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## Change and the Poetics of Plenitude in Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery

# ABSTRACT

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The essay attends to a paradox found in some crucial poetic efforts by Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery. In some of their most important poetic works Stevens and Ashbery take on the task of positioning the poem toward the plurality of reality, the plurality that is concentrated in the phenomenon of change. As they do so, they invariably encounter a tension within the poem itself: as the poem merges with the flow of changes in the external world—the physical changes in time and space—it also calls up permanent forms of imaginative purposive capability of attending to change, envisioning it, or, indeed, of installing it. These forms must be more permanent than it is postulated by some theories of the poetics of transitivity, which are polemically discussed in the text. The tension between the element of change and permanence is what allows the poems of Stevens and Ashbery—each poet finding his own aesthetic and epistemic strategy—to put the poem forward not as an external “representation” of change, but as the very source of the abundant possibilities of producing world descriptions in which the notion of change may be meaningful. Such positioning of the poem is what I am calling “the poetics of plenitude.” This poetic strategy makes the poem an aesthetic counterpart to the epistemic action of developing an inquiry, and I am building a definition of this term by reference to the classical pragmatist theory of inquiry. This move is related to my treating Stevens and Ashbery as the poets belonging to the Emersonian-pragmatist intellectual and aesthetic tradition. The paradoxes of change and permanence discussed in the text are treated as inherent in this tradition.

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The pragmatist Emersonian poetics is vitally related to and intertwined with the concept of change. Change is an idea, a trope, and an objective that lies at the heart of Emerson's mysterious notion of *self-reliance*, and the influence which his formulation of this key concept has radiated on thinkers and poets to come after him has much to do with change as a certain epistemological conundrum. When Emerson speaks of *self-reliance*, he is in fact meditating on the vexed relation between change and stasis, and in this meditation change is considered as a transformative state within the subject.

Emerson recognizes that the proper meaning of the concept of "change" reaches beyond a mere statement of the factual shift occurring within the bare material reality. Change in Emerson is something more than the purely mechanical, clockwork relocation occurring in the Newtonian universe; the proper sense of change as a conceptual process is related to the question of the human registering and participating in it. This registering is a peculiar kind of the loss of the self, a paradoxical process of self-obliteration in the service of self-reintegration. In the key moments of the Emersonian text—the key fragments of such essays as "Nature," "Self-Reliance," and "Experience"—the self is theorized as a dynamic entity which does not so much participate in change by adjusting to it, but is in fact a source of change.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to a pattern that is characteristic of Emerson's philosophy of the subject found in agency. It is a rhythm whose successive stages are self-abandonment for the sake of the consecutive affirmative re-finding of the self on a different level of integrity, coherence, and self-sustaining power found through action. This rhythm is defining for Emerson's textuality, his essays frequently proceeding from the tropes of loss to the renewed gesture of self-making. An outline of this rhythm is found in the "transparent eyeball" vision at the opening of "Nature." First, the passage describes the loss of the personal at the moment of the visionary entry into the communion with the neo-Platonic *pleroma*: "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" (6). Immediately, the loss is compensated for by a promise of participation in a power that, although it is divine, is always eventually located by Emerson in the human: "I am part or parcel of God. . . . in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (6). This aesthetic perception is only an introduction to the vision of merging with the neo-Platonically conceptualized creative power at the end of the essay, when Emerson's effort is to reverse the repressed memory of the soul's location at the center of creation, in a retelling of the neo-Platonic story of creation, backed by the Kantian transcendental philosophy of the mind: "Man is the dwarf of himself. . . . The laws of his mind, the periods of his actions externized themselves into day and night. . . . But, having made for himself this huge shelf, his waters retired" (37). The return of this repressed memory of having been the center of creation again leads to a merger of loss of the self and its reintegration on a different level, which we observe at the close of this passage: "if his word is sterling yet in nature, it is not conscious power, it is . . . superior to his will. It is instinct" (37). "Self-Reliance" continues the same discourse of re-integration through merger with a higher power. The key passage of this essay defines self-reliance as

But such positioning of the self toward the concept of change brings with it a number of complexities and tensions. These tensions are characteristic of a specific kind of poetics, common to some poets of the Emersonian aesthetic and conceptual heritage. It is a tension-ridden, dynamic poetics which I am calling the poetics of plenitude. In this essay, I am going to discuss the problems and paradoxes attendant on the concept of change in the work of two poets who belong to the paradoxical Emersonian tradition I have outlined above: Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery. By tracing the conceptual difficulties discovered by both of these poets, as they make the concept of change their main topic, I will illustrate how these difficulties are in fact a defining feature of the very poetics these poems propose—the poetics of plenitude.

