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**Section:** Academic articles

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**Keywords:** Wallace Stevens; *technic*; speculative poetry; Jean Wahl; irrationalism

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**Received:** 16 April, 2021.

**Accepted:** 31 May, 2021.

**Published:** 15 July 2021.

**How to cite:** Groves, Adam Staley. "Wallace Stevens, *technic*, and the ethics of the imagination." *Inscriptions* 4, no. 2 (July 2021): 183–194.

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# Wallace Stevens, *technic*, and the ethics of the imagination

Adam Staley Groves<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

What would it mean to make the human fiction? This question is central to Wallace Stevens's theory of poetry. Here I consider an ethics of the imagination particular to what Stevens's "the poetry of thought" and "supreme poetry." Such an ethics may thwart what Martin Heidegger terms "enframing." Central to *The Question Concerning Technology*, enframing is compared to contemporary issues of social media which exemplify the exponential growth of *technic*. Stevens's early prose "The irrational element in poetry" is analyzed as an unwitting theorization of *technic* which offers a rebuke of enframing. Supporting Stevens's theory as critical vehicle, I discuss the relationship between Stevens and the unheralded French philosopher Jean André Wahl, particular to what both consider the "absolute object." Thus Stevens's human question, once considered the fourth tenant of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, "It must be human," concerns concepts of subjectivity informed by *technic*.

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## i. Human: Fiction

Wallace Stevens's heralded poem *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* moves toward an unknown "It," rather "It Must Be Abstract, It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure."<sup>2</sup> Understudied and ultimately related is Stevens's questioning whether or not "It must be human." The human question appears in a letter to critic Robert Pack. What follows is a statement of frustration "The truth is that my critics seem never to have read anything later than HARMONIUM." At the time of their correspondence, *Harmonium* (1921) had been in circulation for thirty years, our poet was seventy-four and would die the following summer. Stevens's frustration concerns what critics have ignored his entire career, namely his "lifelong ambition" for a theory of poetry or what he terms "supreme poetry" and "the poetry of thought."<sup>3</sup>

Much of Stevens's theory occurs in his prose texts. The significance of a prose-based theory is the intent, presentation, and audience which are undoubtedly different from a poet's poetry. For critics and the reading public, *Harmonium* was the most accessible if not marketable work. Yet it was followed by a ten-year hiatus. When Stevens returns to verse in the early 1930s, he is

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<sup>2</sup>This article was kindly proofread by my old friend, Vincent van Gerven Oei (<https://punctum-books.com/people/vincent-w-j-van-gerven-oei/>).

<sup>3</sup>Wallace Stevens, "A collect of philosophy," in *Collected Poetry & Prose*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1997), 854-855.

interested not only in poetry but also in criticism and theory. This shift coincides with renewed fame as result of the publication of *Ideas of Order* (1936). According to *Wallace Stevens – Collected Poetry and Prose* (1997) a first obvious attempt at theory is Stevens's preface for William Carlos Williams's *Collected Poems 1921–1931*. *Williams* (1934) is followed by a critical assessment of Marianne Moore's verse *A Poet That Matters* (1936).<sup>4</sup> By the time that Stevens composes and lectures *The Irrational Element in Poetry* (1936) at Harvard, his theory turns to his verse and equally himself.

Closer examination of the exchange with Robert Pack may help us better understand his frustration.

There is just one thing about it that seems to me ought to be changed and that is your conclusion that I get nowhere in particular ... I do at least arrive at the end of my logic. And where that leads ought to be perfectly clear to you.

Five days later Stevens responds to an apparent edit, "Mr. Stevens's work does not really lead anywhere":

That a man's work should remain indefinite is often intentional. For instance, in projecting a supreme fiction, I cannot imagine anything more fatal than to state it definitely and incautiously. For a long time I have thought of adding other sections to the NOTES and one in particular: *It Must Be Human*. But I think it would be wrong not to leave well enough alone.

To state something definitively is fatal, reckless, and ignoble yet the critic here is duly criticized. Perhaps Stevens's early venture into the critical mindset had given him permission?

