruler-ruled structure. As the Laws tell Socrates, he was wronged, “not by us, the laws, but by men” (54c). Although Socrates reverses

the status of ruler and ruled, consistent with (yet reversing the trajectory of) the constant reversals between the ruler and the ruled to which the poetic heroes are subject, the ruler-ruled dichotomy remains unchanged and unimpaired. Indeed, the ruler-ruled structure cannot be wrong, for it constitutes the very basis upon which right and wrong are assessed in the ancient *polis*. Thus, third and finally, it is ever so important to recognize that Socrates' position is utterly consistent with that of the Homeric heroes. For the heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, it is right for the one who is ruled to suffer harm to his lot and not to try to do wrong in return. For Socrates (and Plato), it is right for the Laws, which ultimately rule the city, to do harm to their citizenry and not to suffer wrong done to them in return. Homer and Socrates are in complete agreement (as are the rulers and the ruled): there is "no common ground" between the rulers and the ruled. Although Socrates' position—in which right makes the claims of might—reverses the heroic position—in which might makes the claims of right—both might and right are sentenced to unending contradiction as the result (and, indeed, as the principle) of ruler-ruled relations.

Thus, what becomes evident in attending to the poetry of Homer and to the philosophy of Plato is the contradiction of both ethics and aesthetics in ancient Greek texts. We thereby see that the contradictory opposition between Homer (poetry) and Plato (philosophy) reflects the opposition—between the mortal and the immortal, the ruler and the ruled, and the beginning and the end—that, in replicating the divided line (which we took up in Chapter 2), sentences ancient Greek images to contradiction. (Indeed, it is worth noting that, by its own logic, Plato's image of the just city would be expelled from the truly just city, for which and in which there are no images.) But it is important to see, then, that neither Homer nor Plato ever raises the question of the image's truth. Rather, their texts indicate that they know not whereof they speak and that they speak not whereof they know. What we today find so problematic, when attending to the relation

between Homer (Greek poetry) and Plato (Greek philosophy), is that neither of these authors claims to know the truth. Indeed, reading Homer and Plato becomes irreconcilably problematic when we try to impose a problem, a conflict, between Greek poetry and Greek philosophy, i.e., when we pretend that the Greek poets and philosophers debate about which of the two is true.

Thus, because of the unrelenting opposition between the truth and the image, the soul and the body, the immortal and the mortal, reality and the appearances in ancient Greek poetry and philosophy what *we* learn is that neither the image (the surface of the letter) nor the truth (the depth of the spirit), neither aesthetics nor ethics, which together comprise the subject of modern poetry, begin in ancient Greek texts. In ancient Greek poetry and philosophy, the use of simile demonstrates the contradiction embedded in the notion of a just law (or right rule) and justice (as the fatal *dikē* of Zeus) represents the law of contradiction, which states that opposites cannot combine. Thus, in ancient Greek texts, there is no shared point of view or common framework—of freedom, equality, and solidarity (i.e., paradox, dialectic, or metaphor)—that can include both ruler and ruled as at once sovereign and subject (to invoke the third formulation that Kant provides for the categorical imperative in the *Grounding*). Rather, for Homer and Socrates, all images, as repetitions of the one, are opposed to the one in itself, the truth (of nature) itself.

Thus, Stevens is right when he suggests that poetry

has not always had

To find: the scene was set; it repeated what

Was in the script.

There are two paradoxes, however, that follow from the acknowledgement, on the part of Stevens, of a time “before” the theatre of poetry changed in bearing the dialectic of the image’s truth. The first paradox is textual. For, in naturally repeating the contradictory script of nature, it

follows that we cannot find what suffices for modern poetry in these texts (e.g., Greek poetry). These texts are unreadable according to the hermeneutical (dialectical) standards of modern poetry. In other words, these poems do not constitute poetry according to our modern standards.⁹

The second paradox is historical. The paradox of the historical account of the past that suffices for modern poetry—and that foregrounds the distinction between the poetry that reflects the contradiction of its natural region and the poetic theatre that exposes the act of the mind—is that this historic distinction is never in the past. We never get past—there is no overcoming—the demand to distinguish between two ages of poetry. That is, the poetry that contains images that reflect the apparent operations of nature—natural mythology—is no more (or less) a part of our past than of our future. For it is precisely the distinction between natural mythology, on the one hand, and the poetry that exposes the drama of the mind, on the other, that serves as the enduring souvenir—the eternal memoir—of modern poetic practice.

The two paradoxes that follow from articulating the difference between natural mythology (the mythology of nature) and the theatre of modern poetry, the image's truth, correspond, then, to the double-paradox that describes our relation to ancient Greek myth—as contradiction. The texts of the ancient Greeks are unreadable—except as consistent with their own contradiction, except as consistent with themselves. The ancient Greek scripts are not readable as *contra-diction*, as scripts that are not texts (scripts)—except by those who occupy another stage and time. But, paradoxically for us, ancient Greek texts remain essential to our comprehension of modern philosophy and poetry today—as a souvenir from a foreign time and place. For they serve as an instructive tool—a heuristic—in our battle against idolatry, in which either one or both of the opposites upon which ancient Greek texts are founded are imagined to be true: a position that fails to answer the question of the image's truth and to which we refer, in

modernity, as dualism. For, as we have seen, the ancient Greeks never claim that their images, in naturally reflecting their region, embody any knowledge of the truth. In seeing, then, that modern poetry does not originate in ancient Greek mythology and that ancient Greek philosophy does not surpass (but, rather, reflects) the contradiction of ancient Greek myth, it remains for us to show, in the next section, that the paradox of beginning—from nothing natural—in the Bible is identical to the paradox of beginning with the concept of self-reflexivity—of beginning with the dialectic of the image’s truth—in modern poetry.

iii. Biblical Myth as the Poetry of Our Climate

In analyzing, in this section, Stevens’ short poem “The Poems of Our Climate” alongside the myth of Adam and Eve in the Bible (in addition to the commentary that Stevens provides on the relationship between Adam and Eve and the origin of modern poetry in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”), I shall argue that, just as the myth of Adam and Eve shows us that the Bible is founded upon images that embody the moral imperative to know good and evil, so also Stevens shows us that modern poetry is founded upon nothing but the desire to reveal one’s mind through the appropriation of our imperfection. What we shall learn, therefore, in seeing that the paradox of beginning in the Bible is identical to the paradox involved in the origin of the poems of our climate (i.e., modern poetry), is that the content (the concept) of the Bible is modern and that Stevens’ poetry is biblical, both ontologically and historically.¹⁰

In “The Poems of Our Climate” Stevens adds to the repertoire of poems in which he demonstrates that nature does not suffice for modern poetry, that poetry begins not with the imitation of nature but with the exposition of the mind. He opens with a still life, “Clear water in a brilliant bowl, / Pink and white carnations” and “nothing more.” That is, the poet begins by

describing carnal nature and nothing incarnate. But he then notes, in life as in poetry, “one desires / So much more than that.” For, as he observes in section II,

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one’s torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

For, as he notes in the first line of section III, “There would still remain the never-resting mind.” One desires “so much more” than the serenity of natural peace and appeasement because one desires “more” from one’s desires. Because there remains the never-resting mind, because we begin conscious of our desires (to invoke Spinoza¹¹), we learn that the desire to be carnal and “nothing more” is not a carnal desire, but demonstrates the incarnation, the reality, of the mind, for which natural similes do not suffice. One “would still” rather desire to be back in the paradise of nature without any desire—in the state of natural peace in which all of one’s desires are met—than not desire at all. Even the desire to ignore (to be ignorant of) our torments by immersing ourselves in the fleshpots of the hour involves acknowledging these torments and so demonstrates that we care, at least, to desire not to live in torment (however carelessly we work out this desire).

Because of the eternal restlessness of the mind, Stevens points out in section III that “one would want to escape” the state of nature, to “come back / To what had been so long composed.” But there is a subtle paradox, then, in the long composition of the poems of our climate. For what

our “escape” from the state of nature reveals is that we never began in nature. Rather, we begin *compos mentis*—with a history of poetic composition (synthesis) that exists *a priori*. The long composition to which we “come back” is prior, in principle, to the natural scene with which we start in section I.

That the long composition, the history, of the poems of our climate is biblical is revealed by the allusion to the myth of Adam and Eve in the final lines of the poem, in which Stevens summarizes the conclusion to which the mind eternally returns (as its incipient beginning):

The imperfect is our paradise.

Note that, in this bitterness, delight,

Since the imperfect is so hot in us,

Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

Stevens juxtaposes natural perfection and human imperfection, a still life and historical composition, simple objects and compound subjects. But what he reveals, through these contrasts, is that both perfection (paradise) and imperfection are moral categories that apply not to the nature of simple objects but to the will.

Indeed, there is a double (compound) meaning when Stevens comments, in section II, on the effort to conceal the “evilly compounded, vital I.” For the poet associates the concealment of the “I” responsible for pretending to return to a natural state of innocence (natural perfection) with evil. Yet, because the desire to conceal our torments involves compounding evil, as opposed to overcoming it, what we discover is that the sole method for overcoming what torments us is by exposing our imperfections. The imperfect is our eternal (historical) paradise because the knowledge of our imperfection is constituted by the desire for “more,” the desire to add unto—to augment, to refine, to complement—what we know or think. The desire for “more” expresses the

indomitable will to truth at the cost of natural serenity. The desire for “more” expresses the will to expose our imperfections—to be revealed to one another for the sinners that we are—in hot pursuit of a fuller sort of companionship, our never-resting effort to see our desires compounded through one another. That we begin imperfect, as a result of the desire for “more,” implies, however, that we also begin perfectly understanding the consummation of desire. Thus, as Stevens declares in “Asides on the Oboe” in response to his question “Did we / Find peace?”

We found the sum of men. We found,

If we found the central evil, the central good.

The peace of paradise, we learn, is not circumscribed within nature but cut by the sword of knowledge—the knowledge of good, as the consummation of our desires through a romantic interchange with one another (to recall the “Re-Statement of Romance”), and of evil, as the revelation of what we conceal (repress) about ourselves and our desire.¹²

In showing, then, that the poems of our climate do not seek to imitate nature but to construct images that satisfy the mind as the consummation of our desire, Stevens reminds us of the act of the mind that comprises the subject of modern poetry. He shows us, consistent with his demonstration in “Of Modern Poetry,” that the poems of our climate begin from nothing natural by self-consciously demonstrating the contradiction of pretending to begin, of seeking to begin, in nature. Thus, “The Poems of our Climate” recaptures, in alluding to, the paradox embedded in the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible, which also ends, as we shall now see, by showing that we begin self-consciously, knowing good and evil.

In Genesis 2, after God provides “every tree that is pleasant” so that the natural desires of Adam and Eve are fully met, we are told that God planted two more trees in the garden’s midst: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9). God commands Adam and

Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge (2:17). But the multiple authors (including the redactor) of the story thereby introduce a complex (multi-dimensional) paradox.¹³ For how do we understand God's command when it appears that, as the command implies, Adam and Eve do not yet know what constitutes good or evil? What does the command not to know good and evil mean to one who claims to be innocent, i.e., not to know good and evil?

What is stunning about God's command is that, for the person to whom it is addressed, there is no way to follow it or to disobey it—without contradicting both God and oneself. To prove oneself loyal to God by following the command—the proof that one does not know good and evil—inevitably involves demonstrating one's knowledge of what it is that one claims not to know. To ensure that you avoid knowing what you are asked not to know you are required to get to know it. To follow God, therefore, is to disobey (contradict) God. To disobey God's command, to demonstrate one's knowledge of good and evil, is to demonstrate that any command to remain ignorant of good and evil is self-contradictory and, thus, that one is incapable of disobeying it. There is no way to observe or to comprehend God's command—without knowing good and evil.

As Kant states in a particularly fine comment in the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” “Before reason,” i.e., the practical knowledge of good and evil, “had awoken, there was neither command nor prohibition and hence no transgression” (8:115). Kant sees that a prohibition against knowledge cannot exist within the “state of innocence” in the natural garden (8:115). But what we discover, then, in light of Kant's comment, is that God's command is self-consciously contradictory and cunning. For what God's command proves is that men and women do not begin ignorant or innocent in the garden of nature. Given that God's command can be heard (comprehended) only by those who know good and evil, it follows that what God truly

commands Adam and Eve to do, in issuing his prohibition, is to demonstrate their knowledge of good and evil. The command not to know good and evil is an invitation to know good and evil. The command not to know good and evil expresses the imperative for Adam and Eve to get to know what it means to know right from wrong, good from evil.

Thus, after Eve figures out God's cunning plan and demonstrates her knowledge of evil (and so of the good), God re-enters the scene to clothe his people and states, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (3:22). Again, the Bible demonstrates here the supreme command of the concept (and the content) of metaphor on the part of its authors. The "likeness" between God and man is not physical (natural) or immediately cognitive (theoretical) but moral. The image, we learn, that describes both divine and human nature reveals a moral truth. The moral knowledge of good and evil is embodied in the myth (the image) that captures the relationship (dialectic) between God and wo/man. The self-consciously contradictory command of God demands that human beings demonstrate that there is no contradiction between the divine and the human (or command and obedience) by becoming *like* God in demonstrating their knowledge of good and evil.

To show, then, that God's command at the beginning of the story—not to know good and evil—is radically identical to his statement at the end of the story—that man knows good and evil—is also to show, furthermore, that the story of Adam and Eve does not present us with a chronological sequence of events in which man lapses from a perfect state of natural ignorance to an imperfect state of sinful knowledge. Rather, the story presents us with a cunning paradox: that it is not possible to be ignorant of that which you are ignorant. The story of Adam and Eve is radically self-reflexive because its composition shows that what is wrong or evil is to pretend to be ignorant or innocent, i.e., to attempt to reduce humanity back to the nothingness of nature. To

attempt to begin at the beginning (with the innocence of natural Eden) is to find ourselves, with Eve, post-fall: with sin on our hands. What the story shows, then, is that the Bible does not begin where it naturally begins (either in Eden or in ancient Sumer) but that it can begin to be meaningfully narrated (and read) only from a point of view other than that with which it begins, a point of view that knows good and evil. Thus, the transition—expulsion—of Adam and Eve is not a natural change, a change from one natural form to another. Rather, the change—the “fall”—expresses a moral or ethical transfer through which man becomes *like* God in demonstrating his knowledge of sin or imperfection.

For my overall purposes in this study it is important to note that both “The Poems of Our Climate” and the myth of Adam and Eve engage the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. That is, each of them, in making the metaphorical relationship between contrasting concepts (e.g., the imperfect and paradise) central to their composition, reveals that the truth of their images can only be understood from (as embodying) a moral point of view. But they also put us on notice that the moral point of view embedded in their presentation can be revealed only by attending to the contrasting (dialectical) images that they employ. For my purposes in this chapter, it is important to see, then, that the myth of Adam and Eve and “The Poems of Our Climate,” in demonstrating that it is no longer possible to begin with the myths that ignorantly reflect their natural region, expose their true meaning by embracing the structure of self-conscious contradiction (in other words, paradox or metaphor).¹⁴

That the myth of Adam and Eve demonstrates that the Bible begins with the paradox of the image’s truth is also what Stevens advances in a key section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” in which he deepens our understanding of the paradox of beginning that is involved in biblical myth. In the fourth canto of the first part of the “Notes” Stevens writes:

The first idea was not our own. Adam

In Eden was the father of Descartes

And Eve made air the mirror of herself,

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves

In heaven as in a glass; a second earth

.

But the first idea was not to shape the clouds

In imitation. The clouds preceded us.

Although I shall defer my discussion of the relationship between Adam (the mythical father of man) and Descartes (the so-called father of modern philosophy¹⁵) to the next section of this chapter, I do want to provide a critical commentary on the relationship that Stevens proceeds to draw between the myth of Adam and Eve and the origin of (modern) poetry as the creation of the first idea. The paradox of the first idea is that, although it is not our own, it is we alone who think it. The first idea is that which we think in existence. Thus, in order to conceive of the first idea, human beings must also be present, as first, in the beginning. The beginning—to think of what is first—requires a relationship with what is not our own. But the awesome implication of thinking about what is first is that, because the first idea is paradoxical, because there is nothing that is first—there is no idea of what is first in space and time—the idea of what is first, the beginning, can only be conceived by one—i.e., by everyone—who comes second. That is, this idea can only come into existence in and through a relationship with another who is not immediately identical with this idea, in the beginning. The last becomes—is—first and the first becomes—is—last.¹⁶

Thus, Stevens captures the paradox of beginning—in relationship—with which the Bible opens (and that we examined in Chapter 4). The clouds—everything in nature—naturally preceded us, as the speaker of the canto suggests. Still, there is nothing natural that takes precedence over the *first* idea. The second earth describes the (re)creation of the world through heaven’s lens, through the lens of the mythical idea that each of us, from the “immaculate beginning” to the “immaculate end,” is eternally responsible for thinking (“Notes” I, iii). Thus, the speaker observes, in reflecting upon the beginning of the myth of Adam and Eve, the origin of men and women,

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.

There was a myth before the myth began,

Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place

That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves

And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (I, iv)

That is, Stevens subtly indicates that biblical myth does not present us with a beginning that is naturally prior to or that naturally generates the mud and the clouds (the earth). For the myth begins not in ignorance (of its natural origin) but venerably (really and truly) with the perfect (complete) articulation of what it means to begin at the “centre” of life. But what Stevens also suggests, therefore, is that nothing natural is prior to the mythical beginning of the Bible, provided that we see that the beginning is not a natural beginning in time and space but describes the principle—the first idea—according to which we live the time and the place. Thus, Stevens captures the paradox that, precisely because the myth does not begin from anything that naturally precedes it, there is nothing natural that is prior to the beginning of (biblical) myth.

Because, however, the beginning of man is not in time but time begins with the first idea (of relationship), we discover that there “was a myth before the myth began.” There is no beginning, in other words, that is not a re-beginning. For the beginning of myth, of fiction, describes the compound and compounding of images—the relationship—that demands the creative (critical) interpretation of its audience. The beginning of myth can be conceived, therefore—as articulately complete and as completely articulate—only by those who enter late upon the scene, the men and women of the time. In other words, what is first, the beginning, can only come into existence after it begins. Both “before” and “after” are articulated and venerated according to the myth that makes every time complete as the time—the moment—to think (heighten, amplify, renew) the relationship that comprises the first idea. Thus, because biblical myth is self-reflexive—because it shows us that it is its own beginning—it becomes historical in demanding an account by its audience and readers such that they demonstrate their own knowledge of the first idea. “From this,” from the re-articulation of the complete structure of biblical myth, modern poetry springs. For it is only when we begin with the self-consciously contradictory task of beginning with what is other than ourselves that we find ourselves in a relationship that is responsible for its own beginning.

The hard lesson of modern poetry, as we learn in analyzing the (inter-)textuality of Stevens’ poems, is that we are entrusted with the task not of imitating nature but of making paradise out of the knowledge of our sin or imperfection. Poetry challenges us, in other words, to expose our imperfections by finding ourselves in and through what is “not our own” and what is “not ourselves.” But it is so important to recognize, then, that, just as the Bible does not begin by reflecting its natural region but with the dialectical composition of the image’s truth (as we have seen), so modern poetry does not begin with the myths of the ancient Greeks but with the

creative and historical task brought into existence by the biblical structure of self-conscious contradiction (i.e., paradox, dialectic, or metaphor). For it is only when we see that the structure of the Bible is modern, in the beginning, and that modern poetry is biblical, ontologically and historically, that we shall be in the position to account for the dialectic between the religious and the secular that, as I shall now show, is embedded in Stevens' strongest poems.

iv. "A Primitive Like an Orb" and "Description Without Place"

Before analyzing the concept of description—the theory of the word—that embodies the relationship between the religious and the secular in Stevens' poem "Description Without Place," I want to examine "A Primitive Like an Orb." For Stevens introduces, in this poem, a concept of proof (for the existence of poetry) that allows us to see what constitutes the theory of the word that he advances in "Description Without Place" and that provides us with the resources for working out the link between Adam and Descartes in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

In "A Primitive Like an Orb" Stevens begins with a series of images that reflect two distinct terms of discourse:

The essential poem at the center of things,
The arias that spiritual fiddlings make,
Have gorged the cast-iron of our lives with good
And the cast-iron of our works. But it is, dear sirs,
A difficult apperception, this gorging good,
Fetched by such slick-eyed nymphs, this essential gold,
This fortune's finding, disposed and re-disposed
By such slight genii in such pale air. (I)

Stevens espouses the discourse of the spirit (the good) with the discourse of labor and appetite (the cast-iron that results from the combined work of forging and gorging). What is essential to the poem—the “essential poem”—is found at the center of this contrast. But the center, then, is not a physical center located between two objects. The center is nothing outside of these terms of discourse, the “things” with which the poem fiddles. The terms—on which we gorge ourselves—thereby become the poetic terms of human fulfillment when we see (apperceive) that each of the terms becomes meaningful when it is brought into relationship with—when it is conceived in and through—the other as its natural opposite. Not only does Stevens indicate, then, in initiating his poem, that poetry (aesthetics) has an ethical core (the subject of which is the good of the spirit). But he also reminds us that the good is realized in and through the (iron-clad) framework of metaphor (or, in Hegel’s philosophical terms, dialectic).

Stevens then elaborates on the existence of what is “essential” or “central” to poetry:

We do not prove the existence of the poem.

It is something seen and known in lesser poems.

It is the huge, high harmony that sounds

A little and a little, suddenly,

By means of a separate sense. It is and it

Is not and, therefore, is.

.

One poem proves another and the whole,

For the clairvoyant men who need no proof:

The lover, the believer, and the poet.

Their words are chosen out of their desire,

The joy of language, when it is themselves.

With these they celebrate the central poem,

The fulfillment of fulfillments, in opulent,

Last terms, the largest bulging still with more[.] (II, IV)

That one poem “proves another and the whole” means both that the poem becomes itself (one and whole) through its relation with what is other than itself and that it creates (demands) the poetic engagement of others. The concept of “one poem” does not refer, therefore, to a numerical value (or to any number of poems) but embodies a concept of relationship. For, as we also saw Stevens indicate in “Of Modern Poetry,” the poem does not exist outside of its relationship with a reader who is willing to take on the task of working out its oxymoronic (self-consciously contradictory) terms by seeing how—in what way—the framework of these terms constitutes the framework of her own life and self. Thus, not only does the poem prove itself by becoming other than itself in demanding that its readers conceive of themselves in and through the concept of relationship embodied in its images. But the poem also proves to be other than itself—as equally the creation of the reader—as she learns to conceive of the relationship between the disparate terms of discourse within the poem in relation to her own life.

The existence of the poem—the concept of existence that constitutes the subject of modern poetry—requires, therefore, a “separate sense” (cited above). The poem is neither seen (sensed) nor known (understood) as the objects of nature are seen and known. The sight (immediate perception) and knowledge (immediate cognition) of the elements of the poem are grounded upon a “sense” (concept) of the separation of the existence of the poem from these immediate elements. But the existence of poetry is also not subject to logical (deductive) proof. For the proof—the demonstration, the argument, the instruction, the illustration—of existence, as

the speaker conceives it, violates the rules of “general” or “ordinary” logic (to invoke the terms of Kant and Hegel). Rather, “It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is.” Stevens is articulating here, in the barest of terms, the paradox that is central (essential) to the creation of the wholeness and integrity of poetic truth. The paradox is that we cannot understand the truth of one set of poetic terms (whether sacred or profane, transcendental or prosaic) except insofar as we also recognize how—in what “sense”—those terms are not true or do not express what is truly essential (central) to the poem. The truth of the one can only be known in and through the other (as its natural opposite). The truth, then, is that there is no good thinking or writing—no good poetry—outside of paradox (as another version of the relationship involved in dialectic and metaphor). The paradox is that, although the appearances of a poem can and must be both seen and known, what we see and know cannot account for the existence of poetry. For what constitutes the existence (the subject) of the poem, in embracing the metaphoric truth of dialectic (the dialectic of metaphoric truth), prevents us from using what we see and know as a model for understanding the poet’s images.

Stevens thus unites the object of the poet—the existence of a good poem—with the object (subject) of the lover and the believer: i.e., with the existence of the other (people in relation) and God. The existence of a good poem—identical to the existence of the other (the beloved) and God—is not seen or known but thought, willed (chosen, desired), loved, and believed. The existence of God or love (relationship)—identical to that of a good poem—is also not subject to empirical or logical proof. But we thus find ourselves engaged, as we examine the proof of existence for those who “need no proof,” in the nexus of relations—between God and persons, thought and existence, self and other (relationship)—that constitute both the explicit and the implicit subject of Descartes’ philosophy.

As Descartes' indicates in the *Discourse on Method*, the existence of the person—my existence—cannot be proven on the basis of what I see or know—without collapsing into illusion. But I can gain reliable knowledge of what I see precisely because I cannot think except as existing and I cannot exist except as thinking. I think, therefore, I am. I think—about everything that I see and know—and, therefore, I am—nothing that I see and that I know not to be thinking about its existence. I think and, therefore, I am—other than what I see and know. Both my thinking and my existence (what or who I am) are constituted by a relationship with what is other than what is immediately seen or known about me.

That Stevens aligns, then, the poet with the lover and the believer—that the object of the believer, the lover, and the poet (i.e., God, love, and poetry) are one—is no accident. As we shall see in further chapters, because, as Stevens correctly points out, God is dead—as a concept modelled on the pagan gods of ancient Greece (Phoebus) and nature¹⁷—the concept of God re-emerges in his poems as the supreme fiction “without which we are unable to conceive” of life or to exist (poetically, creatively).¹⁸ God is the concept—the supreme fiction—that you cannot exist without thinking. Because God cannot be seen or known—because any concept of God modelled on what we see and know is a lesser version of the supreme fiction—God is that concept that you cannot think without existing. God is the idea of the other through which I perfect—amplify, enrich, add unto—my existence. In Descartes' terms, God is the idea of perfection. God, whether in terms of biblical or philosophical discourse, is the concept of that which perfects (my) existence. But what one further sees, then, as Descartes indicates, is that I cannot think about my existence without conceiving of the existence of God. Thus, Descartes captures the ontological proof for the existence of God, which we examined in Chapter 2. For what he shows is that I cannot think of my existence except in relation to another, the other, through which I assess the

status—the (im)perfection—of my existence. One existence (whether divine or human) proves another (both divine and human) and, therefore, the whole (at once divine and human).

But it is when we see, then, that the principal subject of Descartes' philosophy is relationship—as that which embraces the thought and existence of God and persons—that we further see what Kant sees (albeit implicitly). The ontological proof for existence—the existence of both God and the self—is not a subject of theoretical but of practical demonstration (reason, belief, poetry). The consequence of Descartes' arguments (which Descartes does not yet see and which Kant ironically reveals) is that I cannot think about the existence of God outside of a concept of relationship that is embodied in the practice, in Kant's terms, of loving your neighbor as yourself. I cannot think except as existing in relationship, as the principal subject of love, belief, and poetry.¹⁹

In holding together, then, Stevens' examination of the “central poem” in “A Primitive Like an Orb” and the philosophy of Descartes (along with Kant), what we discover is that Stevens' proof—in capturing the paradoxical construction of relationship (“It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is”)—also re-iterates the ontological proof. The existence of poetry is not “something seen or known” or proven, whether empirically or logically. Rather, in invoking (paradoxically) two different notions of proof, the poem proves that existence is not seen or known but thought, loved, believed, and created. What is seen or known in life or in poetry does not account for what is worthwhile about existence, for the existence of love or desire (the will) or for what we love about a poem. Thus, Stevens indicates that the words of a poem—indeed, the words of “A Primitive Like an Orb”—are chosen (out of desire) and, therefore, that it is not nature but the authors and readers “themselves” that are embodied in the language of the poem (IV). What we enjoy about the poetic use of language is not the immediate mood that the poem

invokes, or the sights, sounds, and smells that it imitates, but the relationships (between the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane, the sudden and the slow to develop, the provocative and the subtle) that constitute its existence, the existence of poetic relationship in which two emotions become one when conceived from a point of view that accounts for the wholeness (integrity) of a relationship between two people.

Stevens' proof for the existence of the "central poem" is as sparse as Descartes' proof for the existence of God and the self. But it is because it remains so rudimentary—so fundamental—that its implications are so far reaching, "bulging still with more" (IV). Indeed, Stevens puts us on notice, in concluding the fourth section of the poem, that we desire "more" not because we do not know the end that we desire—not because we are not perfect—but because desire (in relationship with another) is the end, the last term (and concept). These last terms—the terms of human fulfillment—describe, we then learn, the contract or compact before which "the used-to earth and sky... Lose the old uses that they [i.e., poets, believers, and lovers] made of them,"

And they: these men, and earth and sky, inform

Each other by sharp informations, sharp,

Free knowledges, secreted until then,

Breaches of that which held them fast. It is

As if the central poem became the world,

And the world the central poem, each one the mate

Of the other.

. denouncing separate selves, both one. (V)

Because poetry, Stevens informs us, begins not with nature but with the desire to create nature—to make life good—the relationships that it includes (between earth and sky) embody the free

relationship between men (and women). The poem becomes the “world” of human freedom. To be free is not to become free from the “world” but to engage in its poetic creation by using natural images metaphorically.

Thus, the revolution in modern poetry that Stevens subtly recounts in “A Primitive Like an Orb” captures the revolution in metaphysics (modern philosophy) that we saw Kant advance in his critique of purely practical reason. The “old uses” that the poets “made” of the earth and sky embody the old metaphysics that is lost for us in which the mind is conceived (imagined) to conform to objects and so to remain the secret of another space and another time hidden in the recesses of nature. But these uses are breached by metaphor (embodying the revolution of Kantian metaphysics). For a metaphor, in using earth and sky in a way that contradicts any natural use, shows us that it cannot be conceived by using nature as a model for our understanding of the image (i.e., the poem’s existence)—without collapsing into contradictory illusion. Thus, the existence of metaphor provides us with a method for overcoming contradiction. For, in embracing paradox as the proof of its existence, a metaphor shows us that there is no contradiction (between its elements) when it is understood that these images do not describe natural operations but embody the realization of human freedom. In working out the relationships inherent in the metaphors (oxymorons) of Stevens’ poetry, we find ourselves demonstrating, with Kant, that there is no contradiction between nature and freedom. To study Stevens’ conception of the intercourse between the “central poem” and “the world”—in which each one becomes the other—is to find ourselves demonstrating that, although we begin with nature, how we use nature does not arise from anything natural but begins and ends with men and women as ends (“things”) in themselves.

Although Stevens' poem begins and ends by wedding two languages of discourse—the sacred (divine) and the profane (human), spirit and work, poetry and the world—Stevens also points out that it is through the marriage of these terms of discourse that existence becomes one (whole) and denounces “separate selves.” Indeed, there is but one existence in which both (two) are one and that is the existence that is constituted by human desire or freedom. There is one existence—but there are, therefore, separate “senses” in which we interpret existence. The “central poem” can only exist in the appearances: “The light / Of it is not a light apart, up-hill” (VI). But the subject (existence) of the poem must not be interpreted according to its appearances. Rather, we must interpret its appearances according to the concept of relationship embodied by its images (metaphors) in which one is known in and through another and, therefore, each one becomes “whole” as a representation of the relations that inform us of our freedom.

Thus, Stevens introduces in his poem a dialectical relation between the whole and the part. He notes,

The central poem is the poem of the whole,

The poem of the composition of the whole,

.

And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,

Not merely into a whole, but a poem of

The whole, the essential compact of the parts.... (VII)

The whole is not the sum of its (lesser) parts. The whole is of no greater sum than any of its parts. It is important to note, that is, that the parts are not lesser than the whole. The “lesser” poems do not describe, therefore, the “parts” to which Stevens refers, each of which, in its

“compact” with another, is whole. Indeed, the discrimination between the part and the whole, on the one hand, and the lesser poems in which the existence of the “essential poem” is seen and known, on the other, is confirmed in the final section of the poem:

That’s it. The lover writes, the believer hears,

The poet mumbles and the painter sees,

Each one, his fated eccentricity,

As a part, but part, but tenacious particular

.

