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“These Immeasurable Mysteries”: Rites of Passage in Stevens and Cummings

MEGAN MILOTA

IN HIS STUDY of religious beliefs and practices among Americans, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Wade Clark Roof observes that “whether churchgoer or not, the subjective world of the American [is] a space open and spiritually revisable. To be American [is] to allow for cognitive and experiential shifts, to make and remake religious worlds” (153). Roof uses terms such as “lived religion” (157) and “quest culture” (Roof and Caron 119) to describe his countrymen’s preference for a personal sense of spiritual meaning. If Roof’s assessment is correct, then America provides an unusually open space where spiritual ideas and faiths may be freely negotiated and combined according to individual preferences. This has a bearing on the solitary and contemplative tendency that George Lensing has identified in several of the country’s greatest writers. As Lensing proposes, “The great isolation of Hawthorne, Dickinson, Robinson, and Stevens suggests a peculiar disposition of many American writers: their self-consciousness, their distrust of the world beyond an immediate circle, and, above all, the great inward probing that their art variously discloses” (*Poet’s Growth* 48). In her own reflections on American religious poetry, “That Highest Candle” (a title paying homage to Wallace Stevens), the novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson speculates, furthermore, that “If there is a single subject upon which the gaze of the major Americans has been fixed since Whitman and Dickinson, it is surely human mortality, consciousness thrown into sharp relief by the fact that consciousness as we know it will cease” (138).

In this essay, I will use as a starting point the idea that many American poets are interested in a solitary contemplation of death, and that this confrontation with the end of consciousness is informed by their ever-adapting belief systems. I would like to push the image of a privately questing artist one step further by proposing a specific hypothesis: the engagement with mortality can trigger a kind of mystical experience that harkens back much farther than the faith and practices of America’s Protestant settlers—an experience that is more akin to those undergone by Eleusinian initiates. My focus on Greek mysteries has an affinity with Edward Clarke’s recent comparative study of Yeats and Stevens, in which he sets out to uncov-

er and situate the anagogic elements in these two poets' later writings. Instead of contrasting Stevens with his Irish peer, however, I have chosen to juxtapose two mainstays from American anthologies, Stevens and E. E. Cummings, and read them as modern mystagogues of an unsuspected kind.¹ My use of an ancient occult tradition as a means of comparison is meant merely as a framing device to help us conceive of the two poets' spiritual inclinations and gestures in their late work. It should not be confused with the assertion that Stevens and Cummings were active occultists like Yeats, Ezra Pound, or T. S. Eliot. Leon Surette has already covered the influence of theosophists and orientalist, such as Madame Blavatsky and Allen Upward, on modernist poets. Yet his definition of occultism as "metaphysical speculation . . . about the nature of ultimate reality and of our relation to it" (*Birth* 13) is sufficiently abstract and capacious to be relevant also for my attempted reading.

"I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF YOU AS A KIND OF NEIGHBOR": AMERICAN AFFINITIES

At first glance, it may seem like a strange exercise to discuss Stevens side by side with Cummings. The two poets' writings and lifestyles were very different, as they both insisted. Cummings reportedly "despised Stevens as 'a business man': how could he be an artist?" (Kennedy 452). Stevens, in turn, condemned Cummings' stylistic habits during a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951 when he dismissed poetry "in which the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations. These have nothing to do with being alive" (*CPP* 746, qtd. in MacLeod 44). Cummings, a self-proclaimed "poet and painter" (qtd. in MacLeod 37), would likely have defended his poems as attempts to honor his commitment to two media simultaneously. One of the aptest examples in this respect remains his frequently anthologized picture poem about a falling leaf, which originally opened *95 Poems* (1958):

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(CP 673)

Even Helen Vendler, who has been largely dismissive of Cummings, once admitted that poems such as this constitute Cummings' "most original and charming contribution to English verse" (*Part* 324).

