

## READING WALLACE STEVENS IN PLATO'S LIGHT

Beatriz PENAS IBÁÑEZ  
Universidad de Zaragoza

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The capacity of the work of art to represent another reality fictitiously while bringing it to mind is one of the most central aspects not only of the work of art but of every sign relation. The classics alluded to this quality of the work of art by means of the traditional name of "mimesis." It must be noticed, though, that mimesis, always a basic tenet in literary theory, is just as relevant at the level of a more general discussion of meaning. As a matter of fact, mimesis may take place within the realm of art as well as within the realm of the non aesthetic and, of course, it may occur in simple as well as complex systems of meaning.

It may be due to this general semiotic relevance of the idea of mimesis that the very term 'mimesis' has become equivocal, and its practicality questionable; but this quality, "equivocalness," of the term is increased by its duplicitous sources, Plato and Aristotle, who wrote on mimesis from different vantage points. The differences between both, as it might be expected, already start at the foundation level of their respective sign-theories.

Even though they hold different standpoints on the matter of mimesis, both authors have laid the foundation stone for a never-ending discussion on the problem of representation which this paper will retake and respectfully use for the sake of illuminating Wallace Stevens's texts.

It is my assumption in this article that Stevens shares with Plato a certain view of the worlds of fact and fiction which is not to be severed from the related concept of

mimesis which sustains it. In this they both diverge from the paths of realism as opened by Aristotle's philosophical writings.

## 2. STEVENS'S READING OF PLATO: A QUEST FOR VISIBILITY

Plato's theory of the sign and mimesis is developed in one of his Dialogues, *Cratylus*, where he defines the mimetic sign in relation to its linguistic counterpart, the noun, without his excluding the consideration of the mimetic in the realm of the art forms. In *Cratylus* the noun is itself a case of mimesis because it is a relation of representation by which the essence of things is recalled by means of letters and syllables. Plato calls this relation 'mimetikos' or the imitation of the thing in its reality. In *Cratylus* (1977: 151), Plato makes Socrates say:

Correctness of a name, we say, is the quality of showing the nature of the thing named.<sup>1</sup>

According to Socrates the rightness of a noun lies in its capacity to render something "visible" to someone. In other words, a noun is right if it (re)presents the nature of the thing by means of sound. That is, what nouns do when they make meaning is to expose us to the nature of things.

Some poets have appreciated the power of words to bring to life the things they represent. For example, what Wallace Stevens does in one of his poems is to deal with the theoretical issue of sign and meaning while apparently dealing with a vision or perception of a surface impression.

His poem starts by describing a wintry afternoon scene of a beach where there can only be seen a white man walking alone on the white sand, and the scene includes a deserted white cabin. But the writer never mentions that either the man or the beach are white. It is the textual arrangement of his description that allows us to "see" it. The design of the poem plays with a set of textual elements, partaking of the linguistic and the semiotic, which, I think, must necessarily be taken into account for an adequate understanding of the poem.

The poem reads as follows (I add italics and bold type):

Farewell to an idea ... A cabin stands,  
deserted, on a beach. It is *white*,  
as by a custom or according to

An ancestral theme or as a consequence  
Of an infinite course. The flowers against the wall  
Are *white*, a little dried, a kind of mark

Reminding, trying to remind of a white  
That was different, something else, last year  
Or before, not the *white* of an aging afternoon.

Whether fresher or duller, whether of winter cloud  
Or of winter sky, from horizon to horizon.  
The wind is blowing the sand across the floor.

*Here, being visible is being white,*  
*Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment*  
Of an extremist in an exercise ...

The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.  
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,  
A darkness gathers though it does not fall

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall.  
The man who is walking turns *blankly* on the sand.  
He observes how the north is always enlarging the change,

With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps  
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,  
The color of ice and fire and solitude.