[...], the giant of nothingness, each one

And the giant ever changing, living in change.

Even the image of the gigantic whole becomes a peculiar metaphor. For the center of this whole exists outside of its circumference (in its “eccentric” parts, which become whole in and through another). Each one, in relationship to this whole—lover, believer, poet, and now painter—becomes the center of the whole, yet a center that is known only in and through a relationship to another point of axis (access). Each one is thus imagined as the “giant of nothingness.” The part that each of us plays describes our whole participation in the whole of life.

The giant is a recurring motif in the poems of Stevens (and, indeed, a peculiarly mythical one). The giant conjures an image of power. But Stevens then tests our comprehension of this power, of our power—of the power of love, belief, poetry—by capturing it in the idea of nothingness. As we shall see in the next chapter, the idea of nothingness that Stevens introduces in his poems cuts both ways. The giant, the “central” or “essential” poem, existence, the whole, the part, love, God... are all nothing (in natural space and time). But the giant is also nothing outside of the appearances of natural space and time. The giant is nothing outside of existence—

as constituted by one in relationship with another—for it is existence that we value above all else and that we are concerned to prove. Indeed, the giant is not giant in terms of space and time.

Rather, the giant, the existence of the poem, is

A vis [i.e., a force or power], a principle or, it may be,

The meditation of a principle,

Or else an inherent order active to be

Itself, a nature to its natives all

Beneficence, a repose, utmost repose,

The muscles of a magnet aptly felt,

A giant, on the horizon, glistening[.] (VIII)

The nature of our poems, as of our existence, becomes transformed by the “principle” on which we meditate. The nature that we employ in our images thus takes on the status of human nature, i.e., the freedom or “beneficence” that becomes native to us, not as a result of anything natural about us but as a result of our relation to the proof, the principle, of relationship through which life is made good (“beneficent”: to make good). The power of this giant thus describes the human *vis* (a Latin term meaning, as indicated above, force or power) to exist, not as determined by the natural conditions (the natural forces) at work in our lives, but to use those conditions, to transform nature, through the spiritual labour of freedom.

Thus, the “change” in which we live, to recall the final lines of “A Primitive Like an Orb”—the change in which existence (both divine and human) is constituted—is nothing (in terms of natural space and time). But that change, then, is everything as the process through which we preserve our integrity as creators of life (and poetry), as persons, both individually and collectively. The change describes what Stevens identifies as the miracle that is contained in the

“multiplex” of lesser poems. Here is where we find ourselves grappling, then, with one final aspect of Stevens’ poem, an aspect that provides us with a way of discerning why (how, for what purpose) Stevens introduces a relation between Descartes and Adam in his “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

Stevens indicates, as we saw, that the existence of the “essential” poem, the supreme fiction, is seen and known in its lesser versions. The sight and the knowledge that is conceived through the relationship that comprises what is “essential” to poetry put before us the sight and the knowledge of those lesser poems that try to reduce the existence (subject) of the poem to an object of sight (empirically) or knowledge (according to theoretical or formal categories). That it is in and through these “lesser poems” that we identify the “central poem” is not to say, however, as Stevens knows, that that which is perfect (central, essential, supreme: “the giant, on the horizon”) arises out of our errors or ignorance of it. Rather, he notes, “The essential poem begets the others” (VI). Thus, the paradox here is that, while the essential poem does not naturally generate (cause) the others as its (empirical) effects, the lesser poems are exposed as imperfect—and thus begotten—by none other than the supreme fiction, whose idea of perfection exists as the overcoming (the miraculous change) of that which is less perfect.

It is important to note that when Stevens indicates in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” that Adam is the father of Descartes—that Descartes is the son of Adam and Eve—he does not mean to suggest that the father precedes the son or that modern philosophy succeeds (and so replaces) biblical myth. Rather, his poetic genealogy indicates that we cannot know either the father or the son outside of their relationship. Stevens alerts us, that is, to the relationship between the knowledge of sin and doubt. Descartes begins to doubt all that he knows when he is introduced to the idea that all that he knows is not perfect. The knowledge of sin—the

understanding that our conception of existence is not perfect—breeds a profound self-doubt. But to doubt existence, as both Descartes and Stevens reveal, is to prove that, in critically discriminating between what you are and what you are not, you are—perfect in the knowledge of yourself as constituted by a concept of relationship that is both divine and human. To doubt is to learn how to distinguish, therefore, between greater and lesser poems, the true and the false (deception or illusion). To doubt is to demonstrate one’s knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve begin by doubting God’s command, by doubting human knowledge of divine command. But what the myth of Adam and Eve shows us, then (as we saw earlier), is not that man begins ignorant of the fulfillment of existence but that he begins with the power to discern the true from the false (right from wrong). To begin thinking (doubting) is to begin with sin. To begin with existence is to begin sinful. To begin with sin is to begin thinking and existing. To begin by doubting everything that we know—as lovers, believers, and artists (whether poets or painters)—is to begin with self-conscious contradiction—with paradox—as the demonstration or proof that existence (in relationship) is perfect.

Although Stevens exposes his own bias towards art when he suggests, in his letters and essays, that art is a substitute for religion and that poetry “may be” philosophy’s superior — reversing the hierarchal ordering to which, as we saw, Hegel was partial—Stevens’ poems do not allow that hierarchy to stand.²⁰ In other words, we cannot develop a comprehensive reading of his poems on the basis of that hierarchy—without repressing certain aspects or elements of his poetry. Indeed, it is ever so important not to import this hierarchal mode of thinking into one’s reading of “Description without Place.” For it is here that the implications of Stevens’ conception of poetry—his theory of the word—for how we conceive of the relationship between the religious and the secular become truly apparent.

After opening “Description without Place” with a probing meditation on the relationship between seeming and being—in which “to seem—it is to be”—Stevens distinguishes between two examples of “things” that seem to be. The first is the natural sun. The second is a queen whose “green mind,” in describing the sun (nature), “made the world around her” (I). But Stevens’ description of the mind—of what the mind seems to be—then takes on paradoxical shape. For he describes the mind as an “illustrious nothing” and “golden vacancy” (I). Yet he then aligns this illustrious nothingness with actuality—“Such seemings are the actual ones”—before distinguishing between actuality and appearance. Indeed, he goes on to indicate that it is the life of the mind that we actually see, hear, feel and know in our descriptions and that it is the nature of “flat appearance” to which we are “blind” (II). He thus aligns, in the fifth canto of the poem, the seeming of description with the “spirit’s universe” as composed of the “difference that we make in what we see / And our memorials of that difference.” Stevens thereby anticipates the justice, the justification, of his description of (poetic) description in the next canto, wherein he states that,

Description is revelation. It is not

The thing described, nor false facsimile. (VI)

We cannot describe as an object, in other words, that which we must presuppose (the actuality of the mind) in order to describe an object at all (to recall Kant yet again). There is no facsimile—except a false one—between the “thing described” and the act of description (the theory of human communication). But there is also no facsimile—except a false one—between description and revelation. The revelation of description is the revelation of metaphor. The statement “Description is revelation” engages the structure of metaphor. For, in distinguishing between description and the “thing described”—the objects of possible experience in natural space and

time—Stevens puts us on notice that all description involves human artifice, i.e., metaphor, the meaning of which is not revealed by the immediacy of its terms. Description is the revelation of the twofold standpoint, the razor sharp distinction between the nature of the terms that we use and the act of the mind embodied in the use of those terms.

But what we further discover, then, is that the revelation of this distinction also brings into existence the grave possibility of “false facsimile.” Indeed, as Stevens puts it in “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,” what we look for in existence, what we desire to see and to reveal in our descriptions, is “a second of the self” (II). He notes of the youth, the son, the young scholar of poetry studying the “profusion of metaphor,” who is himself “the irreducible X,” that,

He must say nothing of the fruit that is

Not true, nor think it, less. He must defy

The metaphor that murders metaphor. (II)

For he “seeks as image a second of the self, / Made subtle by truth’s most jealous subtlety...”

(II). Because what we seek in existence is the truth of ourselves, we can become confused and reduce the existence of the self to a reflection of the fruit (the objects) of natural life. It is because description is the revelation of the twofold standpoint—the infinite difference between ourselves and nature—that we can fall into the gap by drawing a simile between description and revelation. It is because what we seek in reading poetry is to find a second of ourselves, to find ourselves in and through its images, that we can reduce the truth of the poem to its immediate images.

Stevens’ use of the metaphor of “murder” to describe the act of reducing existence to its natural similes is apt. For not only is the act of murder metaphorical—just because I kill another human being does not mean that my action is murder—but the absence (the death) of metaphor

in life is the signal that one has reduced life to death, to nothing thinking or, therefore, existing. Stevens' formulation of "false facsimile" or "false metaphor" as the "metaphor that murders metaphor" alerts us, moreover, to the fact that it is precisely the metaphoric relationship between self and other that is responsible for reducing that relationship to nothing (II). There is nothing besides "metaphor"—the revelation of human description—that is responsible for introducing the possibility (and actuality) of collapsing the difference between human subjects and natural objects. Nonetheless, even this possibility (actuality)—because it depends on the metaphoric distance between ourselves and nature—cannot foreclose the possibility (and actuality) of our reconciliation with life, not on nature's terms but on the poetic terms of human discourse (relationship). We must "defy" (put no faith in) the false metaphors, the images that falsify the truth of ourselves, precisely because we cannot accommodate for human difference—the difference "that we make in what we see"—so long as we reduce the truth of the self to its natural appearances, which invariably results in opposing what is naturally true to one to what is naturally true to another.

The truth is both subtle and jealous, then—as God in the Bible maintains a subtle jealousy—because any attempt to formulate a concept of the truth in the image of nature results in the reduction of human difference—and the subjects of poetry—to nothing. This jealousy is subtle, however—and so distinct from the green-eyed monster that typifies love's egotistic perversion—because it does not exclude any of the natural differences among its subjects (including the subjects of poetry) from becoming the testimonials, the expressions, of the truth of relationship that constitutes the existence of the self. The difference of poetry describes the difference that we "make" in each other's lives when we seek as an image a second of the self through the subtle revelation of the self of the other.²¹

The revelation of description, therefore, is twofold. In revealing the distinction between ourselves and that which we describe (nature), poetic description further reveals that we cannot find ourselves mirrored in nature but that ourselves—our descriptions—are truly revealed in and through the other and the other’s descriptions. Description is the revelation of self and other. Description is the revelation of existence as constituted by the relationship between self and other. Description is the revelation that what Stevens describes as the “categorical predicate” in section V of “Description Without Place” is you. The one object—the object of every subject—the object that I cannot *not* think about or describe—is the other. Thus, description is the revelation that what is categorically imperative in life—and in poetic description—is to describe self and other according to the terms of relationship in which both the subject and the object of our sentences (prescriptions, judgments, expressions) are human subjects. Thus, Stevens continues to describe his concept of description as

[...] an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be,

A text we should be born that we might read,
More explicit than the experience of the sun

And moon, the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,

The thesis of the plentifullest John. (“Description Without Place” VI)

That description involves the revelation of a “text we should be born that we might read” is a rather counter-intuitive and strenuous turn of phrase. For the text here is both that which we reveal (write, author) in describing life and that which is revealed by our descriptions, a text of which we are the authors and a text that intends us to read it (that involves a purpose for us) from birth. It is a text that we both author and read, a text that to author is to read and that to read is to author. It is a text of which both authors and readers are both authors and readers. Stevens thus demands of his readers, in working out this turn of phrase, that we recall the hermeneutical relationship of modern poetry in which to read a poem requires our own creative authorship (finding our lives and selves doubled in and through it) and to write a poem involves facing (reading) the men and women of the time (one’s readers).

But Stevens also adds, in “Description Without Place,” a layer to writing and reading modern poetry that it is pivotal to note for resolving the argument of this chapter. For, in aligning his text and argument with the text and argument of the Gospel of John (i.e., with the Bible), Stevens develops a theory of the word that is at once religious and secular.

Indeed, the Gospel of John opens with the revelation that it is the word (of poetic description) with which we begin: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” John goes on to report, after aligning the word with the true light “that enlightens every man,” that “the world was made through” the word of God and yet “the world knew him not”:

But to all who received him... he gave the power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh.... (1:1-14)

John indicates that the origin of human existence is not the natural flesh but the word. We are all born of woman from the natural seed of man. But the natural seed of life cannot account for what we make of our lives or the world. The miracle of birth is not that there is a secret cause hidden in the infinite recesses of Mother Nature, but that there is no cause that can account for who we are as people, both individually and collectively. The world is “made” according to how we understand (“receive”) the revelation of the word.

“Thus,” Stevens observes in the final section of “Description Without Place,” it is the “theory of description” that “matters most”:

It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,

The buzzing world and lispings firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,

In which nothing solid is its solid self.

The theory of description “matters most.” For, as Stevens indicates, description is the revelation that we are responsible for “making the world” in demonstrating that our words distinguish us from the “buzzing and lispings,” the sounds, of nature.

As responsible, then, as both Stevens and John argue, for the “making of the world,” the word is a word at once like and unlike any other. Indeed, there are no other words than those contained within the world of human language (whatever the language that one is speaking). The “word” is not a magical cant or buzz word that conjures the presence of the truth or of God. The “word” is a natural term like any other. But “the word” is also a word (a concept) unlike any natural term. For, because it is nothing “solid” outside of the resources of language, there is no

word or sequence of words than cannot contain (express) the word of God or the truth. What counts is not the words that we use (including whether or not we use the words “God” or “truth”) but how we comprehend the origin of human communication, the revelation of our lives as lived wholly within the “canon,” the text, the word of human relationship.

As we saw above, Stevens indicates that to read (interpret) this “text” is not the cause but is the reason we are born. As John indicates, in recounting both the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the incarnation, we begin, collectively and individually, not with the natural flesh but with the word of God, the command to love one another. Although the word “God” occurs first—in terms of the sequence of words in John’s text—the word of God is not prior to but is used here to describe the origin of men and women. To locate our beginning, however, not within the bounds of natural discourse, shows us that there is no natural discourse—no flesh—that cannot become the “book of reconciliation” or, in John’s terms, the native home of love, as divine as it is human.

Indeed, how we describe existence reveals our own point of view (the concepts and the principles by which we live). But we also reveal how we view (think) others view us. The word is responsible, therefore, not for generating nature but for “making the world,” as Stevens and John suggest, that comprises human interaction, in and through which is revealed none other than the poetic truth of relationship. The “text we should be born that we might read” becomes our own—our very flesh—as the story of our lives that lies waiting for us within the lives of our relations, provided that we do not fail to read the events of existence (including birth and death) according to the revelation that we can reconcile ourselves with the world only by authorizing for ourselves images in which we see all others (who constitute the world we live in) as ourselves.

It is no accident, then, that Stevens uses the very concept—“reconciliation”—that (in Chapter 4) we saw Hegel use to describe the dialectic of the spirit, the process through which the self finds itself in and through its other (which Hegel also describes as absolute love). For reconciliation is “only possible,” as both Stevens and Hegel observe, in the book (the text: the descriptions) in which we do not locate ourselves in the natural world but, instead, use the natural world to express the true value that we bestow upon human existence. It is also no accident that Stevens uses the language of the “book”—of the Bible—to express the thesis through which he reconciles poetry and the world. Indeed, in his description is the revelation of both the past and the future as at once religious and secular. The word (of God) is not located—it is nothing—outside of the world of human description. But the world of human description is not predicated on nature or on natural mythology but on the revelation of relationship, at once human and divine. What we learn, in seeing that the Gospel of John articulates the “theory of the word” that “matters most” to Stevens, is that the poetic word of Stevens is as religious as it is secular and that the theory of the word—the revelation—of John’s Gospel is as secular as it is religious.

Indeed, the religious is not to be identified with the Church or with the Bible *per se*.²² The religious is not to be immediately identified with anything different from the world. For the word of God is known, as the authors and figures of the Bible hold, in and through the world as the principle, the word, by which it is imperative to live. The religious describes the “difference that we make in what we see” by employing our differences in the service of one another (“Description Without Place” V). Moreover, the secular does not describe the world of nature or that of pagan mythology. The secular is known only through the world in which “nothing solid is its solid self,” the world in which human beings are responsible for the revelation of the word. The secular is not a position opposed to religious difference; rather, it describes the standpoint

that seeks to accommodate all differences insofar as these differences preserve human freedom. Thus, what we learn in attending to the implications of Stevens' poem is that, just as the Bible is founded upon images that embrace the existence of relationship as the truth of every enlightened person and age (as John points out), so the secular poet can be truly modern (and so properly secular) only insofar as he founds his poetry not on nature or on ancient (pagan) mythology but upon the metaphoric structure of the Bible.

In other words, in uniting his theory of the word with that found in the Gospel of John and in indicating that "it is a world of words to the end of it," Stevens reveals to us that there are no "middle" ages—except in name. There is nothing—no space and no time—that separates the religious and the secular. There is no space and time—there is nothing—outside of the dialectic of the word as at once religious and secular. Another way to put this paradox is to indicate that human beings of every age begin in the very middle—which was excluded, as we saw, from ancient Greek texts. For we begin and end, in every age, with the responsibility to transform the conditions of the world into conditions suitable for the thought and expression (existence) of human freedom.

Our task, then, is not to distinguish between the religious and the secular but to discern the difference between the religious (as the word of God realized in the flesh as the love of one another) and the religious (as the word of God reduced to the natural images of the flesh) and the secular (as the word of human description revealed as the transcendental act of reconciliation) and the secular (as the reduction of the world that belongs to human beings to the "buzzing and lispings" world of nature or natural myth). What is important, then, is to recognize that neither religious nor secular epithets are self-justifying. Just because I identify as religious or as secular does not mean that my actions—what I do, what I love, what I believe in, or the texts that I read

and write—are just. Still, just because I identify as either religious or secular does not exclude the possibility (or actuality) that my actions are just. What counts, we learn, in attending to the various facets of the relationship between the religious and the secular, is that, whether we use religious or secular terms of discourse, we see what Stevens’ poem, in reiterating the word of the Gospel, reveals: that each can be truly justified only in and through the other. Thus, in seeing that the existence of modern poetry can be justified only through terms that are at once religious and secular we are now in the position to account for the false and falsifying dualisms with which the figure of “Sunday Morning” is riven.

v. “Sunday Morning”

In “Sunday Morning” Stevens sets out a seductive trap for his readers by presenting the conventional point of view of modern thinkers and poets in terms that appear to disrupt the conventional point of view of religious thinkers and poets. He sets the scene:

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

We then find a woman in this scene who begins to dream “a little, / and she feels the dark / Encroachments of that old catastrophe”:

As a calm darkens among water-lights
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead.

For her dreams carry her,

Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and the sepulchre.

It is difficult to discern the point of view of the poet, the speaker, in section I. We do not usually use the term “complacency” to describe that of which we approve. Thus, it appears—at least, initially—that the author’s point of view remains aloof, not to be directly aligned with that of the woman. Still, while the commentary of the speaker does not praise the woman’s thoughts, there is no indication (whether in the form of parody, irony, or satire) that the speaker, in editorializing the perspective of the woman through the use of free indirect discourse, is critical of her point of view.

As she contemplates the silence of Palestine, the place of the story and the tomb of Christ, the oranges and the green wings of the parrot become “things in some procession of the dead.” But, the woman then asks herself (as the speaker indicates) upon contemplating the sacrifice of Christ, “Why should she give her bounty to the dead?” The woman proceeds to pose two further questions:

What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

But her questions are unsettled and unsettling. For her questions—why? what? shall?—put us on notice that she knows of a reason—from a point of view that is opposed to her own—why the beauty of the earth shall *not* become divine or heavenly. Still, she states,

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights.... (II)

For, “These are the measures destined for her soul” (II). What is so seductive about the woman’s position, and the position in which the conventional view of modernity takes shape, is that the terms that are used appear to marry heaven and earth, divinity and the self, the soul and emotion. Thus, it appears that the woman espouses the unity (dialectic) of discourse of which we all approve and that, as we saw in the last section of this chapter, gorges “our lives with good” (“A Primitive Like an Orb” I). It is important to keep in mind, however, that divinity and heaven are aligned here not with the principle (the proof) of poetic creation but with the nature of the earth, which the woman opposes to what she views as a dead God: a concept of divinity that does not exist outside of our human projections. The woman continues to oppose the secular (which she aligns with the natural earth) to the religious (which she views as occupying a space and time—a history—different from her own), consistent with the opposition between (natural) freedom and (holy) sacrifice that we find articulated in section I. Thus, the poem begins to lay the snares of its trap, both for those who uncritically reject the poem (whom the woman condemns as enslaved to religious illusion) and for those who uncritically accept the point of view of the woman.

Because the woman does not see that what constitutes divinity is the self of (human) relationship and that what constitutes the self is (divine) relationship—because she gives no indication that what constitutes the relationship between the divine and the self is the categorical imperative to love one another (ethics)—she reduces both divinity and the self to the

immediacies of feeling and mood. Moreover, because absent from her account of the self (as divine) is the ethical principle of relationship, the woman does not see that her feelings and moods proceed from any other grounds than those that reflect the natural conditions that surround her. As we shall see, it is precisely because she provides herself with no basis on which to assess her feelings that her opposing emotional impulses do not become liberating as the content through which she becomes one (with herself and others) but are paralyzing (as symptomatic of the dualisms that do not allow her to resolve her various feelings).

In section III, after opposing herself (her secular position) to the religious, the woman's dreams turn to the history of the human race in defense of her position. She appears to recount the conventional narrative of human history (at least, in the West), beginning with the ancient Greeks and Romans:

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large mannered motions to his mythy mind.
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.

The woman then asks, "Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be / The blood of paradise? And shall the earth seem all of paradise that we shall know?" (III). It appears that, in her account of history, the human race moves beyond the ancient Greek and Roman myths (natural mythology) in which the gods remained entirely opposed to what is human. Yet, it also appears that the woman remains rather contemptuous of the story of the incarnation (the virgin birth), calling the

shepherds who discerned the divinity of God in man “hinds” or dogs. The hinds (as representative of the appetites or desires of men and women) remain, that is, different in nature from, if not opposed to, the god who became man: Christ. It appears, then, that, although she rejects the myths of Jove, she desires to go beyond the story of the incarnation (i.e., Christianity). Indeed, the woman thinks that, when the earth (nature) becomes our end and paradise,

The sky will be much friendlier than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

Still, her position reinforces the opposition between the religious (the divinity that exists outside life) and the secular (as the life of the natural earth). Her position is no less divided and dividing than the position to which she is opposed. For her position does not disrupt but continues to collude with the false and falsifying dualism between the divine and the human, wherein the divine is projected beyond human reality and human reality is reduced to its natural imitation.

The important question to raise about section III is: Why—how—does the concept of “enduring love” get introduced here, given the divisions that the woman sets out? Where does “enduring love” fit in? With the religious? With the secular? With the death of God? With the nature of the earth? The woman indicates that the nature of the earth takes a seat “next in glory” to enduring love. But what is so valuable or worthy about nature next to a love that endures? As we saw Kant point out in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, love (at once divine and human) can and must have no rivals—without becoming compromised by one’s appetite for happiness. One cannot serve two masters, to recall Jesus, without becoming divided against oneself in one’s pursuit of self-serving ends.²³ Although the woman claims to be perfectly content with nature,

again aiming to unite the two discourses of existence (paradise and the earth), she remains not wholly satisfied with her own point of view. As she observes in section IV,

... “I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?”
There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home....

Our hearts yearn with the woman’s sweet questions as we read. For, on the one hand, we agree. As Kant demonstrates and as Stevens determines, God is dead—as an object of theoretical knowledge. Heaven is a dead and deadly image—when it is viewed as the reward of an immortal space and time divorced from (outside of) all space and time. There is nothing so sweet as the questioning of the nature of existence. But we must also question, on the other hand, the basis on which the woman of “Sunday Morning” poses her questions. For the basis on which she sets out—the opposition between the religion of a paradise beyond life and the secular life of a natural paradise—leaves her utterly at a loss for answering her own questions.

What is important to realize, in other words, is that neither of the opposing points of view that shape “Sunday Morning” can account for the existence of enduring love. From the religious point of view (as the woman conceives it), love endures but it does not exist. The love for God is divorced from (and opposed to) the love of existence. From her own (secular) point of view, love

exists but it does not endure. For, as her question in section IV indicates, the birds fly south. The green leaves of April become brown, fall, and perish as the spring and the summer are naturally replaced by the fall and winter. Her contentment, then, with nature is also the very cause of her discontent—with her inability to locate paradise on earth. Indeed, she notes in section V that, in her contentment, she still feels “the need of some imperishable bliss.”

Because, however, the woman in the poem does not reconcile the perishable and the imperishable through the concept of poetry—of the word—as the demonstration that we are not determined by the conditions in which we live but are free to live—to transform—those conditions on the grounds of enduring love, she sees no way of locating that which is imperishable—the ultimate satisfaction of her needs—in life. Thus, death becomes the natural home—as forever the end—of that which perishes. “Death,” she notes, “is the mother of beauty; hence from her / Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires” (V). That there is no fulfillment of human desire in life—that to fulfill desire is to become dead to life—is poetic nihilism. That the beauty of life is not located in life but in death follows (naturally) from reducing life to the beauty of nature. Yet, her position also directly contradicts (undermines) her own refutation of the religious—as the service of death.

Indeed, that death is the mother of beauty remains the ugly motif of modern nihilists—unless and until it is redeemed by the poetic understanding that, because there is no life without death, death is a practice for which we are ever responsible in life. In Kant’s terms, death is not an object of theoretical knowledge. Death is nothing—but the supreme test of our love for one another and of how we understand the grounds of our relationships with each other. Death is the natural expiry of life. But the wonder and the mystery of death is that, regardless of how many times I explain to myself the scientific causes that led to another’s death, that scientific

explanation cannot account for the loss or for the pain that I feel in meditating upon that person's life and our relationship. Death can be understood, in other words, to involve and to express the beauty of life when we realize that death is not the cause of its own pain. We the living, we the loving—we are. Death is not beautiful as the end of life. Life—the lives of one another—is the beautiful end of death. There is nothing so beautiful in life than bearing witness to the eternal resolve to care for one another in death. But death can be truly beautiful, therefore, only insofar as we see that death is not the end of life, that the end of life is not located in death. Rather, our end, in life as in death, is located in our enduring love for one another.

Because, however, the woman of “Sunday Morning” reduces the beauty of life to its natural satisfaction, she continues to reduce death to its natural images. In the sixth canto of the poem, she reiterates her critical stance against the religious concept of heaven as an immortal space and time divorced from the space and time of earth. “Is there no change of death in paradise?” she asks:

Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find. (VI)

While she is penetrating in her insight that the conventional image of immortal life (the reward of heaven) involves falsely applying categories, which belong to nature, to the concepts of the infinite and the eternal, she appears bereft of any insight into her own contradictory position, which she then describes in section VII. After clearing the skies of any religious projection, she imagines that,

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.

Whereas the conventional religious point of view involves, as the poem indicates, using the categories of space and time in forming one's concept (image) of eternal life, the woman of "Sunday Morning" views the categories of space and time as immortal or eternal things in themselves. She views the appearances of nature as eternal and infinite—"as a god might be." The dualism that she identified in the conventional religious position to which she is opposed returns in her own point of view in the form of the opposition between the appearances and the cosmos of space and time, which she conventionally views as things in themselves. Thus, we can understand why Kant worked so hard to show that the categories of space and time are not to be used to comprehend things in themselves—as the idealist proposes—and that space and time are not things in themselves—as the empiricist supposes. Rather, the categories of space and time are concepts by which we measure the appearances. (It is also when we appreciate Kant's demonstration that space and time are not immortal things in themselves that we can begin to account for the history of these concepts—as standards of measure that human beings are constantly refining and augmenting.)

Because the figure in "Sunday Morning" opposes the secular to the religious, she ends up reproducing the same dualism involved in the religious position that she rejects. Indeed, dualism inevitably resurfaces in our own positions unless we learn how to find ourselves in and through the natural terms of the point of view opposing our own. In viewing nature as the "savage

source” of life—as opposed to the word of poetic creation—the woman is incapable of locating herself anywhere—except by reducing the life of the self to the nothingness of nature. Thus, she ends by observing of the worshippers of nature that,

They shall know well the heavenly fellowship

Of men that perish, and of summer morn.

And whence they came and whither they shall go

The dew upon their feet shall manifest. (VII)

In attending to the image of the dew—which condenses out of nothing (but thin air) and evaporates into nothing (but air)—what we learn is that the men who serve nature know nothing of “whence they came or whither they shall go.” They remain ignorant of their beginning and their end. In reducing the beginning and the end of the self to nature, the self becomes completely absorbed in the eternal cycles of the natural world. Death, then, becomes nothing but the natural consequence of life. Life becomes nothing but the natural service of death. Both death and life—along with the poetry in which they are contained—become worth nothing as conceived in the image of nature’s “dew.”

Because the figure in “Sunday Morning” uncritically rejects the religious, she sees no other recourse for art—for the beauty of poetry—than to return to pagan mythology. However, she thereby exposes her misunderstanding of pagan (natural) myth. For the ancients, as we have seen, nothing in nature perishes. Natural mythology does not involve the explanation (mythologizing) of nature—“as a god might be.” Rather, for the ancients, nature is the divine (force of life) and the divine is (the moving force of) nature. Nature and the divine reflect the contradictory concept of fate—that for which there is no explanation. Moreover, the woman exposes her misunderstanding of the religious. For the authors and figures of the Bible heaven is

not a transcendent place beyond the clouds but the spirit of community, without place, with which we ought to engage existence. Thus, she is caught between the death of nature, the earth in which everything perishes, and the death of God (or a dead God). In failing to comprehend the distinction between a natural mythology that reflects its region and the poetry that embodies the image's truth (both biblical and modern), she remains suspended between two false alternatives: she sees no alternative between serving Mother Nature or Father God. She finds herself without a choice: either serve the mother of death (nature) or the father of death (God or the God-man).

In the last section of the poem the woman returns to her dogmatic rejection of the religion of the Bible and to her skeptical acceptance of the natural earth as the object of her belief (to which, however, she is incapable of wholly committing herself). But what she discovers is that, just as she is incapable of accepting that everything perishes, she is unable to dispense with the story of Jesus. She is reminded of Palestine and she hears the echo of her own voice crying, “The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.” The lines that follow, in reiterating the dualistic snares in which the woman is entrapped, continue to expose, however, the woman's ambivalent (divided) point of view. For the speaker notes,

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

Now it is the reader who has questions. For what is it that is “inescapable” here? The “wide water” of history, the past, in which we find Jesus' story? Or the freedom of nature—the island—that the woman herself is incapable of fully supporting (sponsoring) and that she aligns

with the chaos that results from a dependence on (through the worship of) nature's objects? In the end, the return of the religious (as the repressed echo of the past) is the inescapable result of the attempt to be free of human history. For to decide upon natural freedom—to attempt to be naturally free from the past—invariably involves rejecting, and so engaging with, that past, demanding thereby that we respond to the story of Jesus. The religious, therefore, returns in the woman's account as that which she is unable to escape in attempting to bind herself to a natural image of freedom.

In her account of the death of Christ, the figure of "Sunday Morning" does not see what Tertullian sees: that the dead man and the resurrected man are not two men, but one man.²⁴ She does not see that the natural facts of a person's death cannot account for the person that one lost. That he is dead cannot account for how we account for his life. Rather, to account for the embodiment of existence—including the body of Christ—requires that we tell the story of how that person lived on the basis of the principle of relationship, the command to love one another. The dead (murdered) and the resurrected Jesus are, therefore, one man. For we cannot provide an account of the one without revealing the (historical) presence of the other. In other words, what the woman does not see is that, while there is certainly a belief in an after-life within Christendom, the Bible—recognizing that human beings are naturally composed of the very dust of the earth—never suggests that the soul can be known as an object of experience separately from the body. Thus, to read the Bible coherently we must not confuse the concept of eternal life (or of that which does not perish) with an immortal state of happiness located after death. Eternal life means that human life, founded upon the knowledge of good and evil, is not bound by or to the exigencies of nature and that we are free to live all that nature throws our way on the everlasting grounds of love.

