Poetic Iconicity

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MARGARET H. FREEMAN
Myrifield Institute for Cognition and the Arts
Heath, MA, USA

Poetic Iconicity

Iconicity is the means by which poetry creates the semblance of felt life. Or, to say that somewhat differently, a poem is an icon of reality. This paper is an attempt to explore the meaning and significance of those statements. Much, if anything, of what I will say is not new. Rather, the paper is an attempt at a synthesis, a pulling together of many strands of observations and research on the nature of poetry and reality, the concept of iconicity within a semiotic framework, and the role of feeling as a motivating force in poetic creation. To document the extensive research on these topics would unnecessarily weight down what is, for me, simply an attempt at clarification of my own thinking. I realize this opens me to criticism. However, if this exploratory essay helps others to see similar links and relationships among many seemingly divergent approaches, I hope I will be forgiven for documenting only the most immediate sources for the state of my current thinking. These include Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of existential phenomenology, especially as developed in his last work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory of the sign, and Susanne K. Langer's theory of art.

In addition, the work of Reuven Tsur in Cognitive Poetics (http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/index.html), cognitive linguistic research in general and into conceptual metaphor and conceptual integration networks (blending) in particular (http://markturner.org/blending.html); it is the above works and the work cited in the bibliography of the Iconicity Project (http://home.hum.uva.nl/iconicity/) that have informed my thinking. My choice of a Wallace Stevens poem to illustrate my argument is accidental but not arbitrary.[1] Stevens, I believe, perhaps more than any other modern poet, consciously developed in his poems and through his writings a poetics of the imagination as lived experience: "poetic truth is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination … expressed in terms of [the poet's] emotions … of his own personality" (Stevens 1965: 54).

The Relation of Poetry and Reality

In her article in the first volume of the Iconicity Project, Elżbieta Tabakowska (1999: 411) makes the following point:

> Traditionally, it has been generally assumed that iconic relations are one-way processes: from expression to concept. However, if we agree that the ability to recognize a given similarity results from the language user's knowledge of a given culture and language, then we can also reasonably assume that the process may be reversed: via the (linguistic) convention, the user of language might associate (by recognizing relevant similarities) certain expressions with certain concepts, and in consequence arrive at a certain view, or interpretation, of reality.

The suggestion that Tabakowska makes here – that iconicity has something to do with the way we perceive reality – reflects the direction I will take in defining what I mean by poetic iconicity.

As I hope will become clear in the course of this paper, poetry (as is true of all the arts) is an attempt to break through or transcend the fact that the way we are constructed as human beings, and how that structure gets expressed in human language, constrains our view of reality; that the minute we become conceptually aware of the world around us, we have at the same time made that world a phenomenological one, rich in its overlayering leaves but poor in enabling us to experience its essence directly.

Science is one attempt to overcome this limitation. By constructing an artificial language through which to explore the nature of our physical world, mathematicians have succeeded, as far as is possible, to access what is elsewhere called Mind Independent Reality, or MIR.[2] But by the very nature of its methodology, science cannot help us understand the nature of our phenomenological world, that is, the world as we experience it. This is where the arts come in and, especially for my purposes here, the literary arts.

I would like to begin my exploration into the relation of poetic iconicity to the question of reality by telling a story. In our very last seminar with Dorothy Emmet, Sir Samuel Hall Professor of Philosophy at the University of Manchester, before we were to graduate in Philosophy Honours, Professor Emmet said: "Whatever else you are, I hope that you will not leave this University as naïve realists." I wondered at the time why Emmet would reduce everything to something that seemed, after four years of immersion in philosophy, so obvious to us. Her statement has never left me, and I have come to understand the wisdom of her parting words. She was in effect using Occam's Razor to cut to the very heart of the philosophical enterprise. We had been taught that all invention, all discovery, must start from some axiom or other. Science starts, as Alan Sokal (2000: 51) expressed it, from the axiom that objective reality exists: "There *is* a real world; its properties are *not* merely social constructions; facts and evidence do matter." Ironically perhaps, religion also starts from

a similar axiomatic premise of objective reality: that there *is a* God. As Carl Sagan (2007) once put it, "I would suggest that science is, at least in part, informed worship." Philosophy begins where science and religion cannot go. By questioning the basic axiom of objective reality, philosophy opens up the possibility of alternative worlds.

The worlds of science and religion in their very different ways open up our minds to the idea of worlds of abstraction, beyond the senses. For example, the discovery in modern physics of atomic time, in its unvarying precise oscillation, replaces the concept of earth or solar time by which we have recorded time for centuries. Atomic time is a move toward abstraction, away from the identification of time passing that is more closely linked to our senses, time as recorded by the diurnal movement of the Earth and Sun.[3] Religion depends on another kind of abstraction, on its belief in the immaterial, the world of the spirit. Mysticism and meditation are two ways in which this immaterial world may be accessed and experienced. The aims of philosophers are different, in that they attempt to explain why and how we as humans experience alternative worlds. Poetry, as Stevens (1965: 54) notes, differs from philosophy in that poetry's truths come about by empirical, not logical, knowledge, so that "they are pursuing two different parts of a whole." That "whole" is, I believe, the underlying nature of the real.

In Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of the sign (Hoopes 1991), icon, index, and symbol mark the scalar movement of the sign from concrete to abstract. That is, the icon is closest to the concrete experience of the senses, the index one step removed, and symbol the furthest away, representing the sign only in a conventionalized or abstract manner. All three forms participate and interact in the language sign. The icon itself has a tripartite structure, composed of image, diagram, and metaphor. Iconicity, then, provides a means for expressing the world of the senses, before the conceptualizing mind moves us toward abstraction. It is, in Merleau-Ponty's (1962) terms,

our primordial experience of precategorial being that underlies the structure of reality. This reality is usually "invisible" to us, not as absence or void, but as being hidden in the visible but always present in the moment. As Merleau-Ponty (1968: 404) notes, the sense of our inherence in the world, our experiencing ourselves in the present moment, "the presence of oneself to oneself, being no less than existence, is anterior to any philosophy, and knows itself only in those extreme situations in which it is under threat: for example, in the dread of death or of another's gaze upon me." It is at moments of great emotion that we are made, if only momentarily, self-aware of our being as part of the primordial being of the present moment. This is the reality that the arts attempt to capture through their emphasis on the concrete, the particular, the individual. By restoring the primacy of the sensations and emotions of our individual and particular experience, feeling is invested with form and form with feeling. It is this that creates the possibility of iconicity in the arts.

In order to explain what I mean by poetic iconicity, I think it important to clear up what I find to be some terminological confusion in the literature. In semiotics, the existence of such varied terms as *sign*, *significans*, *significatum*, *signifier*, *signified*, *designatum*, *denotatum*, and so on, indicates a certain amount of conceptual struggle in identifying and describing the relationship between what has been termed *form and content* or, variously, *form and meaning*. A similar terminological confusion surrounds the terms *imitation*, *isomorphism*, and *motivation*. Since these latter terms are involved specifically in iconicity, I have tried in the following sections to determine where the confusion lies.

Imitation

Imitation is perhaps the most common notion underlying iconic use of language. Studies of mimesis can be traced back to Aristotle (Sternberg 2003: 326). The title of the first volume in the Iconicity Project series, *Form Miming Meaning* (Nänny, Fischer 1999), reflects this tradition. In its crudest form, imitation is understood to occur when the form of a linguistic expression appears to reflect or "mirror" its "sense" or meaning. Poe's famous section from his *Essay on Criticism*, showing how sound may "eccho" [*sic*] sense, is frequently cited for auditory or imagic iconicity (e.g. Alderson 1999: 111; Meier 1999: 149); Caesar's *veni, vidi, vici* for syntactic or diagrammatic iconicity (e.g. Haiman 1985: 4; Müller 1999: 397). Theories of imitation in language depend on the notion that language is predominantly arbitrary and thus tend to assume that iconic usage is somehow more primitive in language development (e.g., the bow-wow, pooh-pooh etc. and gesture theories of language origin, and the idea that children's first linguistic expressions are iconic in nature; cf. Fischer 1999: 345), or that it is superimposed upon what is otherwise purely arbitrary by some kind of analogy between form and meaning. This rather narrow view of imitation or mimesis obscures the role that metaphor plays in creating the similarities that make expression iconic.

It is a common misperception that similarity or, to use Stevens' term, resemblance, exists *a priori* among objects, images, and ideas. Instead, as Stevens (1965: 76) notes, it is the human conceptualizing mind that creates resemblance, whether in nature or in metaphor: "It quite seems as if there is an activity that makes one thing resemble another… The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance as the painter begets in representation… It is not difficult, having once predicated such an activity, to attribute it to a desire for resemblance." Stevens (1965: 73) is careful to distinguish between imitation and resemblance: "An imitation may be described as

an identity manqué. It is artificial. It is not fortuitous as a true metaphor is… Resemblance in metaphor is an activity of the imagination; and in metaphor the imagination is life." This point can be seen most clearly in examples of sound. An ornithologist who imitates bird calls does so through exercising his vocal cords to produce sounds outside the realm of human language. Onomatopoeia, on the other hand, is the use of phonetic and reduplicative human language sounds, like "cuckoo" or "cock–a–doodle–do," to approximate the birds' calls. The same is true for the arts. My friend who paints the birch tree in our North meadow is not creating an imitation of the tree; she is painting its image: her mental conception of what she sees transformed onto canvas. One is reminded of Magritte's famous painting of a pipe, with the accompanying caption, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. An icon, then, is a *creation* of resemblance or, in Langer's (1953) term, *semblance* of life, not an imitation.

Isomorphism

The "desire for resemblance" is part of the structure of human reality. Our minds work analogically by creating relations among objects, ideas, and images. The principle by which we make these correspondences is called isomorphism. The term *isomorphism* has been used in language studies to reflect the notion that one form = one meaning (Bolinger 1977: x; Ungerer 1999: 307). However, terminological confusion rises here by using the term *meaning* or even the word *content*. Exactly what is meant by these terms is unclear. A leap has occurred between the form of a sign and what a sign signifies. Meaning is not directly accessible in the words or even the structure of language; it is created by the mind operating on language in the context of experience, memory, situational context, and feeling (Brandt, Brandt 2005; Sinha 1999).