As Glen MacLeod has documented, Stevens and Cummings conducted an intermittent correspondence, and their biographies connect them in more ways than we might expect. Both writers were born and raised in the Northeast, and the natural landscapes of their youths populate their poems. They both attended Harvard, and although Cummings was fifteen years younger, they were both witness to a gradual but pivotal change in the nature of higher education taking place around the turn of the century: the broadening and secularizing influence of the social sciences and the slow drift away from religion as the dominant frame for understanding human behavior. The result was a gradual displacement of the clergy as the "final arbiters of knowledge" at the university (Wacker 254). In fact, Cummings' own father, who was a renowned Unitarian minister and Emersonian, was among those who opened the doors to the secular sciences: in 1891, he taught the first course in sociology ever offered at Harvard (Moore 233–34).

While Cummings never explicitly described himself as a transcendentalist, the effects of his upbringing as a minister's son can be seen in much of his work. For Cummings, personal growth was a key aspect of his belief system. In the 1938 introduction to his *Collected Poems*, he addresses his ideal audience, setting it off from those he calls "mostpeople" because "you and I are not snobs. We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing; the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves" (CP 461). Cummings believed in an ideal world that intersected the human and natural realms during moments of epiphany, usually brought on by intense feelings of love (Cline 90). For instance, he writes that the unifying love felt by two individuals can lead to a glimpse of the immortal, where "one's not half two. It's two are halves of one" (CP 556). Unlike his more cerebral or artistically detached and impersonal contemporaries, Cummings frequently and unabashedly proclaimed love's role in creating, as he called it, "a naturally and miraculously whole human being—a feelingly illimitable individual; whose only happiness is to transcend himself, whose every agony is to grow" (*six nonlectures* 111). One of Cummings' popular love poems declares his preference for emotional experience over intellect and convention by arguing that "since feeling is

first / who pays any attention / to the syntax of things" (CP 290). As he grew older, though, Cummings' confidence in the transcendental powers of growth and love was shaken. Norman Friedman notes that his final publications reveal "a greater awareness of pain, loss, and emptiness, and a correspondingly greater sense of the difficulty of transcendence" (315). In addition to his customary appraisals of love and his biting political satires, Cummings' later publications also include poems about the failure of his body and the faltering of his faith. Thus, he writes in *95 Poems* that "a total stranger one black day / knocked living the hell out of me" (CP 730). The stranger turns out to be the reflection of his aging self and is met as both a "fiend" and an "immortal friend."

By contrast, the contemplation of a world without God was an inherent facet of Stevens' work throughout his poetic career. Guy Rotella sums up the difference in Stevens' and Cummings' worldviews when he writes that "in Stevens the will to believe is just that, an act of will, a necessary, beautiful, useful, but—in any absolute sense—finally futile imposture; in Cummings the will to believe is one with believing" (283). After a childhood contentedly steeped in the doctrines and traditions of the Presbyterian church, Stevens shifted toward a reverence that was unbound by church walls, where "One might preach the country as a kind of earthly Paradise" (letter to Elsie Moll, qtd. in Lensing, *Poet's Growth* 52). Although he came to call himself "a dried-up Presbyterian" (L 792), the church retained a purpose in Stevens' contemplative life alongside with nature. Each stimulated his imagination in different ways, and although as a young man he wrote that it was "Impossible to be religious in a pew" (L 86), Stevens also admitted that "it is *very* impressive to go to church if you do not go mechanically" (L 132). According to Milton Bates, Stevens acknowledged that both reality and the spiritual were creations of the individual mind (48), and he wrote that "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (CPP 901). In the wake of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Matthew Arnold and Friedrich Nietzsche, Stevens thought that imaginative poetry could replace the void left by an imaginary God, and he strove in his writing to create "a poem equivalent to the idea of God" (L 369–70). As a result, "Stevens seems often on the verge of claiming for poetry a metaphysical agency, even if, characteristically, the assertion of such power seems virtually indistinguishable from a thwarted yearning" (Sharpe 69). David Jarraway, in his book *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief*, explicitly draws attention to the evolving nature of Stevens' definition of and relation to God, calling it a "repetitive quest" (6). This is consistent with Roof's formulation of Americans as spiritual seekers; it also explains how, toward the end of his life, Stevens began "to understand poetry as a kind of transcendence-in-immanence" (Mutter 762). What all these critics collectively define is a contemplation of belief that is both the stimulus and subject of the poetic exercise. Their observations support the image of Stevens as a

spiritually questing, creative American—much like Cummings—and they provide the critical foundations that allow me to undertake a comparative study of the forms and manifestations of the two writers' respective poetic pilgrimages.

