

## Minima Moralia and Opusculum Paedagogum *Imagined perspectives in Wallace Stevens and Theodor Adorno*

### Minima Moralia y Opusculum Paedagogum *Perspectivas imaginadas en Wallace Stevens y Theodor Adorno*

Artículo recibido el 27 de septiembre de 2018; devuelto para revisión el 29 de enero de 2019; aceptado el 28 de febrero de 2019.

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**Líneas de investigación** Imagen poética y teoría crítica; estéticas de vanguardia del siglo xx; estética y pedagogía en América Latina; estudios queer y políticas culturales.

**Lines of research** Poetic image and critical theory; 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde aesthetics; aesthetics and pedagogy in Latin America; queer studies and cultural policies.

**Publicación más relevante** “From Romana Gens to *cumbiatella* propaganda, migration an identity in Ital - Peruvian mobilities”, *Modern Italy* 24, núm. 1 (febrero de 2019): 21-44. DOI: 10.1017/mit.2018.28.

**Resumen** Imaginación y pedagogía. Los textos de Theodor Adorno buscan acercarse y comprender la vida dañada de los seres humanos luego de las catástrofes del siglo xx. Sin embargo, para el filósofo alemán, tan importante como el daño, es la reconfiguración de la buena vida. Asimismo, uno de los motivos principales de los textos del poeta estadounidense Wallace Stevens es cómo la imaginación puede dar una forma a las partes de un mundo que aparece como dañado, sin sentido. Este ensayo muestra que ambos, filósofo y poeta, comparten un acercamiento pedagógico a la crítica cuya dinámica es la imaginación estética. Al reconocer lo que no es idéntico al sujeto y, simultáneamente, que un entendimiento desnudo del mundo (es decir, no mediado por la subjetividad) no es posible, Adorno y Stevens buscaron reconciliar el objeto con el sujeto por medio de la imaginación o la fantasía que se configura como la herramienta para pensar “modelos críticos” (Adorno) o “ficciones supremas” (Stevens) que puedan devolverle el sentido al mundo no mediante su totalización, sino gracias a una praxis crítica, pero sobre todo estética.

**Palabras clave** Teoría crítica; dialéctica negativa; poesía estadounidense; imaginación; pensamiento identitario.

**Abstract** Imagination and pedagogy. The works of Theodor Adorno deal persistently with the damaged lives of human beings following the catastrophes of the twentieth century. However, for the German philosopher, no less important than that damage is the reconfiguration of the good life. Likewise, one of the leitmotifs of the works of Wallace Stevens is how imagination can give a form to the parts of a world that seemed ruined, meaningless. This essay shows that both philosopher and poet share a pedagogical approach to criticism whose dynamics is aesthetic imagination. Recognizing what is not identical to the subject and, simultaneously, the impossibility of a naked understanding of the world, not mediated by our subjectivity, Adorno and Stevens yearned to reconcile subject and object. For them, imagination becomes the tool to conceive of an “aconceptual synthesis” (Adorno) or an “abstract imagination” (Stevens) that gives sense to the world not through totalization but through an aesthetic reconstruction.

**Keywords** Critical Theory; Negative Dialectics; American Poetry; Imagination; Identity Thinking.

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**Minima Moralia**  
*and Opusculum Paedagogum*  
*Imagined perspectives in Wallace Stevens*  
*and Theodor Adorno*

Poetry and *materia poetica* are interchangeable terms.

WALLACE STEVENS, *Adagia*

...erstes Medium die Imagination ist.

THEODOR ADORNO, *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction*

**I**magination and pedagogy. The productive relation between imagination and aesthetics has accompanied the history of modern philosophy. A good example of this persistence is the prominent place Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) gave to poetry in the development of history.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Friedrich Schil-

1. The first connection I found between the works of Theodor Adorno and Wallace Stevens was the constellation of senses that the words *Minima Moralia* and *Opusculum Paedagogum* brought to my mind. I have not found a work that compares both authors; however, the translator of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, frequently mentions that Stevens' work "often provides a North American concordance to Adorno's thinking". See Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 64, 162, and 207-208.

2. On the role of *fantasia* as poetic and recreative instinct in Vico's historical knowledge, see

ler (1759-1805) considered the free play of imagination and understanding as necessary to build a free society; aesthetic experience played for him a major role in human communication.<sup>3</sup>

In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) political interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* set imagination as the center of intersubjectivity and the condition to understand the world and our being in it.<sup>4</sup> Continuing this tradition, the works of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and the American poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) proclaimed the urgency of connecting imagination and aesthetic experience as *a form of pedagogy*.

Both these authors share a pedagogical approach to criticism whose dialectical dynamics are aesthetic. Recognizing what is not identical to the subject and, *simultaneously*, that a naked understanding of the world, not mediated by our subjectivity, is not possible, Adorno and Stevens sought to reconcile the object with the subject. For them, imagination becomes the tool to think an "aconceptual synthesis" (Adorno) or an "abstract imagination" (Stevens) that gives sense to the world not through totalization but through an aesthetic reconstruction.

One of the main focuses of Adorno's works is damaged life of human beings after the tragic events of twentieth century. Nevertheless, for the philosopher, as important as remembering historical disasters is the reconfiguration of the good life after these events. Similarly, one of the persistent motifs of Wallace

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Cecilia Miller, *Giambattista Vico Imagination and Historical Knowledge* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 120-137.

3. "Aesthetic experience offers us an experience of negative freedom, freedom from determination. We are momentarily released from the prejudices, the tendency to disbelieve, the awareness of self and we are cast instead into a 'temporary oblivion'. And in that 'oblivion', free from moral and physical determination, that state of aesthetic indeterminacy, we are brought to an awareness of our moral freedom" (122), see Michael John Kooy, *Coleridge, Schiller and Aesthetic Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

4. See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992) and Wolfgang Heuer, "La imaginación es el prerequisite del comprender' (Arendt): sobre el puente entre pensamiento y el juzgamiento," *Cuadernos de Ética y Filosofía Política* 7 (2005): 44. Also important regarding the relation between imagination, aesthetics and philosophy are the works of John Dewey and Gaston Bachelard. For the vital role of imagination in their works, see J.J. Chambliss, "John Dewey's Idea of Imagination in Philosophy and Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 4 (1991): 43-49, and Edward Kaplan, "Gaston Bachelard's Philosophy of Imagination: An Introduction," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 33, no. 1 (1972): 1-24.

Stevens' work is how imagination can give a form to the fragments of a world that seems wounded, without meaning. Consequently, this essay argues that both, philosopher and poet, share a pedagogical approach to criticism whose dynamics is aesthetic imagination.

Recognizing what is not identical to the subject and, *simultaneously*, that a naked understanding of the world, not mediated by our subjectivity, is not possible, Adorno and Stevens yearned to reconcile the object with the subject. For them, imagination or fantasy becomes the tool to think "critical models" (Adorno) or "supreme fictions" (Stevens) that give sense to the world again not by totalizing it, but through a critical and aesthetic praxis. Turning philosophical tradition upside down and getting close to paradox, Adorno's models are "aconceptual synthesis" and Stevens' "abstract imagination" gives sense to the world not through totalization but aesthetic reconstruction. Through a careful close reading of their works, this essay aims to materialize Hullot-Kenter's intuition according to which Stevens' work "often provides a North American concordance to Adorno's thinking."<sup>5</sup>

The first two sections deal with the recognition of the object (the non-identical) and the role of imagination as cognitive tool towards a critical experience of the world. The third and four sections focus on what abstractness means for Adorno and Stevens and in what sense the modern work of art must be abstract. The fifth section briefly describes how Adorno's (and Stevens's) critical models (and supreme fictions) were forms of resistance to dogmatism in the context of May 1968. The last section offers some reflections about an Adornian constructive plan of action (pedagogy) through the design of critical models (aesthetics).

