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**“A cure of the ground and of ourselves”: The ecological poetry
of Wallace Stevens**

Voros, Gyorgyi, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1993

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A

"A CURE OF THE GROUND AND OF OURSELVES": THE
ECOLOGICAL POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

by

GYORGYI VOROS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of
New York.

1993

1993

GYORGYI VOROS

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

"A CURE OF THE GROUND AND OF OURSELVES": THE ECOLOGICAL
POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

by

Gyorgyi Voros

Adviser: Professor Charles Molesworth

Wallace Stevens understood the crisis of modernism as humanity's disordered relationship to the natural world. This study reads Stevens's work as a modernist nature poetry that reimagines the Nature/Culture dialectic and seeks to reinstate its forgotten term--Nature. Stevens's term "reality" emphasizes the physical universe as non-human Other. The primary relationship articulated in the poems--between human beings and non-human nature--defines all other relationships in Stevens's poetry, including the poet's relationship to language.

Two extra-literary discourses frame the discussion. Phenomenology, the science of human experience and perception, elucidates Stevens's grounding of language in the physical, the processive and the perceptual. Ecology, the science of interrelationships, interconnections and energy flow, provides an analogue for Stevens's poetic theory and practice. For Stevens, language is a natural force, part of the non-human Otherness of nature within which the individual dwells (in Heidegger's sense) and comes into expression.

After contextualizing Stevens within American representations of nature, and examining the poet's early relationship to the landscapes of his youth, the dissertation

examines Stevens's journey as a young man to the mountainous wilderness of British Columbia. The study postulates that the Canadian trip profoundly influenced Stevens's conceptions of language and silence, his symbolic geography and his sensibilities toward wild nature; and it spurred Stevens's shift from a Romantic toward a phenomenological conception of nature.

The dissertation reads the poetry as it is governed by three major metaphors: nature as house; nature as body; and nature as self. It examines the idea of oikos as it underlies Stevens's sense of the world as dwelling or household and language as the primary currency in the household economy. Since the human being's most intimate dwelling is the body, the study examines Stevens's pursuit of a physical poetry, the representation of sensory experience, and the evolution from tropes of seeing to tropes of hearing as the primary expression of bodily presence and participation in the world. Finally, the work discusses Stevens's representation of the continuum between self and world, particularly as that relation is expressed in his late lyrics.

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Introduction

Stevens's Earthy Anecdote: A Prologue to What is Possible in Rereading Stevens

1. The Sun's Rhetoric

The tops of mountains are among the unfinished parts of the globe, whither it is a slight insult to the gods to climb and pry into their secrets, and try their effect on our humanity.

Thoreau, The Maine Woods

A rare meteorological event, known as a glory, sometimes occurs on mountaintops. Given a unique configuration of sunlight, moisture and mountain, there appears in the air a huge full circle rainbow that irradiates the sky and saturates the land below with unearthly brilliance. A spectator stumbling upon such a scene unwittingly adds himself to the sun's rhetoric: facing the glory, illuminated from behind by the sun, he casts an awesome shadow into the valley, miles tall, encircled by the resplendent aureole. In the event, the stunned spectator may not immediately recognize his own shadow stretching away before him, but may see instead a spectre or a god. Indeed, this magnificent trick of the weather is thought to be behind the halo iconography of many religious traditions, appearing variously as Buddha's Glory, the

devouring fire atop Mt. Sinai, and Ezekiel's wheels within wheels.¹

Such an event taken as a whole, with all its dazzling interplay of natural and human elements, perfectly illustrates the dynamics of Wallace Stevens's poetry. The scene features his favorite ingredients: sun, clouds, mountain and man, brought into strange relation. Its components make up that typically Stevensian pair, "The weather and the giant of the weather" (CP 385)². Seen in the light of Stevens's mind, the whole tableau puns visually on the making of a supreme fiction, and it lends itself to interpretations favoring different degrees of imagination and reality, depending on where the spectator stands, or at least which way he faces, and what he wills himself to believe.

This sunlit (but finally human) arrangement also serves to illustrate the way in which natural forces suffuse the imagination in Stevens's poetry to compose reality. Those same natural forces pose, for Stevens, his philosophical and artistic dilemma: he is the poet poised on the mountaintop, enamored of a vision of a god, but knowing that the shadow is his own, knowing that the real artificer is the sun, and willing himself to see "the plainness of plain things" (CP 467). The arc of Stevens's long career is the arc of the man swerving away from the gorgeous, commanding illusion to come face to face with its source, the sun, seen "Without evasion by a single metaphor/ . . . in its essential barrenness" (CP 373).

Stevens's well-known dialectic between imagination and reality takes place between these two points of vision--human illusion and stark, physical fact. Unfortunately, these two most notoriously confounding words in Stevens's canon have fostered a widespread view of his poetry as a metaphysical tug-of-war between abstractions, in which the valiant Imagination struggles to wrest the modern world from the grip of an ever-encroaching, noxious Reality. In this view, Stevens's eventual reconciliation to reality betrays the disillusion of a man who, in a skeptical age, finds diminished solace in brave, solipsistic fictions. A less polarized view exalts Stevens as mythologizer of the self and priest of subjectivity who conjures forth reality from the all-powerful imagination.³

Neither version of this strident dialectic, however, accounts for Stevens's allegiance to what he termed the "faithfulness of reality" (CP 472). Alan Golding has noted the imbalance in the critical literature regarding the role reality plays in Stevens's work:

Most readers agree that Stevens' poetry represents a lifelong meditation on the relation between imagination and reality, but his adherence to the "reality" side of that relation sometimes gets short shrift. We forget that all of those famous statements in which Stevens celebrates the imagination can be matched by statements in which he celebrates a literal, physical, reality, the

world before it is transformed by imagination . .
(124).

The contradiction to which Stevens's readers must turn, then, to rephrase Golding's observation above, is that while it is true that Stevens honored, even championed, imagination, he fiercely maintained fidelities that belie the currently overwhelming thrust of his literary reputation as a celebrant of mind alone. For all his reputation as a poet of abstractions, Stevens was preoccupied with physical experience--with the place the human body holds within the greater body, the "body wholly body" (SP 128) of the world. He declared reality to be "the spirit's true center" (OP 177), and announced the purpose of his poems to be the restoration of contact with reality: "[W]e live in a world of the imagination in which reality and contact with it are the great blessings," he wrote (L 753).

What the world was like "before it was transformed by the imagination," what it may become again when the imagination learns to decreate itself, are among Stevens's primary concerns, on par with his concern for the imagination. The value of that faculty, for Stevens, finally lies not in its usefulness in weaving solipsistic fictions, but in getting through to the fundamental physical universe of which humanity is but a part, and not necessarily the major part:

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.