The critical difference, then, between the Bible and Christendom (between what we saw Tolstoy refer to as religious consciousness and the religious cult) exposes for us the difference between Stevens' account of the theory of the word—which reconciles religious and secular discourse—in “Description Without Place” and Stevens' portrait of the dualism between the religious and the secular in “Sunday Morning.” Here, then, it becomes apparent why it is so important to maintain the dialectic between the religious and the secular when one undertakes to conceive of the relationship between ethics and art. For not only is the point of view of the woman of “Sunday Morning” (who poses as secular) unable to account for the existence of enduring love (ethical action), but she also reduces the art of poetry to the imitation of nature. Indeed, there are no (true) metaphors in “Sunday Morning.” Rather, the images that are employed in the poem reduce human subjects to reflections of nature (similes), the truth of which remains impenetrable. What we learn, then, is that we cannot account for the relationship between the two discourses of existence—the sacred and the profane, or the sublime and the lowly—unless we see that the union of these contrasting discourses expresses the ethical nature of modern poetry. But what we additionally learn is that we cannot account for the discourse of relationship, whether in ethical or aesthetic terms, unless we comprehend the dialectic—in opposing the dualism—between the religious and the secular.

That is, the simple union of religious and secular discourse is no indication that we are in the presence of truly modern poetry. The immediate or natural union of these opposing terms is destined to remain contradictory and ambiguous—wherever there is no discernible ethical content (context or implications) or whenever readers fail to discern this content. The dialectic between the sacred (religious) and the profane (secular) devolves into a contradiction (dualism) of the worst order when we fail to see that the poetic marriage of these two discourses expresses

the ethical practice of “making the world” that belongs to men and women by embodying the principle of relationship within the natural conditions of life. “Sunday Morning”—founded upon the dualistic opposition between the religious and the secular—ends with the ambiguity with which it began, with the “Ambiguous undulations” of pigeons as “they sink, / Downward to darkness on extended wings.” For the point of view of the poet remains, from beginning to end, entirely ambiguous. Nonetheless, we see—without any ambiguity—that there is no way to account properly for ethics or aesthetics on the basis of the dualism embodied in the poem. What we learn, therefore, from an analysis of “Sunday Morning” is that we cannot escape the dualism that falsifies our understanding of both ethics and aesthetics unless we see that truly modern poetry is at once religious and secular.

The title of “Sunday Morning” thus poses a peculiar challenge to its readers. For the title, in invoking the Sabbath, challenges us to learn how to consecrate our time on earth by uniting the spirit of rest and work, the good of life and the nature of death, the past and the future. What we discover, however, is that we cannot consecrate (or consummate) our time—by wedding the peace of faithful rest with the belaboured work of enduring love—on the basis of the dualism that shapes “Sunday Morning.” Indeed, it is precisely because commentators all agree (with very few exceptions) that “Sunday Morning” presents the viewpoint from which Stevens composes his poetry that scholars cannot come to any consistent agreement about how to interpret the religious content of his poems. Not only, however, are scholars typically divided about how to view Stevens’ concept of the religious (on display in his major poems). But their commentary often becomes divided against itself (contradictory) as they seek to expose the reasons for their agreement with the “secular” point of view of the woman in “Sunday Morning.”

For example, in *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* Adelaide Kirby Morris undertakes to examine how it is that we can preserve the relationship between the two discourses of imagination (poetry) and faith (religion). Indeed, Morris is thoughtfully committed to the marriage of the visible and the invisible, the credible and the incredible, the real and the ideal. He also sees that it is precisely the marriage of these concepts that is at stake in the biblical doctrine of the incarnation (124). However, Morris compromises his understanding of this relationship by continuing to hold that the imagination (art: the poetry of the supreme fiction) replaces religion (the Supreme Being) in modernity. Morris argues, apparently in agreement with Stevens himself, that, although imagination is never independent of faith or belief, the imagination can become an “immeasurably greater thing than religion” (4). Because, however, he views the imagination as overthrowing religion, consistent with the figure of “Sunday Morning,” he finds himself with no other option than to reduce the secular imagination to the capacity to draw similes between human life and the nature of the earth. He reduces art to nothing creative, to nothing but the effort to demonstrate that nature is “enough,” as if this effort did not belie the knowledge of what nature lacks (8).

Morris is acutely aware that central to his analysis of imagination and faith is the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Nonetheless, because he continues to oppose the secular to the religious, not only does he falsify aesthetics by reducing it to an imitation of nature but he also falsifies the ethics of modernity by basing “how to live” and “what to do” (to invoke the title of his final chapter) on what we naturally perceive. According to Morris, because aesthetics involves the service of the natural earth, what art communicates (symbolically) is the personal task of men and women to “efface themselves before reality, plunge into the complexity of an exterior world, and relinquish their will to power over things” (157). Art becomes

symbolic, therefore, of social forms that require the repression of ourselves and of our feelings for anything but enthusiasm for the nature of the earth. (Indeed, as we know, our natural similes are forever worthy of celebration, but only insofar as they reveal to us the glory that being human is not the consequence of anything natural about us but embodies the practical proof of our thoughtful relations with one another.)

In falsifying, then, both aesthetics and ethics, Morris has no standard by which to interpret the content of biblical images except as reflective of the very dualism that underpins what he views as the separation between modern poetry and Christianity. Although Morris correctly acknowledges that Christianity is not composed of merely symbolic iconography but contains an “ethical vision” that “teaches men how to live and what to do,” he fails to distinguish systematically between the ethical vision of true Christianity (the Bible) and Christendom (143). Moreover, because Morris fails to see that any critique of religious values can be launched only on the basis of principles that are, fundamentally, religious (as we saw in Chapter 4), his text remains largely oblivious to the idea that what constitutes secular freedom is not the worship of nature but the expression of enduring love.

Thus, although Morris sets out to establish a relationship between Christianity and the ethics and aesthetics of Stevens’ poems, he finds that, because he sees Stevens’ poetry as involved in an evolution that “has left Christianity behind,” he is unable to articulate anything other than a merely symbolic relation between the religious images of Stevens’ poems and the Bible, consistent with the conventional view in the liberal arts today that the Bible merits a rhetorical study of its literary form but not concentrated analysis as the exposition of the truth that constitutes human existence (47). Thus, Morris argues, ultimately, that poets of the modern imagination, including Stevens, use the letter of biblical imagery but do not appropriate its spirit.

What Morris ends up showing us, however, despite himself, is that, in viewing modernity as the overcoming of Christianity, he cannot maintain any critical distinction between them. For, according to his account, they rely on one and the same binary opposition between the spirit and the letter. What *we* see, therefore, is that we cannot critically maintain the distinction between two ages of poetry unless we realize that the distinction that Stevens invokes in his poem “Of Modern Poetry” articulates not the difference between biblical (religious) and modern (secular) images but between ancient Greek (or natural) mythology and the structure of biblical myth.

“Sunday Morning” repeats for us, then, the typical story that we are told of modernity: that it represents a victory of the secular over the religious, the human over the divine, natural freedom over sacred obligation. But it is also typically modern in that it ends in ambiguous images that fail to capture the relationship between the two discourses (the sacred and the secular) in which it operates. Paradoxically, however, “Sunday Morning” remains an important poem for scholars of modern poetry. For it is important to remain alive to the difference between the dialectic that is embodied in the strongest poems of Stevens and the dualism present in “Sunday Morning.” What we must learn is that we cannot and must not read Stevens’ strongest poems—including “A Primitive Like an Orb” and “Description Without Place”—on the basis of the dualisms advanced in “Sunday Morning.” Rather, we can overcome and appropriate the dualism—between the religious and the secular—present in “Sunday Morning” only on the basis of the dialectic of the word—at once divine and human—that is put forward in his strongest poetry. In other words, the irony that we must learn to savour is that, while it is the publication of “Sunday Morning” that made Stevens famous as a poet and that remains one of the poems for which he is best known today, Stevens devoted the rest of his poetic career to showing that modern poetry is utterly without foundation in the dualisms set out in that poem.

I want to be sure to note, then, as I conclude this chapter, that one of the reasons that Stevens' poems are so difficult for all of us is that not all of his poems equally express his insight into the human condition. Indeed, Stevens writes some of the most satisfying poetry of all time, poems that embody the dialectic between the religious and the secular discourses of modernity by embracing the relationship between ethics and art. But Stevens also writes poems that self-consciously expose the contradictions that follow from failing to embody this dialectic, in addition to poems that fail to become responsible for their contradictions (thus failing as poems). The challenge for us readers is to discern—to learn how to discern and to articulate—the difference among these three types of poems. The difficulty, in other words, is to learn how to account for the infinitely fine distinction between the poetry of dialectic (including those poems that, paradoxically, demand that readers become responsible for dialectic by exposing the contradictory implications of failing to begin with the principle of relationship: i.e., metaphor) and the poetry of dualism (contradiction). As we have seen, we can properly account for the difference between dialectic and contradiction—and so, as I shall show in subsequent chapters, for the difference among the three types of poems that Stevens writes—only insofar as we preserve, with Stevens, the critical distinction between two ages of poetry (i.e., the fundamental difference between Greek and biblical myth), which provides us with the historical background that allows us to see that truly modern poetry is at once religious and secular. It is in light, then, of the critical distinction between ancient Greek poetry, on the one hand, and biblical and modern imagery, on the other, that I shall now take up two of Stevens' strongest poems in order to show that we can both rightfully enjoy and properly understand Stevens' poetry only insofar as we remain committed to the fundamental relationship between ethics and art.

¹ Stevens uses the phrase “Theatre of Trope” to describe the supreme fiction of modern poetry that necessitates the will to change *ourselves* in section x of Part II of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

² See Brayton Polka, “The Image’s Truth: Wallace Stevens and the Hermeneutics of Being,” 43-5.

³ In raising the question of the “principle of human life, that is, its beginning” in his essay “Distance and Relation,” Martin Buber proceeds, in concert with Stevens, to expose the “ground” and beginning of human existence through its contrast with “that of other known beings.” He notes, however, that this beginning “cannot be thought of as a beginning in time.” For it is “not sensible to try to discover when and how a certain species of life, instead of being content like the rest with the perception of things and conditions, began to *perceive its own perceiving* as well” (emphasis added, 59).

⁴ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. IV, chs. 3-6 and bk. XI, ch. 5. See also Plato’s *Republic*, in which Socrates accepts the law of contradiction as his first principle by indicating that he can show that all objections to it are incorrect (contradictory). Still, before moving on, Socrates notes that he agrees “that if [the law of contradiction] should ever be shown to be incorrect, all the consequences we’ve drawn from it will also be lost” (bk. 4, 436b-437c).

⁵ It is important to recall that Helen is the prize awarded to Paris through a contest arranged by the gods, as Homer indicates in Book 24 (27-30). But, as Homer also notes, Paris’ prize turns out to be the curse that destroys him, his house (*oikos*), and his city.

⁶ As Jones notes in his study of Greek tragedy, “We are at grips [here] with the most extraordinary problem, the absence of problem” in ancient Greek texts (190-1). Indeed, it appears problematic to us that right and wrong are averred *ad hominem* (relative to the man) and that what is right for the gods is not right or just for men and women, the citizens of the *polis*. But it is not a problem for the ancient Greek authors. For that the actions of its figures are both right and wrong, both deeds for which the heroes are to blame and deeds perpetrated by the gods, is utterly consistent with the universal flux of nature (fate), the beginnings and the ends of which, as naturally opposed, are constantly proving to be neither the beginning nor the end. It is instructive to realize, then, that the ancient Greeks do not share our problems: what is a problem for us is not a problem for Homer (or the tragedians or Greek philosophers). Thus, it is important not to project our problems onto Greek texts and then to read into them a search for the solution to those problems. Rather, fate, as the prime mover of all things (moved), ineluctably proves to the ancient Greeks that human beings are ignorant of their beginning and their end. Fate shows human beings to be blind to and ignorant of themselves by involving its actors in a contradiction from which there is no exit. Fate is both known, as the principle of all life, and unknown—in itself—in proving all human knowledge to be other than and opposed to itself.

⁷ Deuteronomy 30.19-20.

⁸ Epicurus echoes the advice of Achilles when he advises his fellow Epicureans to “Live unknown,” at which Epicurus himself did not succeed (*The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers* frag. 86).

⁹ Northrop Frye thoughtfully articulates the difference between a simile (i.e., ancient Greek poetry) and a metaphor (i.e., modern poetry) in his essay on Stevens’ poems entitled “The Realistic Oriole,” wherein he notes that, “A world of total simile, where everything was like everything else, would be a world of total monotony; a world of total metaphor... would be a world where subject and object, reality and mental organization of reality, are one” (72). For, he

argues, the principle of identity involved in a metaphor “respects individuality” and so is different from logical identity (or any notion of similarity or likeness that shares this logic) (71). Thus, Frye contends in his lecture entitled “The Motive for Metaphor” that, with metaphor “you’re turning your back on logic and reason [*sic*] completely, because logically two things can never be the same thing and still remain two things” (11). Through his articulation of the difference, then, between the “world of total simile” and the “world of total metaphor,” he provides us with a way of distinguishing between the two types of repetition that Stevens introduces in “Of Modern Poetry:” i.e., between the poetry that repeated what “Was in the script” of nature—which ends up replicating, *ad infinitum*, the same natural scenario that takes place before it—and the poetry that repeats, in “the delicatest ear of the mind,” exactly what its audience wants to hear by introducing a concept of repetition (in metaphor) that changes the scene from one of natural imitation to one that engages the dynamic relationships that comprise who we are as people, both individually and collectively.

¹⁰ I want to acknowledge, once again, the numerous studies of Brayton Polka as my source for this argument. (See also note 8 in Chapter 1.)

¹¹ See the “Appendix” to Part 1 of the *Ethics* (26).

¹² By associating peace with the sword of knowledge, I mean to invoke the image of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who advises his followers: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household” (Matt. 10.34-6).

¹³ As Robert Alter indicates in his Introduction to *The Five Books of Moses*, in which he provides his translation and commentary on the Torah (the first five books of the Bible):

The standard account offered by modern scholars of the Torah identifies four principle literary strands (together with a number of lesser ones): J, the Yahwistic strand (the divine name Yahweh is spelled with a J in German); E, the Elohist strand; P, the Priestly strand; and D, for Deuteronomy. The first three are unevenly intertwined through Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers; P predominates in Leviticus; and all of Deuteronomy is D. J and E are so designated because of the name for the deity each characteristically uses, respectively, Yahweh and Elohim. (xi)

¹⁴ Although I argue here that the myth of Adam and Eve bears no relation to the natural mythology of the ancient Greeks, it is important to see that the difference between biblical and natural myth is not one of dualistic opposition. The category of natural mythology does not exist, as we have seen, outside of the knowledge of the image’s truth (biblical myth). Thus, what the myths—images, stories, parables—of the Bible show is that, because whatever exists outside of the creative structure of the Bible is nothing—in itself—there is nothing outside of the Bible. Dualistically opposing biblical myth to natural mythology involves the reduction of the truth of the Bible to its immediate images. The problem, then, of viewing the Bible and natural mythology as dualistic opposites is that the jejune differences upon which this point of view relies cannot account for the fundamental difference between them. Thus, the position that opposes the Bible to natural myth (whether held by creationists or secularists) possesses no defense against the equally false position of those (whether secularists or creationists) who claim that biblical myths are myths like any other. The proponents of this position hold that all myths seek to explain natural events. But this claim is false in regards both to natural mythology and to biblical myth. For, as we have seen, the natural myths of the ancient Greeks do not seek to explain nature but to show that nature is—in itself—inexplicable. The myth of Adam and Eve

does not seek to explain the natural generation of human beings but to show that our own images, at once divine and human, cannot be understood on the basis of anything natural. Although there is nothing in the Bible for which a simile cannot be found in extra-biblical culture (above all, in the myths of the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, and Romans), no simile can account for anything that we learn in the Bible. In other words, we do not learn anything about the Bible—its message or images—by identifying similarities between its images and those of other ancient cultures. For no simile between an image and its natural substitute can ever account for the image’s truth according to which, as I argue, the myths of the Bible must be understood.

¹⁵ While it is Descartes who is dubbed the father of modern philosophy, it is worth noting that it is Petrarch who is the first in world-history, so far as I am aware, to align philosophy not with the ancient Greeks but with the knowledge of God in the Bible. In “On His Own Ignorance and the Ignorance of Many Others,” in defense of his refusal to use Aristotle (or any of the Greeks) as the standard by which he measures either his learning or his comprehension of the Bible, he announces that, “Now, it is a fact that it is true and supreme philosophy to know God, not ‘the gods’ – always provided that such a knowledge is accompanied by piety and faithful worship,” by which he understands the drive to do good and to be just (80). In aligning true and supreme philosophy with the Bible, he further observes, in a stunning claim, that Plato and Aristotle do not belong to the category of “true philosophers” (101).

¹⁶ Thus, Stevens observes in section II of the “Notes” that there is a “celestial ennui” that accompanies the first idea: “What else, prodigious scholar,” the speaker then asks, “should there be?” I understand this celestial ennui to describe the forlorn longing—indeed, even the boredom—that is indicative of the absence of the first idea. That is, I understand this “ennui” to be consistent with the paradox that the first idea can come into existence, to use Kierkegaard’s idiom, only through a second idea, a re-thinking, in other words, of what it is that comprises our top priority. The paradox of this ennui, then—indeed, of the boredom that is engendered by the first idea—is that it also expresses the most intense meditation, for it involves the drive to realize what it is that is first in our lives as we “move between” that “early candor” that describes the beginning of the first idea and “its late plural” (I, iii).

¹⁷ Following his dedicatory note, Stevens launches Part I of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (which he titles “It Must Be Abstract”) with an instruction for the youth, the militant student of his poetry:

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

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

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

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images . . . (I, i, the ellipsis is Stevens’)

Thus, he concludes, “The death of one god is the death of all.../ Phoebus is dead, ephebe” (I, i). It is worth noting, however, that to become ignorant is not to *be* ignorant. To become ignorant, rather, is to forgo knowledge in order to make room for faith in the image’s truth (to recall Kant’s famous proviso in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*). Stevens wipes from the face of the poem any image of God as that which stands behind or beyond the appearances of nature: the sun. Still, nature, clearly perceived, is truly seen solely “in the idea of it.” Thus, we find ourselves before a wonderful paradox. Stevens expels from his poem all sun-like images. But he does so in and through an idea (image) of the sun. For he then introduces what he describes as the “project for the sun” (I, i). The project for modern poetry, we learn, is to compose images for which there are no natural substitutes. What Stevens is indicating, in these opening lines, is that our images (metaphors) and lives constitute and so demonstrate our expulsion from the state of nature.

¹⁸ In his essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens notes, as his demonstration for the intercourse between poetry and the “world in which we live,” that “what makes the poet the potent figure that he is...is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (31).

¹⁹ As Descartes points out in the *Objections and Replies*, in which he includes the responses that he received to his *Meditations* and his replies to those objections raised against him, “when we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of syllogism. When someone says ‘I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist,’ he does not deduce existence from thought by means of syllogism” (100). Descartes also insists, in the *Discourse on Method*, that the proof for the existence of God is not logical or geometric. For, he writes, “there was nothing at all” in the arguments of the logicians or geometers “that assured me of the existence of their object” whereas “returning to examine the idea I had of a perfect being, I found that existence was contained in it...” (20). Indeed, as Kant notes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, perfection “can be taken either in the theoretical sense... [or] in the practical sense” (5:41). The concept of the “perfect being,” the perfection of existence, does not invoke a theoretical (whether empirical or logical) concept of perfection. The concept of perfection—the notion of God, the supreme fiction—refers to a notion of practical worth or value, to what we will or desire (as the good) of life. While Descartes does see, then, that the concept of perfection—the idea of God—that he weds to the existence of the “thinking thing”—the self—is not a theoretical (logical) concept, he does not proceed to indicate (as Kant does) that thinking the existence of God involves and expresses the moral practice of love.

²⁰ See the *Adagia* (notes from his collected notebooks) 906. See also “The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet” 668. Still, Stevens’ tone here is far from definitive. Indeed, his tone shifts, as is typical in his essays and letters, when, in the next sentence, he indicates that any attempt to define the difference between philosophy and poetry is “almost one of apologetics.”

²¹ *Poesis*, which forms the root of the word “poetry,” “is etymologically derived from the ancient Greek term ποιέω, which means ‘to make’” (Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poesis>, January 6, 2018).

²² We could equally say that the religious is not to be immediately identified with the Synagogue or with the Mosque, with the Torah or with the Qur’an, *per se*. Although I discuss the “religious” in connection with the terms in which it is understood within the Christian tradition in this chapter—given Stevens’ general (albeit, far from exclusive) focus on Christian dogma in his

poems—I want to be sure to note that the concept of the “religious” that I develop here, in light of Stevens, prohibits any hierarchal ordering of the Abrahamic traditions of the Bible.

²³ See Matt. 6.24.

²⁴ *De Carne Christi*, ch. 24.

Chapter 6

“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”

The Ontology of Creation from Nothing

In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” Stevens invokes a mesmerizing interplay between imagination and reality, the metaphysical and the everyday, the city of God (as a new haven or heaven) and the city of earth (New Haven, Connecticut). In establishing this relationship, he advances, as we shall see, a critique of the attempt to know imagination or reality as they are in themselves. Through his critique of metaphysics, then, which he enacts in his poem, Stevens provides us with the metaphysical standards for his own critique. That is, what I shall argue, in this chapter, is that it is when we see how Stevens’ critique of metaphysics provides us with the metaphysical standards for the critical interpretation of his own poem that we shall further discover, with Stevens, that the ontology of creation from nothing that he introduces in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” is as ethical in its content as it is aesthetic in its conceit.¹

Stevens begins the thirty-one sections of his poem by noting:

The eye’s plain version is a thing apart,

The vulgate of experience. Of this,

A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—

It is salutary to meditate on these prefatory words, which both embody and anticipate the concept and the content of the poem. For in these few words Stevens captures the paradox that he endlessly displays throughout his poetic meditations. The paradox is that the “eye’s plain version” or plain description of things is not a part—not located among—those things but describes a “thing apart.” This paradox serves as the “vulgate”—the gate or point of access—to

our experiences by translating the sacred word (of metaphysics) into the popular or common tongue of the people (*vulgus*), as Stevens indicates through his allusion to the Latin translation of the Bible by St. Jerome in the late fourth century CE. Through the repetition of the conjunctive phrase “and yet,” Stevens puts us on notice, moreover, that this paradox—of poetic translation—is infinitely iterative as involving a renewed iteration of one’s position in and through opposing (mutually qualifying) terms.

Stevens also anticipates, therefore, in the prefatory words of “An Ordinary Evening,” the demonstration of his late poem “The Plain Sense of Things,” in which we are told:

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To the plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination
. . . .
Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence
. . . .
all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires.

As we meditate upon the plain sense of things—the plain description of New Haven—what is revealed is the stolid absence of the imagination in the objects before us. And yet, this absence “had / Itself to be imagined.” This “absence,” as an image, reveals the presence of imagination.

Paradoxically, the absence of imagination is its exposé. The concept of “necessity,” then, with which Stevens concludes “A Plain Sense of Things” performs a double-duty. The necessity of nature is not an object of sensible experience but a subject of imagination. But imagining the necessity of nature exposes to us the necessity of human imagination. The “eye’s plain version” describes an act of the mind. The description of nature as “plain” reveals that human description occupies a habitat, a nature, a climate, apart from that of the plain sense of things. Nonetheless, Stevens does so by determining the mind’s part, the role, the participation, the act of the mind that is involved in translating experience through its understanding of plain nature. As Stevens then reveals in the remainder of the first section of “An Ordinary Evening,” it is not the “plain sense of things”—not the experience of nature—that is the subject of his poem but our poetic imagination of what is real or actual before us.

It is not so easy to engage the hermeneutical effort of modern poetry that Stevens re-enacts for us in the opening of his poem on New Haven. For, as we also saw in “Of Modern Poetry,” he demands that we work out a meaningful interpretation of the poem by submitting ourselves—the existence of human imagination—to interpretation. It is not easy to read Stevens because it is not the things that we see but the way that we see things that he puts on trial as the subject of his poetic creation. It is “Of this” that his poem is composed,

As part of the never-ending meditation,
Part of the question that is a giant himself:
Of what is this house composed if not the sun

These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances
Words, lines, not meanings, not communications,

Dark things without a double, after all,
Unless a second giant kills the first—
A recent imagining of reality,
.
A larger poem for a larger audience,
As if the crude collops came together as one,
A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age. (I)

In raising the question about the true nature of his images and the edifice of poetry, Stevens turns our attention to the objects that we experience. A poet is able to conjure immediate images of these objects. As readers of poetry, we are capable of concentrating on what we see or experience of the lines of the poem, the black contours on the page before us. But as soon as we concentrate on the “houses” of New Haven or on what we see of the words on the page, we are no longer meditating on what these images mean or on what the words communicate. Stevens is leading us unto the realization that the meaning of his poem is not gleaned from our immediate experience of its images. He demands this effort at (metaphysical) double-vision from us as his method for exposing the truth of the first line of the poem: that even our plain description of what appears before us is a “thing apart” from the way in which we experience the objects of nature. The way in which, then, the mind is a “part” of the scene or participates in reading poetry raises a challenging question about the nature of our own (human) existence (as poetic or creative). The question raised by Stevens is the question that launches Kant’s metaphysical investigations: how is it possible to question—or to imagine—the nature of our existence? How

is poetry—the synthetic nature of which a poem is composed—*a priori* possible? As in Kant’s philosophical inquiry, so we learn here that this question is a “part” of what we are examining—questioning—when we undertake to meditate on the grounding of our human experience.

The meditation with which Stevens begins “An Ordinary Evening” introduces, therefore, the distinction between the appearances and the existence of poetry. That the “appearances” of what accommodates the self or the poem are appearances “of what appearances” indicates that Stevens is fully aware that there is nothing behind or beyond the appearances. Yet his question is thereby concentrated further. For of what is poetry—as the act of the mind—composed if not the appearances? How is it possible for the synthesis of experience to expose the mind—as “a thing apart”—if there is nothing beyond the appearances? Stevens provides an answer to his question using mythical terms. There is no double, no image, that does not reflect the appearances—“Unless a second giant kills the first.” Indeed, we are in the presence of the transformation of myth into modern poetry. The “second” giant is not first in natural terms or in terms of physical size, but is supreme or greater in terms of power and strength. But the strength of the “second giant,” therefore, is not to be conceived or imagined in physical or natural terms.

In learning, however, that this giant’s size or power is not physical—for the second giant’s power succeeds that giant whose power is conceived in the image of nature—it follows that the giant of modern poetry is nothing outside the appearances. Rather, Stevens uses images of physical size—the giant and “largeness”—to demonstrate that the images of poetry do not compose the appearances but use the appearances to compose a scene of which the mind is a part. That is, the second giant, the image through which Stevens embodies the doubling—enlargement or edification—involved in the appearances of a metaphor, becomes the first when we see that the natural terms or appearances that a poet employs do not reflect the appearances

but embody the image's truth. The paradox, then, of the meeting between these "giants" is that what is first—the appearances—becomes second and what is second—as gigantic "in everything but size"²—becomes first. The second giant, which is not naturally first, becomes the first *a priori* by embodying the doubling or the synthesis of the appearances. That is, when viewed from the point of view of supreme (infinite) power, "first" and "second" are not temporal assignments but metaphors for what we value in life. That the appearances do not contain any double of our lives—until we learn not to see ourselves in the appearances but to see the appearances as the imaginative embodiment of relations that edify human existence—shows us that the doubling images, the self-reflective features of modern poetry, are not located in what we experience of the poem but in those images of reality that bear those relations in which we find nothing but ourselves. The giant, then, is the image that embodies the renewed imagining of reality in which we see the double of our lives. But the self, in turn, is the embodiment, the double, of this supreme being—that than which no greater can be or be conceived by the poets of modernity.

That the subject of the poem is the nature—the image for the reality—of the self is further exposed when Stevens describes the city of New Haven again in the second canto of "An Ordinary Evening," in which he asks us to

Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,

So that they become an impalpable town,

.

Impalpable habitations that seem to move

In the movement of the colours of the mind,

.

In the perpetual reference, object
Of the perpetual meditation, point
Of the enduring, visionary love,

Obscure, in colors whether of the sun
Or mind, uncertain in the clearest of bells,
The spirit's speeches, the indefinite,

Confused illuminations and sonorities,
So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart
The idea and the bearer-being of the idea. (II)

Following from his demonstration, in section I, that the houses, the objects of his poem, become the images (the “impalpable habitations”) of the self through the doubling of metaphor, he notes here that these images thus contain a “movement” whose point of reference, as twofold, engages both the sun and the mind. For, in seeing that the appearances of a poem are contradictory—that the second giant kills and, thereby, becomes the first—Stevens further sees that poetry is composed of objects (subjects) that can be thought only as existing and that can exist only as thought. For the subjects (objects) of poetry—the relations that are implicated through its images—cannot be conceived according the categories of natural space and time (with certainty or definition). That thought (imagination) and existence (reality) are “confused,” then, is not a sign of Stevens’ opprobrium. Rather, his observation that “we cannot tell apart” the idea and the bearer-being (existence) of the idea means that the difference between imagination and reality is not available to the empirical senses. Stevens illuminates, consistent with Kant, the relationship between thought and existence by demanding that his reader cease to divide ideas and reality in

empirical terms. The critical distinction is not between thought and existence, imagination and reality—the idea and its bearer-being—but between the objects of experience that are available to the empirical senses and the subjects of poetry that are housed in images of the self that embody a relationship in which the first becomes (the) second and the second becomes (the) first and which show us, therefore, that each—in its idea and its bearer-being—can be conceived only in and through the other.

It is important to see, then, in section II, that both imagination and reality—thought and existence—*are* relationship. In other words, both the idea and its bearer-being describe at once the poem and the self—and, therefore, demonstrate their relationship. Thus, in becoming one, the idea and the bearer-being of the idea become two as the subject of the relationship that is contained in the images of the poem. What we learn, when we see that both the idea and its bearer-being are twofold—that both thought and existence are constituted by relationship—is that the point of perpetual reference, the point from which we examine every (other) point, is the idea of a relationship in which the “crude collops come together as one” in that “great bosom... alive with age” (I). The point of reference through which we reflect upon ourselves and our works describes a concept of relationship that is embodied not in our experience of the objects of nature but in the metaphoric bosom—the heart—of our relations, which Stevens also describes as the point of “enduring, visionary love.”³

In section III of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens proceeds to deliver a profound commentary on love, on which I want to concentrate before turning to the critique of metaphysics—the metaphysical critique—that he sets out in key sections of his poem. For Stevens’ commentary on the concept of love in section III is the sole instance, so far as I am aware, in which Stevens reveals what he understands by a loving relationship or “our love”

(notwithstanding his self-reflexive critique of the concept of romance that he incorporates into “Re-Statement for Romance,” in which, however, he never uses the term “love” or even “romance” [outside of the title]). Indeed, there are innumerable occasions in which Stevens invokes images of love or uses figures who are in love to describe the relationship between the imagination and reality that constitutes the ontology (or metaphysics) of his poems. However, because he uses love, in these instances, to explain his metaphysics, he does not enter into an explicit or critical explanation, on these occasions, of what he views as true love, as distinct from love’s false perversion.

Following his reflections on the twofold point of reference, the point of “enduring, visionary love” in section II, Stevens states, in opening section III, that, “The point of vision and desire are the same.” He thus observes, in poetic terms, that, “It is to the hero of midnight that we pray / On a hill of stones to make beau mont thereof.” Beau mont or the good and peaceful mountain of the civil state—the beauty of poetry—expresses a point of view on reality. The point of vision is that from which we see. But this point also doubles as that which we see: the end, aim, or goal for which we pray and work as poets. The point of view from which Stevens composes his poem and from which he invites his reader to interpret his images involves and expresses, therefore, a concept of the fulfillment or consummation of our desire: a vision of the highest good or *summum bonum* of life—that which we love above all else—whose realization also requires the heroic action of another.

