

THE FIRST STAGE OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN THE WORK OF WALLACE STEVENS AND JOSÉ ÁNGEL VALENTE: “NOTES ON A SUPREME FICTION” AND “CINCO FRAGMENTOS PARA ANTONI TÀPIES”¹

SANTIA GO RODRÍGUEZ GUERRERO

Universidad de Valladolid

guerrero@fyl.uva.es

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ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens and José Ángel Valente share some ideas, such as decreation or the role of early dawn regarding the creative process. This comes as no surprise since Valente read Stevens who then might have become a significant model for him. Stevens' term “decreation” resembles Valente's *retracción* and points towards a common idea of poetry. For Stevens, decreation is a move towards the reduction of reality to the nothingness from where the poem arises. Similarly, Valente's *retracción* is a step backwards towards condensation. In both cases, the poem is stripped of all unnecessary elements to become the creative space in which it is re-created. Another significant element is the first stage of creation, which Stevens calls “the edge of sleep” and which Valente reformulates as “las lindes del día”

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(“the edge of the day”), which is for him the creative space and the moment when the poem is created.

RESUMEN

Wallace Stevens y José Ángel Valente comparten ideas acerca del proceso creativo tales como la descreación o la importancia del amanecer. Esto no debe sorprender pues Valente leyó a Stevens quien pudo convertirse en un modelo importante para él. El término descreación que utiliza Stevens se asemeja al término “retracción” de Valente; ambos apuntan hacia una idea común de lo que es la poesía. Para Stevens la descreación es un movimiento hacia la reducción de la realidad y hacia la nada de la que surge el poema. De un modo parecido, la “retracción” valentiana es un movimiento hacia atrás y al mismo tiempo de condensación. En ambos casos el poema queda despojado de todos los elementos innecesarios y, así, llega a ser el espacio creativo del que nace el poema. Otro elemento significativo dentro del proceso creativo es el primer momento de la creación, lo que Stevens llama “the edge of sleep” y Valente denomina “las lindes del día”. Este es el espacio creativo y el momento en que se origina el poema.

José Ángel Valente (1929-2000) was a poet whose development was decisively influenced by British and American literature. He was well acquainted with British Romantic poetry (Fernández Rodríguez 9-78; Perojo Arronte 182-185) and 20th century British poetry as can be seen from his translations of Robert Duncan, Dylan Thomas or John Keats (Valente *Cuaderno*), not to mention the influence that T.S. Eliot exercised on him (Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan 623-628). Nonetheless, it is surprising that despite Valente’s quotation of the first lines from the introduction to *The Necessary Angel* in his first book of essays, *Las palabras de la tribu* (1971), he has not been associated to Wallace Stevens with the exception of Julián Jiménez Heffeman’s passing mention in *Los papeles rotos* (188).

The fact that Valente quoted Stevens or was influenced by British and American poetry should come as no surprise since Spanish poets took British and American poetry as a major model in the twentieth century (Gallego Roca; Doce). Other events, such as his lectureship in Oxford between 1954-58, merely consolidate, but do not add anything to his literary upbringing.

Valente might have read Stevens as early as 1952. In issue 30 of the Cuban magazine *Orígenes*, José Rodríguez Feo published a translation of “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting”. This magazine was edited by Rodríguez Feo and José Lezama Lima, a poet with whom Valente maintained a sustained literary friendship throughout the years. Furthermore, Louis L. Martz’s *The Poetry of Meditation* was a defining source for Valente’s poetics as he argues in his essay “Luis Cernuda y la poesía de la meditación” (Valente *Ensayos* 138-140). While the essay seems to be concerned with an analysis of Cernuda’s poetry, it is in fact an