In *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, Lensing suggests a relation between Stevens' summer poems and Christian mystical experience, particularly the "dark night" trial meant to result in an orgasmically induced transcendent experience of the divine spirit (277). This is similar to the initiation rituals in the pre-Christian Dionysian mystery schools both in their method and in the season in which such experiences occurred. Rather than retread old critical ground, however, I would like to focus on a few of Stevens' autumn and winter poems here, linking them to the Eleusinian mysteries in which Dionysos played a significant role as the god "of poetry rather than ritual, of poetry touched and deepened by mysticism" (Harrison 543). Instead of looking for evidence in Stevens' and Cummings' entire oeuvres, I will limit myself to their later poems as these contain more frequent and lucid instances of thanatopsis.

"AWAKENED FROM SUMMER'S GREEN TRANCE":
PREPARING FOR THE THANATOPSIS

The rites of Eleusis and the cult of Demeter held sway in the Western world for more than two thousand years, and "All authorities agree on the preoccupation of the Mysteries with the life after death, and on the chthonic character of its rights" (Surette, *Light* 50). Eleusinian mystery knowledge was passed down orally from one hierophant to another. While this makes a conclusive summary of the rituals impossible, veiled references to the rites can be found in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Plato's simile of the cave in *The Republic*. Historians have deduced with a relative degree of certainty that the preparation of Eleusinian initiates occurred in two phases, called the Lesser and Greater Mysteries. The Lesser Mysteries were celebrated in Athens in the spring in honor of Persephone's return from Hades. Their primary function was to purify, cleanse, and endow the proper feeling of reverence and expectation in initiates in preparation for the Greater Mysteries. These took place at the temple of Demeter in Eleusis during the month of Boedromion, or late September (Mylonas 243). In the months leading up to the Greater Mysteries, a neophyte was supposed to develop an open and accepting stance toward the divine. William Dean has recently discussed a similar shift from a negating or "apophatic" to an affirming or "cataphatic" theological stance in Stevens' poems. He argues that in the poet's later work, "The balance . . . shifted from denying knowledge of God to experiencing a God that is unknown" (192). I would like to examine this shift by approaching it through the lens of an initiation or personal trial.

Read from this perspective, the poems of Stevens and Cummings that celebrate the physical pleasures of summer should also contain an acknowledgment of the trial of self-confrontation to come with the changing of the seasons. For that reason, I am skeptical about Lensing's assertion that Stevens' summer poems simply "celebrate the fictions of his faith" (*Seasons* 275). They also contain traces of his acknowledging the upcoming experiences of eradication in autumn and winter. For example, Stevens admits in "The World Is Larger in Summer" (the second of his "Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It") that even when the "sensuous summer stood full-height," his feeling of contentment was already waning and "Left only the fragments found in the grass, / From his project, as finally magnified" (*CPP* 437). "What We See Is What We Think" also contains a note of foreboding, for "At twelve, the disintegration of afternoon / Began, the return to phantomery, if not / To phantoms" (*CPP* 392). At noon, the height of summer and the midpoint of the year, the trees are "as green as ever they would be," with everything afterwards constituting a disintegration, a graying and dulling of the ecstasies of summer. Likewise, in "Lebensweisheitspielerei," Stevens describes how "Weaker and weaker, the sunlight falls / In the afternoon" (*CPP* 429). As summer's hope and life-giving forces begin to wane,

Little by little, the poverty
Of autumnal space becomes
A look, a few words spoken.

Each person completely touches us
With what he is and as he is,
In the stale grandeur of annihilation.
(*CPP* 430)

In this case, the autumn evokes a feeling of tenderness in Stevens. He can empathize with his fellow human beings and his aging self, but this does nothing to ease Stevens' apprehension about death's indiscriminate annihilation. Here Stevens unsuccessfully strives for what Caroline Spurgeon calls a mysticism of love and beauty that "gives magnificent utterance to the belief that change is not decay, but the law of growth and progress" (55). John Keats, who has been described as a practitioner of this type of mysticism, can claim that "We fall by course of nature's law," but that we are surrounded by "A power more strong in beauty, born of us / And fated to excel us" ("Hyperion" II.181, 213–14). The poverty of the late summer offers no such comfort for Stevens.

