In a passage made famous by Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Hölderlin proclaims:

Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnet Der Mensch auf dieser Erde.¹

*Full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth.*

The lines are from a poem that makes a romantic statement of the traditional analogy between poetry and architecture, and they are cited as the occasion for one of Heidegger’s essays (“Poetically Man Dwell,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*) on the nature of dwelling, another of which was discussed in the first chapter of this book. Hölderlin’s lines allow Heidegger to treat poetic creation as a kind of building but also to reflect on the nature of dwelling made possible by this construction. *Dwelling, or das Wohnen,* as we have seen, is Heidegger’s word for “man’s stay on earth,” a sojourn marked out in time by the limits of birth and death, and in space by the expanse between earth and heaven. As the human experience of these dimensions is formed in language, poetry is the art that is capable of taking their measure, and thereby the measure of human being in the world. For the poet, language is far from being a prison house. On the contrary, the poet constructs an authentic relation to language, and thereby to being itself, by remaining open to its inherent possibilities, its unforeseen disclosures.

In this chapter I wish to take Heidegger’s citation of Hölderlin as a
point of departure for a study of architectural figures in the philosopher’s American contemporaries Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. My reading of their poems takes place on two levels. One is the analysis of the architectural construction as a poetic image. A precedent for such an analysis is to be found in the work of Freud and Bachelard, both of whom explore the symbolic content of the image of the house as it occurs in dreams or poems. The architectural images that draw my attention, though, are not limited to houses: they include other constructions, such as the woodpile or the stone wall, because these, too, are part of the built environment with which the poet is concerned. The second level of my reading goes beyond the poetic image in order to show that the relation between poetry and architecture is more fundamental than that of mere representation. Both are primordial forms of making, for poetry does with the material of language what architecture does with the materials of the earth. Is the relation between poetry and architecture an especially privileged one when compared to that which exists between other art forms, such as painting and music? Heidegger would have it so, based on the notion of dwelling, which he sees as belonging especially to these arts. Frost and Stevens offer their own, modern versions of the analogy between poetry and architecture; for both poets, the poem is a construction that also serves in some sense as a place of dwelling. As I shall attempt to show, however, the difference between the two poets lies in the respective meanings they assign to this dwelling in relation to the more universal conditions of being. For Frost, the poetic, like the human habitation, serves only as a temporary refuge from the surrounding chaos. For Stevens, the construction of a dwelling place for the imagination is likewise necessary to being; but the risk is that the imposed order of such a construction will stand in the way of the poet’s pursuit of discovery.

The notion of dwelling is already familiar to a certain “Heideggerian” tradition of reading American poetry. I shall cite just two examples, both from influential critics. In his book on Frost, Frank Lentricchia reads the poet according to what he refers to as the Heideggerian notion that “the world is our home, our habitat, the materialization of our subjectivity” (4). Similarly, in an essay on Stevens and Heidegger, Frank Kermode writes, “The place where the poet dwells, especially if it is his place of origin, will be his mundo, a clarified analogy of the earth he has lived in” (262). In both cases, the notion of dwelling is given a reassuring plenitude, as if a perfect synthesis were possible between the poet and his world. To my way of thinking, however, such approaches fail to take account of a tension al-
ready present within Heidegger’s thought between dwelling and its impossibility, a tension also characteristic of Frost and Stevens. This is apparent, for example, in the difference between Heidegger’s claim that dwelling is the “basic character of Being” and his assertion that the “real plight of dwelling” is that human beings “ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 160–61, emphasis in original). To this ambiguity within the concept of dwelling itself must be added the problematic nature of this ideal under the specific conditions of modernity. According to Adorno, these conditions have effectively put an end to the myth of dwelling: “Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible” (Minima Moralia 38). “The world is no longer habitable . . . the heavy shadow of instability bears upon built form” (“Functionalism Today” 12).

Given what I take to be an inherent instability in the concept of dwelling, my approach to the architectural imagery of Frost and Stevens is closer to that of contemporary theorists such as Mark Wigley and Jacques Soullilou, for both of whom architectural meaning is inevitably involved with loss and spectrality. Wigley writes, “A house is only a house inasmuch as it is haunted” (162), whereas for Soullilou, “Le spectral est ce qui traverse l’habiter et le non-habiter architectural, rend leur destin solitaire, et défait cette opposition aussitôt qu’elle essaie de se reconstituer” (The spectral is that which is common to architectural dwelling and nondwelling, which gives them a common destiny and which undoes the opposition between them even as this opposition attempts to reconstitute itself) (75). An illustration of this principle is to be found in Frost’s early poem “Ghost House” (1913), which begins:

I dwell in a lonely house I know
That vanished many a summer ago.