There was a myth before the myth began,

Venerable and articulate and complete (CP 383).

The muddy centre which throbs at the heart of Stevens's corpus is no less than the earth itself--"the point of survey, green's green apogee,/. . . Axis of everything, green's apogee" (CP 373).

Stevens, who was in many ways an anomaly among his contemporaries, was one of the only two major poets of his generation--Robert Frost was the other one⁴--to express the crisis of modernism specifically in terms of humanity's disquieting and vexed relationship to the natural world rather than in terms of cultural or psychological fragmentation. He was one of the few poets of his generation who understood intuitively the implications of modern scientific discoveries for humanity's view of the material universe and who found psychic consolation and spiritual salvation in recent versions of the world. He offered an affirmative, frequently joyful vision as an alternative to the twentieth century's increasing objectification of nature and alienation from it. His abiding concern was the rediscovery of a dynamic, fulfilling relationship with the vast non-human portion of the universe without resorting either to traditional religiosity or to the philosophy of humanism that prevailed during his lifetime. Unlike Emerson⁵, Stevens knew from the start that the condition of humans in the universe was a condition of unrequited love, since nature can never answer to human longing in human terms. Still, he courageously chose the "atmospheres and oceans and the principle of order" in nature as his "ultimate inamorata" (qtd. in Morse xxxii): and his

choice illuminates a new (or perhaps age-old but forgotten) way of being in the world.

To read the poet in this way represents a departure from the thrust of Stevens criticism to date, which, with little variation, has placed him in the idealist tradition with infusions from the French symbolistes.⁶ As Gerald L. Bruns has written: "We know that it is quite natural to situate Stevens's work within an idealist framework. The epistemological turn, whereby the mind is all in all, is foundational for Stevens and is presupposed by the entire tradition of Stevens' criticism" (25). Why, one must ask at this juncture in the history of reading Stevens, is it "quite natural" to impose such readings on the poet who wrote that "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world" (CP 325); who thrived in the "exquisite environment of fact" (OP 164); who judged that "The most beautiful thing in the world is, of course, the world itself" (OP 167)? Why is it that the "epistemological turn," while undoubtedly valid, has so thoroughly eclipsed the equally important earth-bound, nature-rooted facets of Stevens's work?

The prevailing epistemological momentum of Stevens criticism may be explained by the combined forces of the poet's personal idiosyncracies, literary historical circumstance, and biases inherent in our culture. To begin with, Stevens himself is notorious for strewing the path of interpretation with red herrings (he disclaimed the predecessors and influences that mattered most and talked up

the less significant ones). Until recently⁷, virtually nothing was known about the particulars of Stevens's life, tastes, or reading. This dearth of fact in which to ground his early poems was conveniently subsumed within a theoretical framework that shunned biographical or ideological intrusion: while Stevens started publishing his work well before the second World War, the major force of his reputation was established during an era in American literary history dominated by the New Criticism, a theory of contextualism in which "a poem is seen as a self-existing, self-sufficient system of language whose form and content are reciprocally caused . . . [and which] does not exist before it becomes articulated in language" (Lentricchia 15)⁸. Stevens's first two volumes, Harmonium and Ideas of Order, gaudy with linguistic fireworks, seemed designed to parade the theory, and though in subsequent volumes he turned his verbal virtuosity to different ends, as I will show below, his early reputation as a poet's poet, removed from the meatier stuff of life, followed him. The major criticism of the past two decades--specifically that of Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom--has broken with prevailing formalist and contextual readings of Stevens in portraying his work as the final, late flaring of Romanticism; yet it does not address the ways in which he departs from, or extends, that tradition.

Finally, twentieth century cultural biases regarding humanity's relationship to nature have also hindered reading Stevens as a nature poet. During Stevens's life, the major

philosophical response in the West to the cultural detonations set off by the great materialist thinkers--Darwin, Freud, Marx--as well as by the catastrophe of the first World War, was Existentialism--a stance founded on the severance between humans and nature which posited an absurd universe. Stevens, too, articulated a demythified, non-transcendental naturalistic nature--"we live in a place/ That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves/ And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" (CP 383). Yet, for Stevens, this same alien place offered human solace--"The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,/ On this present ground, the vividest repose,/ Things certain sustaining us in certainty" (CP 375).

The century of Romanticism which made such declarations of faith in nature familiar paradoxically also taught its adherents to view nature almost entirely as metaphor for human values--as an adjunct to human perceptions, human aspirations, the mind. Not all the English Romantics or the American Transcendentalists valued nature in and for itself apart from its value as macrocosm reflecting human microcosm. Thus, Stevens's version of nature came to be seen in the Romanticist context with all its implications of humanism. Despite his own clear statements to the contrary, Stevens came to be regarded as a humanist who deified the imagination, whose major realities resided in the mind, and whose consolation for vanished gods was poetry, the supreme fiction.

Stevens strongly objected to the anthropocentrism of this position. "The chief defect of humanism," he wrote, "is that

it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction" (L 449). That "something else" that had to be taken into account in creating acceptable fictions to live by was the physical universe which exists prior to and beyond the human, and for which Stevens's primary word was "reality." Because Americans (and Westerners in general) have not to this day come to terms with the non-teleological, non-anthropocentric nature that Stevens perceived and praised, it is no wonder that his poetic dialogue with it has often been misread.

Wallace Stevens, then, sought to write a new nature poetry that answered to what he perceived to be a great lack in American consciousness--a sense of the immediacy and profound presence of earth itself, rock bottom foundation of human thought and experience. As a young man, soon after he completed the trip to British Columbia that would prove to be his most consummate experience of the earth as physical, literal entity (Chapter 2 below recounts the details of the journey and Stevens's reactions to this journey), he wrote in a letter:

I thought on the train how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes + barrens + wilds. It still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains

still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens + orchards + fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless (L 73).

Stevens himself kept his gaze rivetted to the face of the giant. As late as 1948, after a century and a half of Romantic thought and nature-worship, he was yet able to observe that "The great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (NA 142).

Stevens's life's work was the writing of that poem. Thematically speaking, writing the great poem of the earth meant celebrating the basic conditions of human existence: humanity's immersion in the physical universe, the immediate, concrete relationship between individual and world, the cyclical character of time and experience, and the continuities among individual, nature, art and society. Poetically speaking, it meant reinvesting language with its ancient powers of incantation, invocation, and performance. Stevens's canon--his great poem of the earth--is a paean to nature in America, and the ritualized transformation, through language, of the poet's own relationship with physical reality. Stevens sought--as Emerson had before him--to establish, articulate and create a new relation to nature, as he understood nature to be in his time and place in history.