For Cummings, the prospect of approaching autumn can also offer clarity and calm to a mind temporarily beguiled by the summer: "awakened from / summer's green trance" Cummings returns to a sober reality where "Mountains are mountains now; skies now are skies—" (*CP* 675).

In this instance, Cummings looks forward to “that white sleep” of death that will reveal a “deeper magic” if only he can muster “the courage to receive time’s mightiest dream.” Like Stevens, though, Cummings does not always admit a readiness to accept his fate. A piece from his final collection, *73 Poems* (1963), proposes that “if seventy were young / and death uncommon” or if “november would be may,” he could enjoy eternal life without “frown[s]” or “foe[s]” (*CP* 798). Yet Cummings cannot sustain his long list of hypotheticals, and the reality of his age and impending mortality results in “a deduction / which (be it false or true) / disposes me to shoot / dogooding folk on sight.”

“O COME, TERRIBLE ANONYMITY”: CONFRONTATION AND TRANSFORMATION

The ruins at Eleusis show an inner temple, called the Telesterion, where the most sacred nocturnal celebrations and mystical rites likely occurred. According to Aristotle, initiates did not receive any formal indoctrination through lessons or lectures; rather, they were made to feel, suffer, and experience certain impressions and moods. The tripartite initiation rituals consisted of the *dromena*, *deiknymena*, and *legomena*: those things that are to be enacted, shown, and spoken (Mylonas 261). These rituals likely included a theatrical reenactment of Persephone’s capture and descent into Hades followed by Demeter’s agonized search for her daughter. The ultimate purpose of the rites was to trigger an individual revelation that the cyclical forces of nature were a visible testament to an underlying immaterial reality. The enactment of Persephone’s yearly return and Demeter’s renewed interest in the natural world assured initiates that the human soul could go through an all-encompassing inner transformation that would provide glimpses of a possible afterlife. More broadly, the Eleusinian mysteries imparted a greater understanding of death and what occurred after death, imbuing the initiate with a feeling of confidence both in the eternal soul and in the ultimate goodwill of the gods.

Stevens’ autumnal poems showcase a gradual acknowledgement of the metaphysical through their descriptions of what we might call the *dromena*, *deiknymena*, and *legomena* provided by nature. “The Course of a Particular,” for instance, which is set in the transition from autumn to winter, thematizes the stasis that Vendler argues was common in Stevens’ late poems (*Last Looks* 26). It also takes the first step toward an explicit admission of chthonic insight. In the poem, Stevens relates to the reader what is enacted, shown, and spoken in the tableau of autumn’s last dead leaves rattling on the branches of trees. While this performance means that “the nothingness of winter becomes a little less” (*CPP* 460), Stevens cannot feel truly heartened; the scene fails to provide him with a sense of hope. While he observes how “the leaves cry,” he notes that “It is not a cry of divine

attention" and the leaves "do not transcend themselves." It may seem at first as if Stevens looks at and hears the leaves, but fails to make a consol-ing connection to his own life. He concludes with a subtle use of apopha-sis, however, adding that the leaves cry

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.

(*CPP* 460)

As Harold Bloom points out, "Leaves that do not transcend themselves are not leaves that utter a cry, and such a cry testifies to the presence of fantasia" (*Wallace Stevens* 357–58). Read from this perspective, the descrip-tion in "The Course of a Particular" is one of a subtle eschatological expe-rience. Stevens stops short of completing his metaphor in the poem; he is content to leave the trees "without meaning more," thereby resisting the temptation to draw easy—even clichéd—connections between the last hanging leaves and his own mortality. These connections are what the readers expect, and the surprise of the final stanza, where we are told that the leaves will not mean anything more than what can be heard in the "fi-nal finding of the ear," makes the absent conclusion to the poem's built-up metaphor more resonant by drawing attention to the futility of language in conveying a sense of revelation. Marilynne Robinson has described a similar experience when writing prose:

You can create an absolutely dazzling metaphor that seems to be resolving things and pulling things together and reconciling things and making sense of things, and then you can collapse the metaphor, and what you're left with is an understanding that's larger than you had before, but finally it is a legitimate understanding because you know it's wrong or you know it's imperfectly partial. (qtd. in Schaub 240–41)

By exposing the failure of the metaphor, in other words, Stevens reveals the ultimately indescribable presence that remains outside the pale of lan-guage.