The poem goes on to describe a place where all that remains of the house are the cellar walls, now overgrown with wild raspberries, and the gravestones bearing names rendered unreadable by layers of moss. The mute and nameless persons buried there are the poet’s only human companions, “tireless folk, but slow and sad.” “Ghost House” is a poem in which the notion of dwelling as a poetic and spiritual condition depends, paradoxically, on the loss of the dwelling as a physical structure—a “vanished abode”—as well as on the spectral presence of its vanished inhabitants.

If the notion of spectrality is a part of the problematics of dwelling, it also serves as a way into the reading of other images of architectural build-
ing, such as Frost’s wells, chimneys, stone walls, and woodpiles. Let us con-
sider one of Frost’s best-known poems, “Mending Wall” (1914). Everyone
is familiar with the argument of this poem: even a stone wall is subject to
constant deterioration, and therefore the poem’s speaker meets yearly with
his neighbor for the purpose of mending the wall that lies between their
lands. The labor of mending the wall is at first described in almost techni-
cal detail, but then, in another tone, is dismissed as “just another kind of
outdoor game.” In a mischievous mood, the speaker attempts to convince
his old-fashioned neighbor that their labor is useless, only to receive the re-
peated answer, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

The poem is often read as a bemused affirmation of a quaint piece of
folk wisdom. But this is to miss the dimension of the poem that is devoted
to the art of building. The thematics of building allow us to see the mend-
ing of the wall both as a metaphor for poetic composition and as a ritual
devoted to the spectral presences for which the wall serves as a monument.
Although these two aspects of the poem are closely related, for the sake of
clarity I shall take each of them in turn. The poetic analogy begins to be
apparent when we notice that, running between the two neighbors, the
wall forms a “line” in which the gaps must be filled by putting stone on
stone, in a work that demands strength, skill, and even sortilege: “We have
to use a spell to make them balance.” Words like spell and balance, with
their connotations of poetic art, call attention to the allegorical function of
this work. Rebuilding the wall is analogous to writing the poem: the stone
is to the length of the wall what the word is to the poetic line: its basic unit
of construction. The precarious fitting and balancing of stones serves as an
allegory for the art of combining words in poetic syntax. The orderly
rhythm of the mending work, as

    . . . on a day we meet to walk the line
    And set the wall between us once again

matches perfectly the regular iambic pentameter of Frost’s poetic line.

The second half of the poem, in which the speaker tries unsuccessfully
to make his neighbor admit the uselessness of the wall,

    There where it is we do not need the wall.
    He is all pine and I am apple orchard

serves only to reaffirm the wall’s aesthetic value, its status, like that of the
poem itself, as a work of art: if it is lacking in any immediate practical use, it
is nonetheless the object of constant labor and care on the part of its adepts.
To say the wall is useless, however, is not to say that it is meaningless. On the contrary, Frost insists on the inscription of the wall within a world of ritual and spectral presences, beginning with the mysterious “something” that doesn’t love a wall, a destructive force that inheres within the logic of its ceaseless reconstruction. This something makes “gaps” in the wall that are doubly negative: figures of lack in themselves, they lack witnesses to their origins, as “No one has seen them or heard them made,” and yet there they are at spring mending time: gaping absences within the promised fullness of the new season. The wall also has a sepulchral function, as a kind of memorial to the generations from which it is inherited, just as the “saying” of the neighbor is inherited from his father, and the ritual repetition of this saying accompanies the annual rite of wall mending. In the enactment of this ritual, the neighbor himself assumes a spectral aspect. Like “an old-stone savage armed,”

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

Trapped in an endless repetition of speech and gesture, the neighbor is himself a haunted and haunting figure, already joined with the dead who built the wall. His spectrality combines with the poem’s mysterious forces of destruction to cast a shadow equally over the acts of building and unbuilding, mending and coming undone. The wall stands at the threshold between the living and the dead, marking the boundary between them, yet bringing them into confused intercourse.