Stevens, of course, did not make a clean, continuous sweep from one locus to the other--from transcendental vision to bald physical fact--on his metaphoric mountaintop. His gaze shifted from mirage to sun and back as he weighed what was "real." He digressed and vacillated, and he frequently contradicted himself. He was unabashedly capable of proclaiming on one page of his Adagia that "Imagination is the only genius" (OP 204), and on another that "we have to accept reality itself as the only genius" (OP 177). He observed nature through a dandy's monocle, a mannerist's Claude-glass, through unadorned New Haven windows and finally through clear air. He dropped and resumed his props as he needed them.

When Stevens thought of seeing the "gold sun about the whitened sky/ Without evasion by a single metaphor" (CP 373), or when he attended to "the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves" (OP 123), what mesmerized him was the flickering presence of something wild, primordial, pre-Oedipal, pre-verbal--indeed something earlier yet: pre-Adamic nature unadorned by human conception, scoured of impastoed human meanings, unmediated, authentic and whole. He wanted to write

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself.

(CP 471).

As this passage from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" shows, Stevens concedes the inevitability of the human. He calls not for "pure reality" but the "poem of pure reality" [*italics mine*]; he desires a language circumventing metaphor, yet its target, the "transfixing object . . . At the exactest point at which it is itself" remains ever apposite to "the word." It was to this central paradox that Stevens returned over and over: that only in the imagination could the absence of imagination be imagined. Always there remained at the center of every glorious phenomenon the unalterable, the troublesome, the fascinating fact of himself, his own body and his own mind, without whose presence the phenomena he observed, and of which he was so integral a part, would not even be. Therefore, what needed revision was Stevens's sense of himself in relation to phenomena; what was open to change were ways of knowing, ways of perceiving and ways of being in the world⁹.

* * * * *

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, in their anthology Modernism, point out that one of the identifying traits of the modernist literary work is the dialectical resolution it seeks to the relationship between forces that, in previous contexts, had been regarded as being in opposition, such as, for example, the Apollonian and the Dionysian and the rational and irrational:

[Such terms] are, arguably, not fixed poles between which the spirit oscillates, but are subject to the dynamism of change, moving on convergent paths.

Suppose, then, that the period we are calling the Modern shows us . . . a compounding of all these potentials: the interpenetration, the reconciliation, the coalescence, the fusion. . . of reason and unreason, intellect and emotion, subjective and objective (Bradbury 48)¹⁰.

It is useful to think of Stevens's work in light of this description: imagination and reality, rather than being fixed poles, are dynamic categories whose interpenetration and interdependence change with history, perception, and experience. In considering the relationship between these terms, Stevens himself discouraged dichotomy in favor of dialectic. Simply, for a human being, neither term can exist or have any relevance or meaning without the other. Reality, "a thing seen by the mind" (CP 468) cannot be perceived by any means other than imagination; on the other hand, imagination, a property of the physical human animal, is itself "one of the forces of nature" (OP 196). Stevens expressed the only available choice when he wrote:

He had to choose. But it was not choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between but of (CP 403).

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens explained the same principle when he wrote that "It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality

adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential" (NA 33).

Stevens's poems, too, effect "a compounding of all [the] potentials" in--and the "interpenetration" of--imagination and reality. To say this is to say that Stevens reconceived and reordered the categories of Nature and Culture. Stevens reimagined these categories not only in terms of their usual Cartesian cognates--that is, as irrational and rational, body and mind, emotion and intellect, subject and object, wilderness and civilization--but also in terms of his own poetic permutations: North and South, the peopled and the unpeopled, voice and silence, human and non-human.

Stevens's sense of the American experience of the Nature/Culture relation was that modern awareness of nature--whether nature be manifested as wilderness, as the human body, or as the human unconscious--had diminished dangerously. Stevens complained that "The material world, for all the assurances of the eye, has become immaterial. It has become an image in the mind" (OP 272).

Human preconception had so blunted the human experience of, and relation to, nonhuman nature upon which the human rested, that indeed nothing but empty anthropocentric image remained. Stevens knew that a cancerous humanism diminishes human experience. "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real," he asserted (NA 6).

This interdependence of imagination and reality is, of course, the subject of "The Idea of Order at Key West,"

Stevens's earliest successful poetic exploration of the dialectic that governs his poems. The poem's speaker, walking on the shore, listening to the singer, posing questions and propositions about the nature of art to his companion, posits a series of antinomies which can be reframed as easily within the categories of Nature and Culture and Human and Non-Human as they can within Reality and Imagination. The speaker balances human mind against nature's "body wholly body" (CP 128), singer's song against the "meaningless plungings of water and the wind" (CP 129), the glassy lights of the town against the darkness of the sea, and human words against the "words of the sea" (CP 130). While the speaker asserts the mutual influences between sea and song, he emphasizes an essential discontinuity between them and averts any suggestion of an easy synthesis:

The song and water were not medleyed sound
 Even if what she sang was what she heard,
 Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
 It may be that in all her phrases stirred
 The grinding water and the gasping wind;
 But it was she and not the sea we heard (CP 129).

The poems' central question asks "Whose spirit is this?" That is, what interface exists between human and nature in song, the poem's metonym for art? The speaker has already shown that the singer's song fails as direct translation of the sea's "constant cry" (CP 128); nor can song effect a seamless identification between singer and natural elements.

Is it then a production of individual vision against the spectacular stage set of nature? After all, "she was the maker of the song she sang./ . . . [the] sea/ Was merely a place by which she walked to sing" (CP 129).

But what if the show were over, the footlights out, the stage empty of the human altogether? The speaker projects a hypothetical scene without singer or audience whose initially paradisaical connotation of a "summer without end," to which the eternal motions of sky and water would accrue, is instantly dispelled by the simultaneous evocation of nature as mindless, mechanical repetition:

If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However, clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone.

"But it was more than that," the speaker hurriedly concludes, "More even than her voice, and ours, among/The meaningless plungings of water and the wind. . . ." (CP 129).

The next lines, suggesting that the speaker is about to locate "spirit," after all, in the singer's voice, initially appear to found the poem upon the Romantic tenet of the mind's ultimate superiority over nature:

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.

She was the single artificer of the world
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made (CP 129).