Stevens and Ashbery's belonging to the Emersonian poetic tradition is a well-established critical fact.<sup>2</sup> They have also been discussed before as a pair of poets related by a strong poetic kinship founded on the concept of poetic influence. This critical narrative has been formulated, both famously and notoriously, by Harold Bloom, who has seen Ashbery's poetry as an almost exemplary case of the "anxiety of influence" in relation to the poems of his poetic father, Stevens (143–46). While this way of approaching Ashbery and Stevens has provided a definite model for bringing the two poets together, I am not going to use Bloom's concept of "influence" in my discussion of the similarities and differences between them. Instead, in my narrower approach, I am going to focus on a certain regularity in both poets' treatment of the concept of change, a concept that, as I am going to argue, is found right at the center of their poetics. Stevens and Ashbery's Emersonian heritage makes these poets attend instinctively to the paradoxical dynamics of change, and their effort consists in containing the

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an ability to join the powers of agency, in fact to become these powers, through instinctual action: "Life only avails, not the having-lived. Power . . . resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state" (144). Again, one sheds the personal, to join a more abstract, more powerful agency. In "Experience," Emerson reiterates his belief in reintegrative and self-creative power of action against the necessary skeptical limitations. Although our condition is a sort of cognitive "poverty," "yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks. . . . We must hold to this poverty . . . and by more vigorous self-recoveries . . . possess our axis more firmly" (324). A nice encapsulation of this pattern is found in "Circles": "it is the power of divine moments that they abolish our contritions" (260). Richard Shusterman, a pragmatist philosopher who has commented on Emerson's ambiguous discourse of self-creation, concludes: "Spontaneous nature and intentional striving may seem inconsistent, but when coordinated . . . they yield the most powerful results" (216).

<sup>2</sup> For Stevens's relation to the Emersonian pragmatist tradition see especially Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism* 21–22 and 179–231; Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism* 124–25 and 166–67; for Ashbery's place in this tradition see Andrew Epstein's *Beautiful Enemies* 3–25.

tensions of change within the very principle of the poetic tissue of their text. In what follows I will discuss the similarities and differences between both poets' treatment of the topic of change. This comparative outline will later enable me to propose a definition of the poetics of plenitude which I identify as the primary poetic aesthetics of both poets.

## 1 PROBLEMS WITH CHANGE

Stevens and Ashbery attend to change in a large number of their poems. Their treatment of change ranges from the basic meaning of the term to its deepest philosophical and psychological complications. There is a traditional lyrical layer in both poets, in which they attend to the change generating passage of time observable in the simplest natural phenomena. Stevens constructed a virtual figurative universe out of his oscillations between the tropes of winter and summer, while Ashbery has been a faithful follower of the lyrical tradition which finds its central topic in the season of spring. Both poets have frequently attended to the theme of the change effected by the sheer temporality of human existence, with a rich spectrum of its psychological and philosophical ramifications. Stevens has made change in time the central topic of the important long poems of his later phase, notably "The Auroras of Autumn" and "The Rock," while Ashbery has identified the struggle against the passage of time as the major characteristic of Parmigianino's painterly aesthetic, an aesthetic a duel with which is Ashbery's main topic in his critically acclaimed "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." The opposition between the tendency of aesthetic artifacts, both poems and paintings, to stall the temporal flow, and Ashbery's effort to burst or dissolve this aesthetics by opening it up onto accident and change, recur frequently in his work, long after the achievement of "Self-Portrait." Here I will limit my attention to a much closer set of poems for both Ashbery and Stevens. First, I will show the problem encountered by Stevens as he elaborates on the topic of change in the central section of his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," a long poem that is Stevens's most complete attempt at theorizing his poetics in the form of a poem. Next, I will trace the similar difficulties encountered by Ashbery, as he traces the challenge of rendering the processes of change in the very fabric of his poetic prose in *Three Poems*.

Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is a central poem of his middle poetic period, and it is often listed by critics as one of his most successful long poems (Vendler 168–69). The poem's importance is underscored by the fact that it is clearly a fruit of the poet's intense work on theorizing his own poetics, the work that Stevens undertook both in

his poems and his essays throughout the 1940s. The first, limited, edition of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” was brought out in 1942, while the essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” the first of the essay pieces later to be collected under the title of *The Necessary Angel*, which takes up a cluster of issues related to those found in the poem, was originally delivered as a public lecture at Princeton in 1942. In the essay Stevens makes the effort to explicate his complex notion of the relation between reality and imagination, in which “the imagination,” far from being a flight from reality, in fact is found within the very grain of the real, as its inseparable layer, a poetic principle that helps humans to be actively responsive to reality, without getting crushed under its sometime mounting pressures. Thus, by identifying the relation between the reality and the imagination as an inseparability of constant mutual opposition, Stevens nominates the poet as a participant in the potent imaginative agency, through which, he or she “gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of [the world]” (662), as Stevens puts it, clearly anticipating the title of his long poem, which was to see print a year after the lecture was delivered.

