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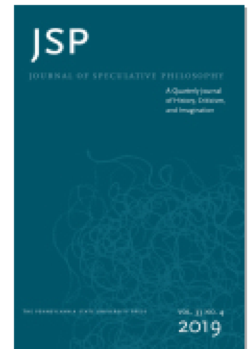

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Thinking Through Sound: Martin Heidegger and Wallace Stevens

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ABSTRACT: How is it that things come to sound in language? What demands does the sound of language make on the disposition of thinking? This article motivates and addresses these questions by turning to two thinkers who insist upon the sonorous character of language: a philosopher, Martin Heidegger, and a poet, Wallace Stevens. Rather than subordinate poet to philosopher or philosopher to poet, I attempt to read the two together in tension. Heidegger's resistance to anthropocentric conceptions of language reveal in Stevens the otherwise understated importance of attunement and disposition. Similarly, Stevens's insistence upon the sound of words reveals a significant and neglected aspect of Heidegger's famous etymological analyses. Together, these two authors draw poetry and philosophy closer together by revealing that thought, as language, always involves a poetic, sonorous element and that the poetic sound of language is already an incipient thinking. On the basis of a careful reading of Heidegger's "Language" lecture and Stevens's poem, "Of Mere Being," I argue that words can be fruitfully understood as the "acoustic gestures" of things and that philosophy, at its best, is able to cultivate a disposition attentive to these gestures.

KEYWORDS: Wallace Stevens, Martin Heidegger, language, poetry, sound

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In his 1950 lecture entitled “Language,” Martin Heidegger announces a turn in the philosophy of language: for the opening theme, “man speaks,” he substitutes a countervailing theme: “language speaks” (Heidegger 2009, 187, 207). Heidegger saw himself living in an era in which the historical determination of the inquiry into language that began with the Greek conception of human being as the animal with language had developed into a relentlessly technical way of thinking that viewed language instrumentally. By abandoning this conception, displacing the occurrence of language away from “man” and toward language itself, Heidegger enacts a dehumanization of language that attempts to open a different avenue for thought. At approximately the same time (1950–55), Wallace Stevens is also working toward a radically different way of approaching language. From his poetic perspective, language is always a “dangling and spangling, the mic-mac of mocking birds,” an acoustic play exceeding sense (Stevens 1990, 486). For both thinkers, philosopher and poet, *sound* comes to occupy a crucial role in their effort to rethink the occurrence of language. Sound, in this context, names not a pure category—for sounds have textures, colors have tonalities, etc.—but a tendency of sense, to which belongs also silence. The importance of sound is perhaps most readily discernible in poetry, which brings to the fore the sonorous character of words (and does so even when we read silently):

> It is the huge, high harmony that sounds
> A little and a little, and suddenly,
> By means of a separate sense. It is and it
> Is not and, therefore, is. In the instant of speech,
> The breadth of an accelerando moves,
> Captives the being, widens—and was there. (Stevens 1990, 440)

As these lines show, hearing the sound of language requires a “separate sense” of thinking than that dominated by the history of technical rationality. How would one understand this different sense? To begin to think about the way things come to sound in speech, to engage this different sense reflectively, requires a distinct kind of thinking capable of staying with and listening to these acoustic movements.

This article attempts to approach such a modality of thinking and elaborate the sounding forth of things in language by putting Stevens’s poetry in conversation with Heidegger’s philosophy. Many scholars have pointed to the direct philosophical influences of American pragmatism on Stevens’s writing (see, for instance, Poirier 1992, Rae 1997, Levin 1999,

Richardson 2014, and the overview in Buchsbaum 2008). No similar case can be made for Heidegger: although Stevens was interested in the German thinker and tried to obtain his books, he never became personally familiar with Heidegger's work (see Kermode 1989, 81–82). Nevertheless, a substantial literature acknowledges the important affinities between philosopher and poet, although it tends to focus on Heidegger's early work in *Being and Time* (see, for example, Hines 1976, Bové 1980, Ziarek 1994, Rosu 1995, Santilli 2002, and Ziarek 2008). I therefore bring Stevens and Heidegger together not in order to attest to a direct intellectual influence but rather because I believe that reading philosopher and poet together offers a path of reflection concerning the way things come to sound in language that is not readily disclosed by either author in isolation. To this end, I focus on Stevens's late poetry—a period whose shift in "philosophical weight" has been largely neglected, as Simon Critchley points out (Critchley 2005, 63)—and Heidegger's roughly contemporaneous "Language" lecture. I develop a reading of Stevens that is philosophically informed by Heidegger's sensitivity to attunement and disposition while, conversely, approaching Heidegger's thought in a way that is poetically informed by Stevens's insistence upon the inexorably and repetitively acoustic character of speaking. Together, these two readings offer a fruitfully binocular vision of a common subject: the sounding forth of things in speech.