I don't mean to try to exercise the slightest restraint on what you say. Say what you will. But we are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system.<sup>5</sup>

The fatality of systematic certainty defines the similarity of critics and philosophers. Disdain for the critic's oblivious disposition is made clear. Understanding that Stevens's theory is created from the experience of a poet is crucial to bridging the gap. The life of the poet characterizes what he studies, which was already independent of official auspices.

Stevens's studies of the 1930s inform *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, which was composed in the early 1940s. Considering that supreme fiction's mandates are conditioned by the "It Must" of the fourth, one should ask why "It Must Not Be Human?" The first three are unquestioned affirmations of an absolute nature, notions reminiscent of a faded pre-critical thought replaced by variations of Kantian critical philosophy and theory. Conversely affirmations are not subject to the hesitation Stevens encounters with the human component. Thus the human question represents a speculative dimension of Stevens's theory. Whether or not the human can be systematized is a speculative thinking about subjectivity according to the poetry of thought.

The human question concerns us today, specifically the loss of human autonomy and the advance of global *technic*. Consider a contemporary example of what academic Shoshana Zuboff terms "surveillance capitalism."<sup>6</sup> Zuboff defines such by "behavioral futures markets" which

<sup>4</sup>During this time Stevens's correspondence with then boutique publisher Ronald Lane Latimer reveals his new penchant for theory. The fundamentals of that correspondence can be found in an enigmatic prose text Stevens writes for the dust jacket of Knopf's edition of *Ideas of Order* (1936).

<sup>5</sup>Wallace Stevens and Holly Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 863–864 (June 7, 1954), 837 (December 22, 1954), and 861–862 (December 28, 1954).

<sup>6</sup>Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*

depend upon “prediction products” developed by social media corporations. She criticizes predictive data products developed from the “free raw material” of “human experience.” Such “proprietary behavioral surplus” is created without user consent which corporations sell to advertisers. The most troubling aspect of her critique concerns the automation of human behavior and the implications for social and political norms. Zuboff believes we naively consider the digitization of society “compatible with democracy.”<sup>7</sup> Her addition to an otherwise conventional critique – that capitalism and democracy are not synonymous – she terms an “epistemic coup.” In her words the problem concerns

not just knowledge, but how we know. How we can know things in the world. The gap between what we can know and what can be known about us is growing exponentially every moment. So there’s new extreme inequality.<sup>8</sup>

The instrumentation of *how* presupposes experience from behind the screen. Yet behavioral automation is itself a novel experience; it is phenomenal, part of reality, and inescapable. Stevens’s concept of the poet’s individuality helps us to understand this novelty. His concept is situated on the subject matter of one’s created content and the evasive nature of the true subject.<sup>9</sup> If social media content is not poetry in the conventional sense, it is nonetheless analogous when it concerns one’s sundries, politics, and other social activities. Moreover a media user generates content which is subjective, felt, and intentionally made. What is different is the creation of additional content without intent or subjective investment in the conventional sense. Considering Stevens’s concept, this intervenes in our relation to the true subject.

Our belief becomes an unwitting proprietary servitude. Thus inequality favors those who possess the tools of a subjective and personal relation that the user has no known relation to. Under such instrumentalization an absolute paradox is created. For the *how* of what *one knows* concerns the very means of knowing and questioning. Where it concerns the poetry of thought such means are the imagination. If consigned unwittingly to algorithmic instruments the imagination becomes a tool. Thus it is no stretch to consider aspects of the imagination to have fallen within *technic*.

## ii. *Technic*, poetry, and philosophy

Usually associated with Martin Heidegger, *technic* is a philosophical concept. In decades past scholars have tried to situate this philosopher with Stevens. Yet if he never mentions Heidegger by name, he encounters his thought from a philosopher whom, unlike Heidegger, Stevens knew and worked with. Unfortunately Jean André Wahl has never received the attention he deserves in regard to Stevens scholarship, a matter I hope to reconcile below. Before doing so, let us consider Heidegger’s “The question concerning technology,” particularly when it emphasizes “the doctrine of the four causes.”<sup>10</sup> Heidegger’s concern is with technologies threatening to veil

(New York: Public Affairs, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>Scholar and author Shoshana Zuboff is professor emerita at the Harvard Business School. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/20/shoshana-zuboff-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-google-facebook>.