### *Still Life*

In fragment 21 of *Minima Moralia*, we read that "every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. He, who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes."<sup>6</sup> A gift is what is given to somebody, and it requires "*imag-*

5. Hullot-Kenter, *Things beyond Resemblance*, 64, 162, 207-208.

6. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (New York and London: Verso, 2005), 43.

ining the joy of the receiver.”<sup>7</sup> At the end of the fragment, Adorno introduced the possibility that the conciliation of organic life be itself a gift. When we talk about a gift, we think about the giver. However, in this instance, Adorno emphasizes the idea that the gift is not just a surrogate of our identity, but it is something that considers what is different from us, that is, the receiver; and this recognition is what prevents the disappearance of the relationship with the object, with the non-identical.

Stevens’ poem “Study of Two Pears”<sup>8</sup> starts with a Latin verse: “*Opusculum paedagogum*”. This verse is enigmatic since both words seem in the accusative form; thus, it would mean “to the little work, to a pedagogue”. However, *opusculum* is also to be the nominative form; in this case, the verse would mean “short work to a pedagogue”. The dictionary has an additional meaning: one who instructs in a pedantic manner.<sup>9</sup> Considering this second meaning, it is possible to infer that the poem is a little work (as *Minima Moralia*) directed to an old or totalizing understanding of the world whose pedantry is his identarian thinking (again as *Minima Moralia*). Likewise, *paedagogum* may be used as an adjective so that the verse would mean “little pedagogical work”.

The poem is divided in six stanzas. After the first verse, it says that “The pears are not viols,/Nudes or bottles./They resemble nothing else”. The title of the poem expresses its desire: the knowledge of organic objects, two pears; it is the encounter of the subject with the object. The second verse states that organic life is different from man-made objects (the viols and the bottles), but also that it is different from the human body as representation, as subjective art (“nude”, in this sense, is an artistic representation). In other words, the second and third verses express the difference between nature and culture but, at the same time, we are told that what we are reading is a “study”, an artis-

7. *Minima Moralia*, 43.

8. Wallace Stevens, *Parts of the World* (1942). All Stevens’ citations come from the *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997); specifically, the analysis focuses on “Study of Two Pears”, “The Poems of our Climate” and “The Immense Poetry of War” in *Parts of a World*, (New York: Knopf, 1942); “Notes towards a Supreme Fiction” (*Transport to Summer*, 1947); “The Ultimate Poem is Abstract” and “Angel surrounded by Paysans” (*The Auroras of Autumn*, 1950), “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (*The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination*, 1951); “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (*Uncollected Poetry*, 1936); *Adagia* (1930-1955); and *Materia Poetica* (1940).

9. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059;entry=paedagogus>.

tic form through which human beings relate to natural beings.<sup>10</sup> In Adornian terms, the poem is declaring that *Vorstellung* (conceptual representation) is not appropriate to express nature because organic objects “resemble nothing else”.

From the second to the fifth stanzas, a careful description of the two pears unfolds. This description is made in terms of the materiality of the organic object. The poetic voice seeks to depict the pears without the intrusion of historical descriptions, without any reference to man-made things. The reason for doing this is that representing nature together with culture has a name in art history, that is, *still life*. The name of the pictorial genre of modern Europe that express what subjectivism can make of nature: it freezes it. It is not a gift anymore, but something that we represent in our terms: oblivion of the object. The stanzas attempt, instead, to *present* the pears with words that *incarnate* them (making them bodies, flesh): forms, curves, surfaces and outlines. Likewise, the pears are full of colorful *nuances* (yellow, red, blue, citrons, oranges and greens); they are not black or white (binaries).

The materiality of the pears is emphasized in the third stanza: “they are not flat surfaces/having curving outlines./They are round”. Their fertility is also expressed by the words “stem” and “flowering”. The two last verses of the sixth stanza show that the non-identical should be taken into consideration in a study: “The pears are not seen;/as the observer wills”. These two verses are the maxim, the *minima moralia* of the poem. The pears are seen, that is, there is a relationship between *somebody* and the organic object. However, this vision is not controlled by the observer. The pears’ appearance (Adorno’s *Schein*) is simultaneously related to the one who sees, but it does not depend on the observer. Adorno’s fragment and Stevens’ poem ask for a *different relationship* between the one who observes (subject) and the organic life (alterity). As we will see, this relationship depends on imagination and it is closely related to the idea of *Darstellung*<sup>11</sup> (portrayal) which Adorno mentions in *Negative Dialectics*.

10. Likewise, “study” expresses the always preparatory status of representation, in other words, the impossibility of an unmediated representation of the object. In art, a study is a drawing, sketch or painting done in preparation for a finished piece; studies are often used to understand the problems involved in rendering subjects and to plan the elements to be used in finished works, such as light, color, form, perspective and composition; see Steven Adams, *The Barbizon School & the Origins of Impressionism* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), 31-32, 103.

11. Portrayal (*Darstellung*) “is not a matter of indifference or external to philosophy, but immanent to its idea. Its integral moment of expression, non-conceptually-mimetic, becomes objectified only through portrayal-language”; Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Den-

*Imperfection as the Paradise of Imagination*

The last fragment of *Minima Moralia* ends with this passage: “But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.”<sup>12</sup> The last poem of *Parts of the World* declares that “The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illuminates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact.”<sup>13</sup> As we saw, Adorno recognizes the non-identical as gift. However, the recognition of the object (of what is other) means neither the hypostatization of the “pure” fact of the positivistic social and natural sciences nor the historical resignation because of war. Adorno and Stevens emphasized another element pointing to a different kind of experience: imagination, fantasy.

Imagination is a mode of approaching reality that makes it possible to think of redemption not as an imposed reflection on facts. Instead, imagination portrays (*Darstellung*) reality as an image that illuminates the endless struggle with fact. Thus, imagination mediates dialectically between subject and object. In this sense, for Adorno and Stevens, poetry is endless experimentation with the form (*Schein*) as a means of immanent redemption: Stevens states in *Materia Poetica* that “poetry is a means of redemption”;<sup>14</sup> that “means” is always provisional and ever-changing, hence “all poetry is experimental poetry.”<sup>15</sup>

The following section focuses on “The poems of our climate” (*Parts of a world*, 1942). The first part of the poem shows “clear water in a brilliant bowl,/ Pink and white carnations. The light/in the room more like a snowy fair/reflecting snow”;<sup>16</sup> the first four lines introduce representation as reflection since it is light that makes it possible to reflect the object. Immediately after, however, the poetic voice reiterates “pink and white carnations” —one desires/So much more than that”. What is the sense of this desire? Paradoxically, this desire adds for more is expressed by the simplification of reality: “The day itself/is simpli-

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nis Redmond (2001), 29. For Adorno, *Darstellung* shows itself non-conceptually via language because “thinking becomes, as something which is expressed, conclusive only through linguistic portrayal; what is laxly said, is badly thought” (29).

12. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

13. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 251.

14. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 917.

15. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 918.

16. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 178.

fied: a bowl of white,/Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,/With nothing more than the carnations there”.

The second stanza shows the agency of this “complete simplicity” which is, hypothetically, able to stop once and for all human suffering (“stripped one of all one’s torments”) and renew subjectivity (“made it fresh in a world of white”); even in that scenario, subjectivity’s desire would not disappear since “still one would want more, one would need more,/More than a world of white and snowy scents.”<sup>17</sup> The second stanza then imagines an *unmediated experience* (Heideggerian *Ereignis*) capable of overcoming reflection (*Vorstellung*) but, simultaneously, recognizes its unsurpassable subjective character. For Adorno, experience is always mediated since it expresses the dialectical relationship between subject and object; the possibility of this pure presence is nothing other than the annihilation of alterity into the sameness of the ego that posits itself as God. This would mean to fall again into idealism whose heir, in the twentieth century, is Heidegger and his jargon of authenticity. Hence, the question that remains is why we “would need more”. The last stanza, related to the *endless* struggle with fact, states that the reason why subjectivity cannot be satisfied with *Ereignis* is the “*never-resting mind*”, in other words, imagination. It is worth to quote the stanza *in extenso*:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,  
So that one would want to escape, come back  
To what had been so long composed.  
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.