Thus, Stevens continues, as he reflects upon the darkness of “midnight” that confronts the desire to transform nature into the expressions of “beau mont,”

If it is misery that infuriates our love

If the black of night stands glistening on beau mont,

Then, ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth,

Say next to holiness is the will thereto,

And next to love is the desire for love,

The desire for celestial ease in the heart,

Which nothing can frustrate, that most secure,

Unlike love in possession of that which was

To be possessed and is. But this cannot

Possess. . . .

In the span of six lines Stevens aligns love with holiness, the celestial, the ancient (in the superlative: i.e., the origin of humanity), the heart, and truth. He then proceeds to distinguish between the desire for love and the desire to possess (or “love in possession”). He puts us on notice, therefore, that the desire involved in love is not the desire to possess or to be possessed by the other. The desire for love is not the desire to possess the desire of the other. The desire of the other is not yours to possess: you do not possess the other’s desire. Yet it is no less true, then, that one’s own desire for love is not a possession. The self—as the product of the desire for love—is not beloved as an object that one possesses. The desire of the self is not a possession but a product (creation) of the labour of love (or will) on the part of each person involved.

Indeed, Stevens is careful to discriminate between the insecurity of “love in possession” and the enduring security (the “celestial ease”) of true love. Because the desire to possess the other as an object—the desire to profit by, in, and through the objects of others—is incapable of possessing the other’s desire, this perverted type of love is possessed with insecurity over the other’s desire. Indeed, “love in possession” is indistinguishable from hatred, not because this

love involves angry, bitter, or miserable feelings but because the feelings of longing and enthusiasm—the flattery and preference—that embody this love are directed solely to the satisfaction of one’s own egoistic desires. My preference for you is solely the consequence of what I view as to my own profit or advantage (as is yours, in turn, for me). Thus, as Pascal concludes, from the point of view of true (divine, celestial) love, all men naturally hate one another.⁴ From the point of view of the desire for love, all desires that confuse the desire for love with the desire to possess—however comfortable, natural, or easy (customary) the feelings that accompany these desires are—are hateful.

The profound implication, then, of distinguishing between true love and love in possession (which, as Pascal notes, is one with hatred) is that, because love truly involves willing the fulfillment of the desires of the other—as one’s own—and not the immediate gratification of one’s own possessive desires, “nothing can frustrate” the desire for love. Because true love involves not choosing for others but the desire to consummate the other’s choices, love abides. Still, as Stevens observes, love involves inexpugnable fury over the misery that one witnesses—the misery that “infuriates our love.” Love is not fooled by that “love” that seeks to possess. Love is enraged by those acts that are truly unloving (or sinful, in biblical terms). The paradox, here, is that, as Stevens notes, while love can be infuriated, it cannot be frustrated.

That “nothing can frustrate” the desire for love is a provocative claim. For that claim implies not only that love can be expressed under every set of circumstances or conditions (both natural and social) but also that love never goes unreceived. That “nothing can frustrate” the work of love means, in other words, that no one can hate what is truly loving. To deny an act of love shown to you demonstrates not that you hate what is loving, but that you do not want what is good for yourself, that you do not think of yourself as worthwhile or as worthy of love. The

repulsion of love exposes your own self-hatred, demonstrating, despite yourself, that what you are truly denying (hating) is not the love of the other, but the frustration involved in suppressing one's eternal desire to love and to be loved. In short, the one desire that we are incapable of overpowering—the “invincible clou,” as Stevens puts it, that embodies “a minimum of making in the mind”—is the desire for love (XI).

That in our darkest hours—in the darkness of “midnight”—it is love for which we pray and that constitutes the goodness and the beauty—the art—for which we work in life reveals, moreover, that the desire for love defies the misery of death. Indeed, though dying involves real misery, there is no terminal illness that can terminate our desire to provide care and so to demonstrate our infinite devotion to the person who is dying. Rather, the misery and the pain that we feel over the death of a loved one involves and expresses the endurance of our love (through which we envision a future full of loving relations on the grounds of the love that we shared with the one whom we lost). Love can be infuriated, we are reminded, but it cannot be frustrated (either by false love [hatred] or by death). Whenever we find ourselves frustrated in love, then, all that we learn is that we are frustrated over nothing. We are frustrated by nothing—but ourselves. For, whenever one's love becomes frustrated, it exposes one's desire to possess the other as an object or to possess the objects of others. Indeed, Stevens does not suggest, in his meditation on love, that we are never frustrated as loving men and women. But he provides us with a way, instead, of working out our frustrations by reminding us to watch over ourselves so that we do not collapse our love into the desire to possess one another.

The realization that it is “nothing” that frustrates us—that we are frustrated by nothing but ourselves—returns us to the ontology that Stevens puts on display in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” That there is nothing that frustrates our love reveals that we are the cause of

ourselves—that we are the cause of our own frustration. Indeed, that in order to account for our frustrations or errors we must acknowledge ourselves as the source of those errors is exactly what Stevens demands that we see as he takes on the false and falsifying attempt to know the imagination or reality as they are in themselves.

Beginning in section IV, Stevens launches a relentless critique of what he calls the illusions of “impoverished” or “rigid” realists, on the one hand, and the “hierophantic” and “polymathic” schools of thought (which I understand as encompassing the many versions, both religious and secular, of what Kant calls uncritical idealism), on the other.⁵ Indeed, he notes,

The plainness of plain things is savagery,

As: the last plainness of a man who has fought

Against illusion and was, in a great grinding

Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out

By the obese opiates of sleep[.] (IV)

The plain description of “plain things” describes the “savage” (uncompromising) effort to divest our descriptions of any illusion or, in Kant’s terms, enthusiasm. But what is revealed by the “cry” of “Plain men in plain towns” are the transcendental elements (adjectives) of human description—which are exposed even in the description of the scene as “plain.” Thus, in this cry, these men hear

Themselves transposed, muted [i.e., softened] and comforted

In a savage and subtle and simple harmony,

A matching and mating of surprised accords,

A responding to a diviner opposite. (IV)

This “cry”—along with its transposition—reappears in several key sections of the poem. Here, it represents the transition to “lewd spring” from “winter’s chastity” by expressing the recognition that the denial of illusion involves the revelation of the mind “As” the mating of the “savage” and the “muted,” together with the icy “cold” and “heat” of romance, in establishing the accord between the human and the divine through our response “to a diviner opposite.”

In the next section, therefore, Stevens opens by reflecting:

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,
Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended[....] (V)

Because what we observe as reality is a consequence not of the eye’s construction but of how the mind is constituted, the savage cry to divest reality of every human contribution results in demonstrating the reality of the mind. Stevens indicates, that is, that we are unable to escape choosing to tell a story (i.e., “dreams” or fictions) about what we view as reality. The idea that one is capable of completely avoiding illusion by reducing reality to what it appears to be becomes the “last illusion,” then, that remains for each of us who fight against illusion. Stevens is in the process of outlining here the *aporia* with which we appear to be confronted when we undertake to think through the metaphysics of reality. It appears that the choice, which is inescapable, is between the illusion of transcendent (supernatural or divine) reality and the illusion involved in the attempt to become certain (disillusioned) about what is real by reducing it to the perception of natural appearances. It is not possible to avoid choosing, and yet it is also not possible, in choosing, to avoid illusion.

As a central part of his method for developing his critique of illusion, Stevens continues, throughout his poem, to focus upon the plain description of things. In section IX, for example, he notes that,

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

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

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

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection.

Stevens is reiterating the demand of poets to speak of reality as it is itself—without deviating from what we see of the objects that we experience. However, he does not stop with “simple seeing.” Indeed, he admits that, “In the presence of such chapels and such schools” as those of the poets who serve transcendent concepts that extend reality beyond the bounds of possible experience (to use Kant’s terminology), the “impoverished architects” or “rigid realists” “appear to be / Much richer, more fecund, sportive and alive” (VII). But, in their opposition to the “hymns” of these chapels and mystical schools of thought—which divide the divine from the human, or the metaphysical from the everyday (objects of possible experience)—these “realists”

fall prey to the opposite error that, in mirroring the idealists whom they oppose, reduces existence to its appearances by contradictorily evading the apprehension of the mind (imagination).⁶

“Why, then, inquire,” Stevens asks, “Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur?”

“No man,” he states, “The self, the chrysalis of all men,”

Became divided in the leisure of blue day

And more, in branchings after day. One part

Held fast tenaciously in common earth

And one from central earth to central sky

And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind

Searched out such majesty as it could find. (V)

No one—“No man” or woman—divided the world because everyone—the self—is constituted by the twofold standpoint between the appearances of nature (earth and sky), on the one hand, and the reality of the mind, on the other. Stevens is subtly pointing out here the false assumptions about what constitutes the division—the distinction—between objects and subjects by those who inquire: “Who has divided the world[?]” He indicates, in other words, that all of us are responsible for producing the dualisms that divide us whenever we fail to acknowledge the paradoxical accord between objects and subjects that results from the savage insistence upon plain description.

Stevens advances his polemic against the false inquiries that seek to evade the will (one’s responsibility for the false assumptions that arise as a result of our twofold nature) in section XX. Here, however, his critique is directed not against “rigid realists” but against the poets who

attempt to know the imagination as it is in itself. Leaving the town of New Haven behind in pursuit of the “shape” of the “absolute,” he notes that

In this chamber the pure sphere escapes the impure,

Because the thinker himself escapes. And yet

To have evaded clouds and men leaves him

A naked being with a naked will

And everything to make. He may evade

Even his own will and in his nakedness

Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere.⁷

That the “pure sphere escapes the impure” because the “thinker himself” escapes indicates that Stevens’ concept of thinking (the “pure sphere” of imagination) excludes all sensible (empirical) content (consistent, yet again, with Kant). But to inhabit the “hypnosis” of the “pure sphere” of imagination introduces a false concept of imagination as subject to the category of space, in addition to a false notion of purity that seeks to evade any responsibility for one’s impurities (illusions or errors). To become hypnotized by imagination is to leave oneself (one’s will) exposed—with one’s rigid opponents: “having lost, as things, / That power to conceal they had as men”—to the criticism of men and women in exposing one’s desire not to engage, not to make, reality in favour of transcendent concepts (VII). That is, the “pure sphere” does not escape the impure unless we—as thinkers—become responsible for our own illusions (errors or impurities).

Thus, it is truly instructive to see that what Stevens is demonstrating, as he tests the possibility of evading the relationship between imagination and reality, is exactly what Kant

describes as the dialectic of transcendental illusion. Indeed, we recall that, as Kant determined, unless reason becomes responsible for its own errors, it cannot avoid reproducing the illusions of either empiricism or idealism. Thus, Kant concludes that transcendental illusion is unavoidable. For it is only insofar as we become responsible for our own illusions, the metaphysical errors, involved in the attempt to know imagination (thought) or reality (existence) as they are in themselves that we can overcome the illusions that result from the attempt to know, through theoretical categories, the subjects of thought and existence (i.e., things in themselves: persons in relation).

It is important to see, then, that when Stevens describes the illusion of disillusion in the opening of section V he traces at once the illusions and the overcoming of the illusions of the realists (empiricists) and the idealists (whether mystics or rationalists). When Stevens indicates that the inescapable romance that follows upon the desire for reality involves the “inescapable choice / Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,” he appears to appoint us the choice between illusion and disillusion (which, as noted above, he also describes as an illusion). But what he truly shows us is that there is no choice, that the choice between (pure) imagination and (pure) reality is not a choice, that there is no choice but to choose to apprehend reality as a “thing seen by the mind” (V). The choice, then, that we are truly unable to escape, to evade, or to shirk is the eternal decision to embrace the relationship—indeed, the “romance” or interchange—between the mind and reality as constituting and as constituted by human description. The choice is not between imagination and reality but between the dualisms of empiricism and idealism, on the one hand, and the dialectic that exposes the self as that which cannot be imagined without existing and cannot exist without being imagined, on the other. The paradox, however, is that

there is no choice, then, but to become responsible for our own illusions (dualisms) as we undertake to articulate the romance or dialectic that comprises the subjects of modern poetry.

Stevens' argument shares an identical structure with Kant's critique of pure reason. In repudiating empiricism and rationalism (to use Kant's terms), Stevens reveals the paradox involved in seeking the poetry of pure reality (without deviation) and pure imagination (without any admixture of empirical categories) and so overcomes the false antinomy presupposed by the inquiry of metaphysicians into how the "world" became divided. Indeed, it is the false antinomy between reality and the mind that Stevens is once again challenging in section VI of "An Ordinary Evening."

In canto VI Stevens writes:

Reality is the beginning not the end,
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals.

It is the infant A standing on infant legs,
Not twisted, stooping, polymathic Z,
He that kneels always on the edge of space

In the pallid perceptions of its distances.

Stevens distinguishes here between reality, characterized by naked Alpha, the beginning, and reality (beyond the bounds of space): Omega, the end. The adjectives that he uses to describe each are important. That Alpha (reality) is naked and an infant means that it is not clothed (apparently) by the dress of human speech or, therefore, by imagination. In-fant means to be without speech (*in-fans*: non-speaking). That Omega is hierophantic means that it represents the

end, the *telos*, the fate that is served by the polymathic (the learned or scholarly) character who represents and is represented by the kneeling letter Z, the vassal who invests his god, existing beyond the edge of space, with glory and honour.⁸ Stevens puts on display for us the typically modern ambivalence between the (falsely) secular and the (falsely) religious view of reality. Alpha and Omega are, indeed, allusions to God (as in Revelation 22:13). The first character serves nature as his god. The second serves a transcendent God on the edge of space. “Alpha fears men,” we are told, “or else Omega’s men / Or else his prolongations of the human” (VI). The character represented by Alpha fears the extensions of what is human (e.g., of the soul) beyond reality by those who serve Omega. But the realist’s response to existence is also inadequate insofar as he, in his rigidity, reduces the beginning of reality (Alpha) to what naturally appears before him (as we have seen).

The end of this canto VI undoes both of these false positions. As Stevens observes,

These characters are around us in the scene.

For one it [the scene] is enough; for one it is not,

For neither is it profound absentia,

Since both alike appoint themselves the choice

Custodians of the glory of the scene,

The immaculate interpreters of life.

But that’s the difference: in the end and the way

To the end. Alpha continues to begin.

Omega is refreshed at every end.

Alpha and Omega, we are told, are around us in the scene. But neither of these characters embodies *us*. The idea that the scene involves and expresses “profound absentia” and that the absence of profundity is noted neither by the one who reduces reality to nature nor by the one who extends it, dialectically (in Kant’s terms), beyond nature’s bounds gives *us* pause. What the profound absence of the mind in the scene reveals—what the abstaining of the self from the position of either the infantine empiricist or the hierophantic idealist indicates—is that the mind is created from nothing found in nature. The nothingness of nature, the knowledge that nature is nothing beyond its appearances, paradoxically reveals the presence and the status of human consciousness—as nothing natural.

Stevens re-enacts, here, the double-move involved in his short poem “The Snow Man,” which he concludes by focusing on “the listener, who listens in the snow,”

And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.⁹

Stevens confronts us, therefore, with working out the paradox that is involved in the concept of “nothing,” the paradox involved in seeing and hearing the nothingness of everything under the sun. For there is nothing that is not there—everything is there—before the listener. It is the concept of “nothing” that is not there.¹⁰ Indeed, when Stevens aligns “nothing” with the self and existence—the nothing that “is”—he demands that we, together with our poetic images, become nothing—that we refrain from locating ourselves among the appearances of nature and yet also refrain from claiming to see or to hear anything outside of the appearances. But he simultaneously exposes us, then—in imagining the nothingness of everything under the sun—to the values that comprise who we are as people and according to which we judge the true worthiness of life (and poetry). To judge the existence of everything finite as nothing is to show

that existence (the self) is nothing finite. Thus, Stevens presupposes—and so exposes—a concept of infinite or eternal worth (dignity, in Kant’s terms) according to which we judge the finite as nothing and ourselves as nothing finite.

Consistent with his demonstration in “The Snow Man,” in the oxymoron of “profound absentia,” Stevens embodies the double-move through which his images both erase and produce themselves by creating poetry out of profound images (concepts) of nothing. Indeed, “profound absentia” is the first image through which Stevens exposes, in modern poetic terms, the ontology of creation from nothing that he incorporates into “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (although it is far from the last¹¹).

The last stanza of section VI of “An Ordinary Evening” is important, then, for comprehending the doctrine of creation from nothing that Stevens invokes in later sections. After indicating that the problem for those who reduce the reality of the mind to nature, as for those who extend the mind’s reality beyond the bounds of experience altogether, is that these characters “appoint themselves the choice” between reality and the mind, he points out the “difference” between the end and the way. But he then proceeds to eliminate the difference between the beginning and the end. For neither beginning nor end, we are told, is ever reached: Alpha continues to begin and Omega extends beyond every end. The problem for us, then, as we read this ending is that there are now two different notions of difference, two different sets of distinctions with which Stevens is operating. First, we get the difference between the beginning and the end, reality and the realm of the spirit, which Stevens then describes in identical fashion. But we also find proposed here the difference between those of “us” who note the profound paradox involved in recognizing the absence of the mind in the natural scene and those characters around us in the scene—reflecting the characters whom we find in “An Ordinary

Evening in New Haven” of which Stevens is critical—who view the difference between the mind and nature as a contradictory opposition and so see no choice but to choose between the false alternatives of empiricism and rationalism, to use Kant’s terms.

But Stevens is not yet done with us—we are not yet done with him or his images—in section VI. For, in revealing that no one ever reaches the end or the beginning, Alpha and Omega become profound images of nothing. There is no beginning or end in our experience of nature. The beginning and the end are neither natural nor transcendent (supernatural) phenomena. What is profound is the realization that these characters, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega, are nothing but our images and creations. Reality begins with nothing but imagination or meditation (at once human and divine). The imagination ends with nothing beyond the reality (existence) of human subjects in the divine work of creating life from nothing. The beginning and the end describe not the finite termination of nature but what we see as the priorities of existence: I and thou.

Indeed, “We seek / Nothing beyond reality” (IX). Rather, “Within it,” we seek,

Everything, the spirit’s alchemicana

Included, the spirit that goes roundabout

And through included, not merely the visible,

The solid, but the movable, the moment,

The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,

The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.

It is not clear, from this passage, that we know what Stevens means by spirit or how the spirit is “included” in reality. But Stevens proceeds to show us, in the very next section, how to

comprehend the spirit—in seeking nothing beyond reality—by introducing a concept of faith that allows us to distinguish between true and false conceptions of spirit.

In section X Stevens observes that, “It is fatal in the moon and empty there. / But, here, allons [Let’s see! Let’s go!].” He begins by subtly distinguishing between the fatal operation of nature and human motivation: the will to see. To tell of what we see, however, is difficult. For, in the poetic description of reality, “The enigmatical / Beauty of each beautiful enigma / Becomes amassed in a total double-thing” (recalling section I). Thus, “We do not know what is real and what is not.” Stevens is constantly inviting the reader—through his use of “we”—to share in the position that he is examining. But he is also inviting, thereby, our examination of—even our resistance to—this position as a representative of our own. That “we cannot tell apart” the idea and its bearer-being (to recall section II) creates the critical distinction between thought and existence, on the one hand, and the appearances, on the other. But that “we cannot tell apart” the idea and its bearer-being—that “We do not know what is real and what is not”—also creates, therefore, the critical distinction between reality and illusion.

Thus, Stevens goes on to note that

We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man

Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died.

We are not men of bronze and we are not dead.

His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.

But ours is not imprisoned. (X)

The man of bronze represents the view of one who aligns the transformations of the spirit with the metamorphosis that he observes in his natural surroundings and so whose spirit is enslaved to nature. Thus, from this point of view, the spirit is relegated and confined to a realm beyond that

of life: death. The ruler of reality, however—as Stevens continually points out—“is a theorist of life, not death” (XXVII). Our spirit is not a magical element either internal or external to nature.

Instead,

. It resides
In a permanence composed of impermanence,
In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept
.
This faithfulness of reality, this mode,
This tendance and venerable holding-in
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.

The human spirit is not imprisoned in nature but resides in “a faithfulness” that defies the death of the bronzed man, the idol of the spirit that is formed by applying categories that we use to understand nature to comprehend reality. Stevens does not explicitly link this “faithfulness” with the concept of love with which he began his poem. But it is telling that the images that he uses to describe this faith—the “tendance and venerable holding-in”—of reality are images of tender human affection and care.¹² It is also instructive to note that the “faithfulness of reality” that defies the idols of the spirit in “An Ordinary Evening” is identical to the spirit of the realist in “Esthétique du Mal” who denies (negates) the phantoms of human imagination.

As the speaker in section X of “Esthétique” asks,
Phantoms, what have you left? What underground?

What place in which to be is not enough
To be?

The speaker continues:

How cold the vacancy

When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist

First sees reality. The mortal no

Has its emptiness and tragic expirations.

The tragedy, however, may have begun,

Again, in the imagination's new beginning,

In the yes of the realist spoken because he must

Say yes, spoken because under every no

Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken. (X)

That it is the realist who is faithful, that it is the one who is faithful who seeks (embraces) nothing beyond reality, describes the “passion for yes” that emerges from the denial (negation: the overcoming) of the false images or hallucinations of the rigid realists and scholastic idealists who impose a false conception of reality onto what is real. To say “yes” to reality, to life, to existence... describes the faithfulness not of the one who is given to what Stevens refers to as the “nostalgia” of “Reality explained” but of the one who remains alive to the mystery of will (choice, freedom) that is expressed in what Stevens calls, in “An Ordinary Evening,” the “Love of the real[.]”¹³

That this faithfulness, then, makes “gay” the hallucinations in surfaces, to return to section X of “An Ordinary Evening,” describes the joyous affirmation that results from the critique of transcendental illusion. For, as Kant demonstrates and as Stevens demands that his readers demonstrate, the only one who can truly negate (overcome) the fantasies of the idealists (whether mystic poets or rationalist philosophers) is the one who engages in a critique of the

illusions that follow from the attempt to explain reality on the basis of its surface appearances. Whereas “transcendent” concepts, in Kant’s technical vocabulary, denote the attempt to explain, to know, objects as they are in themselves beyond the bounds of possible experience, the dialectic of transcendental illusion is that this error becomes our own responsibility, that it is not nature but we ourselves who err. But the discovery, then, that follows from seeing that we are responsible for producing the illusions that we impose onto the surfaces of things also prohibits us from viewing, with the empiricists, the objects of possible experience as things in themselves. There is no going beyond the dualisms of the idealists without critique. For otherwise we end up reproducing, as Stevens realizes, the binary opposition between the metaphysical and the physical (sensuous) in our attempt to get “clear of uncertainty” through the certainty “Of simple seeing, without reflection” (IX). The dialectic of transcendental illusion makes gay the recognition of our errors, then, for it is precisely the responsibility for illusion that separates the faithful realist from his hierophantic opposite and his rigid counterpart, i.e., from the false and falsifying positions that seek to eliminate the possibility of any confusion by providing explanations for reality.¹⁴

That overcoming the illusions of the idealists involves exposing a concept (image) of reality that cannot be explained on the basis of its physical properties is also what Stevens demonstrates in “Prologues To What Is Possible,” which I want to analyze before returning to “An Ordinary Evening.” For it is here that Stevens not only explicates the metaphysics of modern poetry in terms of his understanding of metaphor but also connects the metaphysics of metaphor (the ontology of modern poetry) to the doctrine of creation from nothingness.

After composing, in section I, an image for the “ease of mind” that is found “removed from any shore,” and so from the immediate help of others, Stevens notes, in opening section II, that

The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared
Was beyond his recognizing. By this he knew that likeness of him extended
Only a little way, and not beyond, unless between himself
And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended to be recognized,
The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses
On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep. (II)

In composing a metaphor, we cannot go beyond what it is—the objects—that are immediately (naturally) symbolized. To presume that we can go beyond—that we can glean any meaning from—what the form of the image symbolizes involves what Stevens denounces as the hallucination or hypnosis that results from attempting to inhabit our own sphere, i.e., to know what we are in ourselves. Thus, we cannot go beyond the mere resemblance of things without reproducing the binary opposition between form (appearance) and symbol (meaning) that a metaphor allows us to overcome. But to recognize, then, that the attempt to go beyond the resemblance of objects results in reproducing the opposition that we are seeking to overcome—i.e., to go beyond—we must be located in a position that is beyond that of binary opposition. We cannot go beyond the opposition between, in poetic terms, the literal (form) and the figurative (meaning) unless we locate ourselves between “this and that”—the objects with which we are compared—in a metaphor. That is, a metaphor cannot capture any meaning beyond what its images immediately (naturally) symbolize unless and until we learn to comprehend the relationships that its images put on display.

What Stevens is fundamentally exploring here, as he examines the “likeness” that exists between himself and the images that comprise a metaphor, is the concept of relationship. Relationships are not things in themselves for they exist between things—not in themselves but as the creation of creative human beings. There is, we learn, no relationship, no metaphor, outside of the appearances of objects. But the appearances cannot give us any hint of relationship, i.e., of how the images resemble the “likeness” of ourselves. That is, the appearances of a metaphor cannot be understood on their own basis. Rather, the relationships inherent in a metaphor can only be thought (imagined) as existing and can only exist as thought (imagined). Thus, the relations involved in a metaphor establish the relationship between imagination and reality, between what we understand and what we sense of a poem. The “likeness” of ourselves can extend to our images only insofar as they embody a relationship between objects such that each—both “this and that”—can be known only in and through the other. For it is only then that we can recognize ourselves in the poem’s images, not in terms of what they naturally resemble, but by relating them to the practices, the relationships, that comprise our very selves. A metaphor is an image of the self or it is not—neither of the self nor a metaphor.

Thus, the interdependence “between” the images involved in a metaphor becomes the cause of itself. For an understanding of their relationship—the recognition of the image’s “likeness” to ourselves—is based on nothing, not on anything, that resembles the objects that are involved in it. Indeed, Stevens continues to probe the possibilities of poetry for the journey of self-discovery in the remaining stanzas of his poem. “What self,” he asks,

. did he contain that had not yet been loosed,
Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,

As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased
By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight dithering
The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick[...]

A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,
Creates fresh universes out of nothingness by adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes. (II)

The primary relationship here, through which Stevens enacts the theory of metaphor that he had hitherto developed and that he articulates in a variety of ways in these stanzas, is that between what is added and what is first. For, here, what is added becomes the “first thing” and the “first thing” becomes what is added to reality and its poetic vocabulary. That is, Stevens articulates the paradox that it is only by supplementing, adding another, to what is first that a metaphor becomes the cause of itself, the “first thing” that creates, adds, “itself” from nothingness. The secondary relationship, then, through which Stevens adds to the first is that contained in the oxymoron of a “puissant” (a mighty or powerful) “flick” that he recaptures in the relationship between the creation of the entire universe and a look or a touch that we exchange with one another. That is, in discovering that poetry is *a priori* possible—that it is its own cause or principle—only upon the biblical grounds of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, Stevens also puts us on notice that the biblical doctrine of the creation of the universe can and must be understood only through its relation to the creative human expressions that we employ in the practice of our

relationships with one another. Indeed, it is precisely in seeing how Stevens' critique of metaphysics provides us with the metaphysical standards for the critical interpretation of his own images that we discover that the doctrine of creation from nothingness that he further advances in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is at once ethical and aesthetic, as I shall now undertake to show.

Because Stevens develops, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," a concept of poetry (metaphor) that embodies the ontology (metaphysics) of the doctrine of creation from nothing, he is able to overcome the false opposition between philosophy and religion. Indeed, Stevens unites the quest of philosophers, poets, and theologians in section XXII of "An Ordinary Evening" as he articulates the point of view of the scholar of scholars, the scholar who embodies at once poet, philosopher, and theologian:

Professor Eucalyptus said, "The search
For reality is as momentous as
The search for god." It is the philosopher's search

For an interior made exterior
And the poet's search for the same exterior made
Interior: breathless things broodingly abreath

With the inhalations of original cold
And of original earliness. . . . (XXII)

That the quest of the philosopher and the poet—as the search for God (which is no less than the quest of the faithful theologian)—is wedded to the search for existence is also consonant with the images of the original "cold" and "earliness"—the breath of life—through which Stevens both

imagines and re-enacts the creation of poetry. Indeed, that poets and philosophers (not to mention theologians) seek existence in seeing what is external through a concept of the internal—the interior paramour in which God and the imagination are one, to invoke one of Stevens’ late poems—is imperative.¹⁵ For Stevens knows, as we saw in the last chapter, that existence is not a given, that existence is the gift of poetic creation: that which we “make.” Thus, he reminds us yet again of the critical difference between metaphysical existence (which he aligns with divine reality) and physical externalities (the appearances). But he also reminds us that the task of professional metaphysicians is to view these externalities from a point of view—of both God and the mind—through which these accidents, as the creation (the creative responsibility) of men and women, become the objects (subjects) of our search. These objects become, insofar as they are the consequence of human creation, the works that embody our relation with one another, through love—*par-amour*.

Stevens further demands, then, that we see that to seek existence is to seek God through seeing what is internal in the external. Both God and the imagination gain existence in and through the works that embody our relation with one another: through love—*par-amour*. Stevens is now revisiting (and revising) the thematic material of his poem through the counterpoint of existence (reality) and the divine (god). God and the imagination—as wedded eternally—exist as the love of creation (the human creativity in and of relationship). Existence is created through love, the love of God and human beings. Love is the creation of existence, at once divine and human.

Thus, Stevens continues his probing search in “An Ordinary Evening” to expose the metaphysics involved in the creation of poetry. He notes, furthermore, that,

The dry eucalyptus seeks god in the rainy cloud.

Professor Eucalyptus of New Haven seeks him

In New Haven with an eye that does not look

Beyond the object. He sits in his room, beside

The window, close to the ramshackle spout in which

The rain falls with a ramshackle sound. He seeks

God in the object itself, without much choice.

It is the choice of a commodious adjective

For what he sees, it comes in the end to that:

The description that makes it divinity[...] (XIV)

That the Professor does not look beyond the object does not mean that he looks at these poetic objects with the same eye—from the same point of view—as that with which he sees objects. He does not seek God in natural satisfaction, as does the “dry eucalyptus.” He is not satisfied in his search for God by nature. Nature does not satisfy the search for God (or for reality). Yet, God is also not found—as the object of his search—outside the manifold of physical objects. Rather, to seek God in nothing beyond the object—itsself—means that the Professor is searching for the description of reality that “makes it divinity.” The “commodious adjective” describes the accommodations of the “thing apart”—the faithful residence of the spirit, the impalpable habitations of the self—through which our consciousness becomes a part of the scene by transforming the thing described into the thing-in-itself—the object itself—according to the way in which we describe it. The description of reality (existence) becomes, then, the accommodation of God by demonstrating that human description is “a thing apart,” that we—our works—are not of the same nature as the physical objects that we describe.

Indeed, as Stevens shows us that there is but one existence, so it is useful to think of his poems as containing one thought, or as the development (the never-ending meditation) of one poem. For when we think of his poems as one thought—or as one poem—we are inclined to recall the revelation of description as the inter-wedding of the existence of self and other that Stevens advances in “Description without Place.” The word is the “making of the world,” we recall (VI). So here, in recollecting the thesis of that poem, we learn that it is poetic description that makes the world divine as the creation of human beings in relationship. “An Ordinary Evening” adds, moreover, to our understanding of the description of revelation in “Description without Place” when we realize, in holding the themes of these two poems together, that nothing is revealed apart from the object—itsself—as a part of the creative life of human relationship, of human existence in relationship, which describes the accommodation of God and which we also saw Stevens describe as the categorical referent: love. The eye’s plain version (the way of seeing of Professor Eucalyptus: of men and women who seek existence), as a thing apart, becomes a part—the very making—of the world from a point of view that imaginatively marries the divine and reality through love.