The first section of this paper identifies a proximity between Heidegger and Stevens insofar as both attempt to think of language only as itself. Since Stevens understands language as sound, this poses a difficulty for thought. The second section situates this difficulty in relation to Stevens's late poetry, in which things arise to presence in language as movements of non-objective relations. According to Stevens, reflection that takes up such movements occurs "out of nothing," and this section begins to work through this sense of nothing. The third section follows Stevens's characterization of language as a "foreign song" in which sounds repeat themselves in various iterations by exploring Heidegger's own practices of acoustic repetition. For both authors, the repetition of sounds offers a point of beginning for reflection concerning language as language. In the fourth and final section I explore one way of addressing the relation between sound and disposition by understanding the sounds of words as gestures of things. Throughout, the article remains focused on two related questions: how does the sounding of language enact a spacing such that things come to sound in words, and what demands does this make on the disposition of thought?

Language and Sound

Heidegger's "Language" lecture revolves around a central phrase: "language speaks" (*Die Sprache spricht*). In its initial and negative significance, this formula allows Heidegger to resist the determination of language according to calculative reasoning. "Speaking speaks" is initially offered in contradistinction to the more traditional formulation "man speaks," which indicates a view of language characterized by three features: expression, human activity, and representation (Heidegger 2009, 187, 190). According to such a view, language is the process of externalization by which something internal is expressed, and is in this way an activity of the human being as the *ego cogito* who uses language as a tool of representation to express herself. According to Heidegger, however, this view of language is too narrow in its delimitation. First, it disallows the possibility of encountering language by circumscribing language in advance by means of a view that renders language predictable and controlled (191). Operating under "the understanding that is schooled in logic, thinking of everything in terms of calculation and hence usually overbearing," such a way of thinking prefigures language according to a rational comportment that is deaf to the movements of language not congenial to that comportment (188). Second, this prevailing view of language misses language by always referring language to something else. To the extent that language is viewed as expression, it appears as an externality explained according to an internality, and the place of language and its movement are missed. To the extent that language is held to belong to the nature of man, it seems a manifestation explained according to that nature, and the way in which things manifest in language is missed. To the extent that language is seen as representation, it becomes an image or vehicle explained according to what it represents, and the way in which language speaks beyond objective presence is missed. In every case, language is passed over in favor of something else.

Heidegger's task, by contrast, is to "reflect on language itself, and on language only," as he declares in the opening of the lecture. "We do not wish to ground language in something else that is not language, nor do we wish to explain other things by means of language." He follows this resolution by quoting a letter from Hamann to Herder: "If I were as eloquent as Demosthenes I would yet have to do nothing more than repeat a single word three times: reason is language, *logos*" (Heidegger 2009, 188–89). Heidegger's challenge, in other words, is to bring language *as* language *to*

language. But if this is the project, what can be said? Are we not left with an empty tautology: "Language itself is—language and nothing else besides" (188)? For Heidegger, the challenge is to understand the "is" of language, its existence in the verbal sense. For "speaking is speaking" he substitutes "speaking speaks," broaching the question of the *manner* in which language occurs by emphasizing the verbal character of speech. Instead of leading to something that could ground language or establishing language as a ground for something else, this phrase constitutes an attempt to thoughtfully persist in proximity to language in its manner of eventuation.