In an Adornian turn, the poetic voice declares that subjectivity wants to return to what is “composed” (fragmented, transient). In contrast to the pure experience of the “I”, the “composed” conveys mediated experience: it is neither *Vorstellung* nor *Ereignis*, it is *Darstellung*. In fact, human beings are composed because their formation depends on historical processes that give different layers of meaning to their existences; not being a pure unity (perfection), they can compose and decompose (imperfection). This self-recognition

17. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 179.

is not assumed with sorrow but with delighted irony: “the imperfect is our paradise”. This verse intertwines dialectically two Adornian notions: crevices and redemption. According to *Minima Moralia*, “knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.”<sup>18</sup> This comparison shows a double pair: crevices/imperfection and redemption/paradise.

In the last three lines, the poetic voice declares that imperfection is appealing to human beings (“it is so hot in us”) because it is the promised land of our restless imagination. And, *simultaneously*, delight (inseparable from our bitterness at imperfection) “lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.” In other words, human pleasure dwells in the composed materiality of the poem, in its appearance as experimental work-of-art. Note that even words and sounds, as the body of the artistic composition, are damaged and imperfect but, at the same time, they are persistent, unyielding to any totalizing perfection or simplicity. As we have seen, “The poems of our climate” can be interpreted as an Adornian *ars poetica* in the United States. If in the previous section, the recognition of the object (the non-identical) was the main topic, in this section, the role of imagination as a cognitive tool towards a mediated experience has been central.

### *Why it must be abstract? Iconoclasm and Ineffability*

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno affirms that “the new is necessarily abstract: It is no more known than the most terrible secret of Poe’s pit. Yet something decisive, regarding its content, is encapsulated in the abstractness of the new.”<sup>19</sup>

18. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

19. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), 20. In fact, Adorno mentions some reasons why modern art is abstract: 1) *it is a form of resistance*: “new art is as abstract as social relations have in truth become. In like manner, the concepts of the realistic and symbolic are put out of service. Because the spell of external reality over its subjects and their reactions has become absolute, the artwork can only oppose this spell by assimilating itself to it” (31); 2) *it is a provocation that challenges the illusion of social normalcy*: “if in monopoly capitalism it is primarily exchange value, not use value, that is consumed, in the modern art work it is its abstractness, that irritating indeterminateness of what it is and to what purpose it

Likewise, in *Transport to summer* (1947), Stevens affirms that the supreme fiction “must be abstract.”<sup>20</sup> In this section, I will describe what *abstract* means for Adorno and Stevens, and in what sense modern art must be abstract. If it is understood as what is opposed to concreteness, abstractness seems at odds with the author of the primacy of the object and the poet of reality. Calling into question this opposition makes it possible to overcome this impasse: are abstractness and concreteness really opposites?<sup>21</sup>

For Stevens, far from opposites, “imagination and reality are inseparable.”<sup>22</sup> The poem “Notes towards a supreme fiction” tells an ephebe to “begin by perceiving the idea/Of this invention, this invented world/The inconceivable idea of the sun”. The poetic voice talks about an “idea of the world”. This idea is invented, it does not belong to the world. World as we see it is a construction, a production. So, the first thing the ephebe (who is being educated by the poetic voice) should learn, if he wants to avoid identarian thinking, is expressed in the following lines:

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 (...).

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is, that becomes a cipher of what the work is. This abstractness has nothing in common with the formal character of older aesthetic norms such as Kant’s. On the contrary, it is a provocation, it challenges the illusion that life goes on, and at the same time it is a means for that aesthetic distancing that traditional fantasy no longer achieves” (21-22). For Stevens, “abstraction is a part of idealism. It is in that sense that it is ugly” (*The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 918). Both authors use “abstraction” in two senses: 1) the ugly/empty abstraction (*Aesthetic Theory*, 185) of idealism (which they reject) and 2) the abstraction as poetry of imagination which resists the pressure of reality (Stevens) and as a semblance which protests negatively against reality’s injustice (Adorno). This essay focuses on the second sense.

20. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 329.

21. As B. J. Leggett points out, “the reader who wishes to learn why ‘It Must Be Abstract’ from those who have written best on Stevens discovers two conflicting notions of abstraction, depending in part on whether he is viewed as the Poet of Imagination or the Poet of Reality”; “Why it must be abstract: Stevens, Coleridge and I. A. Richards,” *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Winter, 1983): 489-515, at 490.

22. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 660.

The poem shows what Adorno calls identarian thinking, that which denies what is different by trying to make it an image of itself; in this sense, all difference just vanishes reducing reality to a concept. The poetic voice includes itself when affirming that “the first idea” is not “ours”. In fact, as Adorno would affirm, human beings are always-already part of the dialectic of Enlightenment whose desire for domination erases any difference; the first step to reject identarian thinking is the self-awareness of this fact. Then, the poetic voice introduces the mythical and historical genealogy of the dialectic of Enlightenment. The emphasis of Stevens is not in the wound that reason produces in the object, as Odysseus with Polyphemus, but in the paradisiacal and biblical *locus amoenus* which posits human beings outside the realm of history.

In this sense, the Garden of Eden represents the realm of oblivious fancy and, aesthetically, a poetics of nostalgia that takes refuge in a place where everything is reflection. Within the poem’s dynamics, this mythical origin is the procreator of modern rationalism whose epitome is Descartes’ *res cogitans*. Again, rationalism *decorporealizes* human beings by rejecting their *res extensa*: matter, body, flesh. Thus, human beings return to a garden where culture and nature have become their instruments; in this case, it is Eve who makes air just a mirror of herself and her offspring, perpetuating thus their identarian progeny. This *locus amoenus* is nothing but a reflection of the original couple, it is a glass in two senses: they only see themselves in the beings of the world and, simultaneously, they have trapped themselves inside a prison of glass.

Connecting myth and history (Adam and Descartes), the poetic voice radically rejects the idea of a paradise lost since humanity is always-already in the glass of reflection that is described as a “second earth”. Myth and science as new mythology legitimate identarian thinking: in Descartes’ case, he cannot reject God, creator of a pure and indubitable cogito and guarantor of his philosophical enterprise. Stevens’ “second earth” is analogous to Adorno’s “second nature”,<sup>23</sup> the process of reification by which a historical entity forgets its tran-

23. For Lukács, this reified world (*Verdinglichung*) appears like nature “not in the Hegelian sense of a *sittliche* realm of Objective Spirit in which humans can feel at home but rather in the sense of a false consciousness in which the human origin of the human world has been forgotten”; Vogel, *Against Nature: the Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (New York: State University of New York, 1996), 17. For Adorno, reason’s drive to dominate nature turns into something like nature: “it promises human beings a power over natural forces that will give them happiness and autonomy in their lives but ends by submitting them to forces (now of second nature) that crush ever so much more strongly” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 53).

sience and erects itself as eternal and unchangeable. After these stanzas, the poem refers again to the primacy of the object:

But the first idea was not to shape the clouds  
 In imitation. The clouds preceded us.  
 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.  
 We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues.  
 The air is not a mirror but bare board,  
 Coullisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

The second line of the passage differentiates mimesis from what-is-not-mimesis. Mimesis is, in this sense, the Adornian *Vorstellung*, a representation of the object which does not consider what the object is and transforms it into a reflection of the identarian ego. Thus, “the first idea” (and we don’t know yet what it can be) is not mimesis-as-representation because this would forget the primacy of the object and believe that everything starts with the cogito positing itself as the creator of the whole.

The clouds, which preceded human beings, are nothing but a “muddy center”, they are obscure and confusing; they are not the transparent vision of the mystic before God. On the contrary, the center, which existed before humanity appeared, is covered with mud.<sup>24</sup> In the next line, the poetic voice talks about two myths: one that existed and one that began. The former refers to what Adorno calls the “existent”, it is reality which does not forget the object;

24. “Mud” can be interpreted as the decaying appearance (*Schein*) of representation (*Vorstellung*) as domination (Dialectic of Enlightenment). For Stevens, rational representation has historically covered the object with what-it-is-not, reason’s self-reflection. What Stevens’ imagination (Adorno’s *Vorstellung*) does is to uncover the object, take the mud out, not to find an original given but to obtain an expression that is the outcome of the dialectical interdependence between object and open thinking. This passage reminds us of Benjamin’s “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”, in “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940 (Boston: The Belknap Press, 2006), 392; the semblance (*Schein*) of this barbarism is the mud.

the latter is nothing but the mythical world in Adorno's sense: the reification of something transient which, at some point in time, "began".