<sup>8</sup><https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2021/02/04/the-perilous-power-of-social-media-platforms>.

<sup>9</sup>The complexities of Stevens’s concept are explicated below. Here I am providing a provisional link to Zuboff’s concern.

<sup>10</sup>“But suppose that causality, for its part, is veiled in darkness with respect to what it is? Certainly for centuries we have acted as though the doctrine of the four causes had fallen from heaven as a truth as clear as daylight. But

causality “in darkness,” thus supplanting, destroying, or denaturing the ability to question, if not think, for ourselves. This he terms “enframing” elsewhere defined as “control of the absolute, and the process of representation.”<sup>11</sup> Under enframing humans risk becoming “standing reserve,” a resource that *technic* enshadows if not metabolizes by its mysterious expanse. Considering the doctrine of causes, Zuboff’s concern of “how” belongs to enframing.

Heidegger’s question was not limited to the human’s loss of planetary hegemony to technology. He criticized academics who sought to elevate philosophy to the level of science. Above all, his warning concerned philosophy itself. For Heidegger desired restoration of philosophy’s majesty particular to his later “Kehre” or concern for the oblivion of Being. Heroically Heidegger turns to poetry to save the Being of philosophy. Though this suggests potential agreement with Stevens, it is provisional at best.

In a prose lecture “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” (1943), written at Jean Wahl’s request, Stevens claims that despair is the primary achievement if not the “end” of philosophy. Moreover Stevens understands poetry as “the unofficial view” or the pejorative status that the “official view of being” (philosophy) assigns to it. Because Heidegger desires philosophy to be supreme, or what identifies, organizes, and defines all subject-matter including poetry, he undoubtedly represents the “official view” that Stevens derides. What then does philosophy lack? According to Stevens poetry must satisfy both imagination and reason and is “at least the equal of philosophy” or “may be its superior.” This is specific to the imagination it supplies not only to philosophy, but to all subject matter. Finally, Heidegger was not a poet, which is crucially important to Stevens. He was a critical philosopher who used poetry to rescue philosophy from despair. This rescue attempt runs contrary to what poetry guards: passages of the imagination via an absolute. Ironically, this is precisely what enframing threatens to do to the Being of philosophy.

The irony of Heidegger’s enframing is that poetry becomes philosophy’s standing reserve; its means are for philosophy’s continuity, not “poetry itself.”<sup>12</sup> The exteriority of language – the province that poetry guards – is the sufficient cause of philosophical necessity. In Stevens’s view, philosophy’s inability to define exteriority cultivates despair. This is particular to understanding the imagination, the absolute object, and the intelligence which suppose philosophy’s key faculties. In other words, to imagine the imagination is simply to imagine. To question why one imagines is subsequently a task for the faculty of reason. To assume intellectual faculties are exclusively philosophical is an error of the official view. Heidegger’s irony therefore lurches toward a destructive paradox. For philosophy to fully conceptualize its origin is tantamount to a child birthing its own parent. While possible in poetry, in philosophy the demarcations of the reason and the rational disqualify such a notion. At best, within philosophical prose is the poetry of an orphan.

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it might be that the time has come to ask: Why are there only four causes? In relation to the aforementioned four, what does “cause” really mean? From whence does it come that the causal character of the four causes is so unifiedly determined that they belong together? So long as we do not allow ourselves to go into these questions, causality, and with it instrumentality, and with this the accepted definition of technology, remain obscure and groundless.” Martin Heidegger, “The question concerning technology,” in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 312, 314.

<sup>11</sup>Martin Heidegger, “The origin of the work of art,” in *Basic Writings*, 208.

<sup>12</sup>Stevens’s introduction to *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, makes this stipulation clear: “It means poetry itself, the naked poem, the imagination manifesting itself in its domination of words” (“The Necessary Angel: essays on reality and the imagination,” 639).