The term *isomorphism* was first used in mineralogy to describe the discovery that elements of different minerals were related analogically by sharing the same crystalline form (*OED*). I.e. it is the structures or forms that are isomorphic, not the relation between the compounds and their forms. This principle has consequences for our understanding of the way the mind processes analogy. As Lakoff and Núñez (2000: 78–80) indicate, for structural correlations to be isomorphic, certain conditions on the relevant mappings must hold. To say, then, that form = content is not very explanatory. It is the isomorphic principle of relating structures (what Fauconnier and Turner (2002) refer to in their blending model as the generic space) that enables an analogy to be made. Take, for example, the notion of diarrhea. *Diarrhea* is the term used to describe a physical condition of bodily excretion: that is, the symptoms that occur when the stool loses its normal compositionality and becomes watery, often creating an urgent need for frequent expulsion. Experiencing diarrhea is unpleasant. When I say that a friend of mine has verbal diarrhea, I am creating an isomorphic relationship between the forms that physical diarrhea take and the kind of incessant stream of talk that appears to be produced involuntarily and with some urgency, as evidenced by the speed of delivery and the intonational pressures that accompany the speech act. This is of course a metaphor, produced by blending a bodily function and a speech act. Experiencing diarrhea is unpleasant for the victim, the one experiencing it in physical terms and the one experiencing it metaphorically. What enables the analogy to work is the principle (not the exact identity) of isomorphism.

Note that in the metaphor, the relations mapped between the person with diarrhea and the person experiencing another's verbal speech are not equivalent. Total isomorphism, as several researchers (Holyoak, Thagard 1995: 29–31; Rudrauf, Damasio 2005: 238; Lehmann 2007: 11) have noted, would create complete identity, which is impossible both in the real world and in natural language,

because the experience of phenomenal reality is more complex than any language can hope to encapsulate (what linguists call language as underdetermined). This complexity of life is why Langer (1967: 244) attributes so much importance to the simpler forms of art, since in its semblance of felt life, it enables us to construct "a concept of mind adequate to the living actuality."

Because linguists have taken isomorphism to mean one form = one content, they have tended to conclude that isomorphism disallows synonymy, polysemy, or homonymy (Fischer 1999: 351). But if one sees the principle of isomorphism as shared structure, then it actually predicts the opposite: it enables one form to generate more than one meaning. These different perspectives have important consequences for poetic iconicity. If one adopts the original meaning of isomorphism as shared structure, then it is not simply a question of mapping form onto content, but a question of how similar forms may generate meanings. Emotions, too, may share the same form. As Prinz (2005: 19) notes, "certain emotions [like guilt and sadness] have similar or identical phenomenology." Langer (1953: 373) makes the same point: "the same feeling may be an ingredient in sorrow and in the joys of love." The emotions differ, Prinz argues, not from their form but their cause. Thus the form of crying might occur as a result either of joy or of sorrow. This, then, is the definition of isomorphism that I adopt. It is the propensity for recognizing isomorphism in structures or forms that satisfies our "desire for resemblance" and that enables iconicity to occur. In other words, the principle of isomorphism is what motivates meaning and thus provides the link between form and feeling.

Motivation

The term *motivation* is used in linguistics in opposition to the notion of arbitrariness. A sign that is related to another sign

either by analogy of its internal structure (*paradigmatic*, as in the composition of a morpheme), or by properties of the syntactic context in which it appears (*syntagmatic*, as in anaphor), is said to be motivated (Lehmann 2007: 17). In iconicity studies, it refers to the non-arbitrary relation between the language sign and the conceptualized real world. However, to explain these relations as motivated does not explain what it is that makes a sign non-arbitrary in this way. Motivation, as Lehmann (2007: 23) notes, can be more generally understood as related to human acts and goals, so that the question for language becomes on what basis the sign is motivated: "a sign is motivated to the extent that a principle can be identified that relates it to its content, to the speaker, and to the hearer." That principle, I suggest, is the principle of isomorphism.

For Haiman (1980: 515–516), isomorphism is restricted to the relation between form and meaning in a linguistic utterance, whereas the relation between form and extralinguistic reality concerns an iconicity of motivation. Because conventional wisdom identifies isomorphism and motivation as kinds or types of iconicity (Haiman 1999: 53), the distinctions between them become blurred when considering whether they occur within the linguistic system (*endophoric* iconicity) or are external to it (*exophoric* iconicity). As Lehmann (2007: 18) notes, "specific kinds of motivation like metaphor and metonymy show that the boundary between language-internal and language-external motivation (where language = *langue*) may be hard to draw." The problem is compounded by the traditional separation of semantic and pragmatic meaning. From a cognitive perspective, meaning is neither semantic nor pragmatic, but encyclopedic: that is, it arises from the cumulative association of experience, conceptualization, context, and culture. Rather than considering isomorphism and motivation as different kinds of iconicity, I suggest that they be understood as integral processes in the creation of iconicity. That is, motivation can be seen as the desire

for isomorphism, and isomorphism as the desire for resemblance (or, as I prefer, Langer's term *semblance*).