The swaying treetops in "The Region November" also speak, but "On the level of that which is not yet knowledge"; they tell of "A revelation not yet intended. / It is like a critic of God, the world / And human na-ture" (*CPP* 473). According to Nancy Prothro, the poem reveals that "our knowledge of death, the knowledge that fills our life with meaning, is finally inarticulable and life finally meaningless" (356). I prefer to read this poem instead as an admission of Stevens' evolving cataphatic stance. Stevens must first become a critic of God before he is ready to contemplate the plausibility of His intentions. In the last stanza, Stevens manages to

rupture the melancholic stasis of his supposed detachment and reengage his creative forces through the subtle manipulation of language:

Deeplier, deeplier, loudlier, loudlier,
The trees are swaying, swaying, swaying.
(*CPP* 473)

Stevens tweaks the adverbs “deeply and loudly” used in the first stanza (*CPP* 472), making new English words out of old ones and thereby providing an acknowledgement of “both the virtual life of the non-human and its virtual capacity to ‘say’” (Pearce 131). In other words, even if he cannot translate the “revelation” that the trees express (*CPP* 473), Stevens can at least admit that they exist independently of his mind and that their immanence is not merely of his own invention. Furthermore, the poetic craft displayed in the poem provides “aesthetic satisfaction (intrinsically valuable experience) that, in itself, gives life worth, even religious worth” (Dean 190). In this sense, “The Region November” may be regarded as effectuating a tentative shift toward a cataphatic voice.

Finally, “Of Mere Being” constructs the most complete and explicit image of what exists “at the end of the mind” (*CPP* 476) by providing readers with an undeniable and explicit example of a spiritual affirmation and evidence of a transformative experience. Jennifer Bates has provided a useful reading of the poem through the interpretive lens of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*; she argues that the incomplete nature of the metaphors, the fact that they do not reveal the underlying essence supposed to be represented by the bird and the palm, “waken” us from our habitual understanding of what a metaphor—and a poem—should do, thus quickening “our desire to find the new in the given” (159). The poem again highlights the poetic problem of putting into words something that is “Beyond the last thought” (*CPP* 476). The palm and the bird in the poem cannot be understood by “human meaning” and are “Without human feeling” because they are beyond the realm of human emotion or temporality. They represent both the site of departure and the place of return. Stevens uses language here to achieve an aesthetic approximation of a state of being that cannot be fully fathomed by the intellect. For all its beauty, the “fire-fangled feathers” are but a dim reflection of what lies beyond the edge of human comprehension (*CPP* 477). As Edward Clarke argues, however, “God exists in the labours of a poet, and so the divine inheres in the style of a poem” (208); in this controlled, simple, and elegant example, the “divine” manages to shine through. For those readers, or neophytes, who are eager for some chthonic revelation or comfort, the poem provides ample *dromena*, *deiknymena*, and *legomena* for meditation.

One thing we learn by juxtaposing Stevens with Cummings is that even what could be considered Stevens’ most mystical, hierophantic poem still maintains a degree of distance and abstraction in treating the subject of

to transcendent hope" (298), the parenthetical phrasing at the end of the poem adds an important aspect of ambiguity:

dream, is to
taste
not (beyond
death and
life) imaginable mysteries
(CP 674)

Here Cummings could be taken to say that nature provides a taste of its "not . . . imaginable," eternal mysteries. Alternatively, he could be saying that the autumn afternoon does not reveal anything beyond the immediately physical. The plurality of interpretations built into the poem is indicative of Cummings' doubt about the possibility of life after death—specifically, it "shows Cummings' common assumption that believing *is* knowing to be far less sure than before" (Rotella 299).