For Wallace Stevens, language occurs preeminently as sound. In a lecture given in 1942, Stevens insists that, "above everything else, poetry is words, and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds" (Stevens 1951, 32). His assertion that poetry is words echoes Heidegger's insistence on language as language, but Stevens moves beyond the terms of Heidegger's discussion by emphasizing the sonorous. By virtue of its ineluctably sonorous character, poetry "makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration" (32). One ought no more confuse marks on a page with poetry than one would confuse marks on a page with music; rather, the marks must become gesticulated sound for the poem to begin to speak:

> The less legible meanings of sound, the little reds
> Not often realized, the lighter words
> In the heavy drum of speech, . . .
> These are the edgings and inchings of final form,
> The swarming activities of the formulae
> Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at. (Stevens 1990, 488)

Sound is the element of speech, but it overflows the demands of meaning. Thus, Stevens, too, is dissatisfied with ways of understanding that model thinking after "reason's click-clack," for such ways of thinking will constitute a distorting imposition at worst and at best inevitably pass over the "less legible meanings of sounds" with which it is the task of a thinking on the path of poetry to remain (387). To seek such a sense in sounds—to engage in a thinking that is "of the path of poetry," as Stevens says (Stevens 1951, 32)—requires a modality of thought that can persist with the occurrence of these sounds and make sense of them without reducing them to a conceptual content.

Things and Nothing

For Heidegger, the attempt to bring language as language to language, to think language itself and nothing else besides, requires resistance to representational thought and persistent attention to the way that speaking speaks. Furthermore, as Stevens points out, this means that thinking must persistently attend to sound. As a way of moving toward such a reflection, I consider Stevens's last poem, "Of Mere Being" (Stevens 1972, 398; hereafter referred to by line number):

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze decor,
>
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song. (ll. 1–6)

The first two stanzas form a single sentence, and the assonance built around the vowel sound of "palm" gives them a resonant consistency. The first stanza speaks of a palm that rises; the second stanza speaks of a bird that sings. The dominant figure of this first part of the poem is one of a pure movement, without cause and effect and without whence or whither. The palm rises, neither from nor toward, in the empty expanse of the bronze sky. The distant sky is described as "bronze," evoking a sunset within which the palm, a symbol of the sun, rises. In one register of sense, the palm/sun rises/sets in the empty expanse of the sky; in another register of sense, the palm is the sun, rising/falling in itself. To this precise fusion of images the poem adds another suspension of movement, for the comma after "decor" is grammatically nonsensical. It holds together two independent clauses in a way that refuses their independence, allowing neither simple juxtaposition nor equivocation between the palm, fiery sky, and bird. In this manner, the grammatical movements of the passage remain in unresolved circulation between palm and bird. This typographical relation introduces the lexical accident to which the primary image of the poem refers: the Greek *phoinix*, which is both a palm tree (*Phoenix dactylifera*) and a bird, the phoenix. Like the palm, the phoenix, in its aerial existence and fiery death and rebirth, evokes the sun.

According to the poem, then, the palm/sun/bird rises, singing within itself a foreign song.

In fact, the entire poem is situated in the moment of mobile suspension between the phoenix's rising and fiery dissolution. The phoenix is a self-begotten existence, determined by a circular birth and death. The phoenix rises and falls without provenance or purpose; its manner of movement is the condition for its movement. To understand the phoenix, we cannot look to a cause or effect, for its generation and end point only back to itself. Furthermore, the phoenix is a creature whose own death persists in its living, preserving in its existence its own non-existence. In the poem, the palm/phoenix is situated by this strange death that somehow persists, the other of existence that belongs to or remains with existence.

For the "rises" of the first stanza, the second stanza substitutes "sings" as the only verb. Thus, the pure movement the poem figures is also cast as a movement of sound. The bird sings in the palm, which means it sings in the region at the end of the mind, in the bronze decor. The bird is within the palm's leaves, but through the etymological play of words we have highlighted, it also is the palm, so the bird is simultaneously contained in its leaves (or feathers) and is those leaves. The palm/bird is therefore the singing that sings: in Greek, a *phoinix* is also a musical instrument (similar to a guitar). Importantly, both verbs—"rises" and "sings," situated prominently at the middle of their respective stanzas—are intransitive: rising and singing occur only from themselves. In fact, the comma in the third line encourages us to hear the fifth and six lines as a new sentence that would be entirely without a subject: singing happens in the palm. In these diverse ways, Stevens speaks of a singing that is its own region. At the same time, the bird's singing sounds *in the poem*: it is here that we, as readers, hear the singing of the phoenix. In this respect, Stevens plays on the chime between "palm" and "poem," encouraging us to hear that the bird "sings in the poem." The poem is "in" the region of its words and is its words, as the bird is "in" its leaves and is its leaves, and as the poem is also in the leaves of paper the reader holds in hand while reading. Thus, rising/singing bears a triplicate structure of self-repetition: it is a singing that sings itself in its present occurrence in the song (poem).