Indeed, as Stevens notes, “It is the window that makes it difficult” to live and to be (XVIII). The metaphoric paradox, the paradox invoked in the metaphor of the window—through which Professor Eucalyptus peers—is that the window, the point of reference that frames reality, is both that through which and that which we see. It is the point of view—the way that we see the world—that is exposed in looking upon anything (in describing the world) at all. But it is the frame of reference, then—the point of view from which we interpret existence—that is the subject of our eternal meditation. What we learn is that we cannot see anything at all of ourselves—whether internal or external—or of what a poem means and communicates unless we

are willing to take on anew, with Professor Eucalyptus, a searching examination of the concepts of divinity, existence, and love (desire, will) that comprise the creative objects (i.e., the poetry) through which we see the world.

Thus, Stevens discovers that his description of the poet's search for reality (existence) reveals the creative existence of poetry. As he observes in section XII,

The poem is the cry of its occasion,

Part of the res itself and not about it.

The image of the "cry," which Stevens uses repeatedly (beginning with the cry of the peacocks in "Domination of Black"), now takes on human form (voice, as opposed to the noises of birds). Indeed, as Stevens notes earlier in "An Ordinary Evening," poetry embodies the "cry that contains its converse in itself" (XIII). He is providing us here, in addition to another version of the inherent law of metaphor—as the method of conversion, the transfer, of poetic creation—another version of the marriage of two emotions, two feelings, becoming one—each feeling becoming itself in and through another: its converse. He is wedding the human cry (of misery and suffering) with the ebullient emotion (the tremendous joy) of love. Not only, however, are the implications of this aesthetic merger—as the elliptical cry of poetry—profoundly ethical. But the implications, once we see the ethics involved in the merger of these aesthetic (e)motions, are profoundly aesthetic or poetic for the ethics of love. For we are reminded that there is no ethical relation—no relation between, no becoming one of two people (to recall "Of Modern Poetry")—outside of the poetic work of feeling for one another by taking on each other's separate feelings as our own.

The implications of this poetic cry are also resounding—they reverberate—throughout this study. For Stevens invokes none other than the res itself, the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*).

Poetry, we learn, is not about things. Poetry is not scientific study (whether chemical, physical, or biological). The thing-in-itself, as Kant has also shown us, is not an object for the scientists, but the subject of poets. But poetry, then, is also not *about* the thing-in-itself, as if the thing itself were a thing—whether internal or external—among other things. Rather, poetry is the thing itself. The thing-in-itself is the creation of poetry. The thing-in-itself is both the method and the content of poetic creation—when we learn that poetry involves metaphor, oxymoron, the dialectic between opposing modes of discourse, and conversion in the merger whereby two emotions (feelings) get worked out in and through (as the embodiment of) the relation between two people in love. The thing-in-itself is existence in relationship. Existence—as the creation of relationship, at once divine and human—is the object itself that constitutes the search—the desire—of philosophers and poets (to make no mention of divinely poetic theologians).

Again, it is important to recall that, for Stevens, each “part” of his poems is no less than the whole. The whole is constituted by the relation between each part, one to another. The whole is of no greater sum than any single part. For, as Stevens repeatedly points out, the parts of poetry embody the self—in relationship with another. Thus, when Stevens notes that the poem is “a part” of the *res* itself, he is not indicating that the thing-in-itself persists apart from poetry (or human imagination). Rather, he is but humbly acknowledging the part he plays—creating room for the other—in the play that involves others (his readers) as also creators of the reality of which his poem is a part. The thing-in-itself is an ethical concept of the self—in relation to other selves as ends (“things”) in themselves. The thing-in-itself is the subject of poetic creation—as what poetry creates in containing an expression that contains its own converse in itself. The thing-in-itself is converted from the world of nature to the world of human relationship when we realize that there is no thing-in-itself outside of its (dialectical) relation to another.

What we learn, then, is that the metaphysics of Stevens' poetry shares the same transcendental structure as that of Kant's philosophy. In other words, what we learn is that, just as the creative concepts and critical distinctions of Kant's philosophy show us that the thing-in-itself is a metaphor, so Stevens reveals that the structure of poetry (or metaphor, generally) is the thing itself. So Stevens writes, working out the same problematic in the same intensity of tone in yet another variation,

The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:

The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room,

The gay tournamonde as of a single world

In which he is and as and is are one. (XV)

That the "single world" in which we are—what constitutes the self—embodies the relation between "is" and "as" is a truly remarkable articulation of metaphysics. For Stevens not only captures the relation between heaven and earth—as the world in which "is" and "as" are one. But he also captures the structure of poetic creation (metaphor, oxymoron, double-discourse [not to be confused or conflated with the hypocrisy of double-talk]). For it is critical to see that "is" and "as"—reality and description—are not one in nature. Nature is the one object (the only subject) that does not exist in and through its self-description (thinking) or think about its own existence. Nature is the subject of the description (both the thought and existence) of another: human beings. It is not you and night (nature) that are one—as and is are not naturally one—as we recall the speaker of the poem "Re-statement of Romance" points out. Rather, it is you and I who exist in and through—as—the subject of each other's description. What I discover on my quest for existence is that I cannot describe as an object the other whom I must presuppose in order to

describe an object at all. The self “is” only insofar as it can see—love, relate with—another “as” itself.

My readers recognize, no doubt, this “as” from the adverbial phrase “as thyself” that Cynthia Ozick put forward as the first and last metaphor of poetic creation in her article on the moral necessity of poetry (metaphor), which we analyzed in Chapter 1. Human existence is constituted by the relationship, at once ethical (loving) and aesthetic (metaphorical), between self and other. Human existence *is* constituted *as*—the relationship involved in human communication (description *as* revelation). Finally, therefore, what we learn in uniting existence and description—“is” and “as”—is why it is that this relationship, which constitutes the subject of poetic creation, is the single idea that can unite heaven and earth. For, in seeing that the metaphysical relationship between “is” and “as” is embodied in the relationship between oneself and others, we discover why it is that poetry involves the making of the world, the creation of the earth—*as* the never-ending subject of divine love for one another. The “axis” on which the times turn—both joyfully and ruefully—is human conversation.¹⁶ The “gay tournamonde”—the joyful conversion of the world—is the inversion (the conversion) of the cry that modern poetry lets out in facing the men and women of our time (our “occasion”). Grim reality becomes “paradise” anew—the cry of suffering (lamentation) becomes the joy of hymnal song—when faced with the power of love, the power of human relationship to evince its own endurance in and through a new version (vision) of itself.¹⁷

I press but a few of the keys of Stevens’ poem—including “grim / Reality,” “paradise,” the “cry” and its “gay” turnaround, the “axis” of our times, and the *vincit*, the giant, the invincible power of love, with which we began—in order to continue to remind my reader of the numerous punctuating images that Stevens employs as she takes on the task of following the

counterpunctal movement of his poem. As Stevens finds, in the beginning, that he has no choice—he is compelled—to introduce the ethics of love if he wants to put on display for us a true vision of poetry’s content, so he finds, in the end, that he has no choice—he is compelled—to introduce the doctrine of creation from nothing if he wants to account for the “instinct,” the will, to wed the two discourses of existence (heaven and earth) that is central to modern poetry. Simply put, because he wills to write poetry, he finds that he can do so on no other basis than the doctrine of creation from nothing that underpins the structure of will (the dialectic of love, to use Hegel’s terms) that is central to the Bible. Thus, in section XXVIII he notes that

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.

I understand Stevens’ invocation of a “More harassing” and subtler master to be a challenge to the reader. For what he challenges this master (of poetic creation) to do is to show—through the proof of her life—that the theory of poetry that he makes central to his strongest poems is also the theory of life, the very proof of her own existence.

In once again invoking the relationship between “is” and “as”—the relation between existence and the evasions (indirection) of poetic description—as the theory or proof through which poetry is created, Stevens recalls for us the dramatic implications of meditating on the metaphysics of his poem. He demands that we, extemporaneously, recall that the metaphysics of his poem can only be comprehended as detailing the ethics of human relationship. But he also puts us on notice, then, that it is we who create the world—whether it is a new haven or a hellish nightmare that we find before us—from nothing. He puts his readers on notice, that is, that creation from nothing is an ethical (practical) concept.

Poetry is created from nothing but the marriage of the “instinct” for heaven and the “instinct” for earth: the will. But so we must show, in responding to Stevens’ challenge, that we are created from nothing, that our lives are the responsibility (the creation) of nothing but what we will, individually and collectively. That is, the doctrine of creation from nothing does not denote, as St. Anselm observed over nine centuries prior to Stevens, a nebulous “thing” that is “nothing” from which the world is created. For, as St. Anselm acutely notes, if so, then the world has not been created from nothing but from “something” (which we call “nothing”).¹⁸ Rather, creation is not from anything. God’s creation in Genesis is not the creation of nature—in itself—but the creation of the world of human beings, the world of relationship, from nothing natural. The objects of nature are the very nothing from which poetry is created and of which it is creative insofar as we see that human creativity is nothing natural. The objects of nature denote the subjects of our existence, the very contents of our lives, when they are engaged such that they embody the structure of poetic creation (the structure of metaphor or dialectic, as connoting the ethics of human relationship). The biblical doctrine of creation from nothing accounts for (describes) both the theory of poetry and—as—the theory of life.

Thus, it is important to see not only that the subjects of poetry are the subjects of our lives but also that poetic creation describes our daily practice. As Stevens writes, in section XXII of “An Ordinary Evening,”

. the sense
Of cold and earliness is a daily sense,

Not the predicate of bright origin.
Creation is not renewed by images
Of lone wanderers. To re-create, to use

The cold and earliness and bright origin
Is to search.

Indeed, it is to search “the possible for its possibleness” (XXII). That creation is not replayed (renewed, rethought) through images of a “bright origin” or lone wanderers reminds us of how Kant overcame the impasse created by the false antinomy involved in imagining (thinking about) the beginning of time. Indeed, what Kant pointed out, we recall, is that the beginning in (of) time is a self-contradiction. There was no time before there was time (to invoke another saintly figure in the history of ideas: St. Augustine).¹⁹ That is, the “beginning” can only be imagined in relation to another time, another origin, another—in the beginning. The beginning, in other words, is a metaphor. The metaphor of beginning, not in time but with the task of facing the times, in the beginning, involves the dialectical structure of biblical (and modern) imagery that I have been arguing encompasses the ethics of enduring, visionary love.

Once we see that the beginning, the origin, is constituted by relationship (equally human and divine), it is not hard to see why it is that the creation of the world, as Stevens points out, is a

daily practice. Moreover, when we learn that God is not to be imagined as a “bright origin”—the lone supernatural star among the planets (*planetai*: the wanderers)—we see that modern poetry embodies the biblical doctrine of creation and that biblical creation involves and expresses modern poetic practice. Finally, in analyzing section XXII, we discover that the aesthetic practice of making the world from nothing—from nothing that is not indicative of the poetry of love—that Stevens embodies in his poem also constitutes our own daily practice in searching the possibilities of the world for the actual making of human relationship.

Thus, once we become attuned to the ethical implications involved in the content of Stevens’ poem (as the structure of modern poetry), we are not at all surprised to read, in section XX, that, as man undertakes the task of working out the relationship between imagination and reality, heaven and earth, the city of God (as a new haven) and the town of New Haven, Connecticut, “He may evade / Even his own will” through the escapist images of rigid realists or false idealists. And yet, Stevens notes—after allowing us to ponder, momentarily, the end of section XX—“he may not. He may not evade his will / Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade / The will of necessity, the will of wills—” (XXI). Paradoxically, both statements are true: he may evade his will and, therefore, he may not, he may not evade human will. For to evade the will—not through the intricate evasions of poetic description but through the attempt, on the part of the realists or the idealists, to reduce reality back to nature, to divorce reality from its poetic description—is an act of will. It is true, then, that we may appoint ourselves the choice not to choose, to choose to eliminate the reality of human will (desire) by positing a cause for human existence—who we are as people—outside of ourselves, whether that cause is supernaturally ideal or naturally real. But, then again, we may not. We may not *not* will. We may not *not* appoint ourselves the choice. Thus, what we discover is that the one choice, the true choice, in

acknowledging the will of ourselves and others, is to create the world from nothing by willing for others what we will (and would want to be willed) for ourselves.

Stevens is Kantian. For, in embracing the doctrine of creation from nothing as the ontology of our daily poetic practice, he shows us that what constitutes the origin, the beginning, the creation of the world is the will: human freedom. But he is also Kantian insofar as he then undertakes an examination of will, a critique of practical reason (as Kant would say), and finds that there is no evading the will of self or other. Thus, he captures not only the relationship between will (freedom) and necessity, but also shows us that what is necessary is (to will) the will of all, to be all-willing insofar as what we do supports the will of one another. That is, he captures the categorical imperative: because my will cannot evade the will of others—because I cannot avoid my own will in my relationship with others—the sole endeavour that we can undertake together, the endeavour that it is necessary (practically speaking) to undertake, is that which I can will for all (including myself). The will of wills, at once divine and human, describes the categorical imperative to will for yourself only what you can at the same time will for all others with whom you are in relationship.

Thus, what we learn from Stevens' theory of poetry is that, as he states in the final lines of "An Ordinary Evening,"

It is not in the premise that reality

Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses

A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

What we learn is that reality may be contained in—expressed by—any object of creation provided we see that reality is not a natural solid, but a concept of poetic imagination. Reality is not the predicate—or, therefore, the object of the "premise"—of anything. Rather, as a concept

of the imagination, reality may not be anything other than the force, the image, of the will (of wills). For there is no true poetic reality, no image or metaphor, that does not involve traversing from one to another: in short, relationship.

As Stevens remarks, then, in recalling the difference that is made by a poem, the difference that poetry makes in the world, it is not the country but the “countrymen [who] were changed” (XXIX). Indeed, the countrymen of New Haven, the men and women who confront Stevens’ poetic creation, can only be you and me. Poetry makes no difference in nature—or to scientific study (notwithstanding the fact that the will to study medicine, for example, embodies the metaphoric imperative to do no harm, to love one another, as Ozick reminded her listeners). Naturally, the lion remains the lion and the lamb, the lamb (to invoke the image for peace and justice that was introduced in Chapter 1). The difference that poetry makes is one for you and me to appreciate by seeing that the content (and the structure: the concept) of poetry is ethical, that poetry provides us with a method for uniting our separate selves and so with a way of working out not only the content of the images that we use but also the whole myriad of feelings that we experience daily. Poetry provides us with resources, in other words, for enduring in and through the renewal of our vision of love.

Thus, what Stevens shows us in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” is that we cannot engage in a critique of the metaphysics of poetry unless and until we locate ourselves between (pure) imagination and (pure) reality. That is, in engaging a critique of the attempt to know reality or imagination as they are in themselves, he shows us that his own images can be thought (imagined) only as existing and can exist (in reality) only as thought. His poem demands, therefore, that we see, in working out the relations embedded in and between his images, that the ontology of creation from nothing that he makes central to the theory of poetry describes the

action of enduring, visionary love. In other words, we discover that the ontology of creation from nothing that he invokes in his poem is as ethical in its content as it is aesthetic in its conceit.

Thus, his own poem provides us with a way of answering the challenge that he throws to his extemporaneous masters—you and me—to show in our daily actions how and why it is that the theory of poetry is the theory of life: that life is constituted by the willing relation between self and other that is at once ethical and aesthetic. In the next and final chapter, prior to the conclusion, we shall continue, then, to see how Stevens exposes the ethics of modern poetry as he undertakes to articulate, in poetic terms, the principle of modern ethical practice.

¹ I recognize that, as I shall show, Stevens introduces various personae as his method for enacting a critique of metaphysics (poetry). Still, because he does so with the aim of critiquing (undermining) these points of view (positions), I view the poem to be written from Stevens' own point of view. Thus, I shall refer to Stevens as the speaker of the poem in this chapter.

² "The Sail of Ulysses" III.

³ It is worth noting that Stevens then introduces, in section XI, a concept of metaphysics through a series of images that remind us of the "impalpable habitations" of the impalpable towns in the opening stanzas of section II. In section XI, Stevens notes, "In the metaphysical streets of the physical town / We remember the lion of Juda," which he then describes as the "lion of the spirit," and "we save / The phrase" until the "fact takes up the strength of the phrase" and "Juda becomes New Haven or else must." The metaphysical streets describe the ways in which we live, our ways or paths of life. In holding together sections II and XI, what we discover is that the lion of the spirit, the power of the God of Israel, describes the movement, the power, of enduring, visionary love, according to which the spirit of Juda (the city of God) becomes the community of New Haven (the city of earth), the fact of which is taken up in his poetic phrases. Love, then, is what Stevens proceeds to describe, in section XI, as the "invincible clou"—both the clue and the clou (the nail or point of chief interest)—that unlocks for us how to interpret the poem by exposing the point of view through which the self is revealed as the subject of the poem's never-ending meditation. The invincible power of poetry—the giant than which no greater can be or be conceived—is nothing other, we learn, than enduring, visionary love.

⁴ Pascal writes, from the point of view of equity and justice, "All men naturally hate one another. They have used selfish interest as best they could to make it serve the public good, but this is only a pretense and a false image of charity, for at bottom there is only hatred" (*Selections from the Thoughts* #35).

⁵ See sections VI and VII.

⁶ Stevens' penetrating critique, here, of the attempt, on the part of rigid realists, to compose a poem untouched by poetic imagination reflects heavily on the position of the speaker of the poem in "Landscape with Boat." Indeed, the speaker of this poem launches a truly thoughtful critique of the suppositions of the "anti-master-man" and "floribund ascetic" who projects the

truth into a place and time beyond all places and times in his rejection and denial of existence, consistent with the woman of “Sunday Morning” (though, here, the speaker penetrates yet further by showing that the religious idealism that constructs the “colossal illusion of heaven” is no different from the illusions to which the anti-master man or nihilist is prone). But, also consistent with the woman in “Sunday Morning,” the speaker of “Landscape with Boat”—the position from which his critique is composed—does not escape the contradiction of rigid realist poetry in which the truth is reduced to the immediate images of nature. Indeed, the poem ends with the speaker suggesting that, “Had he,” the anti-master-man, “been better able to suppose[....] He might observe / A yellow wine and follow a steamer’s track / And say, ‘The thing I hum appears to be / The rhythm of this celestial pantomime.’” That is, the speaker ends by suggesting that his humming—the expressions of the poet—“might” involve the mirroring of the world and language. The contradiction, however, is that the “celestial pantomime”—the imitation—of things suggests that the poet composes images of reality without the use of words. The speaker still seeks reality untouched by poetry (trope or “evasion,” in Stevens’ vocabulary). Moreover, I see no conscious use of irony here that alienates Stevens, the poet himself, from the speaker of the poem. That is, the poem does not appear to be, in the end, self-conscious of its own contradictions. Thus, I do not view “Landscape with Boat” as representative of the strength of Stevens’ poetry.

⁷ I return to this passage in my analysis of the role of the will in “An Ordinary Evening” in connection with the doctrine of creation from nothing in what follows in this chapter.

⁸ The “hierophant” is the originally Greek priest who is indoctrinated into the holy mysteries of the gods, e.g., the Eleusinian mysteries, the punishment for speaking a word of which is death. (See the editors’ note for Kierkegaard’s allusion to the Eleusinian mysteries in *Repetition* [181]. Kierkegaard further indicates that those who insulted the institution by refusing to become initiated in these mysteries also faced the punishment of death.)

⁹ “The Snow Man” contains fifteen lines that compose a single sentence. But it is important to recognize that Stevens does not end, in this sentence, where he appears to begin. Whereas he begins by invoking the cold indifference to the wintry scene (and so to life) by the one whose mind reflects the dead of winter, he ends with the listener—indeed, the snow man—who is attuned to the misery foretold in the scene, whose warm heart is not indifferent to life (or death). In appearing to begin with but one point of view, he ends by demanding that the one point of view of his reader, following the train of thought embedded in the poem, distinguish between “regarding” the scene and “beholding” it, not with a mind of winter but with another mind, as Harold Bloom thoughtfully points out in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (57-60). Indeed, it is important to see the difference between the two points of view embedded in the poem so that we do not ourselves become representatives of the cold indifference of the one with a mind of winter by interpreting the image of “nothing” here as consistent with the nihilism of Schopenhauer, as Bart Eekhout attempts to do in his otherwise thoughtful analysis of the limits of Stevens’ poetry in *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*.

¹⁰ In other words, “nothing” is a profound metaphor. The use of the many images through which Stevens conjures the wintry scene in “The Snow Man” but serve to show that there are no images—in nature—for the image (the concept) of nothing. Thus, Stevens puts us on guard against trying to conceive of this concept (image) through a simile with empirical absence or empty space. “Nothing” is, we can say, nothing natural. To put it in Kant’s terms, nothing is a concept involved in human practice, one that belongs to practical reason as opposed to theoretical understanding. “Nothing” is a concept drawn from the store of human values, the

implications of which are primarily ethical (practical) and not theoretical for our comprehension of ourselves.

¹¹ In section XVII, Stevens writes, “A blank underlies the trials of device, / The dominant blank, the unapproachable.” I understand the “dominant blank” to be consistent with the image of “profound absentia” in section VI, “death’s poverty” as the moving face of tragedy in section XVI, the “big X of the returning primitive” that defines the “fresh spiritual” of the poet in section XIII, and the “sepulchral hollows” from which the love of reality arises in section VIII: all of which I view to be consistent with and to embody the concept of creation from nothing.

¹² This faithfulness—reality’s faith, the faith in reality—is once again summoned when Stevens notes in section XXV of “An Ordinary Evening” that it was life “who watched him” and who watched over his poetry, “always, for unfaithful thought.” There is no soliloquy, no poetic meditation upon one’s own life, that does not take place before another, the life (reality) of the other who demands our fidelity to existence. As Stevens further observes, upon receiving the National Book Award for Poetry in 1951, the modern poet “considers his function to be this: to find, by means of his own thought and feeling, what seems to be the poetry of his time.... I say,” he continues, “that he is to find it by his own thought and feeling; and the reason for this is that the only place for him to find it is in the thought and feeling of other people of which he becomes aware through his own thought and feeling” (835). To think and to feel, in other words, is to find oneself confronted by the thoughts and feelings of others. Both thoughts and feelings are acts of relationship, the loving point of which is to accommodate for everyone’s thoughts and feelings, with the exception of those that are not loving (i.e., that are unfaithful to human reality). “Individual poets,” then, Stevens reports upon receiving another award, this time from the Poetry Society of America, “whatever their imperfections may be, are driven all their lives by that inner companion of the conscience.... I speak of a companion of the conscience because to every faithful poet the faithful poem is an act of conscience” (834) To write or to read a poem—even identifying one’s imperfections—involves faithfully speaking to what is true to the lives, thoughts, and feelings of ourselves and others.

¹³ See section X of “Esthétique du Mal” wherein Stevens distinguishes between the cold indifference of “Reality explained”—embodying the nostalgic longing for a time without pain—and the touch of personal pain, the position of care or true sympathy laid out in section V of that same poem. See section VIII of “An Ordinary Evening” for reference to the “Love of the real,” which demonstrates the reality of our love.

¹⁴ It is important to note that, just as Stevens articulates his concept of metaphysics in hermeneutical terms in “Of Modern Poetry,” so he composes his critique of poetry (texts) in metaphysical terms in “An Ordinary Evening.” That is, in engaging us in what I am calling his critique of metaphysics (i.e., his metaphysical critique), Stevens does not allow us to reduce poetry either to its immediate (formal) content or to its transcendent concepts (of whatever form). Thus, he completely eschews—by not allowing us to adopt—the theory of art (poetry) for its own sake and the theory of art as a social instrument (in the service of ends that are not contained in the poet’s images) in our interpretation of his poems. As J. Hillis Miller observes in *The Linguistic Moment*, “Stevens’ poetry is not merely poetry about poetry. It is a poetry that is the battleground among conflicting theories of poetry,” theories that are “as old as our Western tradition” and that are not simply “alternatives among which one may choose. Their contradictory inherence in one another generates the meditative search for ‘what will suffice’” in Stevens’ modern poems (cited in Eekhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, 204).

¹⁵ See “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.”

¹⁶ In section XIX, after distinguishing between a time in which the moon (the stars of the heavens) served as the source for the axis, the “radial aspect,” before which everything bowed and “another time” in which “the radial aspect came / From a different source,” Stevens describes this new source as:

A man who was the axis of his time,

An image that begot its infantines,
Imaginary poles whose intelligence
Streamed over chaos their civilities.

In connection with section XIX, it is instructive to recall the “Blessed rage for order,” the awesome oxymoronic attitude, that is adopted by the woman in “The Idea of Order at Key West” who sings “beyond the genius of the sea,” i.e., whose song does not reflect the noise of the sea that she hears but sings the song of herself and of her “origins.” For,

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

It is important to note the distinction that Stevens sets out, in this poem, between the idea of order that orders the sea (the order of nature) and the “maker’s rage to order the words of the sea” (the human order or civility). That is, it is especially important not to confuse but to place in rightful order these two notions of order so that we do not conflate the stratifications of nature with the order of poetry, in which two emotions, two “things”—the first and the second—become both first (original) and second (supplemental). “The origin could have its origin,” Stevens notes in “Desire & the Object,” once again indicating that the origin of poetry is contained in the image that begins—with itself—by beginning with another. When we rightfully order the two ideas of order that are invoked in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” we see, moreover, that the “chaos” that becomes civilized through the rage for order is a human construct, that we are responsible for this chaos, not nature, when we confuse these two conceptions of order. For nature is never out of order—except from the human point of view.

¹⁷ See the end of section XIV of “An Ordinary Evening.”

¹⁸ In the *Monologion*, Anselm observes that “‘nothing’ either signifies something or does not signify anything. Now if nothing is something, whatever was made from nothing was made from something. On the other hand, if nothing is not anything... [then] nothing is made from nothing,” from which it appears to follow that “whatever exists was made from something” (ch. 8). But, Anselm continues, “if this is admitted to be true, it contradicts everything” regarding the doctrine of creation from nothing and reduces God to a “something” that is “nothing” (ch. 8). In other words, Anselm puts us on notice that central to comprehending the ontology that underpins the doctrine of creation from nothing is the distinction between the biblical concept of nothing— from which existence is created and which, therefore, is creative of life—and the ancient Greek concept of nothing as the void of natural space and time. Because the ancient Greeks have no other concept of “nothing” than that which is based on a simile with the absence of sensible appearances, the ancient Greek philosophers continue to hold, without exception, that nothing comes from nothing, consistent with the poets who are constantly portraying the metamorphosis of everything natural (whether divine, human, or animal) into everything natural. Thus, in imagining the reality of the appearances through a simile with nature, what is real and what is

imaginary (or illusory) are constantly reversing into their opposite, which leaves the ancient Greek authors knowing nothing about what *is* (as we saw in Chapter 5). To confuse our modern (or biblical) concept of nothing with that of the ancient Greeks is to wind up in the empty positions of the empiricists and the idealists, whether religious or secular, who reduce life to nothing by viewing “nothing” as “something” and conflating “something”—the existence of all that is great in life—with that which is “nothing”—in itself. That is, because “nothing” is a concept that fundamentally belongs to practical reason, because nothing is a metaphor, it is also liable to become a truly dangerous idol whenever one draws a false facsimile between “nothing” and “something.” Because we are aware that nature is nothing—in itself—and that we are nothing outside of nature, we constantly run the risk of reducing existence to nothing. “Do we not,” therefore, as Anselm probingly asks, “need to fight against nothing, lest so many constructions of necessary reason be besieged by nothing and the supreme good, who has been sought out and discovered by the light of truth, be lost for a worthless nothing” (ch. 19)? As we know, the fight against nothing is the fight against ourselves that we wage in the service of that than which no greater conception of existence can be or be conceived: enduring, visionary love.¹⁹ See *The City of God* bk. XI, chs. 4-6 and book 12, ch. 15. See also the *Confessions* bk. XI, especially chs. 10-13.

Chapter 7

The Right to Know Is the Right to Be

“The Sail of Ulysses”

In “The Sail of Ulysses” Stevens engages us in the poetic journey of self-discovery—in reading one’s own mind—through his critical commentary on the relationship between knowledge and being. In meditating on this relationship, the speaker of the poem determines, as we shall see, that the right to know is the right to be, the discovery of which launches a chain of entailments that involves linking the singular (individual) and the universal, the human and the divine, the absolute and the historical, the beginning and the end, now and then (signalling both the past and the future), along with the grace of freedom and the necessity of duty: all of which Stevens poetically demonstrates through his use of rhetorically contrasting terms and figural paradoxes. By retracing the links, the methods of poetic composition (or thinking), that connect these dynamic (dialectical) pairs, what I shall show in this chapter, above all, is that we cannot read “The Sail of Ulysses” without presupposing—and so exposing—the relationship (at once absolute and historical) between ethics and art.

Before analyzing, however, the art of ethics and the ethics of art that Stevens puts on display in his posthumously published “The Sail of Ulysses,” I want to take up three short poems (also published posthumously). In “A Clear Day and No Memories,” “Solitaire Under the Oaks,” and “Of Mere Being,” Stevens (self-consciously) contradicts the thesis—the main theme—of “The Sail of Ulysses.” That is, in each of these poems, Stevens tests our comprehension of the relationship between mind and being and so sharpens our understanding of what it is that satisfies the act of the mind (i.e., modern poetry) by showing us, as we shall see, that we can be satisfied by these poems only when we learn that—how—they do not suffice.

In "A Clear Day and No Memories" we find
No soldiers in the scenery,
No thoughts of people now dead,
As they were fifty years ago,
Young and living in a live air,
Young and walking in the sunshine,
Bending in blue dresses to touch something,
Today the mind is not part of the weather.

But surely what occurs to us as we read the closing line of this stanza (as the first of the two stanzas that comprise Stevens' short poem) is that this is not a clear day without memory. In invoking images of men and women fifty years ago, Stevens directly contradicts the title. Moreover, he begins and ends with images that evoke a memory of his own prior poems.¹ That the mind is not a part of the weather (the natural scene) is true, but it is not true that the description of the weather does not expose the mind, including the memory of others and of Stevens' own poetic creations.

The poem continues:

Today the air is clear of everything.
It has no knowledge except of nothingness
And it flows over us without meanings,
As if none of us had ever been here before
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
This invisible activity, this sense.

That the air has no knowledge and yet knows of its own nothingness is an explicit contradiction. Indeed, as we saw in the last chapter, precisely what animated nature cannot know (cognitively) or sense (intuitively) is the concept of its own “nothingness,” which belongs solely to human beings as they undertake to create the world, through their poetic interaction, from nothing. (Not even “nothing,” we can say, is prior to creation, the creative will of human beings in relationship.) In undertaking to put aside the mind—the thoughts and historical presence of people—what “A Clear Day and No Memories” shows us is that, because the mind is not a part of the weather, the natural weather cannot eliminate the presence of the mind (however clear the day). It is particularly interesting, then, to note the oxymoron (the “shallow spectacle”), the metaphor (the “invisible activity”), and the double-entendre (the “sense”) with which Stevens chooses to conclude his poem. Is he not pointing out, in his reverie over nature, the shallowness of the natural day? Is he, then, not further pointing out, in contrast to this shallow spectacle, that the fullness of his poem is contained in its express contradiction in presenting us with the knowledge that the “depth” of the mind is contained in nothing but its historical memory? Is he (not) exposing, therefore, the visible activity of the mind in composing the images of the poem by demanding that we see that the sole activity that is not visible (or “invisible”) in the scene is the act of the mind?

I do not, by posing these questions, mean to be questioning the author’s intent. Regardless of what Stevens intends to mean by these images—through which he indicates, however, that nature’s images are “without meanings,” with the consequence that the meaning of his poem cannot be found on a clear day without memory—in the context of the other poems that we have examined, the contradictions involved in this poem become expressly evident and paradoxically revelatory. His focus on “this sense” at the end of the poem involves, as I noted, a

double-entendre, invoking both the senses and the mind's "sense": what makes "sense." Thus, the poem exposes its own presupposition: the twofold standpoint that expresses (creates) the distinction between nature and the (historical) mind. Stevens makes the same poetic move (with even greater clarity) in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," wherein he notes that, "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation" (I.iii).