When Stevens asked his audience to “consider not that the definition has not yet been found but that there is none” he was inadvertently describing the technical minimalism of poetry.<sup>13</sup> Such technical minimalism offers an implicit rebuke to the technological enframing of the body and the imagination. For one, Heidegger undoubtedly knew poetry’s minimalism prevented Hegel from fully conceptualizing the arts.<sup>14</sup> For another, Stevens seems to have inadvertently considered *technic* in his early prose (a matter I shall return to). If Stevens’s theory checks philosophy’s destitution it should not be considered philosophical, but rather the poetry of thought which accepts the possibility of a “supreme poetry” yet guards against its absolute manifestation. The very thing, perhaps the last it guards, concerns whether or not “It Must Be Human.”

A speculative theory of poetry was Stevens’s enterprise and, like Heidegger, it was concerned with causality.<sup>15</sup> Consider the inadequacy of the four causes of metaphysics that Heidegger references, where he implies there are more causes to be had.<sup>16</sup> Indeed poetry was a cause, in a way, for that philosopher. This can be contrasted with Stevens’s insistence that supreme fiction would have three affirmations and a speculative fourth. Stevens was willing to accept groundlessness, Heidegger was not.

### iii. Jean Wahl and Wallace Stevens

Jean Wahl pioneered continental philosophy in France before and after the Second World War. Wahl was also a poet and had translated Stevens’s poetry into French in the 1930s prior to their meeting in the United States in the early 1940s.<sup>17</sup> Their friendship emboldened Stevens’s theoretical efforts which began years before they met, in the post-*Harmonium* 1930s. When Wahl enters the picture he helps Stevens differentiate the fine threading between poetry and philosophy. Their amicable exchanges changed my understanding of *Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction*, composed in the early 1940s. In the later months of 1942, Stevens exchanged letters with their mutual friend, Henry Church. There we find Wahl had read early versions and received it well, much to their shared pleasure.<sup>18</sup>

The most intriguing evidence I find concerns “the absolute object.” Conversely, Stevens does not use this term until *Poetic Exercises of 1948*.<sup>19</sup> Curiously 1948 is the year Jean Wahl publishes *The Philosopher’s Way*, a book that Stevens reads and remarks of in a letter to Barbara Church.<sup>20</sup> In Wahl’s book, we find references not only to Heidegger, but also to Pascal and Kierkegaard

<sup>13</sup>Wallace Stevens, “The figure of the youth as virile poet,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose*, 666–669.

<sup>14</sup>See G. W. F. Hegel, “Introduction, the romantic arts” and “The romantic arts” in *Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol II, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 796 and 961; cf. G. W. F. Hegel, “The conception of artistic beauty” in *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, translated by Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 32.

<sup>15</sup>In May 2016, the poet Philippe Beck remarks on speculative poetry through his reading of Friedrich Schiller: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQ5tA3FZieM&t=1s>, at time codes 4:00 and 32:00.

<sup>16</sup>See note 10 for Heidegger’s description of the causes and suggestion of additional causes to be made.

<sup>17</sup>Christopher Benfey, “A violence from within,” in *Artists, Intellectuals, and World War II, The Ponting Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942–1944*, edited by Christopher Benfey and Karen Remmler (Boston and Amherst: Massachusetts University Press, 2006), 1–13.

<sup>18</sup>*Letters*, 429–431.

<sup>19</sup>Wallace Stevens, “Poetic exercises of 1948: from the notebooks,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose*, 920–921.

<sup>20</sup>*Letters*, 601.

regarding “this absolute object.”<sup>21</sup> Could this object be the “It” of supreme fiction? In order to answer that question, let us consider Wahl’s definition of subjective experience regarding the “Absolute Other” of Kierkegaard as “this absolute object.” For there Wahl subsequently delineates the poet’s birthright, writing of

our own subjectivity strained to its utmost by its relation to this absolute object ... religious thought is for [Kierkegaard] ... essentially subjective thought, as opposed to all the objective considerations in the system of Hegel. Yet this subjective thought cannot, in fact, be understood without its relation to God, the unknowable object. And so we might say that this thought is a relational thought and that it is founded on a relation to something that at first appears objective. But this relation is felt from within, subjectively. Moreover, its unknowable object is ultimately without any relation to it”.<sup>22</sup>

In Stevens’s *Poetic Exercises of 1948*, we find a striking agreement:

The degrees of metaphor  
The absolute object slightly turned  
Is a metaphor of the object.