We find repeated references to white things and to whiteness, a pervasive whiteness. These references can be orderly arranged in a semiotic hierarchy where the reference to a quality stands first—which Peirce (1955: 74-119) would call a firstness, this is the colour white—, then a series of objects—Peirce's "secondnesses"—which incorporate whiteness to things, the only way for qualities to be perceived. And finally these "secondnesses" can be referred to by means of the corresponding word-symbols, 'whiteness' and 'white', the linguistic carriers of the symbolic idea of whiteness.

To white Wallace Stevens opposes the idea of darkness. But darkness is not totally present, in fact it is described as slowly gathering from the north. The passing from a presence of white into the imminence of darkness, which is *per se* invisibility, is accompanied by an intermediate stage of blue-red and green leading into blankness. But blankness is more than an impending threat to "the man who is walking and turns blankly on the sand" while awaiting the fall of darkness.

At this point Stevens provides us with the symbolism of these intermediate stage colours: blue-red and green are "the colour of ice, fire and solitude" in Wallace Stevens's own words.

The change from present whiteness into future darkness involves "a farewell to an idea," as the first line of the three parts of the long poem repeats all through. The change from white visibility into dark blankness is made especially hard by the premise, a condition defined right in the middle of the poem, that

*Here, being visible is being white*

This premise can be read as a condition: *if something (or somebody) is white, then it must be visible, and conversely, if it is dark, then it must be invisible.* This engenders a situation of partiality which, obviously, discriminates against darkness and builds a perceptual universe of white uniformity.

The perspective of change is not very promising in Stevens's view. He faces us with blankness, which in English may mean a state of meaninglessness and lack of sense. Meaning, though ideological and partial, is ordered and culturally bound but blankness is chaos. The poem is conservative in its fear of change but it is progressive in its unveiling the homology of semiosis (meaning) and culture.

Reading the poem we notice that this process of change occurs in a particular spot, "a beach" placed somewhere called "here" in the poem which, we dare say, may very well symbolize the poet's land, America, to the readers.

### 3. WALLACE STEVENS VS. RALPH ELLISON. AN EXEMPLARY CASE OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Ralph Ellison may well have been one of the readers for whom Wallace Stevens's poem would read as symbolic. The overt reference to a man on a beach might symbolize a man in America. In that case, it is quite likely that his novel *Invisible Man* fetched this title from, or in reference to, Wallace Stevens's line, thus establishing an intertextuality between both texts, Ellison's novel on the situation of coloured people in The United States and Wallace Stevens's symbolic poem on whiteness and darkness.

By choosing a negro protagonist Ellison would be signalling him out of darkness into visibility. Then the protagonist —rightly and properly called "invisible" in the novel's title, on condition of its reference to Wallace Stevens's poem— would paradoxically be visible and his name inappropriate or "not right" in the Platonic sense of rightness.

To Platonic Wallace Stevens the black man is rightly named invisible because the poem says "here [in America], being visible is being white" —do we need to develop the syllogism? With respect to Plato's *Cratylus*, the black man is rightly named invisible in Stevens's world because in it "darkness" stands for, on the one hand, "blankness or meaninglessness" and, on the other, for "invisibility."

Furthermore, for Stevens there are two mutually dependent facts, meaning and perception, and naming is the same as making the named perceptible. So Plato's as well as Peirce's philosophy establishes a semiotic continuum of mimesis which dismisses the tendency to see nature as a collection of facts external to both the human perceptual apparatus and the linguistic capacity. In this respect Plato's semiotic continuum is a far cry from Aristotelian strict realism.

If being visible is being white, the man we see mentioned in the poem must be white, although there is not the least clue that he is so. But were he to be black he could not have been the object of perception; he would have been invisible and, consequently, left out of the poem's language.

The place where one needs to be white —or considered to be so— to be visible at all renders it impossible for a black man to be visible, or in other words, present to the world. Being black in such a place would be tantamount to being imperceptible and, failing to be known, he would consequently be non-existent to the others.

Curiously enough, there is another poem by Stevens with partially the same subject and phrasing. It is a long poem entitled "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which is divided into ten parts. In part six we read:

Not to be realized because not to  
Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because  
Not to be realized.

...  
Yellow thins the Northern blue.  
Without a name and nothing to be desired,  
If only imagined but imagined well.