Resemblance, Stevens (1965: 71–73) claims, is neither identity nor imitation. It is, he says, "one of the significant components of the structure of reality" and is created by the imagination through metaphor. This resemblance can take the following forms: 1) between two or more parts of reality; 2) between something real and something imagined; 3) between something imagined and something real; and 4) between two imagined things. Stevens' suggestion that metaphor might be better described as metamorphosis provides the link between poetry and reality: poetic images "are not the language of reality, they are the symbolic language of metamorphosis, or resemblance, of poetry" (78) that makes "poetry part of the structure of reality … [which] pretty much amounts to saying that the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one, or should be" (81).

That "should be" introduces the question of evaluation. Stevens (1965: 50) speaks of poetry that "completely accomplishes the purposes of the poet." When it does so, it may be said to equate poetry with reality, or, as I said at the beginning, to make a poem that is an icon of reality in its semblance of felt life. To show how such poetic iconicity works, I turn in the following section to one of the last poems Stevens wrote before he died of cancer in 1955.

Wallace Stevens, "Of Mere Being"

In his essays on imagination and reality, Stevens (1965) attempts to define how poetry might be part of the structure of reality, a reality that is both visible and invisible. He quotes Joad's (1936: 551) observation that the intellect "presents us with a false view" of reality by transforming its "vibrations, movements, changes" into "a collection of solid, static objects extended in space." This reification

tendency of the intellect obscures the true nature of the structure of reality, of "things as they are" (Stevens 1965: 25; see also Langer 1967: 20–21). It is the role of the imagination, motivated by the emotional sensitivity of the poet, that enables us to see things as they are, not as things constructed by the intellect. This, I believe, is Stevens' way of characterizing poetry as that which touches the primordial, precategorial component of lived experience. The epigraph he chose for his volume of essays, taken from his poem "The Auroras of Autumn," expresses how one may experience the un-fangled world, the "rock" bare of its covering "leaves," Merleau-Ponty's primordial or precategorial experience, through the senses of the hidden, the unseen that resides within the seen, the in-visible: "I am the necessary angel of earth, / Since, in my sight, you see the earth again."

Stevens' poetry as a whole exemplifies his understanding of the relation between imagination and reality, no more so than in the poem "Of Mere Being." The very title reveals its subject: "mere" being is that which really is, as opposed to that which is constructed by the intellect. The question becomes how poetry can, constructed as it is by means of language, that very product of the intellectualizing, conceptualizing self, nevertheless break through its own barriers to access the primordial, the precategorial (Fónagy 1999: 26). It is, I believe, the same question that Tsur (2004) raises in his discussion of mystic and romantic poetry, and also in his (1998: 223) statement that "poetry is organized violence against language." In other words, all poetic truth is involved with experiencing Merleau-Ponty's invisible in the visible; as Stevens (1965: 61) comments: "It is important to believe that the visible is the equivalent of the invisible." It does so, as I have argued elsewhere (Freeman forthcoming), by means of the strategies of poetic iconicity that make all the elements of the poem, its meter and rhythms, its sound patterns and repetitions, its images and metaphors, its micro- and macrostructures, work

together to create an iconicity of sense experience, the illusion of felt life. In the analysis that follows, I attempt to show some of the ways Stevens' poem achieves poetic iconicity in creating the illusion of "mere being."

Stevens' poem has been described by Helen Vendler (1984: 42) as "an iconic poem," by Harold Bloom (1976: 98, 316, 343, 352) as "a death–poem," by William Bevis (1974: 279) as investing "its perception with value and emotion," by Eleanor Cook (1988: 298, 311–312) as an example of anagogic metaphor. Each of these descriptions, in its own way, refers to the characteristics that make the poem a semblance of felt life.

"Of Mere Being"

1   The palm at the end of the mind
2   Beyond the last thought, rises
3   In the bronze décor,

4   A gold-feathered bird
5   Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
6   Without human feeling, a foreign song.

7   You know then that it is not the reason
8   That makes us happy or unhappy.
9   The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

10   The palm stands on the edge of space.
11   The wind moves slowly in the branches.
12   The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

We do not inhabit the world, as some have said. Inhabitation invokes the CONTAINER metaphor, which predicates that objects

are separate from that which contains them. Rather, we belong *to* the world, we are part *of* the world. This precision of meaning is what poets attempt in iconic representation. Note that the title of Stevens' poem does not say "on" being, which would indicate that the poem is about or on the subject of being, but "of" being, the poem a part of the being that is part of the world. The preposition "of" occurs twice in the poem, at the end of the first lines of the opening and closing stanzas: "of the mind" and "of space." The other prepositions in these lines undergo a subtle shift, from "at the end" to "on the edge." The palm is at the end of the mind but on the edge of space. Had Stevens written "at the edge," he would have created a greater linguistic parallelism between the two lines but have missed the insight. The mind is not equivalent to space; rather, the boundary of the mind is the boundary of space. The palm thus connects the inner and the outer; as it rises at the end of the mind, it stands on the edge of space. The palm's concurrent motion and stasis reflect the reality of continuous metamorphosis, the never-ending change that constitutes life, the living being.