According to the poem, these movements occur at the end of the mind. In Stevens, the "end of the mind" often refers to the limit of subjective perception at which point it is no longer possible to think in terms of objectivity (Ziarek 2008, 79, 81, 84). When language is not always referred

in advance to the expression of a subject or to the representation of objects, something else can be heard in poetry: the rising of a palm, the singing of a bird. These are "things" understood not as objectively present but as dynamic movements that unfold from themselves as relations of activity. "Never the thing but the version of the thing," Stevens says—or rather, the thing *as* version, as turning (Stevens 1990, 332). This echoes Heidegger's way of emphasizing the verbal character of things in the "Language" lecture: "thinging, things are things" (Heidegger 2009, 197). In "Of Mere Being," the palm, bird, and song appear not as discrete objects but as things in this sense.

For Stevens, poetry is the sounding forth of things in language. Whereas for objective thinking, words are "about" objects, in poetry, things shine forth in the movements of language:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.
> The poet speaks the poem as it is,
> Not as it was: part of the reverberation
> Of a windy night as it is, when marble statues
> Are like newspapers blown by the wind. (Stevens 1990, 473)

In poetry, things in their thinging sound in language. Here even marble statues are events that transpire, and language is the spiration of things. In "What Are Poets For?," Heidegger writes that a saying that arises from the nature of language "is no longer solicitous for this or that objective thing; it is a breath for nothing" (Heidegger 2009, 137). Perhaps we can hear this "nothing" in terms of its original contraction: not-one-thing, an occurrence of "thinging" apart from the demand for objective unity. A modality of thinking that attempts to remain with the sounding of things in language, Stevens writes, must occur "out of nothing":

> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
> It is possible, possible, possible. It must
> Be possible. (Stevens 1990, 404)

As reflection attends to the appearance of things in language, it occurs out of nothing. In one sense, this is a thinking with no "out of," a thinking

that attempts to think the sounding of things in language without taking recourse to something else, without the reasoning that views everything in terms of an "out of" conceived logically or causally. In another sense, this is a thinking out of nothing because it emerges not from objective things but from "the version of the thing," from things as events. This "nothing" is what Stevens calls the plain sense of things:

> After the leaves have fallen, we return
> To a plain sense of things. It is as if
> We had come to an end of the imagination,
> Inanimate in an inert savoir.
> It is difficult even to choose the adjective
> For this blank cold, this sadness without cause. (502)

The plain sense of things is a sense for blank, causeless nothing. This is a *sense,* as Stevens says: a taste, not a matter of images. This is why Stevens resists the subject-predicate relation that attaches adjectives to nominal objects. Choosing the adjective is difficult, he says, as he attaches privative non-predicates ("blank," "without cause") to tonal non-objects ("cold," "sadness"). Stevens often speaks in similarly atmospheric terms: "the reverberation of a windy night," "like newspapers blown by the wind," "major weather," "blank cold," etc. Stevens finds in these figures a way to speak out of nothing, gesturing toward dynamic events that presence in a modality apart from that of objective determination. "The indefinite, the impersonal, atmospheres and oceans," he writes, "are precisely what I love; and I don't see why, for a philosopher, they should not be the ultimate inamorata" (Stevens 1989, 33). Things as they are, blank cold, crystal clouds, reverberations of wind—these are all attempts to speak of a sense of existence that arises apart from the demands of meaning, for "There is a sense in sounds beyond their meaning" (Stevens 1990, 351–52). Crucially, for Stevens, this sense of existence occurs in sound: language is song.