My house has changed a little in the sun.  
The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,  
False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin.

It must be visible or invisible,  
Invisible or visible or both:  
A seeing and unseeing in the eye.

Here again the reference is to both visibility and invisibility, which are dealt with in connection with perceptibility. It is a kind of vicious circle by which invisible and unnamed things are "not to be realized because not to be seen" or viceversa; and, furthermore, they are "not to be loved nor hated because not to be realized." That is to say that things invisible and unnamed are excluded from the mechanisms of desire,<sup>2</sup> they are not wanted, not to be desired, perhaps they can only be imagined, never had.

Obviously, Ellison's is an ironic reference to both of Wallace Stevens's poems. In consequence not only does his negro become visible, he also becomes a protagonist, taking the leading role inside the universe of fiction.

### 4. OTHER READINGS OF PLATO:

Ohmann (1987), Reyes (1986), Shklovsky (1925, 1971), Barthes (1977), Girard (1984), Aristotle.

The evidence provided by the discussion of the former literary example may help us see that, as a matter of fact, Plato's mimesis falls within the realm of linguistics and

neutralizes the naïve assumption that mimesis is just iconic similarity, or in other words, imitation of spatial features. In Plato's *Cratylus* it can be read that mimesis is both the well-made primitive noun, which is mimetic in its capacity to represent the nature of a thing, and also the noun which keeps some kind of sensory resemblance to the thing or action represented, as is the case with, for example, onomatopoeic words.

It follows that in Plato's aesthetic theory all types of literary art are mimetic. The objects of their representation are not sensory phenomena (*aistheta*) but essential truths apprehended by the mind (*noeta*) and fuzzily perceivable in the phenomena. The apprehension of truth is a type of fascination (*psikhagorgia* or spell of the soul) that is not brought about dialectically. That is why the poet is divine, as in *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, though at times the poet deserves banishment from the republic, as *The Republic* defends.

Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, underlines that the *logos*, or discourse, should represent a *zoon*, or organism, in its quality of being a wholeness from which nothing can be taken off without damage; that is, a literary text is mimetic because it resembles or imitates nature in its quality of organic wholeness. This type of similarity is mimesis between forms (original and copy), a relation of homology, a penetrant and omnipresent resemblance, between linguistic text and external world; were it otherwise the world could not possibly be understood or, for that matter, spoken about.

In this Plato advances what the modern pragmatists, like Ohmann (1987), defend in their own terms. Ohmann understands literary mimesis as speech-act mimesis. In other words, literary mimesis is not a type of speech act, it is the use of speech acts for a mimetic representation that lacks illocutionary force, for fiction. Says Ohmann:

A literary work is a discourse whose sentences lack the illocutionary forces that would normally attach to them. Its illocutionary force is mimetic. By mimetic I mean purportedly imitative. Specifically, a literary work purportedly imitates (or reports) a series of speech acts. (Ohmann 1971: 14)

The same author (Ohmann 1972) declares that it was unfortunate for the theory of literature that Aristotle fixed the use of the term "mimesis" in reference to the performance of tragedy when drama is just one particular type of imitation. In Ohmann's view, centering the critical discussion upon mimesis as found in tragedy can only lead to a missing of the deeper similarities which connect all the genres and its oral or written forms through mimesis.

Highlighting this vantage point we have Alfonso Reyes's words:

A la ficción llamaron los antiguos imitación de la naturaleza o mimesis. El término es equívoco, desde que se tiende a ver en la naturaleza el conjunto de hechos exteriores a nuestro espíritu, por donde se llega a las estrecheces del realismo. Claro es que al inventar imitamos, por cuanto sólo contamos con los recursos naturales, y no hacemos más que estructurarlos en una nueva integración. Pero es preferible el término ficción. Indica, por una parte, que añadimos una nueva estructura —probable o improbable— a las que ya

existen. Indica, por otra parte, que nuestra intención es desentendernos del suceder real. Finalmente, indica que traducimos una realidad subjetiva. (Reyes 1986: 86)

Aristotle's criterion in his *Poetics* is, at least, implicitly critical towards Plato's. Aristotelian mimesis is clearly developed in his definition of dramatic action as *mimesis praxeos* or imitation of an action. In Aristotle, mimesis or imitation seems to indicate not a homological relation between forms —as in Plato—, but an inner relation analogous to that which is established between form and content in some schools of structural linguistics.