explicit affirmation of Valente's poetics, grounded in British and Spanish poetry. In 1950 Martz had published "The World of Wallace Stevens". It seems plausible that, given the interest Valente took in *The Poetry of Meditation*, he sought out other books by Martz and read his article on Stevens. Another shared source for their poetry is Martin Heidegger's aesthetics. Frank Kermode has made clear Stevens' knowledge of Heidegger while Conte Imbert investigated Valente's knowledge of the German philosopher (Kermode 256-273; Conte Imbert 79-125). Similarly, the creative process as an idealistic process is a concept that both writers would have come across in S.T. Coleridge's essays. It must be noted that Valente would declare that one of the major poets of the nineteenth century and one of the most influential for the development of modern poetry was Coleridge himself (Perojo Arronte 182-85). These sources point to a commonality of thought that might have been perceived by Valente and which guided him in his reading of Stevens' poems.

In this article I propose to discuss the way in which both Stevens and Valente deal with two aspects of the creative process. It is my view that Valente's *retracción* is a term that comes very close to Stevens' notion of abstraction. There are obvious differences between the two poets but the root is identical. Despite their rejection of any kind of vulgarized Romanticism, both authors were deeply influenced by Romantic poets and had started their careers exploring the possibilities of the movement (Carroll "Romanticism" 87-102; Fernández Rodríguez 9-78). Stevens' early adoption of a new Romanticism directly linked to abstraction moved towards a Modernist abstracted poetry as Ragg has shown in his study *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (Ragg 2010: 30-50). Valente read Luis Cernuda as a model for a type of poetry that could sustain the Romantic impulse, as this had been understood in Spain in the early twentieth century (Perojo Arronte 167-196). His insights into Romantic poetry in Cernuda's work and the link between British Romanticism and Spanish poetry of the twentieth century were explained in his essay "Luis Cernuda y la poesía de la meditación" (Valente *Ensayos* 132-44). At a second stage, I will focus on the aesthetics of abstraction in order to discuss Stevens' "immaculate beginning" and Valente's vigil. For that purpose I will mainly concentrate on Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and Valente's "Cinco notas para Antonio Tápies", referring to other poems or essays when necessary, mainly *The Necessary Angel* and *Elogio del calígrafo*, as valuable information may be found in them.

1.- DECREATION AND *RETRACCIÓN*.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is one of Stevens' major poems. It is the last poem of *Transport to Summer* (1947). Milton Bates has called it "Stevens' most ambitious attempt at defining a supreme fiction" (49). Bart Eeckhout analyses it when he discusses the topic of philosophy in Stevens' poetry (108-09). For La

Guardia, the poem represents the climax in Stevens' evolution from a young poet to maturity (73). Although it has been discussed from different points of view and different approaches have been taken to explain it, there is a general agreement that "Notes..." is a poem about poetry. For Stevens, the poem reflects the nature of poetry, or as Critchley says: "the poem is the enactment of poetry's essence". (18) This may be observed, for instance, in the first lines of "Of Modern Poetry": The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice" (Stevens 218). Stevens' poetry is thus infused with a sensation of coldness and distance from the world. However, its inherent abstraction by no means implies a lack of either thought or feeling. In the introduction to *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens succinctly expresses his aim in poetry: "poetry itself, the naked poem, the imagination manifesting itself in its domination of words" (639). A few lines before that he added: "One function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time" (639), which in the end became the permanent endeavor in his career.

As the title suggests "Notes..." is a series of reflections on poetry that are neither systematic nor complete. They are not, however, mere fragments of disorganized ideas written down as they occurred. On the contrary, it is a highly structured poem with a well-thought out and organized pattern. It has also, as Bloom notes, a prospective stance, meaning "rather before in time", and a future achievement (171). The inconclusiveness suggested by the title helps to overcome its closed structure making it, rather than a final manifesto for poetry, a point of departure that looks into the future. In the same way that he did not want *The Necessary Angel* to be literary criticism or philosophy (Stevens 640), "Notes..." merely presents his own view of poetry around 1942.