Repetition and Song

In "Of Mere Being," things sound forth as pure movement. The arising to presence of things in language occurs in a way that Stevens describes as "out of nothing" and Heidegger describes as "for nothing." These phrases

invite a listening that hears the sounding forth of things in language otherwise than in terms of objective presence. Thus, Heidegger declares in the "Language" lecture, "what we seek lies in the poetry of the spoken word" (Heidegger 2009, 194). Listening to speaking speak, in other words, begins with the sounds themselves. As we heard earlier, Stevens emphasizes the sonorous nature of the spoken word and contends that it is in its sounding that things appear in language:

> And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
> Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
> Like watery words awash; like meanings said
> By repetitions and half-meanings. (Stevens 1990, 497)

In Heidegger's lecture, as he attempts to bring language *as* language *to* language, his own words take on the character of liquid lingerings, emphasizing and repeating the sounds of words. He takes his listeners through a series of variations on his central phrase: "Speaking is—speaking, speech," "Speaking speaks," "*Speaking* speaks," "Speaking *speaks*" (Heidegger 2009, 189, 195). Why does Heidegger resort to these repetitive gestures? Repeated aloud enough times, any word undergoes a mutation: we might say that it becomes senseless, but it would be better to say that its drifting conceptual sense becomes inextricable from its acoustic sense. In Heidegger's repetition of the word "language," a sense of strangeness emerges. This happens conceptually, since the repetition appears tautological: merely saying the identical thing twice is a strange way to speak. More importantly, however, the word *itself* begins to appear strange as it moves through its various iterations. By exposing this strangeness, Heidegger exposes the activity of language. This is one way to work toward the sounding of a word itself in its complexities and resonances. In repetition, Heidegger begins to bring to language not what words mean, but rather the activity of language as language, the "sense in sounds beyond their meaning." This is the beginning of one form of thinking "out of nothing," of attempting to reflect upon the way things come to sound in language. In the passage quoted above, Stevens takes similar recourse to repetition: "it is possible, possible, possible."

From this perspective, Heidegger's etymologies can be heard as projects of listening to the sounding of things. The criticism that declares them sometimes spurious is misguided, for it is mistaken

as to the nature of the etymological gesture. As Heidegger says in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the practice of following etymologies does not search for a definitive meaning through a lineage; still less does it attempt to purify words by reducing them earlier forms. Rather, etymologies slacken the determination of words in a conceptual register and create room for rethinking them. It does this by allowing the words in question to establish harmonic relationships that thicken and tighten their sound:

> The etymological examination of the meaning of the word had this result: what we today, and for a long time previously, have called by the name "Being" is, as regards its meaning, a blending that levels off three different stem meanings. None of these is evident definitively and on its own within the meaning of the word anymore. This blurring and blending go hand in hand . . . the word "to be" is empty and its meaning is evanescent. (Heidegger 2000, 78)

The evanescence of meaning is one accomplishment of etymological analysis: it empties the word of its ossified conceptual intelligibility and allows it to sound. Words no longer speak by setting out meaning; rather, they speak in the complex resonances of their harmonic registers. Like rhymes, etymologies highlight the way that words resound in one another, repeating one another.

In Stevens's poem, the bird, palm, and song are brought together by an etymological history that terminates in the triple homonym *phoinix*. In this blending of surplus sense, the words evanesce and become foreign to our ears, which begin to hear the play of sound at work in language. As the poem says, things sound in language in an inhuman manner:

> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song. (ll. 4–6)

As attention shifts to the singing of the song, the object-images of which the poem is composed recede and evanesce; the definite articles of the first stanza give way to indefinite nouns. What comes to the forefront instead is the song itself. In fact, this stanza is the only stanza in the poem that rhymes: we hear three slant rhymes in three lines. Thus, at the moment

when it names the foreign song, the poem puts into circulation musical elements of words that themselves speak the singing without ideas. The stanza also begins and ends by naming the singing, such that the word itself (sings/song) acts as a bookend for the play of sound within. In this stanza, the poem suffuses itself with sound.

The song is "foreign" because it sings from the region of the phoenix, a singing that is its own place, beyond human meaning and feeling. The song is likewise foreign to itself in the poem, because it displaces itself each time it speaks, unable to contain the semantic polyvalences in which it moves. In fact, it is not clear what is modified by the repeated "without" according to which the poem declares its song to be foreign: is it the bird, palm, or song? This grammatical ambivalence is consonant with the blended figure of the palm/bird/singing in which these different senses become entangled and inseparable. The song is foreign, therefore, because something foreign—something that is without human meaning or feeling—belongs to the song and appears in its singing.