In other words, if in the Saussurean school tradition the linguistic form is phonic matter and the content is meaning matter or concept, there is an analogy established between two different relations (the relation Signifier / Signified is analogous to, if not identical with the relation Phonic Form / Semantic Content).

Now, the extrapolation of this Saussurean sign-relation to the field of drama would render the original reality analogous to the Signified and the play analogous to the representing Signifier: the original then would be a signified content to be recovered by means of a signifying copy.

For instance, tragedy is a dramatic form (analogous to the Signifier) representing an aspect of life and nature that lends it its meaning (or Signified, following the former analogy). It is from this perspective that it is possible to affirm that in the Aristotelian tradition, inherited by the Saussureans, the literary work is signifying matter that the author composes from an aspect of life that provides it with its meaning.

That is to say that Aristotle makes tragedy into a text ancillary dependent on nature: "art is nature's maid," and the Saussureans make language dependent on an already given state of the world which is not affected by language. For us linguists, this certainly is a most naïve concept of language which Benjamin L. Whorf (1956) has accurately criticized in his *Language, Thought and Reality*. Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativity goes beyond Aristotelian (also Saussurean) semicology and is contained within Platonic (and also Peircean) semiotics.

Nevertheless, when facing the difficulty to relate the particular in nature and the universal in art, we observe the Aristotelian artist's need to resort to a form of submission to principles foreign to —if not contradictory with— his/ her own art.

In other words, the Aristotelian artist is submissive to principles —extraliterary and normative— of conventional arbitrary adequacy of his / her art to units, measure and decorum relative to a particular literary form, that have little to do with the data of experience either in nature or art.

Truth, in the Aristotelian case, is not Plato's *aletheia*, a quality of the work of art understood as an autonomous organism produced by a demiurgic artist. Quite differently, Aristotle's truth in art is verisimilitude relative to the rectitude with which, according to certain modes and genres conventionally established on unity principles,

a tragedy succeeds in correctly imitating the action of the human being.

Plato and Aristotle deal with the term *mimetikos* in different ways. While Plato's term is comprehensive and covers all textual phenomena, which have the capacity to analogically represent —through their own wholeness— other wholenesses. Aristotle's term is restrictively applied to the literary mode of imitation of an action or sequence of actions through certain poetic conventions of which the text does not seem to be self-conscious.

Conventionality is all-pervading. T. Hawkes uses the simile of a chess game that V. Shklovsky coined in 1925:

Conventionality, the operation of tacit unquestioned structural 'rules' emerges as the animating principle of literary art. Whether that art has pretensions towards 'realism' or not, it remains as 'bound' by conventions which act as rules as much as a game of chess does (Hawkes 1977: 72-73)

But V. Shklovsky himself writes in his fiction book *Zoo: or, Letters Not About Love*, where part of his literary theory finds a place:

There are two attitudes towards art. One is to view the work of art as a window on the world. Through words and images, these artists want to express what lies beyond words and images. Artists of this type deserve to be called translators. The other type of attitude is to view art as a world of independently existing things. Words, and the relationships between words, thoughts and the irony of thoughts, their divergence —these are the content of art. Art, if it can be compared to a window at all, is a sketched window. (1971: 80)

In this passage, Shklovsky, critic and writer, recognizes two distinct attitudes towards the conventionality of art: one attitude is translatory and indexical: "Through words and images, these artists want to express what lies beyond words and images," and another attitude that keeps fiction and the real world in different independent symbolic realms, "art as a world of independently existing things." The former attitude, indexical of external reality, sustains a type of mimetic relation that is not far from Aristotle's definition. The latter attitude towards art stands on a higher semiotic level, predominantly symbolic, where the fiction is a drawing opening into a drawing, a form opening into a form, which brings us back to Plato.