The "myth before the myth" of Stevens's poem expresses Adorno's primary of the object described as "venerable and articulate and complete". It does not suffer the wound of identity (reflection's prison of glass) anymore. Our imagination springs from this myth; however, it is "not ourselves". Human beings, instead, are described as "mimics" in the sense of *Vorstellung*, and the "clouds", the impossible unmediated object, is portrayed as a pedagogue whose *minima moralia* eagerly imagines but finally rejects unmediated experience (Heideggerian *Ereignis*). This tension between yearning and rejection is emphasized through the description of air not as a mirrows (reflections) but as "bare board" (what imagination desires).

This portrayal of air deploys two Adornian aesthetic notions: first, the object (as an artwork) is not subjectivity's reflection because, if that were the case, it would have windows to reflect (*Vorstellung*). However, being a windowless monad (Adorno's description of an artwork), it is a receptive materiality or embodiment to which subjectivity can relate, but which cannot be defined once and for all. The adjective "bare" expresses the mode through which *the* object appears to human beings (emphasizing the agency of the object): analogous to a child's relationship with a toy, human beings should deconstruct history to *imaginatively grasp* (always failing but, as Samuel Beckett affirmed, failing better) the object.

For Stevens, the decline of nobility in poetry is caused by the divorce of imagination and reality, by the rejection of imagining the bareness of the object. Thus, Stevens admits to being unsure whether "the decline, not to say the disappearance of nobility is anything more than a maladjustment between the imagination and reality" ("The noble rider and the sound of words").<sup>25</sup> Then he affirms that

We have been a little insane about the truth. We have had an obsession. In its ultimate extension, the truth about which we have been insane will lead us to look beyond the truth to something in which imagination will be the dominant complement. It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to imagination and that the interdependence is essential.<sup>26</sup>

25. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 662.

26. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 662.

Stevens is talking about truth as subjectivity's reflection which Modernity has obsessively look for. In an unexpected Adornian turn, Stevens declares that this truth, cause of human insanity (the suffering of the world: injustice, wars, cruelty), can make human beings look beyond themselves into a space where a dominant imagination is complementary to and interdependent with nature; the attempt to *model* this space is the task of the poet. It is not difficult to think of Adorno's late text "Resignation" where he states that "open thinking points beyond itself."<sup>27</sup> For Adorno and Stevens, "we" are always-already inside the dialectic of Enlightenment. Hence it is not possible to reject reason, our "obsession with truth", totally since that would mean to regress to a pre-linguistic or nostalgic *locus amoenus* that can be the façade of bad collectivism in its fascist, communist or (neo)capitalist modes.

For Adorno, through open thinking (becoming aware of reason's dominating drive) human beings go beyond themselves to a space that is not here *yet*: this is the Adornian standpoint of redemption or Stevens' supreme fiction (the irrational as the *unknown*). Adorno's open thinking and Stevens' imagination express the human opening to the unknown as an alternative to self-reflection: "Artistic spirit raises itself above what merely exists at the point where the imagination does not capitulate to the mere existence of materials and techniques."<sup>28</sup> Politically, this assertion is polemical because it seems to suggest that it is possible to find a standpoint different from modern reason. This possibility rejects Habermas's never-ending reformation of Enlightenment *ratio* which he posits as the limit of human rationality and agrees with Jacob Taubes' claim that a "new concept of reason"<sup>29</sup> is needed.

Regarding irrationality, Stevens affirms in "The irrational element in poetry" that "primarily, what I have in mind when I speak of the irrational element in poetry is the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from

27. Adorno, "Resignation", en *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 289-293. For Adorno, "such thinking takes a position as a figuration of praxis which is more closely related to a praxis truly involved in change than in a position of mere obedience for the sake of praxis. Beyond all specialized content, thinking is actually and above all the *force of resistance*, alienated from resistance only with great effort" (293). As I will show, Adornian open thinking has the same role as Stevensian imagination: "resisting the pressure of reality" (*Collected Poetry and Prose*, 656).

28. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63.

29. Taubes, *From Cult to Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 232.

which poetry springs”<sup>30</sup> and “the irrational bears the same relation to the rational that the unknown bears to the known.”<sup>31</sup> For Adorno, this space is that of redemption and utopia: “the utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less—this too a form of relapse— objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization”;<sup>32</sup> every utopia must be expressed negatively by the semblance of the aesthetic material that shows materially and immanently the contradictions of its history. Let’s return to the poem to see what “extreme ascesis”<sup>33</sup> would mean for Stevens:

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was  
 A name for something that never could be named.  
 There was a project for the sun and is.  
 There is a project for the sun. The sun  
 Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be  
 In the difficult of what it is to be.

The sun has, simultaneously, a double meaning: on one side, it is the natural object as “bare board”; on the other, it expresses the truth human beings have been obsessively looking for, “Phoebus”. The poetic voice declares that modern subjectivity has made of the object a label which mirrors human desire for representation: Apollo. However, this god is just a name “for something that never could be named”. In this sense, the name, being a representation of the ego *obscures* the object like Adam did with the beings of the world.

Verbal tenses are important in this passage since the projects (self-projections) “were” in a time while the sun simply “is”. Immediately after this temporal distinction, however, the poetic voice points out that “there is” a project for the sun. The present tense of the verb “to be” indicates that this project is not enchained to the temporality of representation that attaches a name to an object. The present tense expresses the always unfinished attempt to name what cannot be named, it expresses the ineffability of the supreme fiction. While Adorno deploys an iconoclast aesthetic (his extreme ascesis), Stevens inhabits

30. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 781.

31. Stevens, *The Collective Poetry and Prose*, 791.

32. Adorno, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today,” *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, vol. 18, 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1996), 236-240.

33. Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” in *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 135-142, at 142.

the realm of ineffability; the sun cannot be represented once and for all, there is no baptism of the object but future and never-ending projects.

The object does not need ornaments or harmonies; instead, it should exist in the “difficulty of what it is to be”. This last verse is a metapoetic moment in which Stevens summarizes his aesthetic principles: the supreme fiction is not an idealized world; it shows the difficulty of existing through an alternative to identitarian thinking; that effort would be the task of poetry. In a letter to Henry Church, shortly after the “Notes” were published, Stevens remarked: “I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The ‘Notes’ start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract (L, 430).”<sup>34</sup> The analysis shows that an Adornian reading of Stevens is possible: seeing Stevens as an Adornian poet or Adorno as a Stevensian thinker. However, a question remains: why must the work of art be abstract? What does this term mean for Adorno and Stevens?

*Why it must be abstract:  
Pressure of reality and de-familiarization of the object*

To understand the connection between Adornian and Stevensian abstraction, it is important to reconsider the finale of *Minima Moralia*:

Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects —this alone is the task of thought.<sup>35</sup>

In this passage, the perspectives which need to be gained are described through the tension of dialectical antitheses: 1) ruins and redemption (rifts, crevices, indigence and distortion are the semblances of the world seen in the messianic light; in other words, the messiah’s perspective shows the world as *facies hippocratica* in the Benjaminian sense of allegory); 2) possibility and impossibility (obtaining this perspective is the simplest of all things since open thinking shows the world’s *facies hippocratica* but it is also the utterly impossible

34. Leggett, “Why it Must be Abstract: Stevens, Coleridge and I.A. Richards,” 497.

35. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

thing because it presupposes a “standpoint at a remove [...] from the bane of existence”);<sup>36</sup> or 3) the conditional and the unconditional (the more thinking tries to achieve an unconditioned perspective of reality, the more “unconsciously, and thereby catastrophically, it falls into the world” since there is no unmediated perspective). The passage ends by pointing out that what matters is the *task of thinking*, not the reality or unreality of redemption.