To be iconic of reality, the poem must capture the sense of our being part of this seen and unseen world. As Stevens (1965: 51) notes in speaking of the feeling of elevation the poet experiences in accomplishing this purpose, "we feel perfectly adapted to the idea that moves and *l'oiseau qui chante*." The idea moves both physically and emotionally, but what of the bird? Stevens is invoking an allusion to Charles Baudelaire's poem "Enivrez–vous," in which the poet says that we must always live in a state of intoxication, either from wine, poetry, or virtue, according to preference, and that if ever such intoxication diminishes or disappears, we should ask of the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock what time it is and they will answer the time for intoxicating in order to free ourselves from the enslaved martyrdom of time. The bird that sings in Stevens' palm is thus an icon for the immersion of the self in the world, in the present moment, beyond

human meaning, beyond human feeling, both the palm and the bird being the phoenix dying and arising in its unceasing metamorphosis in space and time, just as the wind (Baudelaire's *le vent*) as spirit, as idea, moves in the branches of the palm.

But how does the poem accomplish this purpose? It does so through a metaphorical mapping of all the forms of feeling that occur through the poem's textures of sound, structure, and image. The challenge for the poet is how to make language work to encapsulate the sense that is beyond language, beyond human conceptualizing. Stevens does this by metaphorically invoking experience of the precategorial unseen through barely perceived structures and perceptions. Following is just the merest sketch of the rich interweavings that create a poetic iconicity of mere being.

The three main images of the poem are the palm, the mind, and the bird. Their sound patterns resonate through the poem in forming the feeling of mere being that together they constitute. Note, for example, that all begin with bilabial consonants. The [p] of *palm* is an unvoiced bilabial and is thus the furthest removed from the voiced, nasalized bilabial of [m] at the end of the word and in *mind*. The [b] of *bird* falls between [p] and [m] as the voiced bilabial, and shares with *mind* the voiced dental [d] at the end of the two words. The word *mind* is linked through its beginning voiced nasalized bilabial with the title word *mere* and three other words in the poem that begin the same way: *meaning, moves,* and *makes*. All three are verbal processes associated with the process of "minding" (Freeman forthcoming). The only other occurrence of the [m] phoneme is in the middle of the word *human*. At its other extreme, the unvoiced bilabial [p] of palm occurs only in the words *happy* and *unhappy*, both associated with valenced emotion. In the middle lies the voiced bilabial [b] that occurs in the title word *being*, in *beyond, bronze*, and *branches*. Unlike the other bilabial word patterns, none of these are the same part of speech: *being*, though ostensibly a noun, is again

a verbal process, *beyond* is a preposition, *bronze* an adjective, and *branches* the only noun of the group that shares with *palm* physical existence as an object in space. The bird thus analogically invokes the whole spectrum of experience.

One problem with discussing the poetic iconicity of a poem is that since absolutely everything counts toward its creation, one could write a whole book on one poem (Háj Ross's (2000) brilliant monograph on the sound patterns alone in William Blake's "Tyger" runs to forty-six pages). An even more detailed prosodic analysis than the one that follows – of the stress pattern rhythms of the verse lines, its stress valleys with their four syllable clusters (Tsur 1998: 194), the way metrical patterns break across the caesuras, and all the other features of sound, structure, and sense – would only cross the t's and dot the i's of my point: that all these strategies in Stevens' poem are working to create the precategorial experience that is the subject of this poem, and that is at the heart of all poetry that, in Stevens' (1965: 53) own words, achieves what the poet set out to accomplish: "the moment of exaltation that the poet experiences when he writes a poem that completely accomplishes his purpose, is a moment of victory over the incredible…." For Stevens' poem, as for Blake's, it would be an exercise in futility to perform such an analysis for its own sake, since the poem itself so beautifully presents its own being. That analytical criticism is needed at all is a sad but true recognition that not all of us have access to that inspirational ability to capture in language the incredible, the invisible, the primordial, precategorial experience of being – or to recognize it in a poem. But analytical criticism, like Ross's analysis of Blake's "Tyger," can also contribute to understanding the embodied mind: how the imagination forms feeling in language, and show more precisely how language mediates between mind and reality.

Stevens' poem iconically presents the primordial precategorial in-visibility of "mere being" through a strategy of abstraction that serves to make the prosodic forms of its language only potentially realizable;

that is, by either delaying or not fully or completely actualizing the various forms that structure the poem. What results is an abstraction of structure that becomes a ghost form, hovering just beyond the actual conceptualizations of the poem's images.[4] These structures include metrical pattern, stanzaic arrangement, verbal transitivity, and prepositional use.