Frost’s famous definition of poetry as “a momentary stay against confusion” (“Figure” 18) makes explicit the connection between the poem and the wall—this wall, in constant need of mending because of all the forces set against it: the frozen groundswell, the work of hunters, the sheer pull of gravity. Frost suggests that an equally imposing set of forces threatens to destroy the art of poetry, with its roots in incantation and communion with the dead. The work of the poet, then, is one of building an extremely fragile shelter against the constant threat of destruction.

From the same volume as “Mending Wall,” “The Wood-Pile” also contemplates a built object, which, in its location, serves no apparent purpose. A good deal of this poem’s effect depends on the approach to the object, in winter, across a frozen and unknown terrain. At the poem’s beginning, the speaker has already reached a limit from which he wants to turn back, but then he changes his mind: “No, I will go on farther, and we shall see.” He loses himself in a place he can only locate as “far from
home.” Frost’s poems often mark this boundary between known and unknown spaces, but, as in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” he usually turns back before crossing the threshold. In this case, however, the passage into the unknown is rewarded by the strange sight of a woodpile too far from any fireplace to be of use. Here is something familiar yet, in this place, completely unforeseen. One of the strengths of Frost’s poetry is its concrete sense of the human body at work in the place and with the things that belong to that work. His poems evoke the feel of the ax, the saw, and the scythe: the world of things ready-to-hand that Heidegger calls Zuhandenheit. The woodpile lost in the midst of the forest constitutes a radical displacement of that world, one that makes the object itself into an enigma.

As if attempting to dispel this enigma, Frost dwells on the materiality and architectural construction of his object with the same intensity of observation given, in the earlier poem, to the stone wall.

It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.

Signs of the skilled handiwork that went into making the woodpile, however, are seen simultaneously with signs of its decay.

The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken.

To account for the woodpile’s presence so far from any human habitation, the poem offers the only possible explanation: that it represents the forgotten labor of “someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks.” But this does not dispel the mystery of the woodpile, which remains haunted by the specter of its builder, the invisible agent whose body is nonetheless evoked in the marks of his handiwork and the “labor of his axe,” some ghostly woodman “who lived” and “who spent himself.” In the presence of this absent figure, the woodpile acquires an uncanny, sepulchral monumentality, grown over with clematis like a classical temple in ruins. Yet the woodpile itself is also a dying thing, forsaking its monumental function as it sinks into the earth, left

To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

By ending on these lines, the text of the poem sinks into the same decay as the object it elegizes. Once again, the built object, like the poem, stands as
a symbol of order in the midst of the wilderness, but faced with inexorable forces of destruction, its stay against confusion is only momentary.

Curiously, the wall and the woodpile seem to have more life in them than the human habitations in Frost’s poems. In spite of his homespun persona, there is an almost total absence of domesticity in Frost. His houses are invariably lonely, deserted places, like that of “The Cen-sus-Taker” (1923). In this poem, as in “The Wood-Pile,” the speaker must traverse a lost and empty space before finding his object. But this one is less an object of wonder than of despair.

. . . a slab-built, black-paper-covered house
Of one room and one window and one door,
The only dwelling in a waste cut over
A hundred square miles round it in the mountains.

In contrast to the woodpile, which at least testifies to the skill of its maker, this deserted house is the very figure of absence, emptiness, and negation: the words none and nothing resound throughout the poem as if echoing across the barren scene: “An emptiness flayed to the very stone.” But not content with this manifest absence, the census-taker must penetrate to the very heart of this emptiness by crossing the threshold into the house.

No lamp was lit. Nothing was on the table.
The stove was cold—the stove was off the chimney
And down by one side where it lacked a leg.

The absence of human life is testified to by the lack of human light and warmth: there remain only the worn-out relics of dwelling.

In its concluding lines, the poem changes register, from the census-taker’s observations to the poet’s private emotion.

This house in one year fallen to decay
Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses
Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years
Where Asia wedges Africa from Europe.

The reference to the “Old World” is rare enough in Frost to call for a close examination of its place here. The sorrow occasioned by the deserted house is “no less” than that inspired by ancient ruins, but it is the same kind of sorrow? Frost does not say. The traditional mode for the contemplation of ancient ruins is elegiac: Gibbon musing on the Roman Forum,
Wordsworth communing with the spirits of Stonehenge, Byron moved by the sight of Drachenfels,

And chiefless castles breathing stern farewells
From gray but leafy walls, where Ruin greenly dwells.