"Notes..." is divided into three parts headed by the same number of epigraphs: "It Must Be Abstract", "It Must Change", and "It Must Give Pleasure". These are Stevens' three conditions that poetry must fulfill. It is quite significant that when Stevens wrote the poem, he was entering his late and mature phase. The poem does not point to his subsequent poetry, or to the poetry he had already written, but to a poetry of the future.

The first section begins with an address to the poet:

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire (329).

This may be interpreted as an act of decreation. While Heringman has pointed out that Stevens' first lines in the first section are a "symbolic abstraction of reality" (6), and Doggett has also explained that the world is created through perception and thought ("World" 16), I would argue for an interpretation based on a reading of *The Necessary Angel*. For Stevens, "modern reality is a reality of decreation" (Stevens 750). For him it is a change that goes "from the created to the uncreated" (750), and is brought about by the imagination. As James Lindroth was the first to point out, decreation is a term that Stevens took from the French philosopher Simone Weil (43-44). The term provides the poet with a substitute for God (43), which may account for Stevens' desire for a transcendent reality and may also ground the poet's role in a postromantic society. Lindroth analyzes this longing for a transcendent reality and relates it to Weil's concept of spiritual gravity (44). More importantly, decreation served Stevens as a means to investigate the role of the poet in modern society. Stevens was well aware of Shelley's postulation of the poet as the unknown legislator of the world, or as the person more delicately formed and more sensitive to pain and pleasure could not be sustained in the twentieth century (Shelley 6). In Weil's concept of decreation he found, however, a link to Romanticism, and, quite explicitly to Emerson's romanticism. Decreation is, as Weil theorized it, a "mystical notion of the decreation of the self" (Lindroth 44). This leads to Stevens' need to "strip created reality of all illusions" (Lindroth 45). There arises the concern of Stevens' poet for a relation to "the noumenal, to uncreated spiritual reality" (Lindroth 45), that would end in a sort of spiritual bliss that would be reinscribed into the quotidian" (Roy 258). This is not very far from Emerson's ideas as the following quotations exemplify: "The heart which abandons itself to the Supreme Mind finds itself related to all its works" (389) or nature "always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute" (40), not to mention "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (10). Scholars such as Harold Bloom (1976), Joseph Carroll (1987) or Joseph Ridell (1967) have analyzed the relation between Emerson and Stevens. It is important to note that Stevens showed an early interest in mysticism, or quasi-mysticism via Emerson's works. This interest would later appear in Weil's religious works. Ashton detects a subtle Americanism in Stevens' appropriation of Weil's concept of decreation (26). It makes sense then that Stevens would embrace Weil's concepts naturally and that he would think about these concepts carefully even before he explicitly formulated the notion of decreation in the essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting".

Thus Stevens could write in "Notes..." that while writing a poem, the poet must not advance but rather retreat. Decreation is, in Pearce's thesis, the beginning of poetic creation because it is an acceptance of the limits of imagination: "finding is no longer repetition but rather what Stevens would come to call decreation – living by learning the speech of the place, itself uncreated, just perdurably there" (288).

The poet must unlearn everything he had previously learnt and must place himself at the moment previous to creation, which is the moment of nothingness. At this stage of nothingness, the poet becomes himself, and this is the momentous instant for poetry. Experience is rejected because of the prejudices it brings. The world as it is is not necessary anymore. In fact, the world as such is problematic, so the poet must begin from nothingness and must first decreate in order to create again.

“Notes...” is also concerned with the different stages of poetic composition. These are *inventio* or intellectual creation, *dispositio* or the placing of the elements in their correct order and place, and finally *elocutio*, or the eventual finding of the words. At the beginning of the poem Stevens is dealing with *inventio* and the moment precisely before it. The poet must prepare himself for writing and must act as if he had just come to life. All this has important consequences in the function of imagination, as reality is not the thing itself but the aspect of the thing as Ashton argues (39). This idea is linked to Stevens’ “first idea” (Stevens 330), which forces the poet to return to the beginning before the invention of the world. Returning implies the acceptance that the world is a construct and affirms the necessity of seeing with new eyes. Consequently, Pearce has characterized Stevens’ invention “as in-vention, discovery, in no way as creation” and ignorance as “a condition of whatever knowledge... that poetry might in the run generate” (294).