The traditional interpretation of this passage has emphasized two elements: on one side, the rifts and crevices; on the other, the reality or unreality of redemption. The former alludes to avant-garde artworks and the immanent configurations of their materials; the latter, to the paradoxical character of redemption and the *supposedly* pessimistic message according to which the only alternatives to identarian thinking are negative dialectics and extreme asceticism. Without denying those interpretations, it is important to reconsider two aspects of the finale: first, the productivity of a dialectical approach to the “crevices and rifts”; the second, the radical importance of the “task of thought” in relation to the production of “perspectives”. I will show that this reenvisioning of *Minima Moralia*’s Finale can clarify Hullot-Kentor’s affirmation that Stevens is the American poet most akin to Adorno.

It is not so difficult to count the members of Adorno’s aesthetic canon: Kafka, Beckett, Celan and Schoenberg; there are more but not as canonical as those four. However, in his 1945 “Theses upon art and religion today”, Adorno introduces one more figure: Proust. Considering Adorno’s primacy of the object, Proust fits in since the *madeleine* becomes the possibility of a secular infinity through the remembering of “things past” thanks to Proust’s “obsession with the concrete”: “It is he who, in a non-religious world, took the phrase of immortality literally and tried to salvage life, as an image, from the throes of death.”<sup>37</sup> Thinking about Proustian narrative, it is possible to ask where the “rifts and crevices” are. Conscious about that objection, Adorno stated that Proust “converted his novel, blamed today for self-indulgence and decadence, into a hieroglyphic of ‘O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory.’”<sup>38</sup> Regarding the primacy of the object, Proust goes well, but where are the ruins?

The problem lies in the fact that there is a tendency to interpret the ruins (rifts, crevices, indigence and distortion) literally and not dialectically. In a lit-

36. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

37. Adorno, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today,” 240.

38. Adorno, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today,” 240.

eral sense, it is difficult to understand why Proust fits in Adorno's aesthetic cannon. Instead, from a negatively dialectical perspective, it makes sense; two elements can clarify the "perspective" of this dialectical interpretation: 1) hieroglyphs and 2) the quotation of Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* (15: 55-56); both reminding us of Walter Benjamin.

In the first case, allegory, as a prefiguration of dialectical image, works as a hieroglyph that expresses fragmentarily and magically, in the Renaissance's interpretation of Egyptian culture,<sup>39</sup> the decomposition of a historical whole: allegory (Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*) shows, as a monad, the social whole in ruins, its *facies hippocratica*: the petrified hieroglyphic becomes an image of the universality of death.<sup>40</sup> In the second case, Paul's quotation relates to Benjamin's articulation of the Jewish and the Christian Messiah whose point of intersection is their praxis in the historical world, and their arrival at the most unexpected moment.<sup>41</sup> For Adorno, the object becomes a secularized messianic fragment that shows dialectically the crevices of the world: it is in this sense that Proustian aesthetics fits in Adorno's cannon.

Proust does not show the ruins negatively but positively: portraying the primacy of the object (*Darstellung*), the novel expresses, inversely, the injustice that dominates the decadent city, the contemporary world. In fact, the *madeleine* has been transfigured into a messianic object through which it is possible to remember the distortions of the world. For instance, Beckett's mastering of aesthetic material portrays the contradiction of society by a hyperbolization of lost meaning among human beings; this is what we call the absurd. Proust's mastering of the aesthetic material portrays the contradiction of society by a hyperbolization of the felt contact with a forgotten object because of its ordinary function. Facing the forgotten object (the Odradek in Kafka's *Die Sorge des Hausvaters*), it is possible to remember the forgotten ruins of the world.

39. Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 119.

40. In this sense, "the object fragmented and rescued from the abyss is rescued as a hieroglyph, as rune, and is thus revived as dead, empty, redeemed only as a meaningless image, in order to receive an assigned allegorical meaning. [...] This piling up of redeemed but now empty fragments *shatters the mythic context of wholeness and completeness in which the fragments were initially present*. The fragment becomes pieces of mysterious puzzle waiting to be solved" (Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 121; my emphasis).

41. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 389.

This dialectical interpretation of the finale elucidates why Adorno included Proust in his 1945 *Theses*.

The second element of this interpretation deals with the “task of thought”. I consider that reading Adorno from *our* actuality as Latin Americans means to shift the emphasis from the reality or unreality of redemption to the necessity of imagining and producing *functional perspectives*. What I will try to “propound,” at the end of this essay, is that Adorno’s *positive* critical philosophy promotes a *personal perspectivism* (in this sense, he shares some features of French Christian Phenomenology and Latour’s materialist perspectivism). The productive force of Adorno’s Critical Theory is the tireless creation of perspectives in art, politics and every sphere of human praxis; this is the task of open thinking as imagination or *fantasy*. This productivity has been with Adorno from the beginning of his career, from his inaugural lecture “The actuality of philosophy” of May 1931:

Every other conception of models would be gnostic and indefensible. But the *organon* of this *ars inveniendi* is fantasy. An exact fantasy; fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate. If the idea of philosophic interpretation which I tried to develop for you is valid, then it can be expressed as the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question.<sup>42</sup>

In light of this quotation, *Minima Moralia* underscores not the reality or unreality of utopia but the “exact fantasy” which “demands to answer the questions of a pre-given reality [...] without going beyond the [...] elements”: this model is Adorno’s *ars inveniendi* whose main feature is the interdependence of imagination and reality where the former “will be the dominant complement”<sup>43</sup> of the latter. In the “Notes,” the Stevensian voice declares that “the first idea is an imagined thing.” This idea is what preceded humans as representational beings; it is the cloud or the sun (the “pre-given reality” of the object). But, for Stevens as well as for Adorno, this “first thing” is always

42. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Telos* 31 (March 20, 1977): 120-133, at 131.

43. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 622.

mediated and conditioned (*Darstellung*), it “cannot deny its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional.”<sup>44</sup>

The outcome of the interdependence of reality and imagination is what Adorno calls *ars inveniendi* expressed through an exact fantasy: Stevens’ supreme fiction. These critical models should be tirelessly multiplied; this is the never-ending task of thought as the *vinculum* between object and thought. The models (or poems as *attempts to become the supreme fiction*) are perspectives that cannot be defined: “I am evading definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixed”;<sup>45</sup> or with crevices and rifts, distorted and indigent. As we have seen, imagination and fantasy are the guiding forces of Adorno’s and Stevens’ aesthetics.

*What does “resistance” mean? Stevens’ Evading  
the Pressure of Reality and Adorno’s May 68*

This section will focus on Adorno’s and Stevens’ political perspectives to show how the abstract is the notion that expresses the *constructive* impulse of their works which promote a personal resistance to the pressures of society. At the end of the first section of the “Notes,” the poetic voice declares that

The major abstraction is the idea of man  
And major man is its exponent, abler  
In the abstract than in his singular.  
More fecund as principle than particle,  
Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,  
In being more than an exception, part,  
Though an heroic part, of the commonal.  
The major abstraction is the commonal,  
The inanimate, difficult visage. Who is it?

44. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

45. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 664.

The enigmatic character of these stanzas is confirmed by its last question; as Adorno suggests in *Aesthetic Theory*, the work of art should be enigmatic<sup>46</sup> so that it can express the inexpressible negatively. The poetic voice considers that “man”, a name for human beings, has more potentiality, is “abler in the abstract than in his singular”. This affirmation seems to disagree with what has been said about Stevens’ poetics and Adorno’s critical theory regarding the primacy of the object. However, the disagreement is only apparent since what is emphasized in the poem is the labor of the abstract understood as the interdependence of reality and imagination that makes it possible to describe human existence. At this point, it is possible to answer why the supreme fiction must be abstract.