*(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III:46)*

But Frost’s is no romantic melancholy. His ruin is unredeemed by elegy or by any lofty sense of the spirit’s elevation over the ravages of time. It is instead an image of pure negativity and relentless diminishment, “where souls grow fewer and fewer every year.” If, according to Shakespeare, the poet “gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name,” then Frost seems to work in the opposite direction, giving to human habitation the name of nothingness. Readers of Jacques Lacan are familiar with the notion that lack is the necessary condition of desire, and indeed for Frost this nothingness, this emptiness at the center, is the condition for the writing of the poem, an act that, in the poem’s concluding line, he consciously equates with desire: “It must be that I want life to go on living.”

*New Hampshire* (1923), the volume in which “The Census-Taker” appears, closes with another poem on the ruin of human habitation, “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things.” Here the scene is of a farmhouse that has burned down, leaving only the chimney to stand. The barn across the way has escaped the fire but remains deserted; birds fly in and out of its broken windows,

Their murmurs more like the sigh we sigh
From too much dwelling on what has been.

The ruins of the farm seem to support this attribution of human sorrow to the things of the object-world: the dry pump flinging up an awkward arm, the fence post still carrying a strand of wire. But the poem nonetheless seems resolved not to dwell on the loss of the dwelling that this place has been. Rather, to be versed in country things means to write verse that resigns the nostalgia for human dwelling in favor of the detachment of the natural world, represented here by the indifference of the birds: “For them there was really nothing sad.”

The “verse” of the poem itself constitutes the needed compensation for the destruction of human dwelling: a more durable structure than the one forsaken here. The wisdom conveyed by the verse is the only proof against the sentimentalism of the pathetic fallacy.
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.

Concluding his volume with these lines, Frost anticipates, in thought and even in syntactical form, the argument of Stevens’s poem “The Snow Man” (1923), in which “one must have a mind of winter” to regard the frozen landscape

... and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind.

That is to say, according to the privileged knowledge celebrated in Frost’s poem, the phoebes do not mourn the loss of the house, just as in Stevens’s poem the wind, mournful as it may sound, has nothing to do with misery. But Stevens takes the logic of this idea one step further: in a consummation of detachment, the snowman not only recognizes that there is no mourning of human loss in nature; he also recognizes the radical nothingness that is common both to the desolate landscape and to himself. He himself is nothing because the “self” is as much a fiction as the notion of mourning in nature. This nothingness is the condition for the poem, whose function is simultaneously to cover and discover the void on which it is founded.

Stevens’s affinity with Frost lies in such interrogations or measurements of the conditions of being, conditions that, in Stevens as well, often figure in the form of human dwellings. In his reading of Hölderlin, Heidegger makes the point that as human beings we are human only insofar as we have the capacity to measure ourselves “with and against something heavenly” (221). Because of the nature of their materials, poetry and architecture are privileged among the arts in their capacity to make this measurement, one that takes the form of building, whether as the great cathedrals of Europe or as the monuments of poetic art. In terms of this discourse, which joins poetry and architecture to the definition of the human being in relation to the divine (or to the absence of the divine), Stevens stands squarely within the tradition that runs from Hölderlin through Nietzsche to Heidegger, even if his more obvious debts are to French symbolism.

Stevens’s most direct statement of the analogy between poetry and architecture is precisely that which seeks to define the human in relation to the heavenly. In “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (Harmonium, 1923), the person named in the title is addressed in the poem, which opens with the bold claim that “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.” The dif-
ference between poetry and the Judeo-Christian “moral law” is illustrated in the form of architectural metaphors. On one hand, out of the moral law one can make a nave, “And from the nave build haunted heaven.” The nave is the western extension of a Christian church, traditionally built in the form of a Roman cross. The moral aspiration toward heaven is figured here as a purely vertical construction, like the cathedrals of the late Middle Ages. On the other hand, out of the “opposing law” of poetry one can make a peristyle,

And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets.

The image here is of classical, pagan architecture, a peristyle being a row of columns surrounding a temple. Its construction is not vertical but built outward from the center, and it is by following this expansive movement to its utmost that the “masque” of imagination is projected beyond the planets. The two constructions have the effect of converting “conscience” and “our bawdiness,” respectively, into palms: the palms of Jerusalem with all their history of martyrdom, and the more luxuriant palms of Florida, the place of a new paganism in the geography of Stevens’s imagination. It is these Floridian palms that stand for the imagination liberated from the self-flagellation of Christian conscience, and for the universe of Stevens’s poetry. Poetry is thus supreme in its superior freedom, the freedom of “fictive things” that “wink as they will.”