In 1979, José Ángel Valente published “Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tàpies”, a prose poem that illustrates his affinity with Tàpies’s pictorial task. Rather than influence, I would favour López Castro’s interpretation of a later discovery of Tàpies’ paintings that becomes a recognition of his own writings (295). Both Tàpies and Valente share an understanding of the indivisibility of artistic matter and artistic form. Both the poet and the painter are mere interpreters of artistic matter since both of them assume that everything in art comes from matter (López Castro 297). Mayhew points out that “what Valente perceives in the work of the Catalan artist is the powerful connection between the significance of the work of art and the material existence of the artistic medium” (92). Tàpies’ paintings represent the structure of an object which at the same time contains the object itself (59). For Tàpies, there is an organic relationship between the content of the painting and the matter from which it is made. The matter points directly to a sense of poverty that is both spiritual and aesthetic as he uses common materials in order to achieve an ascetic-like plainness (Ihmig 59-60). At the same time this matter provides the canvas with a material existence that erases the differences between signifier and signified or between painting and the objects represented. However, it must also be noted, as Combalia Dexeus argues, that Tàpies’ painting is “extremely complex in its relationship to reality and its ways of representing it” (18).

As Stevens in “Notes...,” Valente in “Cinco fragmentos...” meditates on the nature of art. Like “Notes...,” “Cinco fragmentos...” is the closing poem of a book entitled, *Material memoria* (1979) that marked a watershed in Valente’s

poetical career. From then onwards Valente's poetry entered a period characterized by the condensation of language. Miguel Mas describes the shift from the first to the second period as having three characteristics: the move from the historical "I" to the poetic "I", the poetic act as a process in continual progress and the search for a new way to access reality (46). If until that moment Valente had written poetry that was mainly concerned with social issues, from *Material memoria* onwards, he would focus his poetic endeavor on an investigation into language and representation. Like Stevens, Valente chose a title for "Cinco fragmentos..." that favors inconclusiveness. It is a series of non-systematic and unfinished approaches to Tapiès' paintings. As the title indicates, the poem is divided into five sections. The first two are concerned with art and creation. The last three reflect on Tapiès' paintings. The first sentence of the first section states the nature of art: "Quizás el supremo, el solo ejercicio radical del arte sea un ejercicio de retracción" (Valente *Poesía* 387).² Essentially, art is an exercise in retreatment and condensation, what Valente denominates as *retracción*. This is not very far from Stevens' notion of decreation as analysed by Pearce. For Pearce, decreation is the reduction of the imagination, although "in the course of projecting the decreative process, imagination discovers 'the precious portents of its own powers'" (289). For Valente, *retracción* means a reduction of language but it involves an exercise in the reduction of the imaginative powers of the poet to the essential element as well. This reduction is a task which parallels Stevens' beginning anew. Furthermore, in the essay "Cuatro referentes para una estética contemporánea", he defines the term *retracción* as a poetics of the word that reaches its innermost core: "Palabra, la poética, que se retrae y nos retrae a su absoluta interioridad, frente a la extroversión y el despilfarro de la palabra de una sociedad fundamentalmente reproductora y utilizadora" (Valente *Ensayos* 553).³ In Valente's theorization, poetry protects itself from the banalizing forces that govern consumerist societies. To assure itself that protection, poetry must effect a movement towards its center as well as a movement towards the moment previous to poetry, which is also a movement towards condensation that brings about an intensification of meaning. The movement has the opposite effect to that which it might seem to have at first sight. It is a backward movement in the search for essentiality and for an expression that is not biased in any sense. Its final result is a language that has set aside all the elements that are unnecessary, much in the same way Stevens' language does not contain "the exhilarations of changes, which are the motive for metaphor", as Vendler has pointed out (24).