The simile of the sketched window open to the sketched landscape has a lot to do with a more complex idea of mimesis than the one contained in the simile of a sketched window opening to a real landscape.

The indexical idea of mimesis, acknowledged but discarded by Shklovsky, is parallel to Barthes's "inner mimesis." We read in Barthes:

[...] the text itself plays (like a door, like a machine will 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it, but, in order that that practice not be reduced to a passive,

*inner mimesis* (the Text is precisely that which resists such a reduction), also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term. (Barthes 1977: 163)

In speaking about a kind of "passive, inner mimesis" Barthes seems to have in mind another type of mimesis which would be active and external but, as a matter of fact, he only mentions the former type, passively reproductive of and dependent on the conventional reading of the work of art. By so doing, Barthes is making room for the latter type, mimesis that opens the text into self-productivity and the reader's productivity.

Girard (1984), though being himself a structuralist, thinks there are two types of mimesis too: simple and complex. Simple mimesis is that which is indexical of the external world, while complex mimesis, found in what he calls literature of mimetic revelation, is that which establishes not only the simply mimetic character of the literary text, but the complex mimetic character of a text that discloses the mimetic mechanism that organizes the real world.

For Girard, the literary texts that are secondarily mimetic can be called great literature and, it is his opinion that, when facing the great literary texts, the critic cannot be critical in the habitual sense. (S)he must be critical but balanced so as to allow the study of the superior perspective of knowledge that great literature, which he calls the literature of revelation, can offer.

## 5. WALLACE STEVENS: A LITERARY EXAMPLE OF SECONDARY MIMESIS (IN GIRARD'S TERMS)

The literary text can represent human passions and desires and teach that "real life" desires are purely mimetic. Here again we can use a literary example.

The poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" by Wallace Stevens explicitly connects the two drives: desire and imitation in life and literature. It is crowded with repeated references to "the double," especially in part IV. Some are literal like "every latent double in the world" while others are not, for instance: the repeated references to mirrors, glass and crystal, all producers of second images and doubles. What's more, we have a reference to a world which is in fact "a second earth" a duplicate of the first one. We have its inhabitants, us readers, who the poem refers to as being mimics, that is, actors and imitators, if not imitations ourselves. We, the readers partaking of humanity, are made conscious that "there was a myth before the myth began," that "the poem refreshes life" that everything has its double in fiction as well as in language.

The first idea was not our own. Adam  
In Eden was the father of Descartes  
And Eve made air the *mirror* of herself.

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves  
In heaven as in a *glass*; a *second* earth;  
And in the earth itself they found a green—

The inhabitants of a very varnished green.  
But the first idea was not to shape the clouds  
In imitation. The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.  
There was a myth before the myth began,  
Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues  
The air is not a mirror but bare board,  
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

And comic colour of the rose, in which  
Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips  
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them.

But the closure of the leading idea is found later on, in part VIII of the poem, where we read:

logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,  
Incipit and a form to speak the word  
And every latent double in the word,  
Beau linguist...

At this point the poem establishes the link between mimesis —the main topic in part IV— and logos / linguistics explicitly in agreement with Plato's theory of the sign and mimesis as sketched before.

Besides this, Wallace Stevens establishes a series of balancing ideas which pair through the ten parts of the poem to build its semantic structure: the central pair is that between what is "abstract" (this and other related terms are underlined in the text) and the "concrete" individual (in bold type in the text). The theoretical principle falls within the realm of abstraction and within the realm of concretion falls the particular "exponent," as we see Stevens calls it. Again, 'the commonal' is also abstract while 'the singular' is concrete; this set of oppositions is dealt with in part X of the poem which says:

The mayor *abstraction* is the idea of man  
And major man is its *exponent*, abler  
In the *abstract* than in his singular,

More fecund as *principle* than *particle*,  
Happy fecundity, flor- abundant force,  
In being more than an exception, part,

Though an heroic part, of the *commonal*.  
The major *abstraction* is the *commonal*,  
The *inanimate*, difficult visage. Who is it?