After aligning, in the beginning of section iii of Part I of the "Notes," the poetry of the first idea with the belief in an immaculate beginning (and an immaculate end), Stevens proceeds to describe a number of the nonsensical sounds that we hear in nature, reducing the words of poetry to the onomatopoeia of what we naturally sense, as he did when describing the "buzzing and lispig" firmament in "Description Without Place." But the paradox, then, is that life's nonsense—which we sense—introduces a second concept of sense. This "sense," however, through which we make sense of the world, is not immediately sensible. Thus, what life's nonsense exposes for us, in demonstrating our estrangement from sensible nature, is our relation not with nature but with each other for whom life, whether natural or personal, is not non-sense. Life makes sense, but only from a point of view that is not natural (or sensible in nature). Life's nonsense—sensible nature—pierces Stevens' poem with a sense of the estrangement of his images, which engage nature, from the natural world.

Indeed, the onomatopoeia of nature produces no effect or meaning outside of the creation of poets, the creation of the word: human communication. The origin of life no less than the origin of poetry is not a natural origin. The origin, the beginning (and the end), is the immaculate relation, which pierces in two directions. For not only does this relation show us that we—that our works and poetic creations—are not available to our natural senses, but also this relation reveals that nature is nothing in itself, that it makes no sense outside of our understanding of it.

Thus, Stevens gives us grounds to see that it is we—and we alone—who are responsible for reducing life to “non-sense,” for reducing life to nothingness by confusing sensible nature with the subjects (the “sense”) of poetry and existence.

What Stevens truly shows us in “A Clear Day and No Memories,” when we examine it from a point of view that maintains the “sense” of estrangement that follows from observing the relation between the mind (knowing) and nature, is that memory involves historical and not natural fact. The weather remembers naught. In other words, we are reminded that, because “as and is are one,” to recall the metaphysical position of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” what “is” is not necessary (in natural terms) (XV). The realization, however, that the facts that constitute the world of human beings are not empirically necessary but are the historical products of human will exposes to us what is not right about what “is” by confronting us with the imperative to know ourselves (our being) rightfully. The estrangement of human freedom (in relationship) reveals the “nonsense” that we find plaguing the facts of the world.

Still, it is important to see, then, that these concepts (of right and freedom) are not pure principles that release us from the demand to engage the facts of life. Rather, they are concepts (indeed, actual principles, we could say) that are embodied in, and that arise from, the historical content of the world, which brings me to the second posthumous poem that I want to examine by way of preface to “The Sail of Ulysses.” In “Solitaire Under the Oaks,” Stevens again introduces an explicit contradiction. He writes,

In the oblivion of cards

One exists among pure principles.

Neither the cards nor the trees nor the air

Persist as facts. This is an escape

To principium, to meditation.

One knows at last what to think about

And thinks about it without consciousness,

Under the oak trees, completely released.

To think about that which you know—to imagine the mind—without any consciousness of an object is to think nothing at all. Knowledge without (human) consciousness eliminates all (factual) content. To think or to know without consciousness expresses the self-contradiction—the contradictory obliteration—of knowledge. Is Stevens not illuminating here the thoughtlessness of attempting to exist among “pure” principles?² Is he not exposing the relationship between the content and the concept, being (existence) and knowledge, by explicating the self-contradiction that follows from the attempt to divorce thinking from all content?

Whether or not Stevens himself is conscious of the contradictions of his poem is not, fundamentally, the issue. Whether or not Stevens is conscious of them, the text self-consciously exposes its own contradictions. Indeed, the image of “solitaire” is particularly apt for expressing the self-contradiction involved in pursuing the oblivion of the mind. Life is not a solitary venture at calculation in which the aim is to eliminate all the cards in your deck. Life is not a game of solitaire but a single hand of poker in which you are, therefore, all in. The chips are down. You must play the cards that you are dealt. But as soon as you place your bets you realize that your existence in this game is determined by that on which you stake your life, i.e., that your existence is determined by what you think (of existence). To recall the terms of the argument in which Pascal places his wager: you have no choice but to gamble in the game of life. You have no

choice not to play your hand, for you are engaged. How you live your life, as Pascal reminds his interlocutors, will determine what you have chosen: whether you have bet all on the existence of God by practicing Gods' commands (loving one another) or you have lost all for nothing by folding your hand in refusing to take the risk of exposing yourself to others in loving them as yourself.³

That to stake your life—on God, say, in Pascal's terms—is to see that your existence is determined according to what you think of it brings us back, then, to Stevens and to the relationship between knowledge and being. There is nothing at stake in a game of solitaire. There is nothing at stake in Stevens' "Solitaire Under the Oaks"—unless and until we see, in the context of his other poems, the self-contradiction with which this poem confronts us. Thus, it is important to see that in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens contradicts—and so overcomes—the self-contradiction of knowledge (the premise that poetry is a solitary meditation on pure principles) in "Solitaire Under the Oaks" by embracing the paradox involved in what Kant advances as the critique of pure reason.

In section i of Part II of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (entitled "It Must Give Pleasure") Stevens observes of the sun, the sea, and the moon that these "are not things transformed" by poetry:

Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.

We reason about them with a later reason.

Indeed, we are first introduced to the concept of reason in this poem in section ix of Part I, wherein Stevens indicates that the origin of man is not to be aligned with the apotheosis of nature but with the application of reason.⁴ By noting, then, in Part II—as his commentary on why we are shaken (stirred) by the wonders of nature—that we reason about them with a later reason, he

has committed us to working out two notions of reason. It is useful, therefore, to recall the distinction that Kant makes between theoretical reason (the understanding of nature) and practical reason.

As we saw in Part 2 of our study, Kant demonstrates that we can and must rationally explain everything in nature—provided that we see that the objects of nature are not things in themselves and that the laws by which we explain natural phenomena are human concepts. But what Kant thereby also sees is that we cannot explain what makes the objects of nature good or, we can say, what makes them poetic. That is, he exposes for us the difference between the reasons that we use to explain the appearances of the world (theoretical reason) and the reasons that we use to justify them (practical reason).

While Stevens does not proceed, like Kant, to align reason explicitly with the practice of observing the moral law, he does align reason with the practice of poetry that involves the passion of the heart (as he indicates in section ix of Part I of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”). In recalling the demonstration of Kant, however, what we see is that Stevens also subtly exposes the distinction between the subjects of the mind (or poetry: “things transformed”) and the objects that we experience (e.g., the sun, the sea, and the moon). Thus, we find ourselves before a twofold concept of reason according to which we think about the “things” of Stevens’ poem. But the paradox, as Kant also noted, is that, in invoking the notion of a “later” reason, he shows us that reason describes the first, the primary—indeed, the one and only—application of the mind through which we interpret the facts of the world and the objects of the poem. Thus, Stevens writes, repeating his claim with regards to reason,

We reason about things with later reason

And we make of what we see, what we see clearly

And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves. (“Notes” III, iv)

That we are now looking upon the place and the time as things “dependent on ourselves” indicates that we are not looking on these things insofar as they are determined by natural causes but insofar as they are the products of human beings. That the concept of reason through which we justify what we make of our time in the world enters the scene later or belatedly puts us on notice, moreover, that this conception of reason does not have its origin in nature but in what adds to it—the supplement of nature—as the metaphorical relation that estranges us from the natural and contradictory relations of space and time. The first idea, the first things, the origin of poetry can only be known later through its critical reception by ourselves as we undertake to justify the poetic images—to “reason about things”—that reflect that for which we are responsible in the world as our own creation.

I concentrate here on Stevens’ conception of reason in the “Notes,” which I have aligned with the paradox involved in Kant’s critique of purely practical reason, in order to remind us that reason does not signify the pure principles of logic but expresses the act of the mind, the mind in action, in embodying the principle of justice. What we discover, then, in light of the conception of reason that Stevens introduces in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” is that Stevens’ presentation of the mind in “Solitaire Under the Oaks” is self-contradictory, just as we found in “A Clear Day and No Memories” that Stevens exposes the existence of his poem as self-contradictory. Together what these poems show us, when analyzed from a point of view that embodies the estranged relation that comprises poetic reasoning (which we find in the “Notes”), is that we cannot be rid of either the mind or being without exposing ourselves to self-contradiction. Still, I consider both of these poems to be representative of the strength of

Stevens' poetry insofar as they demonstrate, therefore, the relationship between the mind (thought) and existence.⁵

Indeed, the self-contradiction of the mind and the self-contradiction of being are put on vivid display in the poem that Stevens' editors unanimously decide, following the lead of Holly Stevens, to list as the very last poem in his *oeuvre*.⁶ "Of Mere Being" (written, scholars believe, in the early months of 1955) contains twelve short lines:

The palm at the end of the mind

Beyond the last thought, rises

In the bronze décor,

A gold-feathered bird

Sings in the palm, without human meaning,

Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason

That makes us happy or unhappy.

The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.

The wind moves slowly in the branches.

The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

The speaker indicates, in the second stanza, that "mere being"—which is imagined as a "palm" on the "edge of space" and then as a gilded bird sitting in that palm—is without human meaning and without human feeling. The subjects of "mere being" are not, therefore, the historical and ontological facts of the world—not the reasons that we are happy or not. The poet's subject is

also, evidently, not human reason. Rather, the “mere being” that stands on the “edge of space”—a contradictory space outside all space—represents the thought of that which is beyond anything that we can think. But how, then, can our thought of mere being be anything other than false, if mere being is precisely that which we cannot think about? How, in turn, can our happiness—human meaning and feeling—be anything but a lie, a grand illusion, if there exists a modicum of being (a reality) of which we cannot know or think?

The self-contradiction in this late poem is made so explicit by the fact (even if it is not made self-consciously by the poet) that “this”—mere being: whatever this is—is divorced from meaningful human thought and feeling (existence). For the speaker points out, as we saw, that “mere being” is not to be aligned with the reason for human happiness (or unhappiness). (Is “mere being” not also, therefore, an irrational concept?) What the speaker of the poem fails to point out, however, is that he must exist in order to think (contradictorily) about that which surpasses all thought and that he must think in order to compose (contradictorily) a poem about “mere being.” The mind shows the concept of “mere being” to be self-contradictory and being (existence) shows the concept of mind (beyond all thought) to be self-contradictory. There is no mind outside being and no being outside mind: is and as are (dialectically) one. The self-contradiction of mind and being exposes the necessary relationship between knowing and being.⁷ It is as if Stevens wanted to remind us—even at this late stage in the game—that metaphor (or poetry, more generally) brings into the world the possibility of self-contradiction, the danger of reducing the being and the mind which constitute the self—who we are as people—to that which is not human (or in-human). But his poem “Of Mere Being” thereby only serves to deepen our sense of what cannot be contradicted (denied or refuted) as central to the canon that comprises

Stevens' poetic works: what he announces as the right to know established as the right to be in "The Sail of Ulysses," as we shall now see.

"The Sail of Ulysses" begins with a prologue:

*Under the shape of his sail, Ulysses,
Symbol of the seeker, crossing by night
The giant sea, read his own mind.
He said: "As I know, I am and have
The right to be."*

Following the prologue, Ulysses (as the speaker of the poem) proceeds to relate the content of his soliloquy, which is broken up into eight sections of varying lengths. (The poem also contains notes in its margins, which appear to serve as titles for each section.) The poem then ends, as we shall see, with a coda. But the thesis or axiom—indeed, the conclusion and resolution—of the poem is articulated within the prologue: "As I know, I am and have / The right to be" (my emphasis). For what Stevens indicates—and what we thereby discover as readers—is that the act of reading one's own mind involves us in establishing a commitment to existence that is expressed in the statement "I am." Still, what I am cannot be known—exposed—without revealing my existence *as*—constituted by my interpretive relationship with the totality of life that is not my own. That is, as Stevens repeatedly determines throughout "The Sail of Ulysses" (as we shall see), self-reflection involves the other—*as* the revelation of what I know (think) of myself.

The merger of existence and poetic creation—of "is" and "as"—is nothing new in Stevens' poetry (as we have seen). But the explicit way in which he now highlights knowledge (thinking) as the subject of poetic existence in "The Sail of Ulysses" recalls anew the

relationship between modern poetry and the “first philosophy” of Descartes that we saw Stevens underscore (in connection with the myth of Adam and Eve) in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”⁸ What Stevens adds, however, in augmenting and so amplifying the thesis of Descartes is exactly what Kant adds to the history of thinking by showing that reason is fundamentally practice. For, in “The Sail of Ulysses,” Stevens makes the concept of right (no less than Kant) central to thinking and existence: “As I know, I am and have / The *right* to be” (my emphasis). He invokes, in other words, the rights and freedoms that constitute the basis upon which we live and think. For how, Ulysses asks, “shall the mind,” which he announces as the “Master of the world and of himself,” “be less than free / Since only to know is to be free?” (“The Sail,” VI).

Nevertheless, Stevens does not directly align the theme of his poem with the philosophy of Descartes (or with his mythical forbears Adam and Eve). Rather, he aligns—symbolically, at first—the speaker of the poem, the one who seeks to articulate the act of the mind, with the journey of Ulysses (that Latin name for Odysseus). He calls to mind, therefore, a comparison between Homer’s Odysseus and the symbolic seeker and speaker of his poem. But what he thereby shows us is that there is no comparison between modern poetry, in embodying the relationship between knowledge and being (through the principle of right), and ancient Greek myth.

From the very beginning of his poem, Stevens subtly demands that we make an historic distinction between two ages of poetry: the ancient and the modern. For, as we know from our analysis of Homeric myth in Chapter 5, precisely what Odysseus does not and cannot seek is the content of his own mind. What Homer does not and cannot write about—and what readers of his epic cannot hope to read about—is the content of his (or their) own mind. Because the mind and being are one in ancient Greek thought—according to the law of contradiction and not according

to the dialectical law of inherent opposites—the mind cannot be thought by human beings to exist and being cannot exist as the content of human thinking or consciousness. The contemplation of the revolving heavens does not bring the wise and resourceful Odysseus back to the meditation upon his own existence (as a thinking thing). He does not think about his own existence in contemplating the soul or the mind. Rather, he considers fate, which is unknowable in itself and which proves ineluctably that he does not know anything about what is and that he cannot be something of which he has any (non-contradictory) knowledge. That is, what Homer (as well as Plato and Socrates) shows is that the mind—according to the logic of what Hegel calls finite consciousness—cannot be contained in any text. For, as we have seen, it is the fate of the mind to wipe out its own content in articulating (whether writing or reading) the fatal reversals of which there is no known beginning or end.

The reason that I concentrate here, before returning to Stevens' poem, on the contradiction involved in ancient Greek thought is so that we do not fail to recall that the description of ancient Greek myth as contradictory is meaningful only for us modern readers (and poets) who are not contradictory. In other words, the ancient Greek figures do not know themselves *as* contradictory: they are not contradictory in themselves. For they do not see—indeed, they have no basis for seeing—that they must exist in order to think about that being that cannot be thought and that they must think in order to exist as the consequence of that which they themselves cannot be. They do not see, in other words, that the thought of anything demonstrates that they must both think and exist. They do not see, furthermore, that their texts cannot be read (according to the standards of modern poetry). Rather, it is we modern poets and readers who recognize their contradiction on the basis of the thesis that: “As I know, I am.” It is important, then, to see that Stevens demands that his readers become responsible for the historic

distinction between ancient and modern poetry from the outset of his poem—a distinction that he makes central to the presentation of his poem’s main theme—in order to comprehend the world-historical implications, as Hegel might say, of the poem’s coda in the end.

Before, however, we encounter the coda, we read Ulysses’ soliloquy, which he begins by establishing his central claim:

“If knowledge and the thing known are one
So that to know a man is to be
That man, to know a place to be
That place, and it seems to come to that;
And if to know one man is to know all
And if one’s sense of a single spot
Is what one knows of the universe,
Then knowledge is the only life,
The only sun of the only day,
The only access to true ease,
The deep comfort of the world and fate.

In observing that “knowledge and the thing known are one,” the speaker of the poem compels us to work out a notion of one that embraces both thought and existence. Knowledge and the thing known are not logically one. Nor is there anything of which we know empirically that is one with everything else. The one-ness of life—the image of one-ness uniting both knowledge and things, the intelligible and the sensible—can only be known, rather, as the embodiment of human singularity or solidarity (i.e., as ethics).

There is no leap, therefore, from the self to another or from one “man” to all human beings in this opening section. Rather, what Stevens is demanding from his readers is that we work out for ourselves an understanding of one man—of the self—that can encompass all men and women. He is reminding us, in other words, that any adequate conception of the self is one that can accommodate for the common humanity of all. Just as there is no beginning with the self—as constituted by the relation between knowledge and being—without beginning with the other—as a self—so there is also no beginning with a “sense” of any particular place or time that does not invoke categories of space and time that can account for all places and all times universally. That is, Stevens requires that we see that, following from the one-ness of knowledge and being, there is no life to be known outside of what we know of life, whether natural (spatio-temporal) or human (personal-social). He compels us once again to acknowledge that there is no thing-in-itself beyond the appearances of life. Rather, the appearances of life, the “only life” we know, become the embodiment of knowledge in and through the poetry that serves as the “res itself and not about it” (“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” XII).

Thus, it is important to see that the concept of “one”—the “only life” of the “only sun” of the “only day”—which Stevens invokes in section I, cannot be imaged in terms of place (space) or time. In other words, the knowledge of life cannot be completed or finished naturally in any place and time. Rather, the “true ease” and “deep comfort” of every time (day) and place under the sun can be accessed solely on the basis of the proper knowledge of ourselves. We can find our place in the world—indeed, our destiny or “fate”—solely on the grounds of a notion of the self that, in embracing the relationship between knowledge and being, applies to one and all. (We can reverse this formulation, of course, to indicate that the notion of the self that accounts for one and all can only be realized in and through the “true ease” and “deep comfort” that follows from

finding our place in the world, which does not mean that we do not experience feelings of anxiety or discomfort daily but that we can recognize these feelings as “true” and “deep” only on the grounds of, as embodying, the principle of right.)

It is precisely the relationship between one and all, between the singular (this place) and the universal (all places), that Stevens goes on to capture so astoundingly in section II:

There is a human loneliness;
A part of space and solitude,
In which knowledge cannot be denied,
In which nothing of knowledge fails
The luminous companion, the hand,
The fortifying arm, the profound
Response, the completely answering voice
That which is more than anything else
The right within us and about us,
Joined, the triumphant vigor felt,
The inner direction on which we depend,
That which keeps us the little that we are,
The aid of greatness to be and the force. (II)

That Stevens introduces a concept of loneliness, of which human knowledge is an undeniable and infallible “part,” does not signal here his retreat into solipsism. For, recalling the first section of the poem, we have seen that knowledge is one with the “thing known.” Rather, Stevens indicates that to begin with the solitude of the self, as knowing and being, is to be confronted, from the very beginning, with the “luminous companion,” the “fortifying arm,” and the

“profound response” to existence. The solitary category of human singularity is the very concept that provides us with access to the solidarity of life, just as the concept of human solidarity involves a notion of the singularity—Kant would say the dignity or absolute worth—of each and every one of us. The concept of knowledge doubles as both our own and not our own (according to what is natural about us).

As Stevens observes upon receiving the National Book Award for Poetry in 1951, there is “a vast world of other people from which he,” the modern poet, the seeker in modernity, “derives himself and through himself his poetry.... His poetry is theirs and theirs is his” (835).⁹ The paradox with which Stevens confronts us in “The Sail of Ulysses,” and which he intones in his ceremonial address on the life of the poet, is that to think is to discover that the self cannot be known in itself. Rather, the self can be known—in itself—only in and through the supreme fiction, the principle of life, that comprises “the aid of greatness to be” and “the force” (to recall section II of “The Sail”). The self depends, in other words, on what is not itself. Still, this supreme fiction, this gigantic image of that “which is more than anything else,” can itself only be realized in the actual reality that constitutes our individual lives—the illuminating, fortifying, and profound relations that “keep us the little that we are”: the relations that are embodied in the shared act of reading one’s own mind as adopted by the poet (in Ulysses’ soliloquy) and the reader.

What an analysis of the figural paradoxes that emerge from Stevens’ coupling of solitude and dependence, along with loneliness and companionship, allows us to see, then, is that both knowledge and being, thought and existence, are at once “within us and about us” (II). In other words, thought and existence, as constituting the practice of singular human beings in relationship, are neither internal nor external in natural space and time. Stevens’ description of

the “right” that is found both “within us and about us” does not suggest a physical location but rather invokes images that signify—that are “about”—the personal and the social, the individual and the universal, aspects of human life. The joining of our “inner direction” with the “force” on which we “depend” from without describes the principle of “right” that shows us how each of us—every self—is simultaneously “within us and about us.” In turn, the principle of right that joins ourselves and others is demonstrated (determined) by Stevens upon the basis of the relationship between knowledge and being, which is embodied, in poetic terms, in metaphor and which is realized, in political terms, through the re-organization of the conditions of the state so that the state of human affairs testifies to the right to know and to be of each and every one of us. In other words, precisely what makes existence necessary—as the consequence, *ergo*, of thinking—is also what makes it good.

That the necessity of relating knowledge and being establishes and is established by the “luminous” and “fortifying” conception of right—which joins the individual and the universal aspects of existence in the concept of the self—is also what Stevens demonstrates in the fifth section of his poem. After introducing images of the “true creator” and the “thinker” who, shining as a metaphysician in the dark, is involved in “creating from nothingness” the poetic constructions and “public shapes” that form his poetry in section III, Ulysses breathes deeply, before noting that,

A longer, deeper breath sustains
The eloquence of right, since knowing
And being are one: the right to know
And the right to be are one. (V)

The words of poetry are not right because they are eloquent. They are eloquent because they are right in embodying the idea that “knowing / And being are one.” Thus, Stevens continues, “We come / To knowledge when we come to life.” For, we recall, knowledge “is the only life, / The only sun of the only day, / The only access” to true ease in the world and one’s fate (I). And yet we are then told that “always there is another life,”

A life beyond this present knowing,
A life lighter than this present splendor,
Brighter, perfected and distant away,
Not to be reached but to be known,
Not an attainment of the will
But something illogically received,
A divination, a letting down
From loftiness, misgivings dazzlingly
Resolved in dazzling discovery. (V)

Because knowledge and being are one, to “come to life,” to begin, involves a relation with others who both know (think) and exist. As the product of one’s relations with others, one’s life is not one but two (i.e., shared). There is, therefore, “always” another life because, as the product of the will of both ourselves and others, life becomes subject to the right to know and to be (of all of us). That is, in engaging existence according to the principle of right, we are confronted by the myriad of ways in which we fail to embody this principle in the present. Still, this image of the future, in which the we are reconciled with one another (and ourselves) on the grounds of the right to know and the right to be, is precisely what gives the present its splendor, as the time in which we recognize all that is truly right.

It is important to note, then, that, just as Ulysses prohibits us from opposing this life (in the present) to another life (in the future), he also deconstructs the opposition between (human) misgiving and (divine) resolution. Indeed, it is the divination of humanity through the knowledge of the right to be of each and every one of us—it is our resolution—that creates the very “misgivings” that are “dazzlingly / Resolved in dazzling discovery.” The resolution to these misgivings is received not on the basis of one’s own strength or power but according to the “will of wills,” the will, on the part of both ourselves and others, to desire only what we can will universally for all (“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” XXI).

Indeed, Ulysses does not suggest, in section V of his soliloquy, that we *not* will to discover this dazzling resolution. Rather, in indicating that what we will—the right to know and to be—is not in our power alone, he shows us how to resolve what is within our power with what is not in our power, exposing the relationship between freedom and grace (to put it in the terms that Kant used, as we saw, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*). Stevens prepares us for this discovery when Ulysses notes, in section IV, that the “future place” and time of “another life” represents “A freedom at last from the mystical.” That is, as both Kant and Stevens indicate, the concept of divinity—the grace of God—is revealed not in the loftiness of mysticism but in the mystery of human freedom (will) or practice. Thus, Ulysses, as he continues to reflect on the right to be that none of us establishes on our own and, nevertheless, that each of us is responsible for “illogically” receiving, notes:

There is no map of paradise.

The great Omnium descends on us

As a free race. We know it, one

By one, in the right of all. (V)

Paradise is not a place located at the beginning or the end of life in which all of one's natural appetites are eternally met. The concept of "another" or "future life" describes not the life of another (transcendent) place and time but the task to realize our freedom in all places and at all times as the revelation of the "great Omnium," that which is "more than anything else" (recalling section II), which we know "one by one, in the right of all." The all, the whole of being (human and divine), the relation between thought and existence or between the intelligible and the sensuous, is known from the practical point of view of right as the realization of the freedom of the human race.

In section V, Ulysses is advancing the principal theme of his self-meditation: the relation between knowledge and being, the truth and its images, which constitutes human practice (both ethical and poetic) and which reveals the divine grace that follows from knowing ourselves as both our own and not our own (at once individual and universal). Indeed, "Each man," he notes,

Is an approach to the vigilance
In which the litter of truths becomes
A whole, the day on which the last star
Has been counted, the genealogy
Of gods and men destroyed, the right
To know established as the right to be. (V)

It is characteristic of Stevens to mirror in poetic terms the ethical relations that he articulates in his strongest poems (in concert with his repeated practice of applying elevated language to lowly and humble forms). Hence, he aligns here the process by which the "litter" of truths becomes the "whole" with the descent of the "great Omnium" that we know "one by one, in the right of all." In ethical terms, Stevens puts us on notice that we can know what is truly unique about any one

of us solely by examining how one embodies the spirit of the right of all and that the right of all can be known only “one by one” in examining what is right for each one of us. This dialectic—between one and all—is further explored, in aesthetic terms, through the paradox in which the “litter” of poetic images becomes representative of the “whole” truth, the truth of the whole as the process through which our images become discarded as nothing—in themselves—in order to embody the truth of human relationship. Indeed, the image is related to the truth as aesthetics is related to ethics in “The Sail of Ulysses.” Neither can be conceived without (apart from) the other. Each, in relationship to the other, serves to show how each one is and is not and, therefore, is—in embodying the concept of relationship that bonds thought and existence.

In recreating, however, the metaphoric identity of aesthetics (the image) and ethics (the truth) in his poem, Stevens finds himself confronted by the truth of his own images. That is, Ulysses discovers that, in exposing the truth of himself, he has deconstructed the truth of his own image as a symbol of the seeker. Thus, in section V, Ulysses proceeds to observe that, at the time when the right to know is “established as the right to be,” “The ancient symbols will be nothing”:

We shall have gone behind the symbols
To that which they symbolized, away
From the rumors of the speech-full domes,
To the chatter that is then the true legend,
Like glitter ascended into fire. (V)

Stevens does not tell us directly—he does not name—*when* we “shall have gone behind” the ancient symbols. For, just as there is “always another life,” the time of right—in which everyday “chatter” bespeaks the “true legend” of our origins—is not reducible to any immediate time or place. The origin of the time of right can be known only in the transition to “another life.”

Stevens describes this transition as the double-move that involves both the descending of the (divine) truth upon us and the ascension of our (human) images unto the truth. Indeed, he embodies this twofold movement in his poetic practice by uniting colloquial language (“chatter” and “legend”) with metaphysical diction (divinity, truth, and ascension). Yet, in uniting these two movements, he shows us that we cannot begin with one—either with the divine (truth) or with the human (image)—without beginning with each one—both the divine and the human—as the true image of the other. The paradox is that the transition, then, from ancient symbol (form) to that which it symbolizes (meaning), does not begin with the natural form of these symbols. The truth of his images—as natural symbols—must be of the nature of their creator (at once divine and human).

But what we further discover, therefore, is that modern poetry cannot begin with natural or ancient Greek myth, in which the beginning and the end of the natural genealogy of gods and men—and so the center of the self—remain entirely unknown. For, as we have seen, the beginning and the end of nature are exposed as lies by ancient myth and, in turn, expose all myths to be lies, “rumours,” as Stevens puts it, of the “speech-full domes” that are ignorant of the truth of their images. The “ancient symbols will be nothing then,” when we become aware of the image’s truth, because, in identifying the truth with its immediate appearances, the ancient symbols show us that they cannot embody the truth—as it is known in itself. In other words, precisely what lies behind the ancient symbols is the conception of their own nothingness—which presupposes a concept of existence (of “something”) that is irreducible to its own immediacies. Stevens thus makes use of a wondrous paradox or self-conscious contradiction. For what he indicates is that the truth of the ancient symbols (images) can be known only from a point of view that is not ancient or mythological.

It is this paradox that Stevens (via Ulysses) also articulates in section IV as Ulysses contemplates the origin of his own historic journey of the crossing of the sea by night:

The unnamed creator of an unknown sphere,
Unknown as yet, unknowable,
Uncertain certainty, Apollo
Imagined among the indigenes
And Eden conceived on Morningside [Heights: a street in New Haven, Connecticut],
The center of the self, the self
Of the future, of future man
And future place, when these are known,
A freedom at last from the mystical,
The beginning of a final order,
The order of man's right to be
As he is, the discipline of his scope
Observed as an absolute, himself. (IV)

The "unnamed creator" and the "unknown sphere" describe the truth of the ancient symbols, "that which they symbolized," which cannot be known or named within the "speech-full domes" whose "rumours" expose themselves to be ignorant of the truth of the "center of the self." But the paradox, then, is that we cannot know that this sphere remains unknown to the ancient imagination of Odysseus except by beginning with the point of view of the "final order" in which the natural order of gods and men has been destroyed in the name of the order of "man's right to be" known as an "absolute, himself."

It is worth noting, for the purposes of this study, that the order of man's right to be known "As he is... an absolute, himself" is exactly what Kant describes as the systematization of the union of rational beings in the kingdom (of democracy) in which all human beings are accorded the dignity of being treated as ends in themselves (persons) and not as means to an end (things), which is known in the Bible as the love of God and one's neighbor. It follows, then, that the point of view from which the truth of the ancient symbols in Stevens' poem can be known is not ancient or mythological but biblical in origin.

In the final section of his soliloquy, Ulysses introduces another ancient symbol. He asks, posing the question of the image's truth, "What is the shape of the sibyl?" He then proceeds to indicate, consistent with the paradoxical conclusion of section V, that the "shape" (image) of the sibyl (symbolizing the truth of the self) is "Not,"

For a change, the englistered woman, seated
In colorings harmonious, dewed and dashed
By them: gorgeous symbol seated
On the seat of halidom, rainbowed,
Piercing the spirit by appearance,
A summing up of the loftiest of lives
And their directing sceptre, the crown
And final effulgence and delving show.

The sibyl of the self no longer takes on the shape of the prophetess of the Oracle at Delphi: the "englistered woman" whose speech in "halidom" ("holy-dome") echoes the rumours of the "speech-full domes" in section V. Rather,

It is the sibyl of the self,

The self as sibyl, whose diamond,
Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth
Is poverty, whose jewel found
At the exactest central of the earth
Is need.

In calling to mind the distinction between two ages of poetry—in replacing the *omphalos* found at “the exactest central of the earth” in ancient Greek mythology (rumored to be located at Delphi) with the self—Ulysses re-enacts, in section VIII, the paradox through which he sought to go “behind the symbols / To that which they symbolized” at the end of section V. He proceeds to expose the truth of the self—before which the ancient symbols are seen as nothing—by coupling the images of “wealth” and of the “jewel” of the earth with “poverty” and “need.” Ulysses then observes that for “this,” for the prize that comprises the jewel of existence, the sibyl of the self—that which bespeaks the truth of the self in modernity—is known in the figure of a “blind thing fumbling for its form,”

A form that is lame, a hand, a back,
A dream too poor, too destitute
To be remembered, the old shape
Worn and leaning to nothingness[.]

The formal “shape” of these poetic terms, in which Ulysses espouses poverty and wealth, mirrors the “shape” of the forms (figures) who—poor, destitute, and worn—embody the sibyl (indeed, the true prophet) of the self. As his soliloquy reaches its climax, Ulysses then invokes an image of a woman and of a child and notes that, “As these depend, so must they use.”