“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is a long meditative, philosophical-poetic sequence, which consists of three sections, with the title of each of them formulated in the form of a preliminary instruction: “It must be abstract,” “It must change,” “It Must Give Pleasure.” Despite their terse formulation, the titles might be ambiguous. Does the “it” always stand for the “supreme fiction”? Could the pronoun stand for the work of any hypothetical poem? In the section on change—what exactly is it that *must* change? Is the “supreme fiction” itself a body of imaginings that need to keep changing? How does one go on spinning the supreme fiction, on what principle, on what base? These questions are complicated further in the text of the poem.

The “It must change” section opens on a rich aesthetic register of perceptions, Stevens’s imagery involving creatures of ethereal substance, gaudy colors, and sophisticated lexical provenance, suggestive of the lightness and subtlety of the evoked images. The landscape is airy, fragrant, busy with the lightsome activity of various color- and odor-imparting spirits or beings. But how dynamic, how changeable is this landscape really? It seems that, although full of movement, the scene also contains an element of resistance to change. Yes, the scene fluctuates and shimmers with freshly described objects whose very appearance is pleasurable, but the shimmering itself displays a tendency to linger on and keep returning. The language Stevens finds to reflect the scene immediately registers this tension: “The bees came booming as if they had never gone, / as if hyacinths had never

gone. We say / 'This changes and that changes" (337). The last sentence betrays a note of skepticism regarding change, the reality of which evades the speaker, and the speaker immediately tries to quell this doubt by assuring the reader that "the constant // Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths / Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause / In a universe of inconstancy" (337). Again, however, the very next lines contain suspicion of these trivia, whose busy circuits begin to smack of mere repetitiveness: "It remains, / It is a repetition. The bees come booming / As if—" (337), and Stevens's speaker does not complete the clause, breaking off at this realization of repetitiveness.

Other cantos of this section also abound in the complex intertwining of the tropes of change with those of permanence. In section IV, for instance, we learn that "the partaker partakes of that which changes him" (339). The paradox-ridden tautology points to the core of the problem: does the "partaker" change, or does he enter a stasis of a higher degree, becoming one with that which produces the change itself? Throughout the section Stevens is looking for a truer explanation of change, beyond the merely external theater of the senses.

An ongoing mixture of the tropes for change and those for permanence is also characteristic of Ashbery's most audacious exercise in the form of poetic prose, "The System," a long and copious central piece of his poetic prose collection *Three Poems*, published in 1970. Among its many sources, models and points of reference, "The System" seems to take its main cue from a long tradition of the philosophical treatise on the problem of religious or epistemological skepticism. David Herd, in a splendid reading of the poem, cites a rich list of predecessor texts: Pascal's *Pensées*, Emerson's "Experience," and Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror" (124–42). Pascal's philosophical prose sets the theme: the possibility of refuting religious skepticism in a world suffused with uncertainty, chaos, and contingency. While Pascal's objective was to find justification for religious faith amidst contingent temporality, Emerson, Auden, and Ashbery all try to refute skepticism by remaining faithful to contingency itself—the accident-ridden medium of human changeability.

In Ashbery's case this attempt proceeds in the disguise of a prolonged lecture on the varieties of happiness. Whatever the topic, however, and whatever the outcome of the treatise, we will again encounter the same mixture that occurred earlier in Stevens. The mixture, both figurative and conceptual, binds together in ambiguous knots the ideas of change and static permanence.

Before the theme of the kinds of happiness is established in "The System," the text develops a meditation on temporal change, its apparent, if

paradoxical ease, as the mere physical procession of the months envelopes everyone, and as everyone will sooner or later adjust to this flow:

One is plucked from one month to the next; the year is like a fast moving Ferris wheel; tomorrow all the riders will be under the sign of February. . . . Just to live this way is impossibly difficult, but the strange thing is that no one seems to notice it; people sail along quite comfortably. (65)

This ease of adjustment, its imperceptibility and its pervasiveness, is one of the major concerns of the poem. It seems that the text aligns itself with the progression of moments which is as pervasive and relentless as it is smooth. The poem enters the very banality of the mechanical progression of moments and strives to capture the change worked by them on the self. Frequently, the text searches out the moments when the change is registered suddenly, emerging almost out of nothing, as if it was the sheer accumulation of the temporal flow that produced it, and Ashbery notes all sorts of “the forms of your inattention,” varieties of distraction, submitted by the poem’s unruly zooming device, as it goes in and out of focus. It is this capacity of living in distraction that is the gate through which change proliferates into the self: “and the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it . . . [yet] it is certain that you will rise from the bench a new person” (80).