“A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” is a more incisive version of the longer poem “Architecture,” written in 1918 but not published in Stevens’s lifetime. The initial lines of the first two stanzas of this poem pose questions that are characteristic of Stevens’s conception of poetry in terms of architectural form. The first asks “What manner of building shall we build?” and the second “In this house, what manner of utterance shall there be?” The first question is answered four stanzas later with the image of a “building of light” with towers, “Which, like a gorgeous palm, / Shall tuft the commonplace,” and with “Our chiefest dome a demoiselle of gold.” The poem ends with the injunction that only “the lusty and the plenteous” shall walk “The bronzed-filled plazas / And the nut-shell esplanades.” But the poem never answers the other question, that of the “manner of utterance” or “what shall the speech be” best suited to this stately pleasure dome. In other words, Stevens conceives of his artistic project as an imaginary edifice to be inhabited by or made out of language, but he still doesn’t know what kind of language that will be. The poem’s failure to ad-
equately address this question, which after all was absolutely crucial for Stevens at this point in his poetic career, may be why he never chose to publish “Architecture.” In this respect “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” written in 1922, may be considered a refinement on the earlier poem. In the later poem, Stevens preserves the analogy between poetry and architecture but reestablishes the poetic question as central, while sharpening the dialectic by setting up the contest of styles between the outward-projecting peristyle of poetry and the haunted nave of religion. The outcome of that contest, as we have seen, is both a declaration of poetry’s supremacy and at least a provisional answer to the question of 1918: “what manner of utterance?” The poet’s speech shall henceforth bear testimony to “Our bawdiness . . . indulged at last.”

The spatial opposition between Christian verticality and pagan expansion that we find in this poem is succeeded by more ambiguous architectural forms in Stevens’s next book, Ideas of Order (1935). The central image of “Academic Discourse at Havana” is an old casino. A casino is an ornamental summer house used for dancing and other forms of public amusement; it is a fragile, ephemeral structure, offering little resistance to the ruins of time and the elements. Like the peristyle, Stevens’s casino has stood at the center of an outward-expanding universe, surrounded by fountains and lakes adorned with swans and island canopies. But now the bills of the swans lie flat upon the ground, the windows of the casino are boarded up, and “a grand decadence settles down like cold.” This is Stevens’s language for the degraded historical present, where “Life is an old casino in a park,” no longer inspired by the myths of Jehovah, Leviathan, or the nightingale, nor even by the swans that graced the twilight of these gods.

In this burgher’s world unmoved by anything greater than “Grandmother and her basketful of pears,” can the old casino nonetheless signify in some subtler way, in the tradition of an architecture parlante? The decrepit structure is, after all, Stevens’s metaphor for life. However, the precise nature of the relation between the old casino and “life” can be defined only by considering the function of the poet in the spiritually impoverished world evoked in the poem. “Is the function of the poet here mere sound,” like “the sooth / Of trombones floating in the trees,” or does he have some more redeeming role to play? Hölderlin asked the same question in his elegy “Brod und Wein” (1801): “[W]ozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?” (What are poets for in a destitute time?). His answer is interpreted by Heidegger as follows: “To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods” (94). This does not mean that the
poet is merely a figure of mourning for the departed gods. Rather, it means that the destitution of the present age has made “the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him” (94). In other words, the function of the poet, and not the celebration of the divine, has become the central preoccupation of poetry.

Something like this is at stake in the haunting conclusion to Stevens’s poem. On one hand Stevens says, in a formulation that combines rhetorical genre with architecture, that the poet’s speech may be mere “benediction, sepulcher, and epitaph.” But it may also be

An incantation that the moon defines
By mere example opulently clear.

As a conventional poetic image, the moon belongs to that now defunct repertoire of the nightingale and the swan. But without having lost all the luster of this faded mythology, Stevens’s moon is also “part of nature,” an object giving concrete definition to the poet’s speech by the mere example of its reflected radiance. The poetic mode here is enchantment rather than epitaph, a spell that depends on the moon’s waver ing status between dead myth and present, shining thing. The poem closes with a return to the casino.

And the old casino likewise may define
An infinite incantation of our selves
In the grand decadence of the perished swans.