This must<sup>47</sup> point out the duty of remembering what identitarian thinking has forgotten, “the fact that” what is mediated by language is not a radical alterity. For the poetic voice, a radical other, the “singular”, does not exist. On the contrary, humanity is the outcome of imagination, Adorno’s *ars invenienti*. Abstraction as imagination is Stevens’ alternative to identitarian thinking. Regarding aesthetics, Adorno’s late style (especially *Aesthetic Theory*) deploys subtly romantic undertones in his understanding of imagination and semblance (related to Schiller and Hegel but, above all, to Coleridge.)<sup>48</sup> Stevens

46. The dialectical and irresolvable tension between saying and concealing which characterizes the enigmaticalness (*Rätselcharakter*) of the artwork is the recognition of its conceptual incomprehensibility (*Unverständlichkeit*). Interpreting an artwork is not solving the enigma (conceptual reduction); instead, it is understanding enigmaticalness as what cannot be synthesized or harmonized. This feature gives the avant-garde artwork its abstract and fragmented character which expresses immanently and without violence the contradictions of social reality that cannot be solved by means of a conceptual system. For Adorno, understanding the enigma depends, *primarily*, on imagination: “Understanding in the highest sense—a solution of the enigma that at the same time maintains the enigma—depends on a spiritualization of art and artistic experience whose primary medium is the imagination (*erstes Medium die Imaginatives ist*), (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 122)” this understanding “approaches its enigmaticalness not directly through conceptual elucidation, but rather by *concretizing its enigmaticalness*” (122): Proust’s *madeleine* or Stevens’ pears; my emphasis.

47. For Leggett, “the must of ‘It Must Be Abstract’ is not prescriptive—i.e., ‘it should be abstract’—but a sign of the necessary condition of the symbolizing process of any fiction or myth” (“Why it must be abstract: Stevens, Coleridge and I. A. Richards,” 513), in other words, Stevens’ interdependence of reality and imagination.

48. On the relation between Schiller and Coleridge, see Michael John Kooy, *Coleridge, Schiller and Aesthetic Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), especially chapter 6.

was influenced by Coleridge's understanding of imagination and its relationship with the artwork. Let's return to the poem.

The fecundity of man is not measured in static terms ("particle") but through dynamic ones ("principle, force"). The idea of man, in this sense, is a force which deploys as a "heroic part of the commonal" which is the "major abstraction." "Man" and "the commonal" are interdependent notions since human beings cannot exist outside linguistic and social mediation; thus, the always changing idea of man is a monad of the social whole. These stanzas show the interdependence between man and commonality expressed in the "well-imagined" idea of man. The end of this passage is a question: "Who is it?"

What rabbi, grown furious with human wish,  
 What chieftain, walking by himself, crying  
 Most miserable, most victorious,  
 Does not see these separate figures one by one,  
 And yet see only one, in his old coat,  
 His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town,  
 Looking for what was, where it used to be?

It is a forgotten rabbi; this character shows himself as "miserable" but, simultaneously, as "victorious." It is not difficult to remember the Jewish messiah or the small and ugly theology of Benjamin's *Theses*.<sup>49</sup> He is a "chieftain," a leader who sees particular beings and connects them in an "only one." The figure of the beggar who, as the messiah, can appear in any moment is expressed by the "old coat and the slouching pantaloons." This figure is looking beyond

49. Regarding this figure, two opposed interpretations have been given. On the one hand, Gershom Scholem considered that Benjamin was sincere in putting his faith in theology; on the other, Adorno, in "Reason and Revelation" (2005), affirmed that this figure was "the infinitely ironic description of theology as an ugly creature who must now keep out of sight" since it has become a servant of instrumental reason. I became aware of this difference thanks to Professor Peter Gordon (2015). I think that introducing the aesthetic moment in the debates about Adorno's philosophy makes it possible to find a way out of this impasse. Instead of choosing or rejecting theology, it seems that for Adorno, and for Stevens, the task of thinking is to find a different notion of rationality that rejects its domineering drive (in its instrumental or theological-political forms) and, at the same time, takes advantage of its value as a critical tool towards human freedom. In this sense, aesthetics and imagination (the essay as form, the artwork; Adorno's *ars inveniendi*) would be the processes that could carry out this urgent task. However, this debate goes beyond the scope of this essay.

the town for “what was, where it used to be”. He sees the past and looks for something there; the appearance of this character, his ruins, is what Modernity has always tried to forget: the singularity of the person who, through abstract imagination or imagined abstractness, expresses “the final elegance” of human beings as critical thinkers; he “propounds”

Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man  
 In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,  
 It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect  
 The final elegance, not to console  
 Or sanctify, but plainly to propound.

The forgotten rabbi designs imagined perspectives and puts together (combining materials) the “final elegance”. For Adorno, each person must propound critical models. This is what I call *personal perspectivism* and I consider this the reason why he was so skeptical about the student movement of May 68.

As we have seen, for Adorno and Stevens, identarian thinking cannot grasp the conceptually ineffable but aesthetically expressible “supreme fiction.” What they propose is what I call the “resistance”<sup>50</sup> to the pressure of reality. In the following lines, three notions of Stevens and Adorno will be analyzed: 1) hedonism, asceticism and nobility (society); 2) the pressure of reality and resistance (personhood and perspectives); 3) poets (critical citizens) as designers of exact fantasies (critical models).

50. Stevens is aware of the criticism that can be made against his idea of “resistance” or “evasion” (both his terms). For that reason, he distinguishes between resistance/evasion and the pejorative sense of evasion: “My own remarks about resisting or evading the pressure of reality mean escapism, if analyzed Escapism has a pejorative sense, which it cannot be supposed that I include in the sense in which I use the word. The pejorative sense applies where the poet is not attached to reality, where the imagination does not adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental” (Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 662). Similarly, Adorno, in “Resignation,” points out that his understanding of critical theory is inevitably connected with social reality, and that resisting to the pressure of praxis for praxis’s sake means to posit a critical model that can lead to a real change in society: open thinking (or imagination) “takes a position as a figuration of praxis which is *more closely related to a praxis truly involved in change than in a position of mere obedience for the sake of praxis*. Beyond all specialized content, thinking is actually and above all the force of resistance, alienated from resistance only with great effort” (Adorno, “Resignation,” 293; my emphasis).

1) In “The noble angel and the sounds of the words,” Stevens talks about Plato’s “gorgeous nonsense”: the famous image of the soul as a charioteer and two winged horses. Stevens affirms that it is easy to self-identify with the figure: “The truth is that we have scarcely read the passage before we have identified ourselves with the charioteer, have, in fact, taken his place and, driving his winged horses, are traversing the whole heaven.”<sup>51</sup> What Stevens is pointing out is that Plato’s figure is, basically, an imagined model to understand the idea of human being; the soul is a metaphor, an entelechy. The basic attitude towards poetry is for it to be believed as a model, as a well-imagined mode of understanding ourselves and the world better.

The question of its reality or unreality hardly matters. These modes are the outcome of the task of thought: the perspectives. Plato was using an imagined perspective, a critical model, to express what he thought was more precise and truer regarding human existence. The question today is that “Plato, however, could yield himself to this gorgeous nonsense. We cannot yield ourselves. We are not free to yield ourselves.”<sup>52</sup> Today we are not free to believe in an idealized figure because modern human beings have experienced “a failure in the relation between reality and imagination” caused by identarian thought. For Stevens, this failure is due to the “pressure of reality.”

2) For Stevens, “a variation between the sound of the words in one age and the sound of words in another age is an instance of the pressure of reality.”<sup>53</sup> This declaration relates to the immanent law of material in Adorno’s aesthetics in the sense that the artistic materials express (regressively or non-regressively)<sup>54</sup> the spirit of each historical time. Thus, it is important to remember that, for Adorno as well as for Stevens, artistic materials can follow the spirit of their time or can go against the grain: on one side, the art dictated by the *Reichskulturkammer*; on the other, the poetry of Celan. Stevens, similarly, points out “an asceticism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense in a multiplicity of associations. These conflicts are nothing more than changes in the relation between the imagination and reality.”<sup>55</sup>

51. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 643.

52. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 644.

53. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 650.

54. Benjamin’s aestheticization of politics and politicization of aesthetics; “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 242.

55. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 650.

In this passage, Stevens is talking about two ways of “killing”: one is the rejection of change because of a pessimistic understanding of history seen as an inevitable tendency towards annihilation and/or apocalypse. On the other hand, the hedonists, whose Adornian personification is the consumer, dissipate any real difference, the non-identical, in the infinite multiplicity of metonymic associations that the market offers as commodities.<sup>56</sup> For Stevens and for Adorno, these killings happen because there is no dialectical relationship between “reality and imagination” (Stevens), “object and thought” (Adorno).