The effort undertaken by the text to register the banality of the temporal flow establishes a clear rhythm in which the discourse is caught in the regular shifts between clarity and distraction, a rhythm which in itself achieves a sort of permanence—the rhythm itself becomes installed. Thus, again, as in Stevens, changeability is closely accompanied by tropes of permanence. At some moment we learn: “Apparently then happiness was to be a fixed state, but then you perceived that it was both fixed and mobile at the same time” (83).

## 2 THEORIES OF PURE TRANSITIVENESS

Clearly, both Stevens and Ashbery encounter difficulties when bringing their texts to approach and explain the processes of change. Paradoxically, the tendency of both texts is to find change intermeshed with stasis or permanence. Before I try to account for this intertwining of change and permanence in both Ashbery and Stevens, I need first to relate my argument to an important critical perspective on the poetics of changeability inherent in the Emersonian tradition. A number of critics have pointed out how the Emersonian pragmatist tradition requires the thought of the transformability

of the speaking subject, its ability to shed and overcome all earlier assumed formulas and shapes. Jonathan Levin has identified this necessity and capability for change as the major ingredient and feature of a poetics he has called “the poetics of transition.” Investigating the pragmatist indebtedness in Emerson, Levin demonstrates how pragmatism “rejects all supernatural trappings,” while continuing to cultivate the idea of a descriptive and interpretive malleability of both the self and the world, in which “coming only is sacred” (5). As James and Dewey valorize the possibility of approaching problems from ever new angles, proposing new tools and instruments to obstacles, we obtain an instructive text, according to Levin, on the necessity of treating the subject as a fluid, unstable, dynamic entity, always on the move in the search for new shapes. In Emerson the self is a volatile concept, subject to dissolution in the very text it produces: “the self vanishes in the wake of Emerson’s very act of writing” (28). It is this realization of the fluidity of the process of writing, of any creative construction in writing, that leads Levin to formulate, as he attends to the pragmatism common for Emerson and both of the James brothers, his theory of “transitional dynamic” (9). This dynamic governs the flows of the texts of this tradition, and bespeaks the need and the reality of constant changeability, movement, transformation. In this procession, movements of the self are destructive of it: formulas and shapes the self abides by must be discarded. The transi-tiveness that Levin describes emphasizes the ongoing mechanism of transformation which is dispersive of the self. The self vanishes, dissolves, finds itself ingested by radically higher powers. Levin comments: “The power of genius does not ultimately belong to a stable, coherent, rational agent, but rather derives from other powers that precede and subsume that agent and its agency” (28).

This reading and formulation of the Emersonian pragmatist aesthetics leads Levin to perceive Stevens as a poet of the pragmatist impulse to seek always new possibilities of description and redescription (181–82). Even though working with apparently fixed concepts of reality and imagination, Stevens in his essays avoids any definitive formulations of these terms, while his poems look for the ongoing freshness of redescription, the ongoing destruction of the existing forms of imagination (182). Examining his longer poems, Levin notes states of achieved linguistic indeterminacy, which are Stevens’s strategy of achieving genuine breaks from repetitiveness (184). Levin correctly identifies the Stevens poem itself as the proper locus of the process of pushing forward, beyond the literalized “fictions,” toward the necessarily new positions of the imagination-reality tension (183). It is a process of writing “from the leading edge of unfolding transitions . . . [where] dis-imagination of things is inseparable from their



re-imagination" (187). And yet, while it is definitely true that Stevens's poem is the locus of the process of change, Levin's approach says little of the source of the poem's own capability of keeping the process alive. The process in question is one of the ever renewed ability of departing from, or "evading," the achieved stage of reality descriptions, an ability that Stevens will call "our freshness" toward the end of the "It Must Change" section of "The Notes." The point is that the narrative of "transitiveness" taken as itself—as unceasing changeability—is not enough to account for such sustenance. The "freshness" needs a belonging.

A similar reading, emphasizing the instabilities of the self resulting from the conceptual patterns of Emersonian pragmatism, is proposed by Andrew Epstein, as he attains to the patterns and tropes of friendship found in the poetry of John Ashbery. Just as Stevens, Ashbery, as an Emersonian poet, will be interested in the dissolutions of the self, the self's transitional and transformative energies, always redefining and departing from the obtained shapes. Epstein's focus is a "theory of friendship" that emerges out of the Emersonian discourse. This friendship will appear as fraught with tensions, movements, push and pull relations, burdened with the Emersonian self's injunction to maintain the processes of transformation in motion. The transitional self will obviously have problems maintaining stable relations with other selves, as it is constantly on the move. Epstein echoes Levin in finding the Emersonian-pragmatist aesthetic in the instruction for and wish for "one's incessant transformations" (71).