The analogy is as follows: the moon is to the poet as the casino is to our selves. Both objects, one natural and the other architectural, give concrete form and visual definition to an incantation, that is, a speech of enchantment rather than prayer, born of a kind of reverse sublime in which the human imagination, infinite in capacity, confronts a diminished world. The old casino figures forth that diminishment, but its emptiness is not the existential black hole of Frost’s deserted houses. Rather, its very shabbiness resonates in mute testimony to the permanence of human desire. Too melancholy for comedy, too insubstantial for tragedy, the old casino yet stands as an image sufficiently fitting of the present age to “reconcile us to our selves.”

Stevens’s ars poetica is “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” from the 1947 volume Transport to Summer. It is a poem that traces the origins of poetry to the tension between dwelling and nondwelling, to an originary estrangement from the place of “our” (i.e., human) habitation.
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.

This is the difference between us and wild animals: the spontaneous cries of the lion, the elephant, and the bear are all at one with their natural habitats. But the person addressed in the poem cannot manage such ease of speech. From his attic window, his “mansard with a rented piano,” he looks out over the neighboring rooftops and remains painfully mute, or at best manages a “bitter utterance.”

The question is whether the poet can build a world as perfect for the human as the mountain is for the bear or the forests of Ceylon for the elephant.

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc
And set the MacCullough there as major man?

Perhaps Viollet-le-Duc figures here merely as a famous architect with an elegant name. But for those who know his career, the passage has a special resonance. As we have seen in a previous chapter, Viollet was the great nineteenth-century restorer of medieval architecture, but in the process he often altered the original structure according to his own supreme fiction of the Gothic. One of his most ambitious projects was the restoration of Pierrefonds, the twelfth-century château-fort that he converted into a summer residence for the bourgeois emperor Napoléon III. As it happened, the emperor did not feel wholly at ease at Pierrefonds, and never adopted it as a residence; the MacCullough never took possession of his castle-fortress-home. In Stevens as well, the question of man’s accession to speech as strong and spontaneous as the “power of the wave” is left open; it is a speech only to be imagined. Toward the end of the poem, the Canon Aspirin, a figure for the poet’s intellect, attempts to order his world the way a classical architect does: “He imposes order as he thinks of them” and “Next he builds capitols and in their corridors . . . He establishes statues of reasonable men.” But unlike the architecture of the peristyle, this institutionalized order will not do. The problem is that “to impose is not / To discover,” and for Stevens the poet must find his orders, not impose them. The possibility of such discovery is held out against the inauthenticity of dwelling in a built environment constructed as an order of imposition.

In one of his last poems, Stevens is capable of imagining a perfect form
of dwelling through the figure of the threshold. “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” (1952) was written in memory of George Santayana, who chose to spend his last days in the austere lodgings of a Roman convent, the hospice of the Santo Stefano Rotondo on Monte Celio. The Basilica of Santo Stefano itself, built in the fifth century as a series of concentric circles around a central peristyle, is perfectly suited to the structures of Stevens’s poetic imagination. In its spirit, as well as its use of architecture, both as concrete image and as metaphor for the structures of human imagination, Stevens’s poem has affinities with Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (“Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” 1935–36), where the form of the Greek temple serves the function that, in Stevens, is served by the convent and the dome of the city around it. Heidegger writes:

The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground. (Poetry, Language, Thought 42)

The temple brings the landscape and the human world around it into an “open relational context” (offenen Bezüge), which represents not an imposition of order but rather the conditions under which the historical meaning of a people is made possible: as a work of art it both “fits together” and “gathers around itself” the world. The temple serves as a threshold between nonbeing and being in the sense that it “opens up a world and keeps it abidingly in place” (44, emphasis in original).

The threshold of Stevens’s poem is Rome itself as it is lived by the old philosopher, “On the threshold of heaven,” which is that “more merciful Rome beyond.” It is not, however, a question of passing from this world into the next but of realizing the imagined ideal in the concrete present. Stevens, in other words, reappropriates the Christian imagery of the holy city for his own vision of a human world made heavenly, not by the splendor of great cathedrals but by the consecration of the austere objects of the philosopher’s room, objects that stand in their poverty for the pure joy of his spirit.

The bed, the books, the moving nuns,  
The candle as it evades the sight, these are  
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,  
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes.

