
Be not afeared: the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.

(William Shakespeare, The Tempest 3.2.132–40)

The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses . . . .

(Wallace Stevens, “Of Modern Poetry” 18–21)

“To the deep beat of the drums sing and dance to Dionysus” (Bacchae, Kirk 156); “. . . the timbrels thunder-knelling . . . ” (Way 156); “. . . the sound of the booming drum . . . .” (Internet)

In Wallace Stevens’s “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” the Platonic dream of ascent toward the Heavens elicits a demurral in the modern spirit. We “recognize” but do not “participate in” the figurative ascent in the Phaedrus, in which the noble soul ascends by means of the “noble . . . winged horses . . . of the gods . . . soars upward, and is the ruler of the universe.” For us, Stevens says (the poet’s imagination working perhaps like the light of the sun on Icarus’s wings) “The figure becomes antiquated and rustic”; our transit describes an arc downward, to earth: “We droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground.” Although the impulse to descend to earth is recurrent and overtly thematic in Stevens’s poetry, it might be observed as recurring suggestively in the plays of Shakespeare and Euripides to be discussed here.

The descent to earth, as imaginative eidos, is perhaps as essential, in the Husserlian sense of “essence,” as the idealization of other worlds – “heaven,”
the pastoral retreat, the ideal Republic, the Golden Age – typically but not necessarily imagined as departures from this world to another (higher) sphere. Such ideas of other places than the present one may be thought of as generally evoking possible other worlds. Phenomenological essences for Edmund Husserl, as Emmanuel Levinas observes, are not “empirical concept[s], wherein the essential and the accidental are mixed,” or “formal like the objects of logic,” but “a whole series of conditions which the study of the essences of contents reveals. This study [the third of Husserl’s Logical Investigations] . . . concerns the a priori conditions for objects; above and beyond the objects, the intuition of essences concerns their conditions of existence.” Pertinent to a consideration of what I refer to as “paradoxical instincts” is Levinas’s remark that the pursuit of essences involves “the notion of the ideality of all cultural objects – a symphony, for example.”

The “cultural objects” I here construe as instances manifesting these instincts can be observed ranging across Western culture from classical Greek to English Renaissance to American modernism. Recognizing that historical distinctions must be, and have been, made, I nevertheless propose that contrary impulses occur and recur as essential to thought about temporality and transcendence and can be seen to be thematic in particular instances – Euripides’s Bacchae, Shakespeare’s The Tempest, and the poetry of Stevens. Observing their persistence must entail a precise and attentive look – going zu den sachen selbst – at the ways in which the motifs appear thoughtfully in these “cultural objects.” To notice the “descent” toward earth is to highlight what is perhaps cast in shadow by the major conflicts and themes in the earlier works, but on the other hand is thematically primary in the works of a modern poet, affirmed as a reluctance to pay tribute to Plato’s “dear, gorgeous nonsense” (643). Stevens has been seen both as developing out of American pragmatic attitudes and as demonstrating an affinity for the early twentieth-century phenomenology of Husserl and the ensuing hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger.

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The devolution, Stevens’s “drooping in our flight,” is realized in all three of the instances – Bacchae, The Tempest, and Stevens’s poems – as an acceptance of the conditions of earth, both on the one hand the sensual and intellectual possibilities of life and poetry, the possibility of transcending the subject-object divorcement, of touching another human being, and on the other, the necessity of time-bound existence, death, and the limits of