This view leads Epstein to reading "The System" as a hymn to sheer changeability and appreciation of the contingency and accident-ridden character of existence. "The System" is a poem about the depth and degree to which the post-religious commentator of human existence, such as Ashbery appears to be, must face up to "the notion that experience is marked only by mutability and indeterminacy" (139). For Epstein this approach aligns perfectly well with William James's description of the pluralistically mutable universe, in which the human subject can never rest content at any achieved level or stage of description, and Epstein quotes James's characterization of pragmatism as "a certain willingness to live without assurances and guarantees" (139).

Both Levin and Epstein, although largely correct about the philosophical import of Stevens's and Ashbery's texts, may not be paying enough attention to certain phenomena and tensions of the poetic processes themselves. There is no denying that Stevens and Ashbery, locating the conceptual side of their art in the broad pragmatist tradition, seek a process-based poetics, which, operating beyond all metaphysical assurance, is one with the process of change. It seems, however, that the reading of Emersonian

pragmatism of Emerson and James, offered by Levin and Epstein, does not account for a certain peculiarity within the discourse of changeability and malleability. There is another side to the pragmatist discourse which Levin and Epstein have a problem dealing with. Levin comes close to this other side, when he notes how, within the Emersonian discourse, the self does not vanish but is redescribed as a certain *selecting principle* (33). This is problematic for Levin, since such idea of the self does require a theory of agency, which, in turn, would require us to move beyond the thought of sheer changeability and transitiveness. A principle of selection suggests a point of view, a focus, and integration. No form of agency can survive in the medium of sheer mutability; sheer mutability is no selection and is a scattering of all agency. As a result, Levin offers an inconclusive approach: “Emerson at once retains and undermines the self’s agency by splitting a man’s genius off from his actively thinking, willing self” (33).

It is beyond the scope of this article to enter a debate on the forms of agency worked out within the pragmatist tradition. It would require, for example, a thorough insight into the immensely complex theory of agency found in Nietzsche,<sup>3</sup> an idea that is a fuller realization of what Emerson had been projecting. However, I do want to claim that the transitiveness found in Stevens and Ashbery by, respectively, Levin and Epstein is an incomplete characteristic of these poets’ aesthetics, as it cannot explain the very propensity of their texts to affirm their own poetic power of attaining to change, becoming one with it, and, ultimately, becoming a source of change, a propensity or peculiarity which requires a view of agency that, without being inimical to change, is not scattered by it. Besides the complexities of philosophically described agency, there are agencies emerging in Stevens and Ashbery, agencies very much to be identified with the action of the poetic texts, with the process of the poem. These agencies care for the survival of their own ongoing capacity to govern the processes of change that they are also trying to capture, and as such they are a permanent element of the flow they govern.

### 3 CHANGE AND PERMANENCE

In order to characterize these agencies in more detail, I am now going to return to the paradoxes that I earlier noted in Stevens’s and Ashbery’s poetic discourses on change. As we saw earlier, Stevens’s meditation on change in the central section of “Notes” tends toward circularity, stasis, and

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<sup>3</sup> Two sources shed light on the problem: Alexander Nehamas’s *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* 170–99 and Robert B. Pippin’s *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* 67–79.

permanence. Change as mechanical procession of sensual data is clearly not what interests Stevens. For this reason, he will look for tropes which get the subject to an active position, in which the subject ceases to be a passive receiver of the theater of stimuli. Stevens's subject becomes a "partaker," and Stevens is looking for modes of unity between the "partaker" and the physical layers of the world: "The captain and his men // Are one and the sailor and the sea are one." This trope introduces a Whitmanian invocation of the unity between various layers of the poetic self into Stevens: "O my companion, my fellow, my self, / Sister and solace, brother and delight" (339). The effort of the poem to locate a subjectivity close at the source of the changes is parallel to Stevens's effort to unify the self, his reworking of the Whitmanian transcendental ego into its modernist version: an abstract mind, which, although it exceeds the boundaries of the individual, does propose a form of agency (Altieri 25–37). Whatever changes in Stevens's poem, the process of change affecting the physicality of the world must pass through this abstract self. At times this abstract self obtains a more definite contour of a romantic subject as lover, who participates in the physical changes by desiring them: "The lover sighs as for accessible bliss, / Which he can take within him on his breath, / Possess in his heart, conceal and nothing known" (341). The strangely formed phrase that concludes this passage points in the direction of the trope of "nothingness" or emptiness, or the evasion of certainty, which in Stevens signals the more abstract self or mind—the mind as agent in the world of changes. Thus, at a slightly later passage in the poem, Stevens elaborates his abstractions by thinking of a "poem that never reaches words // And one that chaffers the time away" (343). And he muses of it: "Is the poem both peculiar and general"? This, in turn, becomes a prelude to a complex thought of "evasion": "There is a meditation there, in which there seems // To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended." And later: "Does the poet // evade us, as in a senseless element?" (343).