The interpretation that art is indeed the only ordering principle or activity in the world and the only possible fulfillment of the human "rage for order" seems bolstered by the poem's culminating lines. The speaker poses the poem's second famous question, directing it at Ramon Fernandez.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
 Why, when the singing ended and we turned
 Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Indeed, Helen Vendler's reading of this poem places it within the Wordsworthian Mind/Nature dichotomy and reads it as asserting the Romantics' sense of "the power of poetry over nature" (Words 69). Similarly, Harold Bloom writes that the poem "remains equivocal and perhaps impossible to interpret" because it simultaneously "affirms a transcendental poetic spirit yet cannot locate it, and the poem also remains

uneasily wary about the veritable ocean, which will rise up against Stevens yet again" (Climate 104).

Placing this poem too squarely within the Romantic framework of mind over nature, however, does not yield the most fruitful reading of the poem. The poem's dynamic does not, after all, ultimately rest on the dichotomy between singer and song. The two listeners themselves engage in creation (song-making) by attending to sea and singer. The poem renders a series of propositions, questions, and heightened perceptual experiences engendered in the speaker by the sum of the stimuli about him. Rather than depicting the power of poetry over nature, the poem depicts the power of the sum of perceptual experiences created by human and non-human components in the speaker--whose main role in the poem may be summarized as that of creative listener. (Chapter 5 below discusses the activity of listening as creative participation in the natural world.)

Significantly, the night deepens after the song has ended; the resounding silence, as it were, heightens the effects of song and what might be regarded as the visual analogues to song, the lights, boats, town and other human productions that order and "portion out" the natural scene. It is the difference, the juxtaposition, the interface that is more significant than any element of the experience¹¹. It is finally the speaker, not the singer or the song, who effects the enchantment of the night.

Jean Ruppert is one of several critics who has identified the usefulness and appropriateness of applying a phenomenological perspective to reading Stevens's poems. Her reading of "Ideas of Order" offers a more satisfying resolution to the art vs. nature dichotomy, as well as offering a good working definition of Stevens's uses of the word "real":

For Stevens there is no "transcendental poetic spirit"; there is only the constantly recurring phenomenon of a world measured out in terms of a human response to brute being. . . That being . . . is "real" in the ordinary sense of the word (actual) and "real" in the phenomenological sense (real as revealed or disclosed by Dasein). And the "spirit" whose identity the persona seeks. . . comes neither from the singer nor from the sea (nor indeed from any "transcendental" source), but from the "being-together" of human consciousness and the physical "world." (85).

* * * * *

The poetry of Wallace Stevens, then, enacts a ritual of redress. In seeking to restore contact with the reality of the natural world, Stevens effects a figure-ground shift in perception and understanding. In foregrounding reality as a powerful, necessary and positive force upon the mind and the imagination, in reinstating the human being's own bodily presence to experience, and in demonstrating the creative

nature of perception itself, Stevens tried to compensate for some of the profound losses of his age.

The project of this dissertation is to reread Stevens's work as a modernist nature poetry that reimagines the Nature/Culture dialectic and seeks to reinstate the forgotten term--nature, or to use Stevens's term, "reality"--in that dialectic. My reading is founded on two propositions: first, that the term "reality"--while accommodating human imagination as itself a product of nature--specifically emphasizes the reality of physical nature as non-human Other; second, that in this context the primary goal of the imagination is to meet the very human need to acknowledge, honor, and bond with non-human nature.

One way to frame Stevens's contribution to modern poetry is to say that he moved from the Romantic to the phenomenological. As Chapter 3 below will explore, while Stevens inherited the Romantic legacy of revitalizing the human relationship to nature, he did not believe in an inherent, preordained, mystical union of mind and transcendental reality. Stevens grounded human experience in the physical, the processive, and the perceptual. He affirmed that human Being reaches full expression only within the context and conditions of time, in the course of an ongoing dialogue with the world¹². Stevens also knew that the experience of brute, unmediated reality is by definition inaccessible to human consciousness and that for the imagination to remain a vital force, it must never lose sight

of that fact. In these respects, Stevens's expression of the world is similar to that expressed by the philosophy of phenomenology. Pierre Thevenaz's useful definition of phenomenology aptly describes the very purpose and intent of Stevens's poetry as well:

Phenomenology is neither a science of objects nor a science of subject; it is a science of experience. It does not concentrate exclusively on either the objects of experience or on the subject of experience, but on the point of contact where being and consciousness meet. It is, therefore, a study of consciousness as intentional, as directed towards objects, as living in an intentionally constituted world" (Thevenaz 19).

The second extra-literary discourse (besides phenomenology) framing this study of Stevens's poetry is the science (and increasingly, the philosophy) of ecology. As phenomenology is the science of experience, so ecology is the science of process and relationship. The object of ecology's study is interrelationships, interconnections, the flow and exchange of energy, and the networks among biological systems. The ecological model of interrelationships within an ecosystem can be usefully applied to systems and patterns within a linguistic system. Language, like nature, is prior to the individual use of it; as such it is (as Stevens recognized), itself a natural force and a process within which the individual dwells and comes into expression.

The fundamentals of ecological thinking may be seen as analogues for Stevens's poetic theory and practice. Stevens's conception is ecological in his faith in process and cyclical development; in his representations of nature as presence rather than collection objects and mechanical operations; in his view of "reality" as comprised of the mind combined with the phenomenal world¹³; in his depiction of the human as participant in rather than observer of natural process, whose very consciousness is a form of participation¹⁴; and in his view of the human as an intergral, not dominant, part of the natural world.

Elements of both of these disciplines, phenomenology and ecology, help us, by way of analogue, to understand Stevens's poems. The two disciplines combined provide an invaluable template or frame of reference for appreciating Stevens's renderings of human perceptual experience in the poems.

The following section of this introduction sets forth some general principles concerning a framework for discussing Stevens's work in terms of some literary critical conventions as well as in light of Stevens's stated intentions as an artist. The appropriateness of ecological principles as a template for reading Stevens's work is discussed in brief; a more detailed discussion of ecology as analogue for Stevens's explorations of the exchanges between imagination and reality, and between the human and non-human worlds of nature follows in Chapter 3.

2. "A Text We Shall Be Needing": Wallace Stevens's Book of How to Live and What to Do

The meanings are our own--

It is a text that we shall be needing. . .

(CP 495)

Human culture thrives in language and is in many respects synonymous with language. Poets are the scouts of cultural exploration; they forsake the safe and settled regions of an era's mental landscape and head out for the territories of linguistic terra incognita. The poetry any age deems great, or at least provocative, necessitates a resurvey and a remapping of the cultural and literary landscape. Criticism, as the cartography of literature, bears the same provisional relationship to what it ostensibly represents, or interprets, as a map does to the land. It necessarily negotiates its own rules, delineates its own dimensions (often reducing three to two), and calculates its own boundaries, always artificial and temporary, and different depending on whether the mapmaker has, say, a topographic, a geopolitical, or a bioregional orientation. Criticism makes its own compromises with the terrain and it contrives its own legend. Critics and cartographers simplify and oversimplify, but unlike poets they are privileged with an overview. In the end, they tell their own parallel, but different, story.