Some objects are less susceptible to metaphor than others.  
The whole world is less susceptible to metaphor than a teacup  
is.

There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. One  
does not progress through metaphors. Thus reality is the indispensable  
element of each metaphor. When I say that man  
is a god it is very easy to see that if I say also that a god is  
something else, god has become reality.

Wahl’s and Stevens’s amicable discourse is unusual, for acrimony predominates history. Conversely, Stevens at times encouraged the fight. In an early prose text “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), Stevens ponders the poet’s birthright, that poets are born and not made (which reappears as that later rebuke against the official view of being). Doing so he takes up what Charles Baudelaire propounds one hundred years before: The poet who becomes a critic is superior to the critic itself, thus the critic who becomes a poet would be a “monstrosity ... a reversal of all psychical laws.”<sup>23</sup> If Heidegger was a critical monster, Wahl seems to be less so. Nonetheless, they have proximity to what Stevens shares in terms of Baudelaire’s conceit. Poets are superior critics because they have had to confront and attempt to reason about their inherent and rare ability in a uniquely subjective way. To one degree or another the spiritual crises that poets face are lost on critics who lack an inborn sensibility.

<sup>21</sup>Jean Wahl, “God” in *The Philosopher’s Way*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 283. Pascal is featured in the opening of “Imagination as value” (1948) which suggests a possible influence from Wahl. The relationship between Wahl and Stevens is the subject particular to Stevens’s “theōria.” See Adam Staley Groves, *The Poetic Subject: A Theory of Poetry According to the Poet Wallace Stevens and the Philosopher Jean Wahl*, Diss. University of Aberdeen, School of Language and Literature, 2016.

<sup>22</sup>Wahl, *The Philosopher’s Way*, 283–284.

<sup>23</sup>Charles Baudelaire and Jonathan Mayne, *Art in Paris, 1845–1862; Salons and Other Exhibitions Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire*, 2nd edition, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (Binghamton: Phaidon, 1981), 237.

### iii. The irrational element as *technic*

An early instance of Stevens's human question may help us understand contemporary issues with *technic* and the questionable status of the poet's birthright. Specifically "The Irrational Element in Poetry" where the object of critique begins with subject-object correlationism. Here Stevens clarifies that he is not a philosopher and that his work concerns the theory of poetry. We start with his mercurial conclusion. Referencing "poetic energy" Stevens claims:

It will be time enough to adopt a more systematic usage, when the critique of the irrational comes to be written, by whomever it may be that this potent subject ultimately engages. We must expect in the future incessant activity by the irrational and in the field of the irrational. The advances thus to be made would be all the greater if the character of the poet was not so casual and intermittent a character. The poet cannot profess the irrational as the priest professes the unknown. The poet's role is broader, because he must be possessed, along with everything else, by the earth and by men in their earthly implications. For the poet, the irrational is elemental; but neither poetry nor life is commonly at its dynamic utmost.<sup>24</sup>

In the early part of this lecture Stevens curiously reads his own verse, which unwittingly serves as an example of what the absolute object provides. He tries to define what it means to be a poet, which concerns "personal sensibility," yet "what gives" such sensibility "no one knows." Stevens tells us that "poetry is the medium" of his sensibility or why the form of poetry is possible to be expressed. Moreover his opening, "Poets continue to be born not made and cannot, I am afraid, be predetermined," echoes Baudelaire, before turning to novel speculation or what appears to be a first iteration of the human question:

if they could ... they might have long since become extinct ... they might, on the other hand, have changed life from what it is today into one of those transformations in which they delight, and might have seen to it that they greatly multiplied themselves there.

Two questions come to the fore. First, should poets be predetermined and what is meant by their extinction? Secondly, what is meant by their multiplication and delight "there"?