What exactly is the "evasion" that is introduced in these lines? What does it consist of, what kind of action is it, and who performs it? Before answering this question, let us note at this point that the thought of evasion precedes the final, tenth, canto of this section of "Notes," which is strangely static for a poem on change. The entire canto concentrates on a complex image in which a static mind—the mind of Stevens's observer of changes, an abstract individual seated in the park—seems to hypnotize the surrounding world with his "will to change" (344). The entire discourse on change, or the entire theater of changes, is now revealed to be located within a stationary mind of an observer, a mind, we sense, that is responsible

for the change, and which transgresses beyond the binary opposition of change and stasis.

The discourse on change leads Stevens to projecting a peculiar state of mind, a state which triggers and participates in the procession of changes. This state is achieved in Stevens through a capability that Stevens comes close to revealing when he speaks of the poet's "evasions." It is this capability that exists within, participates in, but does not get dispersed in the elements of change. The capability of "evading" is a permanence that the poem maintains as a paragon of change. Stevens elaborates on the capability of evasion in canto IX, where he identifies it with the synthesizing activity of the imagination. The poetic mind "tries by a peculiar speech to speak // The peculiar potency of the general, / To compound the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima" (343). Change, in Stevens, depends on the capacity of the poem to produce and maintain the state of evasive capability that Stevens is trying to evoke in these lines.

Similarly, Ashbery's poem will present tropes of permanence amidst its own imitation and participation in the element of change. But here we enter the area of a vital difference between the two poets. Stevens's formula for the capability of sustaining change is clearly derived from the Romantic idea of the imagination—a faculty that appears on stage with Coleridge's reworking of German idealism, which, as M. H. Abrams demonstrated amply, comes to supplant the more mechanically oriented "fancy" (167–77). Thus Stevens's "evasions"—the moves of the mind responsible for sustaining change—will belong to the mind as a unified and concentrated faculty—the mind as locus and enactor of the work of the synthesizing imagination. Although this mind is an abstract rather than a personal entity in Stevens, it is characterized by almost absolute self-knowledge and self-awareness: Stevens's poems seek moments in which this mind affirms its self-sustaining presence and activity. Ashbery, meanwhile, explores the area of distraction and dispersion of the centrally posed agency found in Stevens.

Where Stevens's poem of change tends to culminate in intense moments of crystallizing self-knowledge, in which, as in the very last lines of the "It Must Change" section of "Notes," change is seen to emanate from "the freshness of ourselves" (344), Ashbery's poetics proposes a different variety of agency. In "The System," as we already noted, the capacity of living in and through change is equaled to a specific formula of absorbing the very casual, distracted, haphazard character of the oncoming events. "The System" is an attempt to work out a formula in which distraction and inattention appear to be efficient means of preparation to shifts in self-knowledge. Distraction, imperceptible loss of the track of thought, which

is then seen to find itself at a different time and place, gradual modulations and shifts of topics, the comings and goings of motifs, the zooming in and out of focus—these aesthetic strategies constitute the very fabric of Ashbery's long poetic prose. Through them, Ashbery is weaving his version of the continuity of consciousness in time: the moments of both clarity and distraction, of sudden influx of self-awareness and forgetting, are revealed as mutually related, brought together as inseparable ingredients of one medium.

It is this medium—the capacious flow of the poetic prose itself—that is temporality fleshed out in language. The prolonged discourse on the ease of gliding through time is not just an imitation of temporality: within the logic of the poem it is the temporal flow itself. The medium houses and enables the development of themes and motifs that accompany the temporal flow: varieties of happiness, forms of self-knowledge and distraction, learning and unlearning. We observe how Ashbery's moments of learning or absorbing forms of happiness are also forms of change, involving the necessity of forgetting and distraction. Unlike in Stevens, however, it is not the crystalline moments of self-knowledge, but, on the contrary, states of distraction, "forms of inattention," that enable an acceptance and symbiosis with change: "this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention . . . [and] you will feel that a change has begun to operate in you, within your very fibers and sinews" (80).