Present literary critical practice often finds itself polarized between two approaches deemed to be at odds with each other, if not mutually exclusive. The first is that all

innovative literature points the way for its own exploration--that it contains the blueprints for the critical apparatus appropriate to it within its very language and structure. The second is that criticism is a dynamic activity that not only describes, but also effects an ongoing relationship between its subject (the poem, for example) and the surrounding cultural terrain. Either the poem is the cry of its own occasion, and the critic's task is to examine how the poem celebrates itself; or else the poem is the cry of an occasion extraneous to it, and the critic's task is to examine how poem and occasion line up.

Wellek and Warren long ago identified these two broad categories of critical strategy as the "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" methods of studying literature (terms, it might be noted, that sound positively quaint compared to some of the tortured terminology employed in more recent critical discourses). Extrinsic factors shaping a work of art include historic, economic, social and political conditions, the author's own biography and psychology, and more elusively, the "Zeitgeist", some quintessential spirit of the time, some intellectual atmosphere or 'climate' of opinion, some unitary force abstracted largely from the characteristics of the other arts" (Wellek 73). Conversely, intrinsic factors concern the characteristics of the individual work of art as "a whole system of signs, or structure of signs, serving a specific aesthetic purpose" and the intrinsic method, therefore,

concentrates on matters of prosody, form, structure and so on (141).

More recently, Joseph Riddel has reframed these methodologies as the aesthetic mode and the ideological mode of literary criticism (WSJ 63). The first of these--the stance that the poem, in Riddel's words, "bear[s] its own critical language within itself"--is one that has been at the heart of American literary theory since the advent of the New Criticism in the forties (WSJ 63). This position Riddel opposes to the ideological mode, which holds that the poem is "a cultural object, at once the issue and representation of a history which shaped it," demanding "an extra-poetic mode or discipline (philosophy, history, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and so on) which will provide an adequate language to explicate the poem" (WSJ 63)¹⁵.

Critics for the most part have resisted exercising the latter mode of criticism on Stevens's poetry, often preferring to regard him as a poet's poet gamboling in a cloud-cuckooland of language where reference to any specifically political, historic and even biographical content is conspicuous by its absence¹⁶. To return once more to the thrust of Golding's and Bruns's observations cited above, the bulk of Stevens criticism, from proponents and detractors alike, has stressed the hermetic, self-reflective, self-referential aspects of the work, and has generally concurred that his poetry inherently engenders formalist or textualist readings, though the

individual reading itself may have a New Critical, neo-Romantic, phenomenological or post-Structuralist framework .

My own reading of Stevens's poems in this dissertation is founded on the belief that the act of reading contains its own dialectic, and that the richest possible reading of Stevens's poems exploits both "extrinsic" and "intrinsic," "ideological" and "aesthetic" criteria. While the critical approaches I have mentioned above have often yielded invaluable and suggestive readings of the poet's work, too exclusive an adherence to one or the other mode of criticism does injustice to the breadth of Stevens's aims and accomplishments. Generally, two issues about Stevens remain disturbingly obscured: the first is that the poetry of Wallace Stevens does indeed have a specific content, namely, as I have already stated, the relation between human beings and the natural world. The second issue is that Stevens's poetry does indeed promote an ethos; that is, it articulates a philosophy for living and models a fruitful, enriching and, above all, necessary relation to the physical world. Stevens does in his poems something similar to what Thoreau did in Walden, by keeping a running account of life lived deliberately, in investigation of the question "[W]hat are the true necessities and means of life [?]" (Thoreau 7)¹⁷.

Much of Stevens's writings show that he assigned to poetry a surprisingly pragmatic role, and to the poet a very vital role in the life of his times. "The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness" he wrote in the Adagia

(OP 194); in "The Noble Rider" he wrote that the poet's role "is to help people to live their lives (NA 29). He was concerned in a concrete sense with "How to Live. What to Do," as the title of one of his poems suggests (CP 125). Writing poetry carries a moral imperative: "to every faithful poet," wrote Stevens, "the faithful poem is an act of conscience" (OP 253). Most tellingly of all, he wrote that "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (OP 201).

In 1951, at the YMHA in New York, Stevens read to his audience one of his only works of translation, a prose poem by Leon-Paul Fargue, a poet who greatly interested him (Morse xv-xvi). The translated poem reads, in part:

For me, the true artist appears to be like that: he is a witness. Sometimes a guide. Through him should shine the time that inspired him, of which he has disengaged in traits of fire the special symbols, the forms, the views, the spiritual habits as well as the positions of trees or of villages that belong to this time round the carrousel (OP 146).

One surmises that Stevens took pains to translate and publically read this poem because he identified with the role it advocated for the artist. This view of the artist as witness, guide, and alchemist of the cultural elements that define a particular time and place invites inquiry. To what urgencies did Stevens himself wish to bear witness? Across

what difficult terrain did he wish to guide us? What symbols and spiritual habits of his time shine through him? What relation between a man and the world do the poems effect? If "Poetry is a means of redemption," (OP 189) what does it redeem? Not the world, which despite everything is always already saved, but the human being's sense of the world and of himself within the world. The philosopher Martin Heidegger (whose sense of the world was so uncannily similar to Stevens's) showed the only way the earth is ever subject to being "saved": he wrote, "To save really means to set something free into its own essence" [Writings 325]¹⁸. Stevens's efforts to reenvision nature were efforts to set it free from humanity's "stiff and stubborn, man-locked set" (CP 497). This is another way of saying that reenvisioning nature was Stevens's way of setting humanity free from its own encrusted conceptions into a fresh perception of world and experience.

The answers to the questions posed above lie, I believe, in the dialectic between the poems as verbal, aesthetic artifacts--or, to use Wellek and Warren's phrase, structures of signs "serving a specific aesthetic purpose" (141)--and the poems as reflections of the American climate and culture which fostered their creation. The American climate and culture within which these poems arose was one that relied largely, for both its successes and failures, on the obfuscation of the reciprocal, mutual aspects of the human relationship to nature. The rise of technology, the growth in human

population and consequent urbanization, the increasing efficiency and ease with which natural resources were exploited to commercial human ends, and the depletion of wild or even rural lands all contributed to the metamorphosis of America of which Leo Marx writes:

Within the lifetime of a single generation, a rustic and in large part wild landscape was transformed into the site of the world's most productive industrial machine. It would be difficult to imagine more profound contradictions of value or meaning than those made manifest by this circumstance (343).