When talking about thought, Adorno is thinking of an assemblage of the whole “out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight and concentrically arranged all on the same level; their constellation, not their succession, must yield the idea”;<sup>57</sup> these are Adorno’s critical models whose temporality is not successive or conceptual but constellated (*Darstellung*). In this sense, for Stevens, if human beings accept the pressure of reality, another term for the dialectic of Enlightenment, we will be unable to build *critical and imagined models of reality*. The only way to escape the trap of identarian truth is “the resistance to this pressure”;<sup>58</sup> in this affirmation, Stevens gets close to Adorno’s “Resignation.”

3) In “Resignation,” Adorno points out that the critical thinker should resist the dictatorship of praxis understood as bad collectivism or sacrifice, he “should not let himself be terrorized into action, he is in truth the one who does not give in.”<sup>59</sup> For Adorno, more important than being part of a mass is being able to imagine critical models; this is the task of open thinking that “points beyond itself.”<sup>60</sup> This thinking, abler when most imaginative, is “actually the force of resistance”<sup>61</sup> to the “pressure of reality.”<sup>62</sup> For the poet, this pressure of reality is “the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as

56. In this sense, Adorno states that “the category of the fragmentary —which has its locus here —is not to be confused with the category of contingent particularity: The fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 45); it is not the capricious consumer’s freedom but the self-conscious resistance and opposition to the world’s injustice and reason’s dominating drive.

57. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 364.

58. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 626.

59. Adorno, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today,” 292.

60. Adorno, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today,” 293.

61. Adorno, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today,” 293.

62. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 656.

well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual.”<sup>63</sup> However, a “possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become deadlier tomorrow.”<sup>64</sup>

Thus, the poet should be able to think against the grain; this does not mean to avoid historical reality (each time, deadlier). Instead, it means not to be a slave of its pressure, of its demands: “do it yourself!”, publicity and propaganda, religious revival as bad collectivism, consumerism as false freedom and, finally, praxis for praxis’ sake; the latter was Adorno’s description of the student movement of ’68. Despite the historical value of students’ actions which Adorno recognized,<sup>65</sup> he was thinking of a different praxis (imagined perspectives, critical models) that he believed students were forgetting because of the “pressure of reality”: reality was urging students to answer the violence and the lack of imagination of society with violence (Molotov bombs) and lack of imagination (propaganda).

Adorno was standing up for the creation of critical models whose personification is the miserable and glorious “rabbi” capable of propounding these models or supreme fictions. The emphasis of imagination as the *vinculum* of reality and thought is stressed by Stevens: “reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality, that is to say, the imagination and society are inseparable.”<sup>66</sup> This citation makes it clear that the “commonal” (society) and the “idea of man” (imagination) are “interdependent.”<sup>67</sup> For Adorno and Stevens, then, temporality is also important because even if it is inevitable that imagination adheres to social reality, and vice versa, it is likewise inevitable that imagination “always attaches itself to a new reality” because “it is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality.”<sup>68</sup>

63. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 656.

64. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 659.

65. In a letter of August 6, 1969 (the very day of his death), Adorno replied to Marcuse: “I am the last to underestimate the merits of the student movement: it has interrupted the smooth transition to the totally administered world. But it is mixed with a dream of madness, in which the totalitarian resides teleologically, and not at all simply as a repercussion (though it is this too). And I am not a masochist, not when it comes to theory”; *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung: von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail, 1945-1995* (2. Dokumente), trans. Esther Leslie from Wolfgang Kraushaar (Hamburg: Roger & Bernhard bei Zweitausendeins, 1998).

66. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 660.

67. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 663.

68. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 656.

Imagination cannot exist outside its time; in fact, its materials express the contradictions of its history. However, the poem of imagination, the act of the mind that is the poem, goes beyond the present reality by trying constantly, but always unsuccessfully, to portray the “supreme fiction” whose ineffable yet yearned for semblance is the reconciled subject and object. So, why should the work of art be abstract? Because it is imagined: what is imagined is abstract in the sense that is not familiar to us: Beckett’s absurd, Celan’s obscurity, Proust’s *madeleine*, Stevens’ study of two pears. The “estrangement” of things makes it possible to imagine negatively what a utopian supreme fiction would look like. Adorno’s estrangement is the dialectical offspring of the defamiliarization or “ostranenie” (остранение) of Russian formalism.<sup>69</sup>

Adorno’s estrangement shows how the artist, through the mastering of the artistic materials, expresses the unresolvable and extreme contradictions of the world: who can have a conversation as weird as that of the characters of *Endgame*? Who can be so cruel as the character of “In the Penal Colony”? Who can remember everything just by the scent of a pastry? What is the use of studying two pears? Why don’t we just eat them? The first reaction of a person who reads a work of these authors is the following: I don’t understand it, what does it mean? However, Adorno and Stevens do not use dogmatically the idea of de-familiarization but connect it with thought-as-imagination (abstraction) in the enigmatic concept of semblance. What is semblance (*Schein*)?

Semblance is how the artwork as phenomenon appears in front of human beings. For the rationalist tradition, semblance was an inferior way of perception because it meant a distorted perception, an illusion (as when a human being is drunk or mentally ill). In that sense, for Kant, the word *Erscheinung* is the perceptible phenomenon. This changed with the advent of Romanticism: for Hegel, *Schein* is how a phenomenon appears essentially, glowing and shining (*scheinen*). For Schiller, semblance is the appearance of the phenomenon that makes it possible to make an aesthetic judgment.<sup>70</sup> Adorno propounds, instead, that *semblance is a defamiliarized truth that can only be produced by the force of imagination as the human faculty that treats dialectically the object and the subject, the pear and the eye (Darstellung)*.

69. Viktor Shklovski, “Art as Device, Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 5–22.

70. For the philosophical history of “Schein,” see Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Press, 1992), 39–40.

In this sense, what Adorno does is to constellate the concept of semblance and proposes it as a critical model to understand the present in relation to the future and the past: truth, redemption, de-familiarization and imagination are connected immanently in the artwork as an instance of a critical model of society. Stevens, as Leggett demonstrates, takes his idea of imagination from the romantic tradition, specially, from Coleridge. The relationship of Adorno and romanticism (specially Coleridge) should be researched further but it goes beyond the scope of this essay. I finish this section with two quotes of Stevens and Adorno that express what would be the aim of their thought:

It would be enough  
 If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed  
 In This Beautiful World of ours and not as now  
 Helplessly at the edge, enough to be  
 Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,  
 And in that enormous sense, *merely enjoy*.<sup>71</sup>

Real giving had its *joy in imagining the joy of the receiver*. It means choosing, expending time, going out of one's way, thinking of the other as a subject! The opposite of distraction. Just this hardly anyone is now able to do. [...] Every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. He who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes.<sup>72</sup>

I have tried to illuminate Stevens' poetry through Adorno's critical theory and vice versa. In this section, I have shown 1) Adorno as a Stevensian social theorist and Stevens as an Adornian poet; 2) the importance of imagination and de-familiarization for a re-interpretation of *Minima Moralia's* Finale; and 3) that, for Adorno, the condition for historical change is personal awareness of human ability for imagining critical models, supreme fictions. It is *personal*<sup>73</sup> *self-reflection by means for imagination as the primary medium of interpretation* that Adorno thinks can lead the world to a real revolution.<sup>74</sup>

71. Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 369; my emphasis.

72. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 40-41; my emphasis.

73. Each person is a unique monad connected to other monads. The opposite of the personal would be, in this sense, the massive.

74. For Stevens, "it is the privilege of poetry to preserve us from mistaking our notions either

*Final reflections*

Even after renouncing idealism, it (philosophy) cannot dispense with speculation, albeit in a wider sense than Hegel's all too positive one, which idealism exalted and which fell into disrepute along with it.