Disposition and Gesture

Heidegger's practices of repeated recitation are ways of listening to the singing of language, bringing sound forward and following its movements. Similarly, in Stevens's own practices of acoustic repetition ring the singing of sound. By emphasizing dimensions in which language is foreign and inhuman, however, Heidegger and Stevens put into question our own being and the possibility of a kind of thinking that can persist with such singing. Heidegger indicates this turn in "What Are Poets For?":

> But it remains questionable when we are in such a way that our being is song, and indeed a song whose singing does not resound just anywhere but is truly a singing, a song whose sound does not cling to something that is eventually attained, but which has already shattered itself even in the sounding, so that there may occur only that which was sung itself. (Heidegger 2009, 136)

In order to think in proximity with the singing of language and avoid the imposition of thinking language in terms of what it is not, our being must

be implicated in its foreign sounding. In "Of Mere Being," this turn occurs in the seventh and eighth lines, which form the second basic unit of the poem:

> You know then that it is not the reason
> That makes us happy or unhappy. (ll. 7–8)

These lines, situated at the poem's center, are out of step with the rest. Rhythmically, they break with its meter, becoming metrically complex through the accumulation of nonlexical words that do not take any normal accent: "then that it is not the." Grammatically, this stanza, which does not contain a single preposition, breaks with the predominant grammatical character of the rest of the poem, in which elliptical strings of prepositional phrases put everything in ambivalent relation with everything else.

It is in this context that the poem sets up a contrast between reason, on the one hand, and happiness or unhappiness, on the other. Happiness or unhappiness names something without "human feeling" (l. 6), so it does not name emotion in the usual sense. Rather, it indicates a dimension of thinking that is not governed by the logic of the reason, a dimension in which I find myself disposed in a disposition that is "of" mere being. In a passage quoted earlier, Stevens identifies this disposition with an imperative possibility: that is, a hope, which displaces the present and opens alongside it another time ("It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible"). Thus, the poem affirms two ambiguous senses. First, reason is not what disposes us, placing us in a mode of thinking and speaking in the vicinity of the appearance of things in language, since such thought occurs in sensibilities arising elsewhere. Second, such a disposition from elsewhere does not act in the manner of a reason; rather, it is an attunement (*Stimmung*, which is related to voice, *Stimme*) that lies in the intractable sounds of words. As Stevens says elsewhere, "delight / Since the imperfect is so hot in us, / Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds," and again, "We say ourselves in syllables that rise / From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak" (Stevens 1990, 194, 311).

In its sounding, language disposes us, opening a way of thinking that emerges not from reason but from this disposition. According to the middle lines of the poem, this occurs according to a temporal disjunction. The poem speaks throughout in the simple present tense ("rises," "sings"), but here this present is unraveled. The poem does not say "you know" or

“you know now,” maintaining the present, but adds “then” (l. 7). Yet, the verb itself does not change to match: instead of the expected “you knew then” or “you will know then” we read “you know then.” These lines add to the “now” in which the singing of the poem occurs a “then,” another time which belongs to “knowing” in the sense of disposed reflection. In this regard, Schuback draws attention to the Greek verbal system, to which Heidegger devoted much attention (Schuback 2003, 206). The tense of Greek verbs is oriented around aspect, which refers not to the external chronological determination of this or that object but to the internal temporal structure of a thing as a mode or manner of occurrence. Something like this can be heard in English in the differences between “to listen,” “to be listening,” and “to have listened,” which are differences between an internal temporal modality of occurrence (either simple, progressive, or completed), independent of whether the occurrence is to be situated yesterday, today, or tomorrow. In aspectual differentiation, we begin to hear the temporal posture or bearing of things. Perhaps it is in this sense that the word “thing” hearkens back to the Indo-European root **ten*, a stretch of time. These are sonorous gestures of words, ways in which the manner of turning of things sounds forth.