Another important facet of creation is that, for Valente, the creative act is not an act of power but of acceptance or recognition: "Crear no es un acto de poder (poder y creación se niegan); es un acto de aceptación o reconocimiento" (Valente

² "Perhaps the supreme, the only radical endeavor of art is an effort of retraction."

³ "A word, the poetic word, which retreats itself and makes us retreat to its innermost core, opposing itself to the extroversión and the waste of a society that is fundamentally reproductive and utilizer."

Poesía 387).⁴ Creation implies the acceptance of being imbued by artistic matter. It must generate a mood in which the void in space was first created. This opinion is a reversal of the idea of the creative process that was prevalent from the Renaissance to Romanticism. The poet must simply generate a mood of passive acceptance and receptivity that makes the work of art possible. This view of creation, then, negates the common view of the poet's active endeavor. The most important consequence of Valente's ideas is that artistic creation is, in fact, the forming of the creative space. Valente is immersed in a process, characterized by the effacement of the poet, in which the poetic act is a continual creation of the creative space (Mas 56). This poetry is not yet formed and will not be really shaped by the poet as form and matter move abreast in the creation of the poem.

Although Stevens does not mention the creative process in "Notes...", his lines: "you must become an ignorant man again/ And see the sun with an ignorant eye/.../ Never suppose an inventing mind as source" (Stevens 329) point to Valente's ideas of the act of creation and the creative process and show that there are similarities between Valente's *retracción* and Stevens' decreation. Valente read Stevens' works and interpreted the term decreation freely, making use of it for his own poetic theorization. Both decreation and *retracción* point to the dissolution of the self, and both poets are interested in such dissolution, which they link to mysticism either in a more modern fashion as in Stevens' use of Weil's concepts or in a more traditional way as Valente did when he searched in Spanish sixteenth and seventeenth century mystical writers such as San Juan de la Cruz or Miguel de Molinos (Valente Ensayos 317-349) or the Eastern traditions that he mentions in "Cinco fragmentos...".

2.- THE 'IMMACULATE BEGINNING'

I would like to return now to "Notes..." and to Stevens' concept of abstraction to comment on Valente's and Stevens' shared ideas about the beginning of the creative process.

As Ragg has discussed, abstraction for Stevens is a "creative process where the idea of 'poetry' inspires realized poems" (59). It is an idealistic process that puts the emphasis on a particular version of the imagination as theorized by the Romantics and later revised by the Modernists (13). Despite the confusion that Stevens' idealistic "I" may cause in its closeness to the Romantic "I", the limits of the imagination that Stevens establishes in "Notes..." imply that the poet is not the absolute genius that Romanticism predicated. Stevens seems to assert that the emphasis must be put on the process of creation and on the work rather than on the creator. The poet cannot take the world's reality for granted; he must strip it of its

⁴ "To create is not an act of power (power and creation refuse each other); it is an act of acceptance or recognition."

appearance before it is re-created anew. To achieve this re-creation, the writer must place himself in the moment previous to creation, i.e., in the moment of nothingness. The poet becomes himself in this momentous instant for poetry. Despite the ambiguous nature of this “I”, the reader may notice that the poet postulates Stevens’ concept of decreation when he defines it as “making pass from the created to the uncreated” (Stevens 750). Stevens first decreates and then, at a second stage, abstracts from that decreation of reality. The acknowledgment of Stevens’ knowledge of Weil’s concept may suffice to interpret his concept of abstraction. There is another possible interpretation. As Carroll has pointed out in his discussion of Lenora Woodman’s hypothesis, Wallace Stevens had a thorough knowledge of the Cabbala. The return to the Divine Idea, in this case to the first idea, is a return to the void (Carroll *Supreme Fiction* 96).