Though Stevens does not call the irrational element "technic," it is implied by "biological" and "poetic mechanisms." Such he relates to the "pretext for poetry."<sup>25</sup> This I find to be the basis of poetry's technical minimalism necessary to counter the imagination's enframing. Yet the implication of *technic* also depends on what is meant by "the irrational element." An element may be a principle, a substance (in terms of causality and metaphysics), or some material that conducts "poetic energy." At times it is written poetry which holds "disclosures" or notions associated with inadvertent abstraction, which provide to Stevens pretexts for poetry. Disclosures also contribute to his subjectification long after the initial abstractive moment, which persists in written poetry as stored potency. Yet he is careful not to limit this to verse; he grants an abstractive potential for disclosure to the objects of reality, in general.

Poetic energy may be an early term for the imagination and the irrational element a way of remarking on its relationship to reality. What remains vexing is the "systematic usage" of poetic energy used to critique the irrational. For the irrational is not entirely the irrational

<sup>24</sup>Wallace Stevens, "The irrational element in poetry," in *Collected Poetry & Prose*, 792.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 781-783.



element. Yet when the irrational manifests elementally beyond written poetry, it requires a critique for “it will be time enough ... when the critique comes to be written ... by whomever it may be that this potent subject ultimately engages.”

The ‘whom’ concerns “two things at once,” namely “the true subject and the other ... the poetry of the subject.”<sup>26</sup> The true subject is the utmost difficult to follow, according to Stevens. The poetry of the subject less so, because it concerns content and its form. Nonetheless, the true subject is in relation to the poetry of the subject. The true subject concerns “what gives ... personal sensibility,” thus what poetry guards from becoming formalistic, lifeless content. A unification of the two should never meld. The true subject helps develop individual “style,” providing a generative difference of the individuality of the poet however, the true subject cannot become entirely content. It must not or cannot be human.

A poem’s subject matter concerns a human in relation to an absolute object, which generates and facilitates a relation to content. This object and its relation cannot be followed without enduring Wahl’s depiction of “subjectivity strained to its utmost by its relation to this absolute object.” The passages to language’s exterior must remain open. Otherwise, the irrational element known to poetry manifests into pure content and closes the circuit. Poets guard against this occurrence as it is tantamount to the forfeiture of the true subject. Specifically Stevens recognizes such when remarking on

irrational manifestations of the irrational element in poetry; for if the irrational element is merely poetic energy, it is to be found wherever poetry is to be found.

One such manifestation is the disclosure of the individuality of the poet.<sup>27</sup>

For Stevens, changes in reality concern the use of “poetic energy” with regard to the “true subject” via “the poetry of the subject,” thus securing “the individuality of the poet.” Changes in reality means one person with the capacity to freely imagine and produce said changes. This capacity is the basis of the poet’s moral obligation.

Beyond the subjectification of the poet’s individuality, let’s consider *technic*’s enframing of the imagination in terms of Stevens’s speculation: Whether or not poets are born and not made, which is ultimately a question of the human fiction. Conceiving an ethics means accepting that the imagination puts subject and object in relation via “poetic energy” as the imagination is the primary, paradoxical basis of every correlation. It does not mean we take Zuboff’s despairing critique to its extreme conclusion. It means we accept that enframing is not an irreversible dehumanization, for it produces novel experiences in terms of what “seems to be.”

After all, life is increasingly fused with indifferent algorithms. A book, novel, newspaper, or any informational object was already an indifferent program that the imagination historically illuminates. By submitting to countless hours of reading we have already experienced low-intensity enframing. Yet as information became significantly electrified, digitization accelerated the distribution not of the true subject, but rather the poetry of the subject. The subjective relation depicted by Jean Wahl is thus strained to an extreme we had yet to experience. I am reminded of what Walter Benjamin terms *Schockerlebnis* or the experience of shock which indicates a historicization and loss of the imagination. Benjamin was concerned with the authenticity of media objects, photographs, reproductions, and the capacity of novels to give advice, despite having become removed from their authors. According to his concept, historicization

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 785.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 783.

threatened to disintegrate the detection, if not appearance, of “aura,” which I consider analogous to the essentialistic description that Stevens makes of the true subject. Benjamin’s sensitivity to extreme asymmetry is understood as his regard for the poetry of the subject, a poetry which retains vestiges of a true subject via an object’s disclosures. Assuming digitization as part of Benjamin’s concept such would oblivate the aura along with our detection of it by high fidelity. Conversely Stevens’s concept may allow us to reestablish it.<sup>28</sup>

#### iv. The ethics of the imagination: four points

To advance beyond Heidegger and Zuboff’s critiques let us consider the ethical task of the poet in four points. The first point concerns *technic* imposing between the “true subject” and the “poetry of the subject.” In Zuboff’s critique, the latter is underway in electoral politics, fake news, deep fakes, and a host of other commercial conquests producing ignoble fictions. To an extent, algorithms determine one’s style. The stylized human seems to lose a sense for the true subject. What true subject they return to after enduring a strained subjectivity is uncertain.