As a matter of fact, the last tercet establishes a subsidiary connection between the abstract commonal and the inanimate, thus opening a secondary pair (animate / inanimate) which completes the first one (concrete / abstract) by adding a balance between the animate particular individual and the inanimate abstract idea. But, while abstraction is the product of reasoning the animate individual is beyond this constraint. The constraints of logos / logic / or linguistic thought do not apply to what in fact already is, and this results in a praise of a certain kind of ignorance which opens the eye to the original idea of things, so we read:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
the inconceivable idea of the sun.

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.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,  
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a Heaven  
That has expelled us and our images ...

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was  
A name for something that never could be named.  
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun  
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be  
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

Together with the praise of this type of ignorance, we find in the poem a derogatory mention of academies, described as "structures in the mist" in the last tercet of part VII:

The truth depends on a walk around a lake.

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep.  
As on an elevation, and behold  
The academies like structures in the mist.

This derogatory view of institutional knowledge can only be understood against Wallace Stevens's platonic view of the poet as a demiurge, whose poetry lines

approach truth more closely than the academics' could. As the poem proceeds, we start seeing a pattern where two types of knowledge emerge, one is the product of academic reasoning (which adopts the form of nouns, thoughts, images), the other is the apotheosis of poetic clairvoyance (which adopts the idiom of song).

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance  
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate  
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.

They differ from *reason's click-clack*, its applied  
*Enflashings*.

One type of knowledge walks hand in hand with logic, reason and language. "reason's click-clack," which can bring about some "enflashings" of the mind but never "apotheosis," which is attained by the second type of knowledge, that is, knowledge that rests on a "deepened speech," "a leaner being of greater aptitude and apprehension" (part VIII),

As if the waves at last were never broken  
As if the language suddenly, with ease,  
Said things it had *laboriously spoken*.

But what is symbolically couched here is that the logos and logic mentioned before rest on breaking the easiness of undivided original knowledge which has been substituted for by the laborious language of hypotheses and lexical antitheses. Against it the poet, this time in part IX, proposes a language of poetry and song.

My dame, sing ... accurate songs.  
Give... no names

It is as if the poem, though resting on words, were a special language, able to restore the original candour, the immaculate whiteness of the first idea, which seeks refuge in its metaphors. Stevens puts it in these words in part II and III of the poem:

the first idea becomes  
The hermit in a poet's metaphors,  
Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.

... ..  
The poem refreshes life so that we share.  
For a moment, the first idea... It satisfies  
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,  
To an immaculate end.

... ..

The poem, through candour, brings back a power again  
That gives a candid kind to everything.

In a different place we can read that life's events lack relation, the poem's metaphors relate facts or things that resemble or mimic each other. "A likeness" — mimesis — becomes the fundamental principle of poetry which is the stuff of life too, life being an invention, too recent and meaningless in its plurality when compared to the first idea of it.

We read:

*We [poets] say: At night an Arabian in my room,  
with his damned hoobla- hoobla- hoobla- how,  
Inscribes a primitive astronomy*

Across the unscrawled fores the future casts  
And throws his stars around the floor. By day  
*The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla- hoo*

And still the *iridescence of ocean*  
*Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.*  
Life's nonsense pierces us [poets] with strange relation.

Wallace Stevens exemplifies this theory in his work and says that the poet perceives a similar sound, "a hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how," in facts as different as an Arabian's song, the wood-dove's song and the ocean's song, for which he invents the mentioned onomatopoeic phrase. By so applying this term to all the three sounds the poet is underlining a hidden similarity which he, a poet, can make visible by linguistic means.

It is Stevens's view that the poet's task is to make one what was one — at the imagined beginning of the world — and which became multiple later on with the apparition of the logos.

Again we may resume the theme of visibility and invisibility in relation to the power of language to illuminate and, so create areas of perception, and of metaphor to place the facts of life and nature in a close relation of resemblance which corresponds to the mimetic character of phenomena. Mimetic rules govern the poem and mimesis governs the world. Truth is sought after by the monastic man as much as by the philosopher and the artist but truth is in desire only and desire brings mimesis, the attraction of becoming what it is not.