They measure the right to use. Need makes

The right to use. Need names on its breath

Categories of bleak necessity,

Which, just to name, is to create

A help, a right to help, a right

To know what helps and to attain

By right of knowing, another plane. (VIII)

It is important to recognize that the right to help and to know what helps does not arise according to any empirical measure. That is, while need can be assessed on the basis of objective categories, people in need cannot be recognized on empirical grounds. Rather, people in need can be recognized (and assisted) only on the moral grounds of the golden rule, the other “plane” on which we discover the democratic imperative to establish the right to know as the right to be. Thus, “just to name” the needs of oneself or others is to create another need, another category of necessity that envelopes the mind and being in relationship, which Stevens described as the liberation from the “mystical” earlier in the poem (IV). The response to need creates (embodies) the “will of necessity,” the will that dissolves the opposition between our wills by demanding that we each will for one another what we desire (will) for ourselves.¹⁰ When we see, then, that the need to help, the law of charity (the “necessitation” of duty, in Kant’s terms), does not serve the need but the person (who is in need), we also see how Stevens enacts the transition from need to right, from use to creation, and from measure to knowledge. For what we realize is that, just as there is no transition from ancient symbol to modern truth, so there is no transition from (objective) need to human right. Rather, it is the recognition of one’s equal human right to the freedom to know (to think) and to be that is creative of the response, the profound response and the completely answering voice, to need.

In exposing human need by appealing to our rights (as thinking persons), Ulysses' soliloquy is so satisfying, so artistically moving, because it demands that we acknowledge at once the poverty and the wealth of the human spirit. The opposition between these two competing terms—"poverty" and "wealth"—becomes comprehensible when we recognize that these contrasting terms inhere in one another (i.e., as metaphors). For only then can the image of poverty—consistent with the "litter" of truth—become representative of the majestic wealth of creative poetry by embodying the transfer of value or worth from the appearances to the image's truth. The concept of "poverty" that Stevens invokes becomes the true "wealth" of the self when we see that this poverty embodies what Kant calls the purity of a will (the purity of heart) that does not bow to any other incentive but is the author of its own laws (*Grounding* 425). The drama, therefore, that we experience as we read these lines is not found in the opposing terms of Stevens' poem as such but in the dissolving of their contradiction by shifting our point of view from a focus on the finite or sensuous aspects of these images to the way in which they embody the existence, from another (practical) point of view, of right.

By demanding, then, that we see, in concert with Kant, that it is we who give value to the appearances (on the basis of the principle of right) and not the appearances to us, Stevens exposes to us the need for aesthetic or metaphoric—at once social, political, and personal—change. For, as Ulysses observes, in bringing his soliloquy to a close,

The englistered woman is now seen
In an isolation, separate
From the human in humanity,
A part of the inhuman more, and yet
An inhuman of our features, known

And unknown, inhuman for a little while,
Inhuman for a little, lesser time.” (VIII)

It is important to recall that, as Stevens points out, the ancient sibyl seeks to pierce the spirit, to bespeak the truth of the self, through the appearances, with the result that she speaks out of both sides of her mouth in demonstrating human ignorance of immortal truth. The attempt to reduce the truth of the self to its immediate appearances is unimaginable, therefore, from the point of view of the ancient sibyl herself. For it is precisely, as the sibyl signals to her interpreters, one’s knowledge of the appearances that shows one to be ignorant of the truth. Thus, the paradox here is that the inhumanity that reduces the truth of the self to the “dewed and dashed” appearances that bejewel the ancient sibyl is found not among the ancients but upon “another plane” whereon the right to know and the right to be are one (won). The “inhuman” is a category of “our features.” For, from the time in which human beings gain their humanity, any immediate identification of the truth of the spirit with the appearances becomes synonymous with the partiality that is the mainstay of the pitfalls (e.g., the racism, classism, and sexism) of our modern era.

Thus, when we “attain, / By right of knowing, another plane,” we are also confronted with all of the ways in which we judge the truth of what it means to be human—the self—on the uneven grounds of what naturally appears before us: “now” is also the time of our backsliding into the pits of inhumanity (VIII). Still, that the time “now” is the time in which our inhumanity stays with us “for a little, lesser time” indicates that these are also the times of historical progress, the progress that we measure according to the humanity that we bring to being human. The reason that these final words of Ulysses’ soliloquy are so touching is that, in describing the time of human progress as the “little, lesser time” of our inhumanity, Stevens indicates that he is

fully aware that the desire for progress, the desire for “another life,” is not a wish for a paradise of worldly bliss or immediate satisfaction in which every need and all forms of inhumanity are wiped from the face of the earth. The desire for the end is not the desire to end progress. Rather, we find our end in our hope for change, in the human progress that we measure according to the rate at which our capacity to respond to need and inhumanity is accelerated. There is fear interwoven into what we envision as our hope for the future. But there is no less hope embraced in taking on and enduring what we fear as we envision the diminishing of the time of need and inhumanity.

What we see “now,” as Ulysses concludes, when we recognize that our progress is measured in terms of how adequately we respond to our own backsliding, is the enormous gulf, the intractable separation, between our time and that of the ancient sibyl. Indeed, it is important to see that the ancient symbols that punctuate Stevens’ poem become nothing in the end—indeed, that they have been nothing from the beginning. It is even more crucial to recognize that the human rights that Stevens articulates in his poem and that he embodies in the figures and through the images that comprise his poetic meditation express not ancient virtues but biblical values.

This discovery is shocking both for those who are partial to the ancient symbols of ancient Greek poetry and for those who are partial to biblical images (in short, the Bible). For, to repeat, Stevens indicates that the truth of the ancient symbols can be known only from a point of view other than that of the ancients, a point of view from which and for which the ancient symbols are seen as “nothing.” He shows us, in other words, that his own use of ancient symbols has nothing at all to do with the ancient figures themselves. But what one also learns, in seeing that Stevens’ figures (Ulysses and the sibyl) embody the seeking—as finding—and the seeing—

as the knowledge of the right to be human—that are demonstrated by the authors and figures of the Bible, is that the Bible, known as the absolute truth, does not foreclose the possibility of any other set of appearances becoming the expressions of the truth. That is, to know the truth absolutely in a particular set of terms—in words or images—infinately opens up the potential for any other set of terms to embody the truth. While not just any words express the truth, the truth can be expressed in any terms (images) that embody the dialectic of enduring, visionary love (including the images of ancient Greek mythology). In other words, any use of the wondrous facility of natural language—including nonverbal forms of communication—can become the true expressions of the Bible.

While the truth of the Bible, as we know it today, can be revealed only in the particular terms in which it is introduced to us, both individually and collectively—whether through the historic tradition of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam (or any combination of them with their embodiment in the secular world)—it is important not to reduce the Bible to its finite versions. To reduce the Bible to its immediate appearances would be to make biblical truth—the message of love—relative to its immediate terms, whereby the truth of the text becomes both arbitrary and dogmatic. But the Bible is true—it can be shown, as we have seen, to embody the truth in its images and stories (both mythical and historic)—precisely because its authors and figures claim that the truth that constitutes who we are as people is not relative to any set of conditions or appearances but is absolute. The Bible is the revelation of the truth of the ancient symbols in and from the beginning, albeit unbeknownst to the ancient figures themselves.

Consistent with the authors of the Bible, then, Stevens opens up for us, in “The Sail of Ulysses,” an image of the future by demanding that we remain committed to the historic paradox of beginning with nothing ancient in the past. In other words, the sail or journey of Ulysses

embodies what I called, in Chapter 1, the paradox of history and what is known, in the biblical tradition, as the spreading of the word. The spreading of the word does not involve the regurgitation of memorized Bible verses. Rather, the spreading of the word describes, in truth, the transcribing of all words—including the lexicon, largely from the Greek, of philosophy and poetry—into the testaments of human freedom. Stevens illustrates for us, in articulating the sail of Ulysses, a portrait of the future, as the progressive transfiguration of all terms and natural images into the representations of the truth of thought and existence, by demanding that we never lose sight of the history, at once religious and secular, that is constituted by the fundamental difference between ancient and modern poetic practice.¹¹

The one, final figurative paradox to consider is that with which Stevens brings his treatment of the sail of Ulysses to a close. He observes in the coda that

*The great sail of Ulysses seemed,
In the breathings of this soliloquy,
Alive with an enigma's fluttering...
As if another sail went on
Straight forwardly through another night
And clumped stars dangled all the way.*

The enigma of the coda is revealed as a straightforward commentary on the poem's content when we recall the relationship between Ulysses' speech and the profound response of its luminous companion that invokes and expresses the relation between the poet and the reader. For the images of the poem—along with its dramatic contrasts—remain incomprehensible enigmas from the point of view of the theoretical categories of bleak (objective or natural) necessity. These images can be straightforwardly comprehended, however, from the point of view of practical

reason as the embodiment of the relation between knowledge and being that is known “one / By one” in and through the right of all (V). That is, these images cannot will the attainment of their own creative reception. Rather, as they depend on the capacity of their reader to find in them the revelation of her own mind, so must they use the natural images of life to attain another plane of humanity such that they are able to provide creative assistance to the reader in her daily practice. The other sail of another life of another day that is invoked in the coda is revealed, consequently, as the “only life” of the “only day:” the journey of the reader who carries on, now, in the full knowledge of the right to know and the right to be that exposes the need to use, to change, to create conditions that embody the dialectical relations that comprise the self. The end of the poem is both humbling and emboldening. For we find ourselves entrusted with the task of going forward under the auspices of the “great sail” of Ulysses by transforming all of the appearances—the entire depth and breadth of the sea of life—into the expressions of the human right to know and to be.

Thus, what Stevens shows us in “The Sail of Ulysses” is that knowledge and being are—dialectically or metaphorically—one because both knowledge and being are—dialectically or metaphorically—other. That is, the speaker shows us that he can begin with the knowledge and being of himself because he rightly sees that he cannot know or be himself outside of the knowledge of the “luminous companion” of modern poetry (II). To know one is to know all. To depend on one another is to recognize the power and the force of our freedom to provide the “aid of greatness” in the humble recognition of “the little that we are” (II). To try to know our being or to be in our knowledge—outside of the knowledge and being of others—is to become mired in self-contradiction, the contradiction involved in seeking a clear day without memory (the

evasions of mere being) or in solitary absorption among pure principles (the oblivion of the mind).

Throughout his poems, Stevens sets out the limit for the knowledge and being of poetic meditation. But he also sets the limit, therefore, for thinking through the history of poetic composition. For, as the speaker of the poem, Ulysses, finds—in reflecting upon himself (his own image)—the right to know and the right to be arise from nothing ancient. In concert with his subtle, but repeated, distinction between modern poetry (which bears the markings of the image’s truth) and natural mythology (which naturally reflects its natural region), Stevens shows us, in “The Sail of Ulysses,” that there is no comparison between his figure and the hero of Homer’s epic (Odysseus). For, in demanding that we see that to read his text involves reading one’s own mind—as the metaphoric content of his poem—Stevens’ poem shows us that there is no comparison between the way in which he makes comparisons on the basis of the law (at once ethical and aesthetic) of inherent opposites and the way in which Homer uses comparisons (with nature: simile) in his narrative.

In ontological terms, what Stevens reveals to us is that his images, in embracing the metaphor of truth and the truth of metaphor (i.e., dialectic), can only be thought as existing and can only exist as thought. Thus, consistent with the self-reflexive commentary on the interpretation of his own poems that Stevens incorporates into his strongest poetry, in “The Sail of Ulysses” he demands we learn to see, to find, to read ourselves in and through the other and to see, to find, to read (interpret) the other as ourselves. He at once mirrors and demands this hermeneutical embrace through the expression of two emotions, two types (or tones) of discourse, and two converse figures becoming one. The reason, then, that his images are so stirring—moving the sail of history forward as “always” in the presence of another life of

another day—is that they enact the creation of the world anew out of nothingness by embodying the act of treating others as one would want to be treated by them (i.e., the golden rule—the first and last principle—of the Bible).

Consequently, we discover, as we trace the poetic journey of Ulysses and so engage in a dialogue with the text that involves reading one’s own mind, that the aesthetic structures that Stevens puts on display in his poem cannot be understood outside of the ethical values—the principle of right—that the speaker articulates. Yet, in turn, we also find that the ethical structures—the creative identities of self and other, the singular and the universal, human freedom and divine grace—that the speaker puts into play cannot be understood except by attending to the aesthetic mergers, the images and figural paradoxes (in addition to the paradoxical figures), that Stevens utilizes in his poem. In short, we cannot comprehend the imaginative relationships with which Stevens operates in his poetry until we see how these relationships bear witness to the practice, at once ethical and aesthetic, of establishing the right to know as the right to be that constitutes the history of modern poetry.

Thus, just as we saw that the philosophy (metaphysics) of Kant was at once ethical and aesthetic (metaphoric), so we have now seen that the modern poetry of Stevens, in utilizing the metaphysics of metaphor, demands that we take on anew the challenge of exposing the art of ethics and—*as*—the ethics of art. In my concluding chapter, in reviewing the metaphysics of the philosophy of Kant and of the poetry of Stevens, I shall show how locating ourselves between Kant and Stevens, in a study of ethics and art, rewards us with the resources for redeeming the errors that commonly impair our understanding of ethics and aesthetics.

¹ See section VII of “Esthétique du Mal” for an example of Stevens’ use of the image of the “soldier” of time. See also “The Snow Man” for an example of a man whose mind is a part of the weather.

² It should be noted that Stevens' use of "pure" in "Solitaire Under the Oaks" is altogether different from Kant's use of this same term in his critique of "pure" reason, which signals the absence of any admixture with empirical content in the use of theoretical or practical reason. Indeed, one of the reasons that Stevens' poems are so difficult is his complex use of terms. First, Stevens often employs terms that are regularly used affirmatively (e.g., "pure") to denote concepts of which he is critical. Second, he aligns terms that we normally use negatively with positions that he supports (e.g., see his use of "shrinking" in both "The Motive for Metaphor" and "An Ordinary Evening" [XXVI]). Third, he not only uses different (even opposing) terms to describe one and the same position (e.g., "faith" and "reason") but he also uses the same term (e.g., "romance") at different times in completely different ways (i.e., as a marker of opposite concepts).

³ See *Selections from the Thoughts* #209.

⁴ Stevens writes,

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.

They differ from reason's click-clack, its applied
Enflashings.

He goes on to align the application of reason with the "origin of the major man" and the swaddling of Jesus as a babe in the manger, the "hot" of whom is "purest in the heart" (I, ix).

⁵ I measure the strength of Stevens' poetry, therefore, according to the resistance with which it confronts its readers (consistent with Harold Bloom). But I also want to be sure to note that I do not measure this resistance merely according to the complexity of diction that we find in Stevens' poems. That is, while reading a poem involves working out its complex use of diction, the strength of a poem is due to the intensity of its challenge to the norms and customs—the familiar modes of thinking and the conventions of reading—that are accepted by its readers. A "weak" poem is one that does not resist its readers by failing to note the contradictions involved in conventionally opposing the mind and reality or the truth and its images. Stevens is a "strong" poet, then, because, at his best, he demands that we rethink—and so renew our understanding of—what it means to read a poem as the act of the mind.

⁶ Holly Stevens compiled a selection of poems by her father (both published and unpublished) entitled "The Palm at the End of the Mind" after his death in 1955.

⁷ As Bart Eekhout puts it in *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, in surveying the paradoxes that Stevens employs, "we should not forget this element of tactical resistance. It was above all by resisting the limitations of limits" that Stevens at the same time "established them—by problematizing identities, if you like, in the very process of defining them" (154). Thus, Eekhout thoughtfully points out that, because of Stevens' concern with establishing these limits (i.e., with metaphysics), his poems are able to support the diversity of critical approaches that scholars bring to them, which Eekhout celebrates as a sign of the strength of Stevens' poetry. But, because of Eekhout's bent, then, on showcasing the diversity of readings that Stevens' poems support, he oddly avoids establishing the limits for reading Stevens. That is, he does not see that, for example, "The Snow Man" does not support any reading that is consistent with the philosophy of Schopenhauer or that the concept of the "first idea" and "res itself" in Stevens' poems bears no relation to the concept of the thing-in-itself that is advanced in the uncritical idealism that Kant associates with the Leibniz-Wolffe philosophy. Thus, he does not consistently

demonstrate that the limits of writing and reading poetry do not describe the “limits of language” or the limits of the “finite human condition” but, rather, are set out by the critical framework established by the relationship between knowledge and being that Stevens captures through his poetic use of metaphor and paradox (264).

⁸ The complete title of Descartes’ *Meditations* is *Meditations on First Philosophy in which the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Soul and the Body are Demonstrated*.

⁹ These words echo the statement that Stevens includes as an epigraph to his essay “The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet”: “I am the truth but the truth of the imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours” (685).

¹⁰ “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” XXI.

¹¹ In other words, the distinction between the Bible and ancient Greek thought cuts across the terms of that distinction. Indeed, it is fitting that the very terms that I make central to my study of the relationship between the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens—ethics and aesthetics—have their etymological roots in the natural scripts of the ancient Greeks. Still, as I have shown, the ethics and aesthetics of the ancient Greeks, whether in their philosophy or poetry, bear no relation to the ethical nature of aesthetics or the aesthetic (creative) nature of ethics borne in modern texts. Thus, it remains ever so important to articulate, in historical terms, the difference—at once ethical and aesthetic—between ancient texts, on the one hand, and modern or biblical texts, on the other. For it is only in articulating this difference that all ancient terms—including ethics and aesthetics—can be revealed (celebrated) as testaments to the thought and existence—the right to know and the right to be—of all peoples in modernity.

PART 4

Conclusion

Chapter 8

The Art of Ethics and the Ethics of Art

In my concluding chapter I want to summarize the themes and the structural movements of my argument before concluding with a look—once again and finally—at the dynamic relationship between ethics and art involved in Kant’s philosophy and Stevens’ poetry. Indeed, I chose Kant and Stevens not only because of their commitment to the ontology (metaphysics) that shapes modern thought—an ontology that is, as we have seen, biblical in origin. But I also chose them as the betrothed subjects of my study for the very ways in which each of them has been misunderstood. While Kant has often been written off—by philosophers and aestheticians alike—as a rationalist, Stevens has been widely regarded—in a variety of ways by both his supporters and his detractors—as an aesthete. Bringing together Kant and Stevens in this study has allowed me to show, if I have been successful, that neither of these views can account for the fullness or the integrity of either Kant’s critical philosophy or Stevens’ strongest poetry. In examining the works of Kant and Stevens, I have argued, rather, that we can truly comprehend both the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens only if we see that, just as Kant’s ethical philosophy bears an aesthetic structure—one that testifies to the creative nature of human existence—so Stevens’ poetry has an ethical core—one that bears witness to the ethical nature of human practice.

My concern, therefore—above all—has been not only to show *that* philosophy and poetry are intimately related but also to develop an understanding of *how* we can comprehend the intricacies of that relationship. Thus, the form of my study has taken shape around a number of conceptual pairings: including metaphysics (the thing-in-itself) and metaphor, the good and the beautiful, the truth and the image, the spirit (the concept) and the flesh (the content), faith and

reason, ontology and history, and the Bible and modern thought. My argument has unfolded on the basis of six interrelated theses:

1. I have undertaken to show that, just as the thing-in-itself cannot be apprehended as a category of nature but can be comprehended only as a metaphor for the human condition, so a metaphor cannot be understood as a representation of natural phenomena but only as a presentation of what is categorically human.
2. In exposing the revolutionary basis upon which Kant launches his metaphysical philosophy—in which he demonstrates that human beings are ends in themselves whose worth shares no comparable measure with the price of things—not only have I argued that the ethics of freedom and dignity that Kant so ardently espouses bears a creative (metaphorical, artful) structure. But I have also argued that central to the metaphorical structure of aesthetics are the principles of freedom and enduring love (dignity) that are embodied in Stevens' most stirring poetry.
3. I have undertaken to show, therefore, that both modern philosophy and modern poetry—as represented by the works of Kant and Stevens—are profoundly constituted by the relationship between ethics and art.
4. Thus, I have further argued that modern philosophy and modern poetry—as constituted by the relationship between ethics and aesthetics—are biblical in origin, both historically and ontologically.
5. Therefore, central to my examination of the inextricable link between ethics and art in the philosophy of Kant and in the poetry of Stevens has been the fundamental distinction, at once historical and ontological, between modern thought and ancient Greek texts.

6. Finally, it has been important for me continually to point out that central to developing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between ethics and art in modern philosophy and poetry is learning how to articulate the difference between ancient Greek philosophy and myth, on the one hand, and biblical concepts and images, on the other.

It goes without saying that developing a proper conception of any one of the above theses involves working out its relationship to each of them. Thus, each of these theses has been integral to my individual chapters on Kant and Stevens as well as to my overall argument that, just as ethical actions must be creative in order for them to be truly ethical, so must artistic creations engage our most fundamental ethical values in order for them to be truly creative.

The chiasmus, then, within the title of my study, *The Art of Ethics and the Ethics of Art*, which also serves as the title for this chapter, embodies the very structure of my argument. Neither ethics nor art can be known outside of the other; the truth of the one can be known only in and through the other. Consequently, central to my examination of the works of Kant and Stevens has been an analysis of the concept of relationship that underpins both ethics and aesthetics. It is precisely the transcendental concept of relationship that structures both the philosophy of Kant (metaphysics) and the poetry of Stevens (metaphor) to which I shall turn my attention, therefore, in this chapter in order to summarize my argument for the necessary relationship between ethics and art (as I bring my dissertation to a close).

Indeed, Kant articulates the paradox central to the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the concluding section of the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. In determining that there can be no possible explanation for the freedom of the will, Kant indicates that it is likewise impossible to discover or to explain the “interest which man takes in moral laws. Nevertheless,” he continues, “he does indeed take such an interest, the basis of which in us

is called moral feeling” (460). Kant never expels the language of feeling, happiness, or emotion—the affects—from his presentation of human nature and being. Rather, his sole and unrelenting concern is to place our feelings upon a firm “ground” or foundation, the metaphysical “grounding” of the maxims—the shoulds, musts, and ought tos—that inform our actions. That is, his concern is to raise and to resolve the question regarding how it is that we can and must validate (legitimize) our feelings. For, as Kant sees with such perspicacity in his critical philosophy (and as he sheepishly admits in his aesthetic theory), the attempts on the part of his predecessors to base their concept of morality either upon the utility of the objects that we experience or on the feelings that we experience in regards to those objects result in their utter inability to produce any consistent or coherent moral law governing our action. As Kant diligently points out, because our human experience—what serves to please or to displease us empirically—is dependent on the sensible conditions that are not consistent across time and space, founding our moral principles upon our experience—or the results, incentives, and intentions that are entailed therein—can only give rise to vague and indeterminate ideals that can be binding on no one. Moreover, Kant is sensitive to the knowledge that basing one’s actions (will) upon inclinations derived from our immediate sensations results in an utter disinterest in one’s life. That is, in serving the principle of happiness, whose indeterminate ideal of bliss (imagined according to a simile with nature) cannot be located in life, we find ourselves on the desperate road of nihilism in which life—and the feeling that we experience in life—has no stake and cannot hold our interest.

In other words, Kant discovers that he can abide by his revolutionary claim that reason is fundamentally a practice undertaken by human beings only if he maintains that reason takes its cue from *a priori* principles. Human reason—thinking—cannot be derived from anything prior

to it in nature. Yet, therefore, the *a priori* grounds of reason do not occupy any place (space) or time that persists prior to our natural experiences. We cannot explain the reasons for our actions—our will—on the basis of experience. Rather, we both explain—naturally—and justify—practically—the whole of human experience on the basis of reason, i.e., thinking. Indeed, when Kant states, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that he has adopted the altered method of thinking of the natural scientists such that he shall now show that we can know of the world only what we ourselves have put into it, he at once articulates his revolution in metaphysics and anticipates his revolutionary work in morals. In short, the appearances cannot account for thinking; rather, it is reason—the human mind—that explains and justifies the appearances of the human experience.

Thus, when Kant undertakes to examine the basis for our interests in the *Grounding*, he finds that he can do so only by embracing the paradox that it is precisely because our interests cannot be explained on any empirical grounds that we can take a moral or practical interest—at once rational and ardent—in all of life. Although it is “quite impossible to discern,” Kant notes, “how a mere thought which itself contains nothing sensuous can produce a sensation of pleasure or displeasure,” still, he concludes:

This much is certain: the moral law is valid for us not because it interests us (for this is heteronomy and the dependence of practical reason on sensibility, viz. on an underlying feeling whereby reason could never be morally legislative); but, rather, the moral law interests us because it is valid for us as men, since it has sprung from our will as intelligence and hence from our proper self. But what belongs to mere appearance is necessarily subordinated by reason to the nature of the thing in itself. (460-61)

In formulating the paradox of human interest, Kant not only captures his revolutionary insight in metaphysics and morals, but he also articulates the relation between ethics and art in modernity. We must not seek to explain our interests by appealing to the feeling of pleasure or to the objects that provide it; rather, we must justify (validate, legitimize) our interests by demonstrating how the whole range of our feelings bespeaks our commitment to the moral law or freedom. The art of ethics—the good: love—involves feelings. But it cannot be validated on the basis of those feelings. Rather, love must be judged from the point of view that validates the fellow—and, indeed, the conflicting—feelings of each person involved, including the horror and the sorrow that we feel when the moral law of human freedom is transgressed.

In other words, Kant points out that the will can have no interest for us outside of its practical implications in life. But life can have no interest except as the product, and so the responsibility, of our will. Kant thus voices the paradox that is central to becoming, as he puts it, one's "proper self." The self is not known—it does not exist properly or otherwise—outside of its appearances. But none of these appearances—in themselves—can provide us with an account of one's proper self. Rather, all of these appearances can be known as the expressions of my self—of who I am as a person—only from the point of view that charges us with the task of assuming (appropriating) the exigencies of life on the basis of the moral law. All of life's experiences and their accompanying feelings—the travail and the elation of birth, the horror and the consummation of death, not to mention the labour and the joy of writing a dissertation—become the eternal subjects of our interest in life when we evaluate existence from the point of view of the moral law or freedom, the dignity of all human beings.

Kant adds but a single sentence as his commentary on the paradox that follows from acknowledging the validity of the moral law, through which he indicates what it is that properly

interests the self. “But,” he writes, “what belongs to mere appearance is necessarily subordinated by reason to the nature of the thing in itself” (cited above). Kant does not lose his focus here on the interest of life. Rather, he suggests that how we think about the thing-in-itself exposes how we conceive of the proper self, of what is proper to ourselves as human beings. He is setting out once again, with subtle precision, the limits of human knowledge and judgment. We cannot derive knowledge of the thing-in-itself—of who we are in ourselves—from the appearances, which never yield any knowledge of what properly belongs to the self: will, freedom, duty, obligation, intelligence, action, or reason. Rather, the “intelligible world,” with which Kant aligns the self, “signifies only a something that remains over when I have excluded from the determining grounds of my will everything that belongs to the world of sense” (462). “By doing so,” Kant continues, “I set bounds to this field and show that it does not contain absolutely everything within itself.” Here, he concludes, we find ourselves before “the extreme limit of all moral inquiry.” Yet, to determine this limit, we then learn, is of “great importance for the following considerations”:

On the one hand, reason should not, to the detriment of morals, search around in the world of sense for the supreme motive and for some interest that is conceivable but is nonetheless empirical. On the other hand, reason should not flap its wings impotently, without leaving the spot, in a space that for it is empty, namely, the space of transcendent concepts that is called the intelligible world, and thereby lose itself among mere phantoms of the brain. (462)

Kant’s concluding comments here redound so heavily upon those commentators who reduce Kant’s moral philosophy either to idealism, through the lens of the rationalists, or to naturalism, through the lens of the empiricists. To limit ourselves to—to undertake to explain nothing but—

what can be known in the appearances exposes the very paradox of human existence on which Kant's philosophy rests, confounding rationalists and empiricists alike. Indeed, as Hegel reminds us, it is precisely because Kant—in aligning his philosophical programme with the metaphysical and moral teaching of the Bible—eschews the effort of idealists and naturalists to make the possession of happiness (*eudemonia*: to be possessed by a “good demon”) the principle of human life that he revolutionizes practical or moral philosophy.¹

It is particularly important, then, to recap the arguments of the rationalists and the empiricists, both of whom reduce the paradox of human nature (the embodiment of the spirit or the will in the flesh) to a partial (one-sided) account of existence in an effort to know things as they are in themselves, as Kant and Stevens have pointed out.² The argument of the idealists, notwithstanding its infinite variety, goes as follows: Because who I am as a person—my proper self—is “more” than the sum of my natural parts, because I am conscious of my intelligence, there must be an “intelligible world” of whatever form occupying a place and time to which I can gain access as an intelligent being. But note, here, the leap in argumentation. The idealist begins by claiming that things in themselves—the intelligible world—is not physical. Yet he or she ends by applying physical attributes—the categories of place (space) and time—onto the intelligible world, thus giving rise to the “transcendent concepts” that typify this view and that Kant wryly mocks as “phantoms of the brain.”

As we know in light of Kant's analysis of the formal categories of sensible experience in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, space and time are not things in and of themselves; rather, they describe the ways in which we measure what it is that we experience through our senses. To state, not incorrectly, that I cannot be reduced to my physical attributes precludes the next statement, in which the soul or the self—things in themselves—are conceived as objects of

possible experience through categories that apply solely to our physical nature. Thus, the beginning of the argument of the idealists contradicts its ending. Or, rather, the ending exposes for us the mistaken assumptions with which their argument begins. All of the content through which the (uncritical) idealists conceive of things in themselves—freedom, the soul, God: the proper self—is empirical, as empiricists are apt at pointing out.

The argument of the empiricists, notwithstanding its fallow variations, is no less specious. Because we can know nothing of things as they are in themselves except what is available to us through the senses, and because everything that we experience happens according to the laws of nature, there is nothing, so the argument goes, that is truly free. In other words, the idea of freedom contradicts our experience of nature. Kant takes this argument head on in the third section of the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, where he notes that “if the thought of freedom contradicts itself or nature, which is equally necessary, then freedom would have to be completely given up in favor of natural necessity. It would, however,” he continues, “be impossible to escape this contradiction if the subject, deeming himself free, were to think of himself in the same sense or in the very same relationship when he calls himself free as when he assumes himself subject to the law of nature regarding the same action” (456). Kant thereby agrees with the empiricists: the idealist conception of freedom, in which the will is conceived according to categories that properly apply only to physical objects, is a contradictory illusion. But there is little solace for empiricists in the subjunctive mood of Kant’s statement. For he then writes, to their utter bewilderment:

Therefore, an unavoidable problem of speculative philosophy is at least to show that the illusion regarding the contradiction rests on our thinking of man in a different sense and relation when we call him free from when we regard him as being a part of nature and

hence as subject to the laws of nature. Hence it must show not only that both can coexist very well, but that both must be thought as necessarily united in one and the same subject[.] (456)

The contradiction, Kant points out, in which the empiricists take refuge is an illusion. The claim of the empiricists is no less besmirched, Kant notes, by the grave illusion upon which idealism is founded. What is so extraordinary about Kant's remark here is that he points out that not only do the empiricists demonstrate their allegiance to the illusions of the idealists, but they also expose the legitimacy of the idea of freedom. They prove through their arguments, unbeknownst to themselves, the existence of the idea of freedom. For to deny the existence of freedom, based on one's criticism of its idealist versions, presupposes that one possesses a concept of freedom different from, and that consists in a different relation than, that of nature. Kant indicates that empiricists must have a concept of themselves (as free) that is different from the way in which they regard themselves according the laws of nature in order to deny the existence of freedom. Here, then, the end contradicts, and is contradicted by, the beginning. To suggest that there is no freedom—that there is nothing about oneself that is not conditioned by nature—presupposes that one has a conception of oneself that is “more” than merely the sum of one's natural parts and that is irreducible to the natural facts of one's life—as idealists are wont to acknowledge.