It should be clear by now that Stevens was not working with reality. Rather, he was creating what he would call his ‘supreme fiction’. To make this possible he needed a poetic voice that was not rooted in the material world. As he wrote in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”: “although he [the possible poet] has himself witnessed, during the long period of his life, a general transition to reality, his own measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist.” (Stevens 657). Abstraction implies stripping the world of all prejudices that the poet may believe in and which may distort his poetic gaze. To “see it clearly in the idea of it” is to abstract it and reduce it to its essentials. Abstraction also implies a re-creation of the world. The process of abstracting and reducing to the essentials leads to the void where nothing is created but where creation may start. The necessity of this final stage is the problem that the world itself poses to the poet because of the poet’s prejudiced view with which he may be observing the world. Once again, this idea of abstraction is closely linked to Stevens’ decreation, since abstraction cannot take place unless decreation has first operated in the poem. In fact, decreation is the necessary first step from which abstraction starts and both maintain a close similarity while the poetic process takes place.

The return to the first idea is, thus, linked to abstraction and decreation. This first idea moves us from a supposed “immaculate beginning” to “an immaculate end” (Stevens 330-31). As Macksey indicates in “The Climates of Wallace Stevens”: “each poem moves ... between the ‘naked alpha’ of bare fact and the ‘hierophant Omega’ of the sovereign imagination; each moves between the nothingness of being or of death or of sleep and the plenitude of its poetic realization” (195). Macksey is referring particularly to “The Snow Man”, “The Course of a Particular” and “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself”, but his arguments can be used to interpret “Notes...” as well. This is more plausible when he states that each poem “explores an aspect of the vocabulary of negation: the

nothingness of perception, the nothingness of death, and the nothingness of the burgeoning perception” (194-95). It is important to note that nothingness is present in poems other than “Notes...” and that it is related to the creative process in at least two cases. This would imply that the creative process regarded as a passive mood was a concern for Stevens during a rather long period of his career. Valente might have observed Stevens’ concern, which possibly increased his interest in the American poet.

The beginning is the primal beginning when the world has not been created yet; it is the poetic world before its creation and, as I have discussed, it is the moment of *inventio*. Stevens mentions the word “candor” which evokes, in fact, the possibilities of the world before it becomes a reality. As Carroll has argued it is interesting to note that the “first idea” goes beyond “the individual human mind” (Carroll *Supreme Fiction* 163), and consequently is neither born of an individual nor limited by any poetic voice. It is, in fact, the supreme example of poetic virtuality.

For Valente poetry is primarily concerned with silence because poetry advances towards silence: “Porque el poema tiende por naturaleza al silencio” (*Poesía* 388).⁵ This tendency, which is a consequence of *retracción*, may help the poet to meditate. In fact, in the third section, Valente discusses Tàpies’ insights into meditation and the work of art. Valente’s poem on Tàpies states that for the painter the work of art is only an aid to meditation: “la obra de arte como ‘un simple apoyo de la meditación’. Su arte tiene, en efecto, la textura de la meditación” (388).⁶ Meditation transforms Tàpies’ works into forms that are progressively stripped of what is not essential for contemplation. Tàpies, as Valente writes, moves towards a work of art in which the matter is in a permanent creative process of the form. His are not static works that have a definite ending. His paintings are works in progress, most of the time in a process of dissolution into the unformed. For Tàpies form is matter and matter is form, not a particular form but absolute form of itself: “la forma no figura: es. La forma es la material... No es materia de ninguna forma sino forma absoluta de sí” (388)⁷, Valente writes in the poem, which explicitly indicates the absolute identification of form and matter in Tàpies works, as Ihmig has suggested in his analysis (60).