The basic law of mimesis is beautifully summarized when the text says in part II:  
so poisonous

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to  
The truth itself, the first idea becomes  
The hermit in a poet's metaphors,  
... ..

The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher  
appoints man's place in music, say, today.  
*But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.*

*And not to have is the beginning of desire.  
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.  
It is desire at the end of winter, when*

*It observes the effortless weather turning blue  
And sees the myosotis on its bush.  
Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn*

*It knows that what it has is what is not  
And throws it away like a thing of another time,  
As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.*

In these lines of the poem winter is personified. Winter, together with the natural processes that accompany it when it starts to be spring, becomes the embodiment of the forces leading the artist, the monk and the philosopher in their quest for truth. Truth is the target and the trigger of nature, poetry, religion and philosophy in Wallace Stevens's view.

This is particular in Stevens but, if we take heed of what we have been discussing from the beginning of this article, Stevens's vision of the world is circular, which he shares with so many of his fellow writers, the modernists. For Stevens Myth and History from Adam and Eve to Descartes become an explanatory circle where progress does not really take place unless we see progress in the continual superimposition of imitation after imitation and so on till the first idea is theoretically reached.

The drive to imitate is the force that stems from the need of being or having what is not yet. The very earth is described in the poem as an invention, a complex mirror where people have the role of mimics. Reality becomes fiction and fiction reality, thus subverting Aristotelian realism.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

As for Wallace Stevens, Girard and Plato, we can say that their theories are not too distant from one another.

Plato inaugurates this theory of the world as a double, imitation, or mirror image of the former world of ideas. In *Phaedrus* Plato theorizes about the psyche that remembers the ideas once contemplated in the company of the Gods; ideas which the soul wishes to contemplate again even if in the image of a less exact copy or imitation.

Girard's view is that reality is mimetic and art forms can represent it through particular means and techniques. Being himself a structuralist, Girard substantially differs from other structuralists in his reevaluation of mimesis as still relevant to art criticism. It is my idea, too, that an adequate handling of mimesis can help the critic to illuminate certain aspects of the literary work, which, after the formalists, did fall in discredit.

As Fredric Jameson (1972: 82-83) puts it, the formalists defend a radical inversion of the literary work's priorities. They relegate to the background one aspect of mimesis to foreground another. Shklovsky, for example, knows that the literary work of art can be understood to be mimetic in a double sense. In the first sense mimesis is the imitation or depiction of realities which are external to the work of art. For him, this kind of mimesis is disregarded as an accidental or external kind of explanation of the literary work. For the formalists the essential factor in explaining the formation of a text of art is its character of efficiency as a formal entity.

Reality in their theoretical scheme is a counterpoint of the text of art which can be obviated. With independence of this type of external reference to the counterpoint reality, the art form primarily refers to other art forms, so that their fundamental mimetic character derives from their being a structural whole analogously referring to other structures.

All types of mimesis imply some kind of referent, be it internal or external to the work of art, but mimesis is consistent only with those theories which posit meaning as the aim of language and literature.

Other schools of thought (I mean post-structuralism) defend, against Plato-Peirce and Aristotle-Saussure alike, the inviability of a consistent theory of mimesis. Jacques Derrida's post-structuralism (Derrida 1976, 1978, 1981) takes to an extreme the structural tenet that language is just about language. This presupposition questions the capacity of language to speak about reality and makes literature irrelevant. Even more, Derrida's presuppositions render language irrelevant. For him, language and literature become collections of traces, the playground of absences and deletions where meaning can be always deferred. The emphasis on the continual making and unmaking of the sign-processes leaves the reader at a loss.

This poem by Stevens affirms that poetry is fiction pointing towards another fiction, the world (or "the earth" as we read in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"), a world which in turn mirrors a first idea not within human reach because of the falsifying refraction of logos and language. It is for the critic to further ask if poetry is fiction because it is mimetic in the linguistic / aesthetic sense the term has in Plato.