Wallace Stevens belonged to that generation, and it was to life in that rapidly changing American landscape that Stevens's poems answered.¹⁹ Stevens's poetry grew out of what he perceived, consciously and unconsciously, to be America's (and the Western world's) need to realign its attitudes toward, and reacknowledge its relations to, the natural world. All of Stevens' central concerns--his mythologizing of self and his deceptions of self, his rhetoric about the "satisfactions of belief" and the fictions he spun to feed it, his tropes and his tropical rejections of trope, his poetry of pronouncements and his poetry of enactments, and above all his perpetual motion jugglings of the terms imagination and reality--create a body of work whose principal goal is to re-envision the relationship between human beings and non-human nature.

One critic who has placed Stevens's work within "the tradition of environmental reform in American literature" is Cecelia Tichi, who usefully reads Stevens's work as a restatement of Whitman's poetics (256). Tichi faults Stevens, however, for failing to offer an imaginative solution to the destructive transformation of the American landscape. Stevens, writes Tichi,

does not take up the complicated question of how the individual imagination may transform an environment made slovenly--or perhaps conceived of as ruined--by men. (Tichi, 256)

I propose here that Stevens's poetry does take up the complicated question of transforming the environment by modeling, in the poems, ways of thinking, imagining, feeling, perceiving, and knowing (all closely related and often interchangeable activities in the poems) that alter the human exchange with the natural world.

One way to understand Stevens's famous definition of the poem as "the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice" (CP 239) is to read it in terms of "what will suffice" as an adequate response to the "contradictions of value or meaning" to which Marx refers, and which in fact still permeate American culture today. To improvise on Stephen Toulmin's useful formulations in his recent Cosmopolis, Stevens's poems seek to find what will suffice in response to these questions: How are we to recognize wise attitudes and policies for living in the present? What intellectual posture should we adopt in

confronting the reality of our times? What capacity do we have to change our ideas and images?²⁰ And, to adapt Charles Taylor's question posed in Sources of the Self, what is it good to be, rather than good to do (3).

It is important to remember that not only by the agencies of plow or dam or bulldozer or biogenetic engineering or nuclear reactor is nature altered, but more fundamentally by the conceptual framework, the symbolic thought, and the metaphors out of which these machines, substances and sciences grow. (Since the process of symbol-making is cyclical and on-going, machines and sciences in turn give rise to further altered frameworks and metaphors.) As Joseph Meeker has written, "We apply human mentality to the earth according to the requirements of the model we have adopted to explain it to ourselves" (27)²¹.

As I have tried to convey in the previous section of this Introduction, Stevens's great poetic achievement was to reformulate the power of the imagination as a power within rather than a power over nature. Stevens wrote that "genius of poetry" is "the spirit of visible and invisible change. She knows that if poetry is one of the sanctions of life, if it is truly a vital engagement between man and his environment of the world, if it is genuinely a means by which to achieve balance and measure in our circumstances, it is something major and not minor . . . "OP 252)

In this regard, Stevens's nature poetry extends and expands the traditions of American Romanticism. Stevens

picked up where his great predecessor Emerson left off in his late essays "Experience" and "Fate," essays in which Emerson begins to express what today would be called a "deep ecological" stance in their recognition of non-human nature. Stevens also discloses a blood-kinship with Whitman's Romanticism in his willingness to accept, as Whitman did, the human being as player rather than protagonist within the panoramic drama in which non-human elements vastly outnumber the human²².

The views summarized above are unique neither to Stevens nor to American Romanticism. They represent a stance not new but ancient, a minority view of nature rooted in the pre-Socratics, adhered to by mystics and heretics, diluted and then lost in Europe during the Scientific Revolution, and resurfacing now on many fronts during what the media refer to as our "current ecological crisis." What fuels this crisis²³ are the primary, underlying attitudes and power relationships, perceptions and conceptions images and metaphors, articles of faith and objects of desire²⁴, that human beings employ in their relations to that vast conglomeration of "NOT ME" under which Emerson categorized "both nature and art, all other men and my own body, [which] must be ranked under this name, NATURE" (Emerson 22).

Stevens's off-hand remark in the "Adagia," that "Words are everything else in the world" (OP 199), bears an uncanny resemblance to Emerson's famous definition, and suggests that words are wild and though issuing from "Me" are themselves

somehow a part of the "Not-Me" that is nature. In his book on Walden, Stanley Cavell writes of Thoreau's sense of the wildness and power of language: "Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting that fact of their condition" (Cavell 64). Wallace Stevens, too, accepted words as he accepted the natural world, and he understood that the manipulation of language is itself a manipulation of nature.

In his rambling essay, "A Collect of Philosophy," Stevens alludes to the nature of a "cosmic poetry" which, he wrote, is cosmic because

an escape from all our limitations would make us realize that we are creatures, not of a part, which is our every day limitation, but of a whole which, for the most part, we have as yet no language (OP 271).

Stevens's works elaborate a poetic language for that whole. Now I suggest here that a tandem language exists that also expresses the whole, in quite different terms, a language evolved precisely out of limitation itself and not, as Stevens anticipated, out of the escape from limitation. That language, the language of ecology, borrowed from the realms of philosophy and science, is an apt analogue for the "reality" of which Stevens wrote.

A striking parallel exists between the current environmental movement's political and philosophical need to re-envision the world and humanity's place in it, and Wallace

Stevens's artistic, visionary articulations of the same questions. To say that Stevens's poetry questioned and in many ways subverted a traditional Judeo-Christian, teleological, apocalyptic, hierarchical world view (that is, the same world view that today's "deep ecology" movement represents as catastrophic to non-human nature) is not by any means to say that Stevens consciously and overtly rejected a Western world view, or even that he had the merest glimmer of understanding of the environmental repercussions of the mode of life he embraced. The mundane facts of Stevens's habits and activities--his material prosperity, his "patterns of consumption," his alienation from his wife and daughter, his frequently atrophied relations with human beings in general and women in particular (though he did participate actively in the professional and intellectual community)--all these elements attest to the profound degree to which Stevens was unable to integrate into his life some of his most deeply felt convictions--convictions he was not necessarily able to articulate or to enact in any medium except the poems.

Stevens's poems question precisely those basic assumptions of the Western world that the "deep ecologists" question: that humanity is the crown of creation; that it is "meant" to control nature; that human history shows "progress"; that humans are qualitatively different from and superior to all other forms in nature; that nature and reality are things to be understood at the end of an arduous road of

reasoning; that instinct, intuition, and bodily experience are inferior ways of knowing²⁵.