For Valente, Tàpies’ negation of the difference between form and matter erases the distinction between spirit and matter. Matter then becomes a part of the artist and is perceived in its essentials before it has become part of the work of art (*Poesía* 399). The erasure of the distinction brings about the problem of the Romantic “I”. The self can be predicated as long as there is an outer world that is created by that self. Valente, however, chooses the path of identification, which implies that the self does not create the world but instead may be created by the

⁵ “Because the poem tends towards silence by its own nature.”

⁶ “the work of art as ‘a simple support for meditation’. His art has, then, the texture of meditation.”

⁷ “Form does not figure: it is. Form is matter. ... It is not matter of any form but absolute form of itself.”

world. This would seem to go against the possibility of Valente's reading of Stevens' poems. Yet Stevens' mention of the eye in the first lines, and the importance that he attaches to *inventio*, make Valente's reading plausible. For Valente, the work of art is, as I have discussed, generated by the creative space when the poet is infused with the poem. Rather than a generative force, the poet is required to have a mood of absolute receptivity, which would point to Stevens' lines: "Never suppose an inventing mind as source" (Stevens 329). The world stands in front of the poet from the beginning of the creation, and the poet must simply let himself be imbued by it.

My other argument regards the question of visibility. Stevens writes:

It must be visible or invisible,
Invisible or visible or both;
a seeing and unseeing in the eye (Stevens
333).

As Doggett says:

Knowing that realization is not presence, the poet understands that what he is looking at is only an image, the world of his own thought and feeling...Therefore, reality is visible. But since the mind can hold nothing but its own image, and, as vision, in that sense, is only the sight of one's own thought, reality is invisible (*Poetry* 112-13).

The world seems to exist only in the poet's mind, as the reference to the eye suggests. Stevens does not say "a seeing and unseeing of the eye" but "in the eye". It is not a function performed by the organ of the sight, but an action that takes place in it. I would advance the idea that the act of seeing is similar to the act of thinking. It is not only the perception of the external world, but the reflection of that world in the observer's mind.

Visibility and invisibility point to Paul Klee, a painter who was instrumental in defining both Stevens' and Valente's poetics (Ragg 213; Fernández Casanova 273-74). Klee was concerned with making visible what is invisible and he was a referent both for Stevens' abstraction, as Ragg has discussed (213), and for Valente's *retracción*. The painter enlightened Stevens in his late approach towards abstraction that derived "ideas from paintings" (Ragg 214) and shed light on "condensation" and an approach to reality via the enigma, that was to become central in Valente's poetics (Fernández Casanova 274-278).

Nonetheless, there are moments in which visibility and invisibility become indistinct and reality can be both visible and invisible, as Stevens explains in the seventh section of the first part:

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme fortuitous, personal, in which
We more than awaken, sit on the edge of
sleep,
As on an elevation (334).

These are the moments of vigil, in which the clear distinction between reality and dream, or reason and imagination disappear. Things are visible and invisible at the same time, and can be apprehended rationally or imaginatively. The boundaries between the ratiocinative and the imaginative become blurred. These moments become the poetic mood for the poet in the act of writing. There is an awakening, which can be called a sharpening of the senses, of intuition and of the mind. The poet stands above the world contemplating the prospect of a world that is, and is not, at the same time. It is easy to assert then that the poetic state of mind is superior to that of the average person. Thus the poetic action is one of abstracting and of seeing what actually is and what might be, that is, of seeing what is visible and what is invisible. The poet must stand above reality in order to observe, reflect and create the poem, which would lead to the abstraction of reality.

Stevens' above quoted lines, "Perhaps there are moments of awakening/ ...As on an elevation" (334), can be brought into the discussion of some of Valente's poems such as "La señal" and "Luego del despertar". In the first poem there are a couple of lines which read:

Arriba rompe el día.
Aguardo solo la señal del canto (*Poesía* 163),⁸

and in the second poem, the following lines are worth noting:

Luego del despertar
y mientras estabas
en las lindes del día
yo escribía palabras
sobre tu cuerpo (*Poesía* 385)⁹,

⁸ "Upwards the day breaks/I only await lonely for the signal of the song".