In the “Language” lecture, Heidegger articulates the relation between words and things in terms of such gestures. At a crucial point in the lecture, his discussion of poetry leads him to situate the appearance of things in language according to a cosmic “fourfold” of sky and earth, mortals and divinities (Heidegger 2009, 197). Much has been written about this fourfold (see Mitchell 2010). At precisely this point, however, he also opens a completely different avenue of thinking:

> Our old language calls such carrying *bern*, *bären*—Old High German *beran*—to bear; hence the words *gebären*, to carry, gestate, give birth, and *Gebärde*, bearing, gesture. Thinging, things are things. Thinging, they gesture—gestate—world. [*Dingend sind die Dinge Dinge. Dingend gebärden sie Welt.*] (Heidegger 2009, 197)

Here Heidegger attempts to think in harmony, holding together a set of words in different registers through an acoustic relation. By allowing words their rhythmic movements, he listens for the way in which things sound in language. Speaking calls things in their gesturing. Such calling is not merely naming; rather, it is itself gesturing, beckoning. Gesture does not

call by delimiting and setting forth an object. Rather, gesture calls forth gesture: it creates a space that elicits a certain posture or bearing. The gestures that play out in a conversation with a friend give birth to and shape a space in which things appear by virtue of the disposition elicited in me by the gestures of my friend: I lean in as she does, and we are thus able to hear together what is being said. Gesture "re-configures" our attunements. In this sense, Heidegger insists that discussing language "means to bring to its place of being not so much language as ourselves: our own gathering into the appropriation." That is to say, thinking concerning language "demands that we enter into the speaking of language in order to take up our stay within language, i.e., within *its* speaking, not within our own" (188–89). A kind of thinking that does not ask for reasons—that does not seek to explain language by means of something other than language—is called *listening*: a disposition that finds itself disposed by speaking. "It is the listening to the other sounds and resonances in the already sounding sound" in which things arise to presence in language (Schuback 2003, 211). That speaking speaks of the existence of things does not mean that speaking names something before us. Rather, it means that speaking gestures out of nothing, sounding in such a way as to enact a spacing for things and disposing us toward a sense of existence, of the manner of existence of things.

Conclusion

The final unit Stevens's "Of Mere Being" gathers the poem toward its final utterance:

> The bird sings. Its feathers shine.
> The palm stands on the edge of space.
> The wind moves slowly in the branches.
> The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down. (ll. 8–12)

The two simple sentences that form the ninth line are the shortest in the poem, and they emphasize the compact brevity of what is being said: a specific bird, which is its singing, sings; specific feathers, which are their shining, shine. The palm/poem stands, persisting on the edge of a space which opens through the gesture of its movement. In this standing, a slow

wind moves in the branches. This slow wind, which speaks of the other time of "you know then," does not move the branches; rather, it moves in them, intransitively (wind is often a symbol of time in Stevens; see Doggett 1961, 374). There is no order of reasons here, no explanatory causes or purposes. Rather, the rustling palm fronds chime in the euphonic ringing of these lines, which speak movement as it happens in things. In the final line, the preponderance of sound reaches a climax. The sudden profusion of modifiers (and modifiers of modifiers), the accumulation of six strong accents (three in immediate succession), and the bold alliteration together shift the rhythmic composition of the whole. If this poem speaks "of mere being," disposing its listener toward a sense for the existence of things as they sound forth in language, it does so in the movements of sound that dance and shimmer across the acoustic surface of the poem.

At the end of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens remarks that poetry consists in "petty syllabi, the sounds that stick, / Inevitably modulating, in the blood" (Stevens 1990, 407). In a strong sense, "Of Mere Being" is a poem that consists in wordplay, in syllables that stick: a poetics occurring in a region wherein languages interpenetrate and syntactical, metrical, grammatical, typographical, figurative, conceptual, and above all acoustical registers intersect, each carrying their own ambivalences and generating new ones in their conjunction. Poetry speaks according to the sonorous texture of language, remaining steadfastly within the singing that it is, suspended on the edge of a spacing for things in language. In this foreign song, we find ourselves disposed toward the motion of things as they sound forth. Although it is not ours, the sounding of language portends a kind of understanding that must be thought through. If sound is the element of language, then sound belongs also to thought, which follows language in its speaking. In this article, I have tried to show a way in which both Stevens's poetry and Heidegger's philosophical prose are forms of thinking that carefully address themselves to the way things come to sound in language. Without collapsing poet and philosopher together, I have attempted to indicate a register of reflection in which they both carry out a thinking concerning things in their existence that is attuned to the acoustic gestures by which language speaks:

> In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
> Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
> Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all. (Stevens 1972, 337)

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