Without abandoning the figure of the threshold, the spatial configuration here, as in so many of Stevens’s poems, takes the concentric form of a gath-
ering around and in, simultaneous with a radiance outward from the center. Stevens works through all of the stages from center to periphery and back in again. In the absence of the theological framework supporting Dante’s supernatural cosmology, this structure is best expressed through the language of architecture, that is, the world as built by human beings. The outer spheres of this world are the “bird-nest arches” and “rain-stained vaults” of Rome: heaven in ruins, certainly, but not without a certain “naked majesty.” From here the poem moves inward to the space of the room and the mind.

The sounds drift in. The buildings are remembered.
The life of the city never lets go, nor do you
Ever want it to. It is part of the life in your room.
Its domes are the architecture of your bed.

Despite the setting, the poem argues against the silence and solitude of monastic existence. It endorses the mutual attachment in which the philosopher and the city will not let go of one another. Similarly, the tolling bells will not let mercy be “a mystery / Of silence,” nor allow any “solitude of sense” to acquire a music other than their own. Stevens’s vision is of a mind and a world that give form and substance to one another.

*Stanza my stone*, Stevens has uttered in the exuberance of an earlier poem (“The Man on the Dump,” 1938). In the present poem, the five-line stanzas of blank verse are stacked liked carved stone blocks that build toward a heightened intensity. At the end of the poem, which prefigures the end of the philosopher’s life, the respective spaces of mind, room, and city combine to form a kind of grandeur in which the simplest objects are magnified and made monumental, transformed into “the immensest theatre, the pillared porch.” As the setting sun “amber[s]” the room, it and its spare furnishings become

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

As in Heidegger, thinking is identified, by means of an architectural vocabulary, with building and dwelling. For the philosopher, as well as the poet, the “form and frame” through which thinking is realized is that of language. The poem as a whole makes it clear, however, that this edifice
cannot be constructed out of the mind or imagination alone. Rather, it must be discovered in an “open relational context” between the imagination and the world as it is made.

Stevens wrote this poem at the age of seventy-three, three years before his own death. It is an example of what Adorno calls, in an essay on Beethoven, “late style,” one conditioned by the approach of death and the impulse of the artist to leave traces of his own negative subjectivity in the material of his art. In formal terms, the artist has effectively abandoned his earlier attempts to construct a grand synthesis out of his work. Instead, the work registers “the remains of a synthesis, the vestige of an individual human subject sorely aware of the wholeness, and consequently the survival, that has eluded it forever.” This would be a romantic gesture except that, as Stevens says in one of the fragments of Adagia, “The poet is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live . . . but not between people and some other world” (Opus Posthumous 189). The philosopher stops on the threshold, and in that moment is capable of imagining an ideal synthesis of the design of his words and the architecture of his existence, but he is also, in that movement, passing on to some other space, perhaps to nothingness. The “as if” of the poem’s conclusion remains a tentative gesture, returning us to Heidegger’s assertion that dwelling must ever be sought anew, ever relearned and reinvented. Stevens’s urge toward a totalizing structure of the imagination is tempered by the paradox of its impossibility in a world of time. His supreme fiction remains, as he often reminds us, a fiction, a grand design of words constructed out of the desire for an elusive reconciliation.

This is, finally, the fundamental difference between Frost and Stevens in their respective relations to architecture. Frost is essentially a poet of ruins: his houses are empty relics of some happier, more meaningful time. His woodpile, abandoned by its maker, sinks into the earth. His stone wall is a crumbling relic of an age when it made sense, the ritual of its repair a perpetual repetition of the same. The poem as “momentary stay against confusion” registers its function as a formal barrier erected against the darkness to which it testifies, so that as a poet Frost is always, in a sense, “mending wall.” His poems, however, are authentic in their refusal to make any higher claim, in their implicit rejection of a consoling mythology, whether inherited or of the poet’s own making.

If Frost’s poems are constructed against the void, Stevens’s are constructed on the void—acquiring their resonance, as does the sound chamber of a violin, from the emptiness within. This general difference of ori-
entation accounts for Stevens’s particular relation to architectural ruin, which only appears to be romantic. The romantics saw in ruins either the fragility of human existence or the sublimity of a timeless grandeur. Stevens’s ruins are romantic, however, only in the sense given that adjective by his poem “Sailing after Lunch” (1935): as a figure of ourselves, both in our decadence and in our will to construct a meaning from that decadence. This is the sense in which life is an old casino in a park, and in which an old philosopher finds solace in the rain-stained vaults of Rome.