Wallace Stevens is a Modernist poet whose work dramatizes a crisis in aesthetics that allows him to develop a new concept and practice of lyric poetry. In advancing these claims, we distance ourselves from the critical tendency to read Stevens as an epigone of late Romanticism or to assimilate his work to Modernism as a literary period. What both of these approaches generally lack is a basis for linking Stevens to a reading of aesthetics that is both radical and transitional to a new conception of lyric poetry. In the present context, before offering interpretations of individual poems, we shall first consider how the discourse of the sublime raises questions concerning the emergence of the postmodern, considered as an aesthetic category, rather than as a cultural period. This aspect of our discussion will allow us to re-explore the postmodern as a philosophical problem. We will then explore how recent criticism has attempted to complicate the traditional relationship between allegory and representation in proposing a revised conception of lyric poetry. Our analysis of a specific Stevens poem will allow us to identify the break in style that initiates the poet’s later phase. Finally, the act of reversal that Steven accomplishes in his late poetry will be shown to demonstrate how he become a poet of radical immanence, just as it suggests how history may be brought into play as the outer limit of the poet’s world.

Lyotard and the postmodern sublime
Jean-François Lyotard contends that the difference between taste and the sentiment of the sublime, rather than a purely cultural rupture, provides a decisive basis for articulating the modern/postmodern opposition. This difference is more fully expressed in Kant’s presentation of aesthetics than in his earlier work, but it first merges as an epistemological distinction that concerns both aesthetics and morality. In the *Critique of
Pure Reason, Kant maintains that the sentiment of the sublime evokes certain Ideas which are unpresentable.\(^1\) Various Ideas, such as the sense of the world as the totality of all things, are difficult to assimilate to epistemology or ethics as foundational projects. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard identifies non-knowledge, resistance to synthetic operations and aesthetic instability as essential to the apprehension of the Ideas that cannot assume a constant form. Their resistance to canonicity in the cultural sphere indicates how these Ideas frustrate the faculty of the understanding:

Those are ideas of which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience); they also prevent the free union of the faculties which give rise to the sentiment of the beautiful; and they prevent the formation and the stabilization of taste. They can be said to be unpresentable.\(^2\)

Lyotard maintains that the difference between the presentable and the unpresentable marks a basic opposition in modern culture. Kant implied that modernity seeks to stabilize taste in presentation, but he also suggests how stabilization is disrupted with the experience of the sublime in the Ideas of the unpresentable. Kant’s discourse on the sublime was intended to encompass the unpresentable in a rigorous aesthetic framework.\(^3\) And yet, as Derrida suggests in “Parergon”, Kant’s attempt to impose an aesthetic or ethical frame on the sublime calls attention to basic aporias in transcendental philosophy that recourse to the categories cannot easily redress.\(^4\)

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1 Kant provides a basic definition of the concept of the Idea which is operative in his formulation of the sublime: “I understand by idea a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense experience” (see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, New York: St Martin’s Press, 1958 [I.1.A327-A328/B384-B385], 318).
3 Kant states in the Critique of Judgment that the feeling of the sublime brings with it “a movement of the mind bound up with the judging of the object”, as opposed to the “restful contemplation” that adheres to any judgment of the beautiful (see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press, 2000 [I.24], 105-106).
4 Derrida argues in short that, since the notion of the sublime fails to perform the function that transcendental philosophy assigns to it, the sublime, like the colossal, rejects every