The second consideration is *technic*’s self-sophistication by what seems the loss of a true subject. *Technic* inaugurates the user determining the exponential multiplication of itself “there.” This algorithmic augur sources a true subject that it subsequently colonizes and enframes. The true subject is the source of the auspices of “there,” hence realized as standing reserve until entirely denatured or exhausted of potency. Enframing would engender a capacity superior to us, toward what appears irrational to reality or becomes the irrational element itself. If it does, poetry becomes entirely historical and life something we had yet to imagine.<sup>29</sup>

The third consideration is particular to the first and concerns predetermination and the return to the true subject. The lurch toward enframing imagination (of the second point) would produce poets of extinction or multiplication of a “casual and intermittent character.” The exception to this concerns “there.” Where would extinction or multiplication take place? Deplatforming is a type of extinction of poets who multiply themselves across media platforms. The extent of migration or capture of the true subject within *technic* could be revealed in a subsequent struggle to maintain an existence without social media. In this struggle one may encounter the subtle sense of the terrestrial, true subject in contrast to variations according to *technic*. Thus the distinctions made earlier of Stevens and Benjamin’s concepts would need further consideration.

Finally, if the poetry of the subject is all that is predetermined by *technic*, the elusive, true

<sup>28</sup>Here I speculate on Stevens’s use of “subtilizing experience” in connection to Benjamin’s concept of the aura. Writes Stevens “pictures in a museum of modern art often seem to become in time a mystical aesthetic, a prodigious search of appearance, as if to find a way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance, are one and that it is only through reality, in which they are reflected or, it may be joined together that we can reach them. Under such stress, reality changes from substance to subtlety.” Stevens thus revises the mysticism he refers to in terms of subtilizing: “recently I spoke of certain poetic acts as subtilizing experience and varying appearance: “The real is constantly being engulfed in the unreal . . . . [Poetry] is an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock.” A force capable of bringing about fluctuations in reality in words free from mysticism is a force independent of one’s desire to elevate it. It needs no elevation. It has only to be presented, as best one is able to present it. See “The relations between poetry and painting,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose*, 750, and the Introduction to “The Necessary Angel: essays on reality and the imagination,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose*, 639–640.

<sup>29</sup>Stevens’s dust jacket statement for *Ideas of Order* describes the role of the poet in similar fashion.

subject is not. Should this be the case, the poetry of thought gains relevance in a world which perpetually determines it unofficial by demoting philosophy and poetry, whilst increasing funding for STEM education. Nonetheless, we may find two variations of the true subject which are results of Stevens's idea of the true subject.

Zuboff's critique of inequality concerns more than capitalistic greed and moral indifference. Deplatforming, cancel culture, and other social media phenomena already take place in the "there" of *technic* and have real world implications. This means poets of extinction are already here and find something of true subject in social media "there." The ignoble Q of QAnon poses as the true subject when disclosing to followers via Q's poetry of the subject or "Q drops" by which extinction poets multiply.<sup>30</sup> What then faces extinction? Following the attempted coup of January 6, 2021, that may be the United States government. In many reported cases, familial relationships have been shattered. If certain establishment media critiqued this irrational manifestation, other media encouraged it.<sup>31</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic only accelerated our dependency on *technic*. One result was the multiplication of extinction poets via the cartoon of reality that we're compelled to inhabit.