Stevens's poems are integrated, coherent and radical in ways that his life was not. The poems recognize that human life is potentially powerful and joyful only (and paradoxically) when it is perceived in a non-anthropocentric dimension, within the context of a natural world indifferent to it. Stevens conceived of human imagination--and poetry--as potentially offering a way to circumvent the manipulation of the natural world for human ends alone. Stevens recognized that the "enormous a priori" (OP 275) remains a thing apart from its metaphoric representations, and he celebrated that fact. Herein lies human freedom--the freedom to reimagine the world, and in that reimagining to set the world free "into its own essence."

3. A Word about Method

In his fascinating discussion of the "Anecdote of the Jar" in Ariel and the Police, Frank Lentricchia asks the following question about that poem:

. . . what is the place of "Anecdote of the Jar" within Stevens' corpus, the literary universe that inheres peculiarly in his writings taken as a totality? Not as texts written over a period of years but as texts present to one another as if they had been written all at once, in a single expressive act, bearing the poet's vision as if that vision were somehow wholly and always present to its constitutive texts, as their shaping presence" (Lentricchia, Ariel 12).

Wallace Stevens, even more than most poets, operated on the basis of variation and theme, and conceived of his work in its totality. Chapter Four below will, in fact, discuss Stevens's sense of literary economy--his good husbandry of his language, his repeated recycling of linguistic material, his reuse of images, his ever renewable vision applied to ever recurring questions. I have regarded Stevens's work in its totality--"as texts present to one another" --as though they were parts of an ecosystem in which all materials are present at once in different forms, in different stages of development, influencing and modifying each other, and working together to constitute the whole.

Most of Stevens's poetic themes appeared, however nascently, in Harmonium; that volume contained the seeds of ideas that wouldn't reach their full fruition until Transport to Summer and the books that followed. It is in Transport to Summer and the volumes that follow that Stevens's phenomenological, ecological sense of the world achieves its greatest expressions. Most of the poems discussed in this dissertation are taken from those volumes, while earlier poems are discussed in terms of what they illuminate about the mature ones.

As for the thematic organization of this dissertation, I have founded it on the premise that, to human beings, nature is always a version of nature--it is historically conceived by a particular artist, in a particular culture, at a particular time. Stevens achieved his ideas of nature within a specific context, and he organized his images and enactments of his relation to nature around an identifiable group of metaphors.

Thus, the first chapter of this dissertation offers an overview of the metaphors for nature around which Stevens reached adulthood; it reviews the poet's own early experiences in the natural world; and it explores some of his earlier writings about nature. This chapter also discusses one of Stevens's earliest and most durable metaphors for the relationship between himself and nature--the metaphor of nature as a book.

Chapter Two concerns itself with what I will argue to be a pivotal experience in Stevens's life in forming his

understanding of the natural world--a trip he made to British Columbia as a young man. I offer some hypotheses about the probable effect the particulars of this trip had on Stevens's outlook, his language, the development of some of his central images, and the beginnings of that sense of the world I am calling "ecological." The nature and characteristics of such an ecological view is the subject of chapter three, which outlines some ways that the language and ideas of ecology may be applied to literature.

The next two chapters of this dissertation address themselves to two groups of images around which Stevens evolved his sense of the earth and his place in it: the idea of a house and home in Chapter Four, and the idea of the body as the medium for knowing the world in Chapter Five. The final chapter examines the sense of the earth-bound and time-bound self Stevens evolved and expressed in the poems; it will also offer some conclusions about Stevens's poems as natural expressions of the natural world.

Notes to the Introduction

1. Dolores LaChapelle, in Earth Wisdom (Silverton, Colorado, 1978) offers documentation of sightings and meteorological data concerning glories (Chapter 1) as well as an overview of their appropriation as religious symbols throughout history (Chapter 2).

2. Throughout this dissertation, the following abbreviations will be used to refer to frequently cited texts:

<u>The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens</u>	CP
<u>Letters of Wallace Stevens</u> , ed. Holly Stevens	L
<u>The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination</u>	NA
<u>Opus Posthumous</u> , ed. Milton J. Bates	OP
<u>Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens</u> , ed. Holly Stevens	SP

3. Examples of critics reading Stevens as champion of an Imagination to which external Reality is either adversary or entirely subsidiary are legion. In The Clairvoyant Eye, Joseph Riddel interprets Stevens' relation to reality in a way that recalls Wordsworth's "spots of time" figure: "Man's imaginings of the physical world create poems in the mind, abstractions, ideas, memories; and these poems in the mind, these abstractions, become in turn, like Bergson's creative memory, stimulants of the imagination" (148).

Louis Martz sees Stevens' imagination as a way of transcending reality; whereas Irving Howe in "Another Way of Looking at the Blackbird" holds that the imagination itself creates external reality. A. Walton Litz, in Wallace Stevens: The Poetry of the Earth, concludes that Stevens found "a poetic that could include the harsh reality of the present without succumbing to it . . ." (4). In Poets of Reality, J. Hillis Miller throws up his hands, contending that reconciling imagination and reality is an impossible task, and besides, they're the same thing anyway. This conclusion, it seems to me, begs the question.

While all of these critics offer indispensable contributions to Stevens' criticism, my point is that none affirm Reality as, in an of itself, a legitimate, positive force, acceptable on its own, non-human terms.

4. Harold Bloom has commented that Frost is Stevens's "true twentieth century rival, rather than Eliot, Pound, or Williams" (Climate 68).

5. Emerson's attributes to Nature specifically benevolent intentions toward the human. "Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness," he writes in "Nature." "Willingly does she follow his steps with the rose and the violet, and bend her lines of grandeur and grace to the decoration of her darling child" (Emerson 29).

6. Michel Benamou in Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination and Frank Lentricchia in The Gaiety of Language have both shown that what Stevens learned from the symbolistes was not the principles of symbolism per se (which is founded on the discontinuity between spirit and material world, and in which the poet seeks, by occult means, to leap beyond the natural world) but an aesthetic stance and method.

7. This situation has been remedied in recent years by the appearance of Holly Stevens's collection of juvenalia and early journals, Souvenirs and Prophecies (1977); her selection of her father's Letters (1981); Peter Brazeau's oral biography, Parts of a World (1985); Milton J. Bates' critical biography, Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self; and Joan Richardson's two volume biography (1986; 1988).

8. Lentricchia's assessment of such contextualist readings is relevant to my argument: "If a poem is to exist in this way, then the poetic imagination cannot function interdependently with nature, or more grandly, with reality" (Lentricchia 15).