In many of his late poems, Cummings indicates an unwillingness, or inability, to completely accede to a belief in God and an afterlife. Yet in "Now i lay (with everywhere around)," he speaks in the first person about his approaching death and evokes nature as an independent, external, and eternal force. Cummings contemplates the comfort that the sunset and "the great dim deep sound / of rain" (CP 816) bring. Rather than being a prelude to a description of dreariness, darkness, or decay, the rain heralds "a gently welcoming darkestness." Like Stevens, Cummings appears to find solace in the fact that dying is just one of nature's cyclical processes, such as a rain storm or dusk, and is therefore not something to fear:

now i lay me down (in a most steep
more than music) feeling that sunlight is
(life and day are) only loaned: whereas
night is given (night and death and the rain
are given; and given is how beautifully snow)
(CP 816)

In this poem, Cummings plays with the various meanings of the word "given." Night is a given in that it is an inevitability, something that has always and will always occur. To Cummings, this seems to be the only certitude, as if life and day are but temporary alterations in the underlying, original darkness of death. But "given" also evokes a person or entity that actively bestows the night, death, and "beautifully snow," or (in my extrapolation) divine grace, upon the receiver. Seen from this perspective,

the poet lies down to sleep, or die, confident of the existence of a more noble and generous reality—one that provides humanity with the gifts of nature, day, night, and spring. Yet this kind of reality, which is supposedly beyond conscious knowledge, can be accessed only in sleep or death:

now i lay me down to dream of(nothing
i or any somebody or you
can begin to begin to imagine)

(CP 816)

The first, third, and fifth of the poem's six stanzas begin anaphorically with an expanding fragment of the final line: "now i lay me down to dream of Spring." The interrupting parenthetical phrases in each stanza provide suspense and tension, preventing the reader from seeing the line in its entirety until the very last stanza. This structural choice forces the reader to be an active participant in the ongoing construction of the poem. The final line then offers the complete, comforting revelation that death is but one of multiple recurring states of being.

"AS IF NOTHING HAD BEEN CHANGED AT ALL": THE RETURN TO THE COMMON

After the conclusion of the Eleusinian celebrations and initiation rites, there was no obligation to stay at the worship site, to attend subsequent rituals, or to follow any prescribed rules of conduct; initiates could return to their normal lives and habits, presumably enriched by their participation in the autumnal rituals (Mylonas 280). This leaves open the possibility that initiates could later recall—but not repeat—the experiences and sensations of their mystical ordeal. It also reveals a faith that is by no means expected to be consistent or constant—a faith susceptible to doubt, denial, and even incredulity.

An example of the return to doubt can be found in *73 Poems* (1963), where Cummings bemoans the fact that

christ but they're few

all(beyond win
or lose)good true
beautiful things

(CP 805)

Cummings calls the robin a beautiful but short-lived creature "who / 'll be silent in / a moon or two." The poem ends here, with none of Cummings' customary transcendental consolations or evocations of love. There is no

mention of eternal life after death for the robin or the poet. Likewise, in a seemingly atypical summer poem, "The Green Plant," Stevens complains that "The effete vocabulary of summer / No longer says anything" (CPP 431). The summer's glorious colors are "falsifications from a sun / In a mirror, without heat" that will merely die in the autumnal "turning down toward finality[.]" Stevens describes a hostile environment that "Glares, outside of the legend, with the barbarous green / Of the harsh reality of which it is part."

The complete cycle of revelation and doubt can also be seen in "As You Leave the Room"—a reworking of the briefer poem "First Warmth"—where Stevens summarizes his lifelong quest for a satisfying sense of belief. In John Dolan's assessment, "Stevens presents, respectively, the terror and the faith that were the elements of his outwardly stolid life" (172). The title and the opening words suggest that Stevens addresses an audience, but it is unclear whether the italicized "You" is the reader or "Today's character," one of the poet's many personas (CPP 597). The poem is built around the image of the skeleton, but the first reference to "A skeleton out of its cabinet" is rather enigmatic: Stevens may be referring to a skeleton key here, the common name for the long, toothed keys commonly used in American cabinetry until the middle of the twentieth century. Read this way, Stevens asserts that the speaking "you," the character in the first stanza, is not out of place: he is a necessary key to Stevens' complicated personality. This character seems to be more on a quest to find positive evidence of the divine in the poet's corpus.