The poem appears to be written in free verse. That is, there is no clearly discernible metrical pattern that underlies the verse line. The number of syllables per line ranges from a low of five to a high of ten (not more, which is significant); its stress patterns vary from iambic to trochaic to anapestic; its stanzaic tercets fail to approximate the *terza rima* form introduced by Dante (Häublein 1978: 22) and adapted by Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind" (Vendler 1984: 53); there is no obvious rhyme scheme. However, the poem does not read like a prototypical free verse form: it is as though an abstract metrical pattern is hovering as an invisible ghost behind, beyond, or below the acoustic realizations of linguistic stress patterns in the poem (Finch 1993). In fact, this ghost of meter finally materializes in the last line of the poem as a perfectly formed iambic pentameter line: "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down." The rest of the poem has been inexorably moving toward this moment, as its eleven lines begin to approximate but do not quite form the pentameter structure. To explain: the central three lines of the eleven (lines 5–7) have ten syllables, but their rhythm is predominantly trochaic:

> 5   Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> 6   Without human feeling, a foreign song.
>
> 6   You know then that it is not the reason

Line 5 opens in iambic style but reverts after the caesura to the trochaic; line 6 does the opposite, opening in trochaic style, but

ending after the caesura in the iambic. This ending provides a feeling
of closure, reinforced by its position at the end of the first half of
the poem and the period marking the end of the first sentence: "a
foreign song." The iambic nature of this closure halfway through
the poem anticipates the poem's final iambic pentameter line. Line
7, which starts the second half of the poem, is metrically complex.
Neither trochaic nor iambic, lines 7–8 are the only ones in the poem
that approximate the intonational quality of free verse and, as we
shall see, are central to the poem's theme. The fact that this "tercet"
of ten-syllable lines does not form a stanza in itself but runs over
a stanza break also indicates both what is and is not there, suggesting
a form that is invisible (in Merleau-Ponty's sense) within the visible
actualization of the form of the stanzas. There is a struggle going on
between the desire for an underlying metrical form and the actual
representation in the prosody of the lines.

The prosodic patterns of the four lines that precede and the four
lines that follow this central tercet also contribute to the movement
toward the final realization of the iambic pentameter line. They occur
in pairs: lines 1 and 10 have eight syllables, lines 2 and 9 have seven,
lines 3 and 4 have five, and lines 8 and 11 have nine. The eight- and
seven-syllable lines pattern chiasmically across the central tercet, so
that the eight-syllable lines that refer to the palm provide an outer
frame for the bird that is beyond thought in the inner seven-syllable
lines:

1   The palm at the end of the mind
2   Beyond the last thought, rises

9 The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

10   The palm stands on the edge of space.

The anapestic rhythm of line 1 resolves into an iambic rhythm
in line 10, whereas the incomplete iambic pattern of line 2 (with
its ending on a weak stress reinforced by the syntactic enjambment
of the verb) becomes the regular trochaic rhythm of line 9, with its
strong caesura and final closure. Lines 3 and 4 which follow the
introduction of the eight-seven irregular stress pattern of lines 1–2,
each have five syllables:

3   In the bronze décor,

4   A gold–feathered bird

Even though they straddle two stanzas, the comma at the end
of line 3 creates an enjambment which encourages us to read them
together as a ten-syllable line.[5] Their actual division, into two lines
and across a stanza break, creates a trochaic pattern in what would
otherwise be iambic pentameter: another example of the ghost of
a meter hovering "invisibly" in the linguistic actualization. These lines
thus foreshadow both the form of the central (in-visible) tercet in
overrunning a stanza break and the move toward iambic pentameter
resolution in the final line. The second appearance of the eight and
seven syllable lines (this time in reverse order) in lines 9 and 10
(also straddling a stanza break) occurs within the nine-syllable pair
forming lines 8 and 11:

8   That makes us happy or unhappy.

11   The wind moves slowly in the branches.

Both these lines are incomplete in missing the final tenth position
of the pentameter line, but they reinforce the iambic movement
against the trochaic. Line 8 introduces the iambic, only to be lost by

the stolidly trochaic form of the following line (9). The final stanza is wholly iambic in its underlying form, with each line increasing in number of syllables, from eight to nine, to that final realization of ten in the iambic pentameter line of line 12: "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down." These prosodic patterns provide the structure for the other linguistic forms in the poem.

Why did Stevens choose a three-line stanzaic form for this poem? There are three things in the poem that occur three times: the palm, the bird, and the feathers. The poem creates a kind of zoom-in focus, starting with the palm rising into the viewer's perspective in the first stanza, to the gold-feathered bird in the second, and then a focus on the shining feathers of the third. The pattern of repetitions for the words *palm* and *bird* across the four stanzas are as follows:

    1   palm
    2   bird – palm
    3   bird
    4   palm – bird

I have already noted the correspondence of the bilabials in the forms of the two words. Their placement in the poem also creates a pattern of alternation (across all four stanzas) and chiasmus (in stanzas 2 and 4), reinforcing their metaphorical relation, metaphorical because in Greek the form of the word *palm* is the same as that of the word *phoenix* (Cook 1988: 312), thus creating an isomorphic mapping between them. The word *feather* appears in different morphological form in its three representations: "gold-feathered" in the first line of stanza 2, "feathers" in the last line of stanza 3, and "fire–fangled feathers" in the last line of stanza 4. The alliteration of the sound [f] is tri-fold, occurring three times in stanza 2 on *feathered*, *feeling*, and *foreign*, and three times in stanza 4 on *fire-fangled feathers*. These are the only times the [f] sound appears in the poem, except for the one word *feathers* in stanza 3. The alliteration has the effect of drawing together the notions of *feathers*, *feeling*, *foreign*, *fire*, and

fangled, which compose an interrelated metaphorical structure of sense. The word *fire-fangled* is an idiosyncratic coinage. The word *fangled* appears in contemporary English only in the compound *new-fangled*, but Stevens may have had in mind the lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (V.iv.134–135): "Be not, as is our fangled world, a garment / Nobler than that it covers." The line is spoken by Posthumus Leonatus after he awakes from what he thinks is a dream of the ghosts of his family appealing to the god Jupiter to help him, their only living family member, who is in gaol and about to be hung. It is addressed to the tablet he finds on his chest (left by the ghosts at Jupiter's behest) that contains words foretelling his future happiness. He says (lines 146–149):

> 'Tis still a dream, or else such stuff as madmen
> Tongue and brain not; either both or nothing;
> Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such
> As sense cannot untie. Be what it is [.]

The scene is a peculiar episode in the play, but raises the issues of an *autre-monde* that "sense cannot untie": a world invisible, beyond the senses, beyond all reason, and yet real. The "fire-fangled feathers" of the bird in Stevens' poem comprise the visible garment of the visible world that covers or conceals primordial reality.

Just as we have seen line pairings in the verse form structure, so we have pairings in the verbal pattern. Two verbs accompany the three things: the palm rises and stands (lines 1 and 10), the bird sings and sings (lines 5 and 9), the feathers shine and dangle (lines 9 and 12). All are used intransitively (the delayed occurrence of "a foreign song" in line 6 makes it read rather as a noun phrase in apposition to the preceding phrases than the direct object of "sings" in line 5). The transitive verbs are all associated with human activity: "You know" and "is not the reason" in line 7 and "makes us" in line

8. Even the gerunds "meaning" and "feeling" that are transitive in their verbal forms are associated with the human. I have already noted that lines 7–8 are the only ones in the poem that are prosaic in their structure. As Vendler (1984: 42) comments, the declaration in these lines establishes "the claims of sensual desire against the reasoning mind." This human/non-human, transitive/intransitive contrast is reinforced by the movement of the wind in line 11. The word *move* may be used both transitively and intransitively; here the wind doesn't move the branches (transitive), but moves *in* them (intransitive). Every natural thing of the world in the poem is made to "Be what it is," in Shakespeare's words; only human construal creates causal effect.

Another way that Stevens (1996: 636) manages, in his own words, "to get as close to [plain reality] as it is possible for a poet to get" is through his idiosyncratic use of prepositions. As Eleanor Cook (1988: 30) notes, "Stevens' play with prepositions acts to dislocate slightly the logic of referential language, to displace slightly the language of place." The very first word in the title indicates not that the subject of the poem is to be mere being (for then the preposition would have been "on"), but that its subject is to be what constitutes mere being (consider a similar usage of the preposition "of" in Stevens' title "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" where "at" would be expected). The prepositions in the first stanza play with different notions of place: "at the end," "of the mind," "beyond the last thought," and "in the bronze décor," a movement from "at" to "in" through "beyond," another move from the visible *at* to the *in*-visible décor by going *beyond* thought. As Harold Bloom (1976: 98) observes, "'Beyond' is a particularly haunting word throughout Stevens' poetry. His aim always is to play 'a tune beyond us, yet ourselves,' and to teach us, somehow, to 'bear brightly the little beyond.'" The third stanza, already noted for its difference from the rest of the poem, is the only one that contains no prepositions at all.

Elżbieta Tabakowska (1999: 416) notes how determiners establish identity and definition. It is noticeable in the poem that almost all its determiners are definitional ones: there are thirteen occurrences of definitional "the" as opposed to only two identifying uses of "a," both associated with the introduction of the bird in stanza 2. The first word of the poem's first line is "the" and this homophoric usage defines the palm as that which rises "at the end of the mind / Beyond the last thought" and thus establishes its existence as a necessary component of what is beyond thought. It is always there, whenever we reach the end of the mind which is the edge of space. The bird is not defined in the same way; rather it is identified as being in the palm, singing a song that is identified as foreign because it is "without human meaning, / Without human feeling." This identification of the gold-feathered bird draws our attention to the kind of bird it is, not the Yeatsian bird of "Sailing to Byzantium" (although the allusion is there), but the phoenix, the bird of the sun, death by fire and resurrection. Although the phoenix is not mentioned by name, it is there, hovering in the word "palm," which, as I have already noted, in Greek is the same word (form) as that for the phoenix. Likewise, the un-named sun is present in *bronze*, *gold*, *shine*, and *fire*.