"This knowledge" is an ironic trope that reverses Stevens's increased moments of self-recognition. Ashbery's protagonist is an unstable, local subjectivity which proceeds and learns through opening up to the pervasive otherness brought to bear by the profusions of the text—the profusions whose flow insists on the loss of focus and attention. The text takes precedence over any locally posited human subjectivity embedded in it. In place of Stevens's centralized and abstracted mind, we have the procession of the textuality of the poem itself. The moments of intense revelation are also moments of self-dissolution:

all traces of doubt will have been pulverized by the influx of light slowly mounting to bury those crass seamarks of egocentricity and warped self-esteem . . . which you no longer need now that the rudder has been swept out of your own hands. (Ashbery 80)

However, it must now be observed that the text itself does reveal, build, or posit a variety of subjectivity: the flow itself is clearly hypothesized as a form of capacious consciousness capable of reflecting on itself. It structures

its own formula of memory and continuity within which local instances of distraction and forgetting are fed into “the system”—the “fibers and sinews” of the textual flow—and are stored in it. The flow of the poetic prose becomes a formula of knowledge, memory, a reservoir of possible local subjectivities. It has a capability of obliterating attention for the sake of storing memory, organizing it, and activating it at other moments. The continuity of this text as medium, its procession—with its oscillations of focus and attention—is precisely what must be maintained as a new variety of permanence. Stevens’s trope of evasions is not entirely dropped: it evolves from being a trope for a capably centralized mind—a mind which can always produce a new description of material reality—toward signaling the action of the poem itself.

While Ashbery’s local selves, the selves that are embedded in the blocks of prose and which are seen to come in and out of focus, are not permanent, “The System” proposes a different formula for a more permanent agency. The distractions of the text are dialogic—they represent the pervasive otherness of language itself, but the text is a continuous medium capable of maintaining this otherness in a prolonged state of conversational productiveness, which, as some critics have pointed out, is reminiscent of the activity of the analysand in therapy. According to Andrew DuBois, the permanence of this activity is precisely what is at stake, Ashbery’s references to the weather in the poem signaling “an ongoing process, a ‘continuity’ . . . [and] this process is crucially connected to remembering and forgetting, perhaps chiefly in a therapeutic relation” (69). The critic also identifies a tendency of the text to project an overarching, comprehensive atmosphere which he calls “a telling coalescence of those notions of process-without-necessary-progress” (70).

At one of the climactic moments of the poem the discoursing self, now tasked with facing the strong change brought about by falling in love, is able to compose and align itself with the onrush of strong feeling by relying on a mysterious “word,” which, although undisclosed, is believed to be buried in the past of the poem itself:

those eyes . . . are full of apprehension, waiting for this word that must come from you and that you have not in you. . . . Suddenly you become aware that you have been talking for a long time without listening to yourself; you must have said it a long way back without knowing it, for everything in the room has fallen back into its familiar place . . . *the word* that everything hinged on is buried back there. (95, emphasis added)

The fragment clearly turns our attention to the very aesthetic texture and fabric of the poem itself. It brings the activity of “so much talking”

(95)—the activity that is the very substance of the text—to the fore. The fragment delegates the power of organizing knowledge, self-knowledge and understanding, to the larger consciousness of the text, the text that is now evoked as a storage of activated, or, on other occasions, deactivated memory. The achieved organization of the moment is only possible through a “word” that belongs to the past of the text. Ashbery’s own forms of “evasion”—his fruitful rhythm of forgetting and remembering—are not an automatic gain: they are a product and achievement of the technique of the poem itself, which is pointed to in this fragment. While Stevens’s central consciousness is dispersed in Ashbery’s poem, its energies are overtaken by a self-affirming and self-sustaining textuality of the poetic prose. In Stevens, the temporal change is enabled by the faculty of an abstract mind and its imaginative capacity, which Stevens identifies in “Notes” as “our freshness.” In Ashbery, the freshness is decisively the poem’s: it is the capacious linguistic excess and profusion of “The System” that constitutes a permanent—unchanging—medium within which the concept of change is possible and meaningful. The textual medium takes over the function formerly reserved—in Stevens’s poetics—for quasi-Kantian faculties of an abstract mind projected by the poem.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS: THE POETICS OF PLENITUDE

In both Stevens and Ashbery the poetic discourse on change keeps reverting to and finding itself related to the conceptual framework of permanence. In Stevens, quite revealingly, the discourse on change in the central section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is disclosed at the end as a theatrical display sustained by the mind of an immobile observer. It is the mind’s faculty of the synthesizing imagination that sorts out the sensual cornucopia into “change,” thus making change a product of a faculty that is both mental and poetic. Thus Stevens’s title of “It Must Change” is an instruction: change will not occur of itself—it depends on the poetic effort of the abstract central mind that Stevens keeps projecting in many of his poems. We might point at this moment that it is this effort—the capacity to maintain this mind’s productivity—that is the chief concern of Stevens’s poetics. The poem’s subject—or the poem as subject—rallies the will to maintain such capacity. Stevens’s poetics is ultimately one of the constancy of a “will”; again, predictably, the volitional is revealed together with the trope of the mind as the theater of changes toward the end of the “It Must Change” section: “There was a will to change . . . / . . . / . . . too constant to be denied . . .” (344).