9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, ". . . we must rediscover the structure of the perceived world through a process similar to that of an archeologist. For the structure of the perceived world is buried under the sedimentations of later knowledge" (5).

10. In the same anthology, Bradbury and McFarlane's Modernism, Richard Sheppard describes the dialectical program of modernist poetics in these slightly convoluted, but decidedly provocative, terms: "It is then as though the Modernist purpose ought to be defined as the resolution of Hegel with Kierkegaard; committing oneself neither wholly to the notion of 'both/and,' nor wholly to the notion of 'either/or,' but (as it were) to both--and to neither. Dauntingly, then, the Modernist formula becomes 'both/and' and/or 'either/or'" (88).

11. Gregory Bateson writes in Mind and Nature that "science is a way of perceiving and making what we may call "sense" of our precepts. But perception operates only upon difference. All receipt of information is necessarily the receipt of news of difference, and all perception of difference is limited by threshold (Bateson 32).

12. The word "Being" is capitalized in this dissertation when it alludes to Heidegger's use of the term. In Being and Time, Heidegger wrote:

"Being" is the self-evident concept. "Being" is used in all knowing and predicating, in every relation to beings and in every relation to oneself. . . . Everybody understands, "The sky is blue," "I am happy," and similar statements. But this average comprehensibility only demonstrates the incomprehensibility (Writings 44).

13. Gregory Bateson, in Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity set himself a scientific task that closely parallels Stevens's aesthetic task: ". . . the immediate task of this book is to construct a picture of how the world is joined together in its mental aspects. How do ideas, information, steps of logical or pragmatic consistency, and the like fit together? How is logic, the classical procedure for making chains of ideas, related to an outside world of things and creatures, parts and wholes? Do ideas really occur in chains, or is this lineal structure imposed on them by scholars and philosophers? How is the world of logic, which eschews 'circular argument,' related to a world in which circular trains of causation are the rule rather than the exception?" (21).

14. Carolyn Merchant writes "Humans negotiate 'reality' with nonhuman nature" (Revolutions 23). This idea is also, of course, the foundation of the phenomenological perspective.

15. Wellek and Warren point out in Theory of Literature, that this method had its incipience in the Romantic movement, whose spirit and themes so formed and influenced Wallace Stevens. To summarize in broad strokes, these authors hold that Romanticism, in reaction to the rigid poetics of Neo-Classicism, insisted on "the relativist argument that different times required different standards. Thus the emphasis shifted from the literature to its historical background . . . " (139).

16. Happily, recent criticism has reversed this trend. Joan Richardson's definitive biography explicitly locates Stevens within a biographical and psychological context. Alan Filreis and Mark Halliday have examined, respectively, Stevens's social milieu and his response to political events, particularly World War II. Lisa Steinman reads his work in terms of the scientific and technological advances of his time.

17. Leo Marx's description of Thoreau's "location of meaning and value" is applicable to Stevens. "In Walden Thoreau is clear, as Emerson seldom was, about the location of meaning and value. He is saying that it does not reside in the natural facts or in social institutions or in anything 'out there,' but in a consciousness. It is a product of imaginative perception, of the analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mythopoetic power of the human mind." (264)

18. Thomas Hines (The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger, (1976), and Paul Bove (Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry, 1980) have both shown striking analogies between Stevens's thought and that of phenomenological philosophers of his day--particularly with Martin Heidegger--in terms of mutual preoccupation with perception as the activity most central to human experience.

19. Alan Bullock summarizes the key technological and industrial development of the 1890s and the 1900s that "remain the foundation of the technology of the twentieth--as distinct from the nineteenth century. These were: the internal combustion engine, the diesel engine and the steam turbine; electricity, oil and petroleum as the new sources of power; the automobile, the motor bus. . . the tractors and the aeroplane; the telephone, the typewriter and the tape machine. . . ; the production by the chemical industry of synthetic materials--dyes, man-made fibres and plastics" (59). Clearly, these developments would profoundly alter such fundamental constructs as the limits of time and space, the nature of identity and anonymity, notions of work and leisure, and the overall sense of control over nature's rhythms and materials.

20. "How are we to recognize and select 'wise attitudes and policies?' A well formulated approach to the future--a realistic range of available futuribles, within reasonable horizons of expectation--does not depend on findings ways to quantify and extrapolate current trends: that we may leave to enthusiastic weather forecasters, stock exchange chartists, or econometrists. Rather, the questions are, 'What intellectual posture should we adopt in confronting the future? What can we develop for significant aspects of the years ahead? And what capacity do we have to change our ideas about the available futures?' Those who refuse to think coherently about the future, correspondingly, only expose themselves to worse, leaving the field clear to unrealistic, irrational prophets" (Toulmin 2).

21. "Industry, technology, the exploitation of the earth and the aggrandizement of mankind are governed by ideas, faith, and mythology. The cultural images describing what we might be have helped us to become what we are: however the human mind imagines the world, that is how the world tends to become. If we think of it as a farm, it becomes a farm; if we think of it as a spaceship, it becomes a spaceship, and we can manipulate and direct its circuits toward our chosen goal" (Meeker 27).

22. See Middlebrook for a thorough examination of Whitman's influence on Stevens. Cecelia Tichi writes of the Stevens-Whitman connection: "Within the tradition of environmental reform in American literature, Stevens really restates Whitman's poetics. To the mind belong the power to transform matter, even that of an entire environment" (256).

23. It is important to remember that technology per se is not the culprit; rather, it is the conceptual framework out of which technologies arise. Liane Eisler writes that "technology is integral to the human condition. Indeed, the story of human culture is to a large extent the story of human technology. It is the story not only of the fashioning of material tools but also of the fashioning of our most

important and unique non-material tools: the mental tools of language and imagery, of human-made words, symbols, and pictures. Advanced technologies are the extension of human functions, of our hands' and brains' capacity to alter our environment and ourselves. Indeed, technology is itself part of the evolutionary impulse, the striving for the expansion of our potential as human beings within both culture and nature" (32).

24. Carolyn Merchant reminds us that "Forms of consciousness are power structures" (Revolutions 22).

25. For basic definitions and discussion of the deep ecology movement, see Devall and Sessions's Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered. "Shallow ecology" refers to conventional environmental reform grounded in conservationism and wise use of resources. "Deep ecology" refers to a philosophical and at times religious movement seeking to alter the fundamental human consciousness of nature.

Chapter I

"A Nature to Its Natives All": Wallace Stevens
in the Landscape

1. The Idea of a Colony: America as Metaphor

Here was prose
More exquisite than any tumbling verse
A still new continent in which to dwell.
(CP 37)

For a long time now, from the time Europeans stumbled upon it to the present day, America, which is to