In Stevens' poem, it is notable that the one word that is not explicitly mentioned as a human category is emotion. That is, we have "thought" (line 2) in the first stanza, "meaning" (line 5) and "feeling" (line 6) in the second, "know" (line 7) in the third. By feeling, I think Stevens here means sensation (the outer five senses, not the inner emotions). In line 8, finally comes the positive–negative valence of emotion (happy/unhappy). The bird's song is without human meaning or feeling because it is not human, it is an expression of the world just beyond our conceptual reach, it is "foreign" to our understanding through language, and thus it can trigger the emotions that connect us to the physical world of

primordial experience. In other words, only through emotion can we access the full realization of our existence in the world. The desire for the resolution of being, as we have seen, is captured in the perfecting of the iambic pentameter line at the very end of the poem. The sound patterns and modulations of the vowels throughout the poem form the feelings of value and emotion that Bevis (1974: 279) identified. Note that the stressed vowels in the first line move from back to front, from the reference to the natural physical "palm" to the conceptualizing "mind." The second line starts again with back vowels, so that the sudden move to the front in the last word, along with a rising intonation contour, makes the voice rise as the palm "rises." These patterned alternations may be traced throughout the poem, associating the back vowels of the palm with the notions of *beyond*, *bronze*, *foreign*, *song*, and the introduction of the negative, that which is *not*, a strategy of negation that raises the existence of the not-mentioned: "Where there is no exclusion of opposites, there is, strictly speaking, no negative. In non-verbal arts this is obvious; omissions may be significant, but never as negatives. In literature, the words, 'no,' 'not,' 'never,' etc. occur freely; but what they deny is thereby created. In poetry, there is no negation, only contrast" (Langer 1953: 242).

The poem becomes a paean to the phoenix, starting at the moment of its rise from the ashes, and ending in the momentary stasis of the mid-vowel dominance of the final line as the bird is about to be consumed once more by fire. The first and last stanzas thus serve as a frame for the middle two stanzas that encapsulate the moment of the phoenix's life, without human meaning or feeling, without reason, the bird's song connecting us with our emotional senses to the primordial experience of mere being.

The state of elevation that occurs when a poem accomplishes the poet's purpose is, Stevens (1965: 49) says, akin to the feeling of liberation experienced by mystics and saints. In quoting from

Henri Focillon's book *The Life of Forms in Art*, Stevens touches on the elements that I have tried to show characterize poetic iconicity. He writes (1965: 48–49; my emphases):

> In his chapter on "Forms in the Realm of the Mind," M. Focillon speaks of a vocation of substances, or technical destiny, to which there is a corresponding vocation of minds; that is to say, *a certain order of forms corresponds to a certain order of minds*. These things imply *an element of change*. Thus a vocation recognizes its material by foresight, *before experience*. As an example of this, he refers to the first state of the *Prisons* of Piranesi as skeletal. But "twenty years later, Piranesi returned to these etchings, and on taking them up again, he poured into them shadow after shadow, until one might say that he excavated this astonishing darkness not from the brazen plates, but *from the living rock of some subterranean world*."

Both the content and the form of Stevens' poem present, through the processes of isomorphism and motivation, the fact "Of Mere Being," the primordial existence before conceptualizing experience, the subterranean world of the unseen within the seen, in the form of the phoenix, continuously and forever ecstatically metamorphosing in its rising and falling, in its perpetual cycle of death and resurrection. The effect of poetic iconicity is to create sensations, feelings, and images in language that enables the mind to encounter them as phenomenally real. In this way, poetic iconicity bridges the "gap" between mind and world. It is thus that a poem that accomplishes the poet's purpose achieves poetic iconicity, becoming an icon of reality in its semblance of felt life.

NOTES

1. I thank Ewa Chruściel and Joellen Cameron for bringing Stevens' poem to my attention.

2. The problem with the notion of MIR lies in how we understand *mind*. If we assume a Cartesian dualism, then we are creating a circular argument, since we are presupposing an objective reality, independent of mind. If, however, we understand mind as not separate from body, then we open ourselves to the possibilities presented by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. It may very well be, as a result, that MIR is a non-starter, in that it is the wrong way of looking at the problem. Those interested in exploring further the concept of MIR might visit the Karl Jaspers Forum website to find several articles debating the question (http://www.douglashospital.qc.ca/fdg/kjf/index.php).

3. See Michelle Stacey (2006) on the current debate between physicists and astronomers over which measurement should be used for the future recording of time. A similar move toward more abstract measurement occurred when the old standards developed from the physical length of a human arm or a foot were replaced by the metric system.

4. I had written the phrase "ghost form" before reading Helen Vendler's (1984: 6) observation: "To tether Stevens' poems to human feeling is at least to remove him from the 'world of ghosts' where he is so often located, and to insist that he is a poet of more than epistemological questions alone" (see also Bayley 1982: 555). It should be clear that my use of the term *ghost* here refers rather to the phenomenon of breaking through to the unseen reality of this world, not that of some other spirit world, and that I am in agreement with Vendler's belief in the importance of human feeling in Stevens' poetry.

5. I have not been able to see the manuscript to verify that the comma was Stevens' deliberate choice. The first publication of the poem apparently contained a typographical error in this line that may have been introduced by the typesetter. Holly Stevens, the poet's daughter, substituted the manuscript word *décor* for the published word *distance* in the posthumous collection, but kept the comma.

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