Why did Stevens, loving Europe as he did, never visit there? And what did it mean to him as a poet that he didn’t? We know that as early as 1923, Stevens and his wife were able to make a leisurely sea voyage through the Panama Canal, and, on other occasions, he went on to vacation in places like Florida and Maine. He also made a couple of brief visits to Cuba. Eventually, he had the means financially to make a journey across the Atlantic, even as he was able to and did purchase paintings from an art dealer in Paris, carvings and jewellery from Ceylon, and other artefacts from other countries. To the poet for whom ‘life is an affair of places’ instead of ‘people’ (CPP 901), one might expect a visit to Europe to beckon him commandingly.

In addressing these questions, I want first to outline the passion for Europe that Stevens indulged throughout his adult lifetime in correspondence, notebooks and poetry. Secondly, one can only speculate that, at some point in his middle age, perhaps earlier, he realized that it was unlikely he would ever visit Europe or any of the other distant continents. That being the case, he proceeded to explore ways in which he could bring Europe to himself in intimately personal ways and in ways that would have important consequences for his poetry. Two entries in one of his working notebooks ably serve as illustrations of important premises that became part of Stevens’ larger poetics: ‘Poetry As The Switzerland Of The Mind’ and ‘The Alp at the end of the street’ (FPofP 184 and 167). In the end, Europe was only a ‘Switzerland Of The Mind’ or an ‘Alp at the end of [his] street’ – an intrinsically different Europe, but a construct of immense and enduring importance and pleasure to the poet – a unique description without place. The final entry in the same notebook entitled ‘From Pieces of Paper’ is ‘One Must Sit Still To Discover The World’ (FPofP 188).

We know that during his three years at Harvard, Stevens studied French and German languages and literature, as well as British literature. These, in fact, made up the core of his curriculum there. He majored, one might say, in European languages and literature. Later, in one of his ‘Adagia’, he would affirm that ‘French and English constitute a single language’ (CPP 914). Then,
at the age of 20, resolving to leave the university without completing a degree, Stevens confided in his journal his plans for the future: ‘I am going to New York, I think, to try my hand at journalism. If that does not pan out well, I am resolved to knock about the country – the world’ (SP 70). After beginning his tenue as a reporter at the New York Tribune, he was dreaming just a few months later, ‘I hope to get to Paris next summer – and I mean to if I have the money’ (SP 90), and, back in New York having spent Christmas in Reading, he had not abandoned his plan: ‘I am likely to remain here until Spring, at least. Europe is still on the other side of the ocean’ (SP 94). Because of straitened financial circumstances in the ensuing months and years, it remained on the other side of the ocean.

In 1904, Elsie Kachel entered his life, though the two were not wed until 1909. In one letter to her during the engagement, he indulged again in his dream:

Bernard Shaw has just brought out a new thing in London called ‘The Admirable Bashville.’ There is no scenery and the actors act in their everyday clothes. It is a burlesque of Shakespeare, I believe. – Wouldn’t it be nice to live in London and go – say, on Saturday evening? We’ll be going over there one of these days, I hope. – I should mope in Paradise (possibly) if I were to die without first having been to London. – On Sunday, it was Berlin. – I have had my hours for Paris, too. – When I could see the Street of Little Stables, and the Street of Beautiful Leaves, and the Bridge of Arts, and the Church of Our Lady, and the Arch of Triumph – as clearly as I can see you looking out of that frame. – Good Fortune, send us to them all. We’ll save for that. It isn’t so impossibly expensive, you know. People who go once go often. . . . It seems much nearer, too, when the steamers start from the foot of your own street, as they do here.

(CS 141)

It is noteworthy that Stevens has already visited these locations mentally – last Sunday in Berlin and ‘I have had my hours for Paris, too’. His letter speaks of a certain familiarity with Paris, resulting, we might speculate, from his reading, photographs or, more likely, his own interior constructions. But those interior visitations still anticipate the real London, the real Berlin, the real Paris. ‘We’ll be going over there one of these days, I hope’, and with something like adolescent plangency: ‘I should mope in Paradise (possibly) if I were to die without first having been to London.’

Six months later, his longing for London was unabated as he noted in his journal: ‘London continues to be the ultimate point of romance to me. I wish there was some chap there to whom I could write for things’ (CS 141). Here, at the age of 29, Stevens for the first time expresses the alternative of bringing Europe to himself by finding a ‘chap’ who could arrange to send him