⁹ "After the awakening/ and while you were/ on the edge of the day/I wrote words/ on your body".

“La señal” is the opening poem of *La memoria y los signos* (1966). This book opens up a new period in Valente’s literary career, as Cañas has pointed out (175). The poetry he wrote before “La señal” becomes a sort of prologue to his book. *La memoria y los signos* stands in a central position in Valente’s development towards a poetry in which the void, poverty of language and creative dispossession become prevalent. The title of the book points to remembrance and language. The book can be interpreted as a search for history in which language plays a central role. Thus, language is the only path to self-knowledge (Mas 40-41).

“La señal” announces Valente’s endeavor to strip his poetry of every sign that is unnecessary (Jiménez “Lucha” 227). After the dark night comes the redemption of dawn. The night is not the end but the announcement of a new beginning. The poetry that results is poetry of the absolute beginning. “La señal” is a supreme example of the importance that the vigil has in Valente’s poetry. The vigil is a state of intense perception and of a sharp gaze (Cañas 174) and also the occasion for a move towards an essential language that comes as the result of linguistic dispossession. “La señal” is also the poetic word which, in Heideggerian fashion, is an act of knowledge in itself (Mas 41). Poetry is not only an act of reminiscence or of pondering on past events; it is a search for an absolute. It is also a moment of uncertainty and displacement, in which the world may have been turned upside down as in Stevens’ poem: “Perhaps there are moments of awakening./.../in which/ We more than awaken, sit at the edge of sleep” (334). Stevens’ return to the beginning and Valente’s creation of the void take place during the vigil. As Cañas points out, the vigil is a core element in the creation of the figure of the poet. (174). The vigil is the privileged moment of (the most acute?) acute attention and of heightened sensorial perception. However, the inversion of terms that Valente carried out is extremely interesting because it points to the moment when his aesthetics of condensation (*retracción*) takes place. Valente’s vision is consequently a nocturnal vision. Not only is it concerned with shadows, grey tones and indeterminacy, but the vision of the observer who is attentive to the birth of the poem as well.

The creative process is a moment of revelation, a moment of wholeness and creativity in the void, or a moment of exhilaration as Stevens himself wrote. All the same, it is a moment that is always situated at the edge of rational perception. It stands on the brink between rationality and irrationality, or, in Stevens’ words: “a seeing and unseeing in the eye” (333).

Stevens’ “edge of sleep” resounds in Valente’s “lindes del día” [the edge of the day]. This is the moment when the boundary between visibility and invisibility becomes blurred. In an allusive way both poets use the tradition of courtly love poetry. Stevens’ use of this tradition may seem more cryptic, and it is Valente’s allusion that sheds light on Stevens’ aim. What matters is that dawn is the most appropriate moment for poetry, when imagination is at its highest peak because the

night, or darkness, does not prevail and the day, or light, has not yet bloomed. An instant, then, of indistinction, as well as a moment that can be paralleled to that in which thought and feeling are united. This can be paralleled to the moment of decreation, when the passing of the created to the uncreated takes place. As the reader can observe, both decreation and the vigil are dynamic, rather than static moments, and both of them point towards a progress rather than to the final result of the poetic process.

By reading Valente against Stevens, the reader may get a glimpse of new senses in Stevens' poetry. It is my view that Valente read Stevens' poetry closely and kept in mind some of his ideas and characteristics of his poetry that, within the broader context of contemporary poetry, helped him during his career. I am by no means claiming a direct and single influence of Stevens over Valente. Rather, I would favor the interpretation of the discovery in Stevens of concerns that Valente had been already exploring. Valente could have developed his concept of *retracción* by investigating Stevens' ideas of abstraction and decreation. As a consequence, he would have theorized his idea of the creative space, while resorting to Stevens' "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction". What is more interesting, however, is that Valente's reading of Stevens' opens up new interpretations of the American poet.

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