In the fourth stanza, however, the skeleton takes on another, more common figurative meaning, becoming instead a hidden secret, a source of embarrassment, or a skeleton in the closet, which Stevens wants to reveal in order to be released from the discomfort it has caused him:

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,
As a disbeliever in reality,

A countryman of all the bones in the world?
Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

Part of a major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality. . . .

(CPP 598)

Stevens admits his doubt, and the act of casting it momentarily aside results in "an elevation," or a sudden openness to the pristine silence of the snowy scene and the metaphysical quality it conveys. Dolan interprets the snow as a symbol for "that which is hidden or denied" (167), and perhaps Stevens hints at the brief mystical revelations of the divine that the snowy scene recalls, a revelation he "had forgotten." Yet the final stanza, which

builds a conspicuous anaphora, reasserts his ambiguous stance toward belief where “nothing has been changed except what is / Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all” (*CPP* 598). This return to the common mirrors the experience of ancient Eleusinian initiates: the revelation of the unrepeatabe and unreplicable is necessarily followed by a veiling of the once unveiled.

CONCLUSION

When reviewing Stevens’ and Cummings’ respective volumes of collected poems in 1955, the critic G. S. Fraser summarized the sentiments of his contemporary reading public, arguing that “Roughly, of course, we find ourselves fitting Mr. Cummings into a tough and native, Mr. Stevens into a cosmopolitan and sophisticated American tradition” (266). Fraser’s reference to an “American tradition” is especially apt for my analysis of these two poets’ beliefs as a form of personal quest. As more than ninety percent of Americans still profess a belief in God (Roof and Caron 123), it is not a stretch to assume that a fair number of readers is bound to approach Stevens and Cummings with the purpose of extracting bits of wisdom and inspiration, or allegorical and metaphorical scenarios, that can be used in their own personal systems of meaning. This presents a final—though probably unintended—cultural aspect of the two poets’ writings, as “So implicit and universal is the American religion that some of its poets can be unaware that they incarnate and celebrate it” (Bloom, Introduction xxviii). Stevens and Cummings may not have seen themselves as spiritual seekers, nor would they have claimed to have undergone a modern Eleusinian initiation, but this absence of any intentionality on their part does not preclude a contextualization of their poems within a contemporary spiritual quest culture and historical chthonic rites and myths, even if such a contextualization offers but one viable method for understanding their poetic representations of the end of consciousness. For, regardless of spiritual stance and religious affiliation,

death,as men call him,ends what they call men
—but beauty is more now than dying’s when
(*CP* 592)

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Notes

¹Although Yeats's position in modernist poetry criticism is secure, Cummings' is not. Yet Cummings continues to exert a strong popular appeal. According to a 2005 study published in *Historical Methods*, Stevens and Cummings are the third and sixth most anthologized American poets; in terms of the numbers of entries in anthologies, they both rank above Sylvia Plath and T. S. Eliot (Galenson 47). Gerald Locklin's informal survey of contemporary poets and critics reveals some convincing explanations for why Cummings' work keeps being so prominent: it is not his craft as a poet that is cited as the most enduring legacy of his work, but "his sense of fun and play, his open sexuality, his individualism, his political assertions and satires, his innate Americanness . . . and his basic vivifying humanity" (46). Paradoxically, the limited number of poems that may be accommodated in anthologies has been an asset to Cummings' artistic reputation: Helen Vendler has a point when she writes that he "remains a poet who is best represented by his anthologized self" (*Part* 329). Still, in most academic introductions to modernist American poetry, Cummings is depicted as a marginal figure or excluded altogether. In *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, for instance, he is mentioned only twice with regard to the critical reception of his work in the 1930s, while an entire chapter is devoted to Stevens. However, there has been a recent resurgence of academic interest in Cummings' poetry, especially within the field of linguistics. Since 1992, moreover, the annual publication *Spring* has devoted itself to the scholarly study of his life and work.

²Excerpt of a letter from Stevens to Cummings, dated July 8, 1944, as quoted in MacLeod 40.

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