Let us recall Wahl and the "doctrine of how."<sup>32</sup> Subjective experience is first considered objective. It is secondarily realized as subjective, which establishes a paradoxical relation to an absolute object. This is *how* an affirmation becomes speculation, in other words, the "It" which must not be human. Nonetheless, religious thinking associated with QAnon presents many an ignoble lunacy, supposing the 45<sup>th</sup> President is either Jesus Christ or sent by his request.<sup>33</sup> The despairist in me wants to prevent the true subject from enframing. The affirmation I want to make is to convene with a true subject of *technic* and retain my own. In Stevens's words, this means "whomever this potent subject ultimately engages" when the time comes "to adopt a more systematic usage, when the critique of the irrational comes to be written." Historically, this critique has been underway. Take Heidegger's philosophy, which is dynamic content overtaking the subject-object dualism of Descartes, replacing it with the correlation of thinking and being. This correlation has itself been critiqued by speculative realism. None of these examples directly consult the poetry of thought,<sup>34</sup> yet they resound Stevens's maxim particular to "the imagination that is always at the end of an era ... which attaches itself to a new reality."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>.

<sup>31</sup><https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/957371294/how-qanon-like-conspiracy-theories-tear-families-apart>.

<sup>32</sup>Wahl reformulates his original concept of "this absolute object" from *The Philosopher's Way* (1948) in *Philosophies of Existence* (1969). To my knowledge this book was first published in 1958. Stevens had passed away in 1955, so it is unlikely the precise phrasing was read by Stevens. In the rephrasing Wahl explicates the general tenant of relation to the "Absolute" or "God" regarding Kierkegaard's "doctrine of how" or his "basic paradox" to "form a relation, an intense, fervent relation, with a thing that is absolutely without relation, and this paradox defines existence, in so far as it can be defined." Jean Wahl, *Philosophies of Existence: An Introduction to the Basic Thought of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre*, translated by F. M. Lory (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 20 and 84.

<sup>33</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/03/trump-florida-evangelical-rally-king-jesus>.

<sup>34</sup>Judith Balso and Drew Burk, "Stevens: the illumination of seeming," in *Affirmation of Poetry* (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014), 19–34. Balso's *Affirmation of Poetry* is the only work I have encountered which recognizes speculative realism, particular to Quentin Melliassoux's *After Finitude* (2008), to approach what is meant by Stevens's poetry of thought and the relationship it has to philosophy particular to the concept of the absolute (see also Balso and Burk, "Caeiro: a desire for a metaphysics without metaphysics within poems," in *Affirmation of Poetry*, 43).

<sup>35</sup>"It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is

In *The Irrational Element*, Stevens notes surrealist poetry is a content which makes other forms “seem obsolete.” In the same way, I have mentioned Heidegger and the ignoble radicals of the day, they are something like poets driven by “the need of the poet for poetry” based on a “dynamic cause of the poetry he writes.” That means a poet’s “dynamic quality” and “effect” sources the imagination in order to make other forms “seem obsolete.” Thus the form of a once nascent poet (whose potency seems supreme) will “become part of the process of give and take of which the growth of poetry consists.”

The question of the true subject enframed portends a return to feeling. Subjective experience is capable of placing what appears objective into the realm of paradox – the inane paradox of a relation to something which we have no relation. QAnon’s followers and their penchant for extinction promises absorption. Yet one by one, must we be stretched to the extreme experience of Kierkegaard to understand the absolute object as a motor of reality and its expanse? If *technic* seems to imitate this scenario, poets of the true subject are no longer relegated to birthright. They too can emerge and flourish “there” if we are willing to understand “there” takes place in the imagination as reality.

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always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality. The pressure of reality may, of course, be less than the general pressure that I have described. It exists for individuals according to the circumstances of their lives or according to the characteristics of their minds. To sum it up, the pressure of reality is, I think, the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual. The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned.” Wallace Stevens, “The noble rider and the sound of words,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose*, 656.

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**Received:** 16 April, 2021.

**Accepted:** 31 May, 2021.

**Financial statement:** The scholarship for this article was conducted at the author’s own expense..

**Competing interests:** The author has declared no competing interests.

**How to cite:** Groves, Adam Staley. “Wallace Stevens, *technic*, and the ethics of the imagination.” *Inscriptions* 4, no. 2 (July 2021): [183–194](#).



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