This poetic vehicle—the poetic will that also bespeaks “our freshness” in the fragment just quoted—seems, in Stevens, to belong to an abstract subject, a poetic-mental substance, that governs the circulations of the theater of change. In Ashbery, as I have tried to demonstrate, such poetic centralized mental substance is diffused and distributed over and amidst the excess of the poetic prose itself. The prose becomes a medium that takes over the synthesizing functions of Stevens’s abstracted central mind. The medium installs a rhythm of forms of knowledge and memory—in which learning and remembering are seen to be vitally connected to un-learning and forgetting—thanks to which these forms are allowed to progress and variously culminate toward forms of personal life: moments in which self-understanding occurs and is upheld amidst change.

We should be able, by now, to articulate the paradoxical positioning of the poetic texts in both poets toward the phenomena they purport to capture. Rather than this being a position of “description,” the relation of the text to the phenomenon is more that of the enabling medium. The poetic text not only occupies an epistemic outpost from which the phenomenon may be registered or recognized; it also seems to contain and enable the movement of the phenomenon itself, by showing how the phenomenon, or fact, cannot be separated from the methods of its registering and describing. The poetic text is a mother lode of various possibilities of describing reality: no matter if reality changes or not, if it is of monistic or pluralistic nature, if it is material or spiritual—the ascertaining of these “facts” will depend on interpretive/descriptive techniques and the poetic text presents itself as the prime engine from which the activity ensues.

Pragmatism is a method of coming to terms with such abundance. William James understood that the traditional dilemmas of philosophy are less important than the flexibility of the philosopher as he or she moves between the various possible descriptions of reality. He urged to pay attention to the movement itself—and called this epistemic stance “pragmatism.” It is my claim that the Emersonian pragmatist poetics found in Stevens and Ashbery is an aesthetic/poetic echo or reverberation of the abundance of interpretive possibility that attends the pragmatist inquirers as they apply themselves to the inquiry. As they do so, they find themselves amidst an abundant interpretive environment, and it is James’s main claim that we should care for this abundance itself.

The abundance, which keeps pushing the inquiring subject onto ever renewed paths of description, is discovered, slightly paradoxically, by James in his idea of “radical empiricism” which was to soon evolve into his “pragmatism”: “To the very last, there are the various ‘points of view’ . . . and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to the



other” (135). The finding is paradoxical: where the given fact of the matter was hoped to be found, the pragmatist inquirer encounters only a beginning of the further streaks of interpretive proceedings, whose strains are many. Here is how Charles E. Mitchell, writing about James’s indebtedness to Emerson, comments on the paradox:

The foregrounding of uncertainty and change is a key element of radical empiricism. The perceived construction of the world at any given moment is subject to revision . . . the way must be left open for successive “facts” and experiences to be brought into the frame. (91)

It is the frame that lays ground for the future “facts.” Much as this is a clearly epistemological stance, in the pragmatist Emersonian poetics it is hard to distinguish this attitude from aesthetics. The poems of this tradition are aesthetic objects which reverberate with an echo of abundant interpretive productivity: the productivity of constructing a description and the simultaneous awareness of the possibility of its modification. This leads to seeing how the frames of inquiry lay ground for the epistemic finding, and how the frames themselves may change. Pragmatism is an ongoing thought on the flexible capability of modulating the frame, a capability which, by constantly reconfiguring the movement of interpretation, produces an inescapable aesthetic reverberation. Stevens’s and Ashbery’s poems are interceptions of this very reverberation.

Theirs, then, is a poetics of plenitude in which the poem itself becomes a springboard for various future descriptions of the world. Change or stasis—these, amidst others, will be temporary names for the stages of the achieved body of descriptions. What the poem is concerned with most of all is its own role of maintaining the productivity of any epistemic activity. Where Stevens’s and Ashbery’s texts purport to deal with change, they do so successfully, but only at the price of identifying an element of permanence within themselves. This element is the richness and abundance of the interpretive capability put into motion by the work of the poem itself.

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