The Aristotelian understanding of mimesis seems to explain well the literary genre of tragedy against other literary forms which do not rely so heavily on a structure of actions and characters. Mimesis in its Platonic sense, which we claim to be more comprehensive than the Aristotelian one, is as relevant to the explanation of the lyrical poem as to that of tragedy. By making the *onoma* mimetic, mimesis primarily enters the linguistic and secondarily permeates the literary. Texts exact their mimetic character from their being semiotic objects and / or, also, meaningful objects of fictive art.

In terms of the tradition of thought inaugurated by Plato's semiotics and continued by present-day thinkers like Peirce, Ohmann, Reyes, Girard, Shklovsky, and Barthes, as we have discussed before, all art forms are semiotic artifacts which, as such, must be



mimetic *per se*. Then, using for the best the vantage point inaugurated by Aristotle's semiotics and maintained by the Saussurean school, some art forms are secondarily mimetic in their iconicity or, grossly speaking, in their being imitations of physical features, actions and ideas actually present in the external world.

The fact is that both traditions have different conceptions of the sign and, consequently, their conceptions of mimesis diverge. But, this said, our view of the matter is that both concepts of mimesis are not mutually exclusive.

If adequately delimited, mimesis in the wide primary sense will help to integrate the study of all kinds of texts, which will obviate the problem of literariness and genre and can justify the integration of theatre in the realm of literature, something which has sometimes been questioned. It is when mimesis is taken only in its restricted Aristotelian sense that the matter of literariness / genre becomes a problem.

But why should we worry about it all when it is the poet that offers the answer to us again and again, this time in another of his poems: "A High-toned Old Christian Woman" (Stevens, 1953), where Wallace Stevens humorously writes the best of epilogues for us to close the present discussion of mimesis or fiction in reference to the non-narrative? He says that, beyond other literary forms, poetry is the supreme fiction and also a jovial hullabaloo among the spheres. By so saying Stevens manages to introduce another, this time ironic, intertextual reference to Plato and the music of the spheres, which was taken for the ideal model of poetry.

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.  
 (...)  
 A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.  
 This will make widows wince. But fictive things  
 wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

## NOTES

1. ἰονόματα, φαμέν, ορθότης ἐστὶν αὐτῇ, ἥτις ἐνδείχεται οἷόν ἐστι τὸ πρᾶγμα.
2. The term refers to Girard's notion of mimetic desire (Girard 1978), which we shall discuss later.

## REFERENCES

- ARISTOTLE. 1927. *The Poetics*. (Loeb Classical Library, Vol. XXIII). Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP.
- BARTHES, Roland. 1977. *Image - Music - Text*. Glasgow: Fontana / Collins.
- BUENO, Gustavo. 1990. Speech from the Seminar "Introducción al *Cratilo*," Department of Philosophy, University College of La Rioja, University of Zaragoza, 1-2 March, 1990.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.

- . 1978. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- . 1981. *Positions*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- ELIOT, Ralph. 1978. *Invisible Man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- GIRARD, René. 1978. *To Double Business Bound*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- JAMESON, Fredric. 1972. *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- LOTMAN, Juri. 1978. *La Estructura del Texto Artístico*. Madrid: Istmo.
- OHMANN, Richard. 1971. "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 4: 1-19.
- . 1972. "Speech, Literature and the Space Between." *New Literary History* 4.1: 47-63.
- PEIRCE, C. S. 1955. "The principles of Phenomenology. Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs." In *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover. 74-119.
- PLATO. 1977. *Cratylus*. Trans. H. N. Fowler. (Loeb Classical Library, vol. IV). Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP.
- REYES, Alfonso. 1986. *La experiencia literaria. Ensayos sobre experiencia, exégesis y teoría de la literatura*. Barcelona: Bruguera.
- SHKLOVSKY, Viktor. 1925, 1971. *Zoo: or, Letters Not About Love*. 1923. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- STEVENS, Wallace. 1953. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber.
- WHORF, Benjamin. 1956. "Science and linguistics." In Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*. M.I.T. Press. 207-219.