In other words, neither the idealists nor the empiricists can account for the source of the existence of their own arguments. The very possibility of the contradiction into which both idealists and empiricists have fallen—the possibility of claiming that there is a contradiction between nature and freedom—relies on the existence of the twofold standpoint, the paradox, as Kierkegaard would say, that, although everything within the ambit of human experience is entirely natural, we are not merely natural but free. The possibility of the contradiction confirms

the truth of the claim that, as Kant puts it, both freedom and nature are “necessarily united” in one and the same subject (456). To attempt to locate the locus of existence in things in themselves, either rationally (deductively) or empirically, involves the contradictory effort to enslave one’s knowledge to ignorance—of what it is that constitutes one’s own life—and to enslave one’s will to the (mindless, spiritless) objects of nature.

Thus, Kant once again sets about establishing the parameters of his twofold view of existence. When practical reason, he writes, “thinks itself into an intelligible world, it does not in the least thereby transcend its limits, as it would if it tried to enter it by intuition or sensation” (458). Because Kant limits human knowledge to experience, he indicates, as we saw in chapters 1 and 2, that the intelligible world of human reason “is thus only a point of view which reason sees itself compelled to take outside of appearances in order to think of itself as practical” (458).³ Kant stumps the attempts of his readers to imagine the intelligible world according to the categories of place (space) and time that properly apply to the world of nature. Rather, reason is entirely comprised of a principle, a point of view through which we evaluate existence, in practical terms. That is, the proper conception of ourselves as human beings hangs upon how we conceive of the “limit” or the “boundary” of the twofold standpoint. The limit is not a theoretical boundary but a practical bond, a metaphor, as I have argued, for the laws, the obligations, the duties that we impose on ourselves as free human beings. In other words, we limit ourselves to the knowledge of objects in order to prove, once and for all, that the infinite source of human life is the will.

It is useful to note, then, for the purposes of my argument, that, while the twofold standpoint is an image, the meaning of the image cannot be explained to us on the basis of its own appearance but can only be revealed when we recognize it as an image of what we stand for

in life—or before which we cower whenever we repress its truth in adopting the awkward pose of a rationalist (uncritical idealist) or empiricist. The twofold standpoint describes the paradoxical position that we must take in life. To bear witness to the critical distinction between subjects and objects involves the practice of distinguishing between the world of nature and the world of humanity by treating each individual in the world of humanity not as an extension of yourself to be used and consumed by you but with dignity as an end in him or herself. Freedom describes how we appropriate—the way in which we live—what is natural to us. Thus, we see why Kant works so hard, in concluding the third section of the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, to show us that freedom or will defies explanation. Kant's sole aim, in showing that freedom cannot be explained on any empirical basis, is to reveal to us that it is only on the basis of freedom or the will (reason) that we can explain anything natural and that we can justify everything practical. He undertakes to limit human knowledge in order to defend the idea that we are not limited to or by the exigencies of life but are free to live them on the basis of the moral law or love.

It must be shocking for readers—at least, at first—that Kant bars their every attempt to explain the paradox at the heart of his twofold position. It is certainly counter-intuitive—if not a bit bewildering—to realize, with Kant as one's guide, that the paradox through which he articulates his dual position is not to be resolved—as the idealists and empiricists believe—but to be lived—with resolution—on the basis of the moral law (freedom). For there is no more (or any less) sure-fire way to become embroiled in contradiction, as Kant has shown, than to undertake to explain the existence of the paradox of freedom. It is, instead, only from the point of view of the twofold nature of human existence that we can recognize the contradictory—absurd, partial, one-sided—views of the idealists and the empiricists. Kant thus finds himself in cahoots not only

with the authors and figures of the Bible—with Paul, for example, who undertakes to know nothing except Christ, the God-man, and his crucifixion (as we saw in Chapter 3)—but also with Montaigne, who captures the paradoxical truth of modernity when he notes, in initiating his essay “Of Repentance,” that, although he might contradict himself from time to time, the truth he does not contradict (740).

Montaigne establishes the task with which all of us who are interested in giving voice to our proper selves are beset in modernity. He sets us the task of learning with (through, alongside) him how, in revealing ourselves in time, we can accept or resolve the apparent contradictions with which our lives, works, poems, essays... are enmeshed. He enjoins us to the effort to demonstrate that what is proper to the self, to every self—as truly human—is to show that both its own position and the position opposite to it are true. Montaigne reveals that the truth with which we can and must begin to make assay of our lives is paradoxical or, as Hegel would say, dialectical.

As the man on the dump asks in Stevens’ poem by that name—echoing Montaigne’s question *Que sais-je?* [What do I know?], which he poses after having shown the impossibility of discovering the truth on the basis of the natural similes that found ancient Greek philosophy—“Where was it one first heard of the truth?”⁴ The answer, which the man on the dump at once speaks and hears, is absolute: “The the.” The the is the contradiction of appearance and the appearance of contradiction. The truth of the image—the the—is unreadable, therefore, according to its appearances. The revelation of the image’s truth is embedded, however, in the question that the man on the dump poses. For the man does not ask, with the skeptics, what is the truth? Instead, his question presupposes—exposes—that both he and his invisible audience know the truth. The truth of poetic existence, as Stevens says elsewhere, is and it is not, and, therefore,

it is.⁵ Truly speaking, then, the truth can be known only in its contradictory appearances or images, but it is not exposed by those appearances; therefore, it is—revealed solely from the point of view that embraces the dialectical truth, the truth of dialectic, as the principle upon which we must found our lives. The truth of the one—of the self—can be known, thought, proven, and encountered only in and through another: the the.

But Stevens also shows us in his poems, consistent with Kant in his critical philosophy and Montaigne in his essays, that we can never foreclose the possibility of “false facsimile”—the metaphor that murders metaphor by reducing the truth to its appearances as opposed to upholding the truth as the principle by which we live those very same appearances.⁶ Precisely because description is the revelation of the twofold standpoint, we forever run the risk of falling into the gap by drawing a simile between description and revelation and so rehashing, in whatever form, the arguments of the idealists and the empiricists. The contradictory illusions that arise from reducing the truth to its appearances are unavoidable, as Kant says. The sole remedy for illusion, then, as we have seen, is steadfast critique. The sole method, as Montaigne would say, for maintaining one’s integrity as a person such that one would not change a thing about one’s life is the repentance of one’s fundamental errors. The moment that we forgo criticism of ourselves whenever we fail to let be—whenever we fail to accept the dialectical conditions of life that testify to freedom—we slip back into the rationalized and naturalized positions that, in confusing the truth of human relationship with its immediate appearances, never fail to relativize our relations such that we oppress others and repress our proper selves.

Stevens captures the compound or twofold nature of human existence—the truth: the the—when, in one of the concluding cantos of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” he recapitulates, in poetic fashion, the argument with which Kant concluded the *Grounding*. At

“long midnight,” a time, no doubt, in which the lapsing of time is suspended, and after the aspiring figure of the previous canto, Canon Aspirin, settles to bed, the man in this canto is confronted by a dark image of the nothingness of the previous day’s celebrations or “sensible ecstasy” (III, v). After “normal things had yawned themselves away,” we are told:

The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,

Beyond which fact could not progress as fact.

Thereon the learning of the man conceived

.

Beneath, far underneath, the surface of

His eye and audible in the mountain of

His ear, the very material of his mind.

.

The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought. (III, vi)

There is nothing beyond the appearances. Still, it is precisely, as Stevens is so apt at showing, in contemplating this “nothingness” that the point of the poem is revealed. Thinking, meditating, ruminating on the nothingness of all of the natural appearances of life gives us an idea of what lies “beyond” nature: the existence of human thinking and values. Indeed, as I have worked hard to show in my chapters on Stevens, Stevens is one of the most profound, and profoundly paradoxical, of modern poets precisely because, in revealing that the finite is nothing in itself—that it possess no will or consciousness—he exposes the freedom of human existence. As in “The Snow Man,” in canto vi of the third section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” he reveals the

world as nothing but the creation, the very material, of the mind of human beings. The images of nothingness, black, night, absence, emptiness, petty syllabi—the the—that Stevens employs in his poems cannot be comprehended on the basis of a comparison with our empirical experience—of night, black, syllabi, silence, emptiness, or absence. Rather, these images can only be truly comprehended as exposing for us the self-determination of the poem and the poet and thus the absolute worth or value of the will of human beings.

Thus, in these eight lines, Stevens both articulates the limit of human knowledge and provides an impassable critique of the conventional ways of thinking about (or imagining) the very nature of reality. In contemplating the “nothingness” of the revelries of the senses, Stevens’ figure discovers a point of view for which none of the facts of life can account. Yet, the mind is never found outside of its materials. To project the mind—as a thing-in-itself—beyond the appearances of nature is sheer illusion. In other words, “beyond” here is a concept that doubles as the metaphorical image through which Stevens limits human knowledge to the facts of the world. Yet, as we recall from our analysis in chapters 2 and 4 of the concept of “limit” that is set out by both Kant and Hegel, limiting knowledge to the objects of space and time (to nature) involves demonstrating, at one and the same time, that wo/man is beyond explanation as a “thing” that thinks. That is, one never goes beyond the appearances. Rather, to go “beyond” involves overcoming the conventional ways in which we think, the conventional wisdom of both the hierophantic idealists—to use Stevens’ terms—and the rigid realists. Thus, from this point of view, we learn, once again, that the limits that both Kant and Stevens impose on the mind serve as the fortifications through which they defend the idea that human beings are not limited to or by the contingencies of nature but are free to live all that nature throws their way on the basis of

that relationship in which two emotions become one (to recall “Of Modern Poetry”): the relationship that Stevens has also called, as we saw, enduring and visionary love.

It is no accident, then, that Stevens ends this section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” by articulating the bonds of choice that encapsulate the universal demands of Kant’s categorical imperative. “He had to choose,” Stevens writes of his figure:

But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,

The complicate, the amassing harmony. (III, vi)

There is no choice but to choose. There is no choice not to be free. Indeed, I can evade acknowledging my responsibility as a human being by seeking refuge in the arguments of the idealists and the empiricists, or any combination of their views. But I cannot evade the knowledge of my own responsibility for these evasive arguments, however much I might mask that knowledge in the aesthetic garb of poetry or in the metaphysical diction of philosophy. The difficult decision, as Beethoven would say, is not whether or not to accept my being human but to determine how—on what basis—I can accept it.⁷ There is no choice between being—human—and not being—human.

There is no choice for Stevens’ figure, in other words, between choosing and not choosing. He had to choose. He was involved in making choices. Thus, the question remains for this figure how he can make responsible choices, how he can become responsible for the choices that he makes. What is so fascinating about Stevens’ articulation of the concept of choice, or freedom, in the concluding lines of section vi of part III of the “Notes” is that he indicates,

consistent with Kant, that any choice between the facts of nature and the freedom of mind is a false choice. To represent our choice as one between two alternatives that exclude each other is false. To choose between nature and freedom is to falsify our choices by locating the motivation of our will in nature, as a thing in itself, or in nature's supernatural similes. To represent our choice as one between two things, options, alternatives, possibilities... is to be lost in the grips of dualism. Indeed, we learn that dualism is a particularly keen opponent when we realize that not only does it have an infinite variety of clothes in which it masquerades as the truth (the royal authority, the law, to which human life is subject) but, as Kant notes, it also has both skeptical and dogmatic proponents. The skeptic seeks to evade choosing between empiricism and idealism, noting that either choice is false. The dogmatist, whether idealist or empiricist, attempts to choose one over the other, noting that not to choose is false. But Stevens, like Kant, has cut off at its source the skeptical as well as the dogmatic representation of one's freedom. He had—we have—to choose. He was—we are—involved in choosing—not between nature and freedom, not between facts and ideas, not between appearances and the thing-in-itself, not between the flesh and the spirit... but of.

The fundamental burden of choice is not, we learn, *that* we choose but *what* we choose to represent to ourselves as our choices. The one choice that we have eternally to make is to live—to redeem—all that nature proffers—from birth to death—by refusing to use human beings as means, instruments without a choice, and, instead, treating them as ends. The choice, then, is not between freedom and nature but between dialectic and dualism. The choice is either to live freely—by making the sensible conditions of one's life accord with the principle of human dignity—or to live unfreely—by wilfully enslaving one's will and mind to the principle of happiness, in Kant's terms. Thus, Stevens' concept of choice captures the dialectic of inclusion

and exclusion involved in human freedom. To choose to love you—to be good to you; to engage you as a person—is exclusive. I cannot transfer my responsibility for my relationship with you onto anyone else or any other relation. Relationships are non-transferrable (although the roles that we take on in our relations are surely pliable). Yet, herein lies an exclusivity of choice that can encompass each and every person—as well as the entire spectrum of relationships—with which my life is intertwined. To choose you as my beloved—for example, in a romantic context—is not to choose between you and anyone else but to choose you as an individual with a will and a mind all your own, to choose to embrace our relationship under the auspices of the categorical imperative.

But, therefore, the exclusivity through which the law of freedom (the categorical imperative) is realized—one by one, as we saw in the last chapter⁸—is infinitely inclusive. To choose is to choose but one item, thing, option, possibility, aim, desire, or goal. Yet we cannot truly choose anything unless our choice includes all those “things” that “in each other are included,” as Stevens observed. The only two “things,” however, as Stevens points out in “Re-statement of Romance,” that are included in each other are not things at all but the proper selves of one another. There is no choice between the life of the self and the life of the other. The two are inextricably bound.

As Buber observes in *I and Thou*, to say I, to think I, to be I is to be in relation to You. I am an I to me and a You to You. You are a You to me and an I to You. We are both simultaneously I-You: self and other. Buber’s articulation of the word-pair, in which our whole being is involved, profoundly illuminates the ethics (to say nothing, for the moment, of the aesthetics) of human interaction particularly when we realize that the pairings of relationship are omnipresent in life. As Buber suggests in describing the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion that

shapes human interaction, no matter the number of relationships that comprise my life, in encountering other members of my community I never measure anything more (or less) than You.⁹ The one “thing,” then, that cannot be included in the I-You relationship is the false method of inclusion, the method of forming our social groups (of whatever number) on the basis of their appearances, which, as determined by empirical conditions, inevitably excludes others and from which arises, therefore, all of the stereotypes, prejudices, partiality, partisanship—if not worse—with which our lives are riven. Separate (exclusivity), in finite terms, is never equal, as we know. Equal (inclusivity), in finite terms, is always less, as Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish point out after having observed the struggle of parents to construct a rule of fair treatment among their children on the basis of immediate comparisons.¹⁰

What Stevens’ poetic reflections on the limits of choice demonstrate, ultimately, is that, as Buber argues, there is no choice between one’s freedom and the freedom (choices) of others. To choose life, to choose to be, to embrace my existence involves confronting the choices of others—of my parents, for example, or siblings, or friends, or enemies, or fellow citizens, nationally and internationally. I am, nonetheless, entirely responsible for how I choose to respond to that for which I am not responsible, including the choices of others. But I can choose responsibly—and I can hold others accountable (responsible) for their choices—only if I will for myself solely those things that, at the same time, serve to foster and to support the will of all others. It is truly important to point out, then, in order to appreciate the full measure of Stevens’ formulation for the paradox of choice in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” that there is also no choice between the prepositions “between” and “of.” In the infinite variety of life, there are times in which we are called to choose “between” two possibilities or alternatives. Indeed, there are even hard times when we are called to choose between ourselves and others,¹¹ as any first-year

student in an applied ethics class quickly realizes. (We can think, for example, of the famous case that is typically brought up in response to Kant's demonstration that lying cannot become a universal law: the case in which we find ourselves in Nazi Germany, having hidden Jews in our basement, when all of a sudden representatives of the fascist regime come rapping at our door. Alternatively, we can think of the lifeboat example, in which we imagine ourselves adrift at sea without any food: the choice appears to be your life or mine, or else [as one scholar points out] both of our lives.^{12, 13})

While a study of ethics involves an investigation of those situations unique to us as human beings, what interests all of us about these scenarios are the underlying principles that make these situations into dilemmas for us in the first place. These situations are trying—they test our capacity to respond creatively—precisely because we want, with Kant, to uphold the freedom and dignity of one and all: the categorical imperative. Thus, rather than compromise, these scenarios testify to our universal knowledge of the validity of the moral law. We can only make a responsible choice “between” on the basis “of” the necessity to include those lives that in each other are included, the lives of ourselves and others. We can choose between self and other responsibly only if that choice resists the pressure to base our relationships upon the choice between self (i.e., the in-group, of whatever form) and other (the marginalia, of whatever number). We can even preserve our integrity in those awful situations in which we are forced to choose between human beings, the social safety net of existence having been broken into relativistic and dogmatic pieces, only if we remain vigilant in willing the good for one and all and so in showing, even silently, that we make such choices against our will.

Just as a study of ethics involves us, then, neither in the pursuit of happiness (*eudemonia*) nor in a skeptical examination of situations far removed from our everyday lives, so a study of

art involves the appraisal of aesthetics neither for its own sake nor for the sake of art's social utility (as we have seen). As we saw in Chapter 4, Hegel points out, in the *Lectures on Fine Art*, that the absolute and universal need of human beings to produce works of art cannot be recognized by drawing an immediate comparison between the necessity of art and the objective (immediate) categories of human need or appetite (e.g., taste). Indeed, he further observes that there can be no necessary relationship between art and the world (the whole field of human existence)—and so no absolute or universal need for art—if we view the relation between the various realms of life as one of “mere utility.”¹⁴ But I want to be clear that I eschew, with Hegel, both the theory of art for art's sake (in which art becomes idle entertainment) and the theory of art as social utility (in which art becomes a symbol for ideals that cannot be embodied in aesthetic works) not because I do not truly appreciate the lissomness and variety of the forms of artistic creation or because I do not appreciate the significance of art's social (human) content, but because I have wanted to show (yet again with Hegel) that we can truly appreciate both the pleasure and the instruction that art offers us only if we see that one cannot be known outside of the other.

Thus, in undertaking to show how a work of art can (and must) embody the values that are central to being human, I have laid particular emphasis in my study on the dramatic contrasts that structure Stevens' strongest poetry. In holding together the lowly and the sublime, the bric-a-brac of everyday objects and the prosody of poetic diction, the imperfect and paradise, service and majesty, need (poverty) and wealth, necessity and right—such that each can be known only in and through the other—we realize that the description of Stevens' poems embodies the revelation of the principle of relationship (i.e., the law of inherent opposites) that creates (transfigures, transforms) the world and that Stevens develops in terms of the concept of choice

in canto vi of the third section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” In his strongest poems Stevens uses images of natural difference to eliminate the hierarchal differences that are constructed on the basis of the natural appearances of life, for which we alone are responsible. Stevens’ poetry is thus extremely demanding of its readers. For what we realize is that the character of his metaphors and oxymorons—their meaning and invention—expresses the practice of appropriating the sensible conditions of the world such that they become the true representatives of our common humanity (or dignity). Thus, from the point of view of practical reason, as Kant would say, it is not altogether correct to suggest that the thing-in-itself, the mind, is only a metaphor—or that freedom is only an idea. For what Stevens, along with Kant, reveals is that an idea, a metaphor, is lived. Life is based on the very structure of interaction that metaphors expose for us. Thus, as Kant notes, although it is true that freedom is transcendental—a mere idea, from the point of view of our understanding of nature—it is also immanent.¹⁵ Freedom—the freedom to think and to exist that is exposed by a metaphor—describes the paradox of our human actuality.

Indeed, it is precisely this insight—the insight that life bears a poetic or metaphorical structure that embraces the choice of existence—that Stevens articulates, finally, in the epilogue of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” in which he addresses the relationship between art and life. In the preceding cantos Stevens has suspended (elided) every fiction except for one, the fiction that crudely compounds reality through the poetic diction that embraces the dialectical truth of oxymoron (metaphor). He exposes us to the revelation that the meaning of a metaphor can be comprehend not on the basis of its relative appearances but only from the point of view of a structure of values that upholds the concept of an absolute relationship. Here, in the epilogue, he shows us how it is that the “real will from its crude compoundings come”—how the real

(proper) life of human beings comes into existence out of nothing but fiction—by articulating the relationship between the tender words of poetry and the militant life of his reader (III, vii). He writes, in a direct address:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together...

.

It is a war that never ends.

Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.

They are plural, a right and left, a pair,

Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows or that meet

In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.

But your war ends.

.

The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

His petty syllabi,

.

And war for war, each has its gallant kind.

The soldier to whom the epilogue is addressed is the soldier in the barrack, the soldier of time fighting among the Allied Forces in World War II. (Stevens first published “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” in 1943 in a limited edition published by the Cummmington Press.) But the soldier is also the reader. Note, then, the interdependence that Stevens articulates between the soldier and the poet. Because a poem cannot be known in its appearances, in order to convey the meaning of his images, a poet depends on the creative minds and lives (desires) of his readers. The poem is dead, lifeless, and empty without you. Stevens demands, therefore, that you, the reader, affirm your own freedom by demonstrating that the only way that you can penetrate the meaning of the poet’s images (oxymorons) is by locating the principle—the origin and the goal—of poetry in your own life. Thus, his epilogue performs a wondrous hermeneutical pirouette that captures the lives of the soldiers whom he addresses. In the images through which two emotions become one—in locating the meaning of each image in and through its dramatic contrast with its opposite—the poem embraces its other, the reader, who finds her own life revealed in the poem insofar as she sees that the origin of her mind and desire (emotion) is twofold. The reader is no less dead, lifeless, and empty without the poetic verse of I and thou.

It is also important to note that the war is not between the poet (art) and the soldier (life). The two are one—yet plural, a pair. Each has his own struggles. The crossing of parallel lines is the perfect image to capture here the relation between the soldier and the poet. It is the modern equivalent to—in its exquisite contrast with—the image of peace in which the lion lies down with the lamb.¹⁶ The crossing of parallel lines cannot occur—given any amount of space and time. The image bears witness to the miracle that can only describe human relationship. The miracle describes the realization of human freedom, which, as a moral principle, depends on the will of so many (all) others besides my own. The choices of others are not mine to choose, nor

are my choices—my free responses to life—in the hands of others. And yet, there is nothing so real as those bonds that tie us to each other in pledging to uphold the principle of the moral law, the categorical imperative, which, as unconditional, transforms the relative conditions of each of our lives into testaments to the reality of practical love.

In wedding the soldier and the poet in and through the interrelationship between the mind and earth (imagination and reality, the word and existence), Stevens also marries the eternal and the temporal. Whereas the poet's war is a war that never ends (eternally), the soldier's war ends (temporally). Although Stevens appears in his poem to begin with "peace" in his prefatory note and to end with war in the epilogue, what we learn, in examining those appearances, is that what he shows us is the exact opposite. Peace does not have its end—aim or goal—in war. Rather, war has its end in peace. Eternal peace envelops the time of war—as its end. The end of the never-ending poem is the time of peace, which begins and ends with the words that bespeak the transparent dignity of human life. What we learn from a study of Stevens' poems is how to speak faithfully, as the militant ephebe, of the all-too-human struggle for peaceable relationships.

Thus, Stevens concludes his epilogue in the following way:

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

The ease with which Stevens ends his epilogue does not eliminate the struggle of the soldier or of the poet (never mind the struggle of his readers). The glad tidings of the soldier do not eliminate the pain and horror of war (death and sin). Rather, the soldier's ease describes the celestial ease that is gained from the struggles that result from the unity of art and life (ethics). The soldier, we are told, lives and dies on the basis (by consuming the bread: the teaching) of the

word. But so too does the word live and die with the soldier of time, with the reader, with you. As Tertullian is so apt at showing in *De Carne Christi*, just as there is no penetrating the meaning of a metaphor on the basis of its appearances, so Christ (the God-man) bars at every turn the attempt to live vicariously through him (or Abraham, the father of faith). “For this cause,” Tertullian writes, “did the son of God descend and take on a soul, not that the soul,” the proper self, “might discover itself in Christ, but Christ in itself” (ch. 12).

The fictive hero of poetry (whether religious or secular) becomes the real hero of time—so effortlessly, so seamlessly, so handsomely—insofar as that hero embraces the twofold nature of human existence. The fictive hero is discovered within the life of the reader by noting that one’s own existence—including the suffering of death and sin—is founded upon that wondrous fiction that includes those “things” that in each other are included, which, as we have seen, describes the categorical imperative of will (choice). While Stevens begins the first section of his “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” with the death of God, he ends, in the epilogue, with faith in the word. While he begins—faithfully—by declaring the death, lifelessness, and emptiness of the image of God modelled on the natural light of the sun, he ends with the poetic speech that testifies to the divine basis (the supreme fiction) of human life (and death). While the Bible ends—faithfully—with the death of God, it begins with the living word that faithfully bears witness to the divine relationship (image, metaphor) upon which human existence is founded—from the beginning and unto the end. As we have repeatedly discovered throughout this study, there is no choice between the divine and the human, or between the Bible (faith) and modern thought (reason). The validity of one’s interest in the one—the beginning of the one—can only be known (revealed, justified) in and through the other.

The paradox, then, that we are turning round and round—examining from various sides and angles, while repeating its unmistakable motif—in this concluding chapter is exactly that which lies at the heart of the relationship between ethics and art and to which I repeatedly returned in my chapters on Kant and Stevens. Love—as the very paradox of the heart that captures the relation between ethics and aesthetics—can only be known in its appearances, yet it cannot and must not be judged on the basis of those appearances. Rather, the images of love must be judged, tested, probed, redeemed... such that they are shown to bear witness to their foundation in a relationship that begins (and ends) with the choice of the persons involved. For the good to exist it must appear. But it can only appear in and through the aesthetic (creative) structure of metaphor, which reveals that the appearances are not good in themselves but must be made good through the choices that transform those appearances into the expressions of practical love.

Thus, just as the very structure of art is ethical, so the very nature of ethics is aesthetic. It is surely valid not to have any interest in reading the philosophy of Kant or the poetry of Stevens. But it is not valid—one cannot claim with any legitimacy—not to have an interest in ethics or aesthetics. Indeed, to deny that one finds either ethics or art—never mind their relationship—very interesting invokes a concept of interest that, as an analysis of Kant's paradox has shown us, is at once ethical and aesthetic. One can doubt the efficacy of this study. But what I hope to have shown in my analysis of the relationship between the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens is that one can legitimately and meaningfully doubt the relation between ethics and art, as I have presented it here, only from a point of view that more fully exposes—that more amply expresses—the mutual interdependence of the good (ethics) and beauty (art).

In conclusion, what we have learned from a study of the philosophy of Kant and the poetry of Stevens is that there is no choice between Kant and Stevens, between philosophy and poetry, or between ethics and aesthetics. The choice is not “between” but “of.” It is no accident that Stevens ends his exposition of the structure of choice with the preposition “of,” which has the flexibility to function as both a subjective and an objective (or double) genitive. There is—or must be—a double-genesis that generates our choices, just as there is—and must be—a double-genesis between philosophical truth and poetic images. The marriage of philosophy and poetry allows us to remain steadfast critics of the confusion of philosophical truth with empirical or logical certainty as well as the confusion of poetic images with naturally uncertain appearances or with the meaningless contradictions that not seldom result from merely rhetorical word play. The truth of poetic images is ethical. The image of philosophical truth is creative. To choose one over the other is to falsify both, as I have shown. Thus, what we learn—what I have argued—through an analysis of the works of Kant and Stevens is that the only valid choice is to choose “of,” to test the validity of one’s comprehension of Kant or Stevens in and through one’s interest in the other, and to find pleasure and instruction in reading both Kant and Stevens under the guidance of the relation between freedom and nature, metaphysics and metaphor, ethics and art. To commit oneself to a scholarly analysis of the relationship between ethics and art embedded in philosophy and poetry is to become, as I have discovered—to my ever growing delight and surprise—the humble student of the ethics and of the art of human relationship.

¹ See the *Addition* to section 54 of *The Encyclopedia Logic* (101).

² See Chapter 2, where I examine Kant’s critique of uncritical idealism and empiricism, and Chapter 6, where I take up Stevens’ dismissal of hierophantic idealists and rigid realists in his defense of pure imagination and pure reality.

³ Kant goes on to note, summarizing one of the major arguments of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in a single sentence, “If the influences of sensibility were determining for man, reason would not be able to take this point of view, which is nonetheless necessary if he is not to be denied the

consciousness of himself as intelligence.... This thought,” he continues, “certainly involves the idea of an order and a legislation different from that of the mechanism of nature which applies to the world of sense; and it makes necessary the concept of an intelligible world (i.e., the whole of rational beings as things in themselves)” (458).

⁴ “The Man on the Dump.” See Montaigne’s essay “The Apology for Raymond Sebond,” wherein he poses the question “What do I know?” as he advances his direct attack against the propositions of the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics, who aim to suspend all knowledge of the truth (477). Indeed, Montaigne is utterly consistent with the man on the dump as he undertakes, in demonstrating the uselessness of the attempt to prove the existence of God (the truth) on the basis of the philosophy of nature, to show that “[e]ither we can judge absolutely, or we absolutely cannot [judge]” (513). Consistent with Hegel’s observation that every half-truth involves a step away from the truth, Montaigne argues, throughout his essays, that we can and must judge the truth absolutely—that we possess absolute knowledge of the truth—as the rational content of our lives (see Hegel’s Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 22). See also note 18 of Chapter 1 for an additional comment on Montaigne.

⁵ “A Primitive Like an Orb” II.

⁶ “Description Without Place” VI. See “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” for Stevens’ call for the young poet to defy the “metaphor that murders metaphor” and my analysis in Chapter 5.

⁷ Beethoven titles the final movement of his last, completed work, the String Quartet No. 16 in F major, op. 135, “*Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß*” (“The difficult decision”) (Barry Cooper. Liner notes. *Complete String Quartets*, Perf. Italian Quartet. Decca Classics Productions, 1996. CD).

⁸ See section V of “The Sail of Ulysses” and my analysis in Chapter 7.

⁹ In the Second Part of *I and Thou* Buber notes that the “sum of You and You and You [...] can never be anything else than You” (96).

¹⁰ The title of Chapter 4 of Adele Faber’s and Elaine Mazlish’s book *Siblings Without Rivalry* is “Equal Is Less.”

¹¹ There are also mundane times whose hardness is characterized by the cold fact that there seem to be no available choices insofar as whatever one chooses appears to make no difference to one’s life.

¹² In his review of Philip Lieberman’s *The Unpredictable Species: What Makes Humans Unique* Brayton Polka observes that we “are not two cultures but one—the culture that is uniquely and unpredictably human. Yet we do make a critical distinction between science and culture, between the objects of nature and human subjects, between brain and mind, between, in the language of Kant, nature and freedom (things and persons). We (‘humanely’) kill animals, for example, to provide ourselves with food or with experimental ‘subjects’ from which we undertake to learn yet more about our own animal biology, our brains, our genes and so forth. We do not sanction the killing of human beings for either purpose, yet we know that not only our remote but also our recent history is rife with evil acts that we unconditionally condemn. [...] We also have the uniquely human situation epitomized by the lifeboat dilemma: your life or my life, or both of our lives?” (“How Do We Know What We Know?” *The European Legacy* Vol. 21, Nos. 5-6, 582-91)

¹³ Surely, however, we do not need to look too far into the matrix of family dynamics before we realize the ubiquity of these types of decisions in our everyday lives, nor do we have to reflect too long on the experiences of living every day as a member of an oppressed group in North America in order to be confronted with the horrors of having to choose between oneself and others.

¹⁴ *Lectures on Fine Art* 95.

¹⁵ The reality, Kant notes, “of the intelligible world,” whose founding image of the kingdom of ends serves as the rule guiding our actions, “is given to us, and indeed *determined* from a practical perspective, and this determination, which for theoretical purposes would be *transcendent* (extravagant), is for practical purposes immanent” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:105).

¹⁶ As we learned in Chapter 1, the image of the lion lying down with the lamb is not explicitly found in the Bible, in which the prophet Isaiah imagines the city of God as a holy mountain wherein:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid [i.e., the young goat], and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them (11.6)

The spirit of Isaiah’s passage is then captured, however, as the biblical message is spread historically, in the terse formulation: The lion shall lie down with the lamb.

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