ADORNO, *Negative Dialectics*

The typical criticism when talking about Adorno's politics is that his negative dialectics are just "negative", they do not give an action plan. This interpretation misses the point of Adorno's work: dialectical aesthetics. When talking about art, Adorno affirmed that "art's substance could be its transitoriness";<sup>75</sup> for the philosopher, art's substance, traditionally understood as eternal and unchangeable, shows historically the ruins of reality; and dialectically it expresses, through a "refracted semblance", eternity and resurrection: "artworks are semblance in that they help what they themselves cannot be to a type of second-order, modified existence; they are appearance because by virtue of aesthetic realization the non-existent in them, for whose sake they exist, achieves an existence, however refracted."<sup>76</sup>

I have mentioned the *constructive* desire of Adorno's critical theory. In this section, I want to propound what this constructiveness looks like. What Adorno's dialectical aesthetics rejects radically is the domineering drive of modern reason (Dialectic of Enlightenment). Adorno's strongest critique is directed at the expansionist character of reason.<sup>77</sup> In this sense, he cannot give a path to follow because that would amount to expanding himself onto others; instead he "propounds" critical models, that is the task of this "new type of human being"

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for things or for ourselves. Poetry is the completest mode of utterance" (Leggett, "Why it must be abstract: Stevens, Coleridge and I. A. Richards", 515); in other words, poetry is the "major nobility" of imagination, and imagination is the force to "propound" critical models.

75. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 3. In this sense, before introducing Proust, Adorno states that "only by reaching the acme of genuine individualization, only by obstinately following up the desiderata of its concretion, does the work become truly the bearer of the universal" (Adorno, "Theses upon Art and Religion Today," 240).

76. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 109.

77. For Taubes, for instance, the danger of reason is that it is based on the logic of power whose intrinsic feature is extension as (identarian) imposition; for this reason, it is necessary that "a critique of the theological element in political theory rests ultimately on a critique of the principle of power itself" (Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture*, 232) because only when "the universal principle of power is overruled will the unity of theology and political theory be superseded" (232).

that Hullot-Kentor talks about.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Adorno's monad should be understood graphically: being windowless,<sup>79</sup> it cannot be reflection of anything. It is, instead, a contact (*vinculum*) with every other monad. Imagine the situation: the monad cannot "fuse" with another monad, but they can enter in contact through materially felt contact: their way of connection is not reason (identity) but their skins, their appearances, their semblances (*Schein*) as incarnation of what they are (in phenomenological terms, their flesh).

Consequently, the expansionist drive that a monad can have (or believe it has the right to have) is "negated" by the skin-like semblance of any other monad. If objects and individuals are monads and monads have the form of artworks, we can infer that Adorno understood the beings of the world as artworks whose expression is not expansive but intensely felt and imagined. For Adorno, world(s) should strive to become *horizontal constellations of monads*: what would these look like? We cannot know them conceptually since each monad radically and incessantly reconfigures the whole. Adorno thinks that, if we approach individuals and/or objects as artworks, what matters is not their supposed truth but what they express: their singularity, their difference which is immanently non-violent.<sup>80</sup>

78. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 2007.

79. "If I should have to express it boldly, I should borrow a metaphor famous from the history of philosophy. I should compare the work of art to the monad. For Leibniz, each monad 'represents' the universe, but it has no windows, it represents the universal within its own walls. That is to say, its own structure is objectively the same as that of the universal" (Adorno, "Theses upon Art and Religion Today," 239).

80. As we have said, for Stevens, poetry is the "major nobility" of imagination, and imagination is the force to "propound" critical models, perspectives: "*But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same.* Possibly this description of it as a force will do more than anything else I can have said about it to reconcile you to it. It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives" (Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 665; my emphasis). This force rejects "sameness" and by means of a violence "from within" avoids "violence from without". This is the characterization that Adorno gives to the artwork: "To win such perspectives without caprice or violence, wholly by the feel for objects, this alone is what thinking is all about" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247); in other words, art can use the violence of reality without exercising real violence by means of imagination as its *medium*.

The semblance of critical-models or imagined-perspectives is not successive but *lasting* in Bergson's sense of duration: when we try to measure a *moment* (a *monad* in Adorno's terms) it is gone because one measures an immobile and quantitative point, whereas time is mobile and incomplete; since the design of critical models is an *art of monads*, a constellated perspective cannot be measured *only* in conceptual terms (successively, causally, scientifically) because a perspective of this kind is neither a unity nor a quantitative multiplicity. Duration can be expressed indirectly through images that can never reveal a complete picture; it can only be grasped through imagination in Stevens' terms. For this reason, Adorno affirms that "through duration art protests against death; the paradoxically transient eternity of art works is the allegory of an eternity bare of semblance. Art is the semblance of what is beyond death's reach. To say that no art endures is as abstract a dictum as that of the transience of all things earthly; it would gain content only metaphysically, in relation to the idea of resurrection."<sup>81</sup>

Duration is the possibility of understanding what is beyond death's reach, that is, "transience". For this reason, art is paradoxical because, by means of rejecting any eternal synthesis (whose faith is death), it makes appear (*Schein*) what always "is": change. In this sense, art reaches, negatively, what is ineffable, eternity. Adorno makes a methodological hypothesis ("it would") saying that the proposition "no art endures" is the paradoxical appearance (*Schein*) of artworks whose ever-returning transience, as its incapability of representing positively a reconciled world, is nothing but a secularization of the idea of resurrection as the possibility that a *transient phenomenon incarnates reconciliation negatively*. Surprisingly, each attempt to express reconciliation (or the supreme fiction) would be a negative pre-figuration of resurrection; in a similar fashion, Benjamin says that "every second was the small gateway through which the Messiah might enter."<sup>82</sup>

In other words, what Adorno is suggesting is that each and every monad matters when designing critical models of society. It seems that Adorno imagined the world as a friendly society of poetic philosophers (or philosophical poets) where every person is able, as a work of art/monad, to self-express freely.

81. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 27.

82. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.

This position is not quietist; on the contrary, it shows how a community can transform itself: becoming critical thinkers does not mean to reject any collective action (Adorno didn't do so); it means being critical enough and being aware that "massive" or "populist" praxis prevents us from imagining critical models, falling easily in the dialectic of Enlightenment: expansion and domination.

In a time where religious and political fanaticisms seem to reappear, the works of Theodor Adorno and Wallace Stevens demand a plan of action that should be taken seriously: put imagination to work with the aim of designing and implementing critical models or supreme fictions that enable the self-expression of individuals as part of a community. Instead of rejecting the notion of community, both authors strove to design a different experience of the common that is not based on *what it is* (human beings as substances) but *on the shared contact between what is different and that is always changing* (human beings or any object as artworks/monads).

This contact is possible through the *participation in semblance* (*Schein*) of all what exists: the pears resisting ego's identification drive. What is common is what appears and is always changing, all human beings share the transience of their appearances (surfaces, nuances, bodies, flesh) which makes their transformation possible. In this sense, and regarding Stevens' poetics, Charles Altieri affirms that participation "provides both an ontological and social goal for treating the text as something objective and shareable. It matters then that *as* we become aware of our pleasure in participating we also recognize how important the grammar of *as* can be to this enjoyment";<sup>83</sup> participating in the world means to recognize joyfully the differences (*Schein*) that inhabit it and, *simultaneously*, design critical models or supreme fictions that make these differences appear. It is always a work-in-progress.

To be coherent with this plan of action, any attempt at imposing a universal understanding of human beings (procedural reason, secular democracy, neoliberal capitalism, etc.) must be aesthetically criticized. It is our duty, as poetic philosophers and philosophical poets, not to impose our concepts on other worlds or delegitimize what is different from us, the non-identical, but

83. Charles Altieri, *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 131.

to make it appear and shine<sup>84</sup> with all its (im)perfections and with the aim of enriching what is common to all of us: *our world(s)*:

The yellow glistens.  
 It glistens with various yellows,  
 Citrons, oranges and greens  
 Flowering over the skin. ❀

84. “Shine’ is etymologically related to the German noun *Schein* (its near-homophone) and the verb *scheinen*. Both noun and verb are key notions in modern aesthetic theory. English translators of authors such as Nietzsche and Adorno habitually struggle with *Schein*, often going for ‘semblance’ or ‘appearance.’ Hegel famously defined the beautiful as ‘das sinnliche *Scheinen* der Idee’—the sensuous appearance or ‘shining’ of the idea’; Steven Lütticken, “Shine and Schein.” *e-flux Journal*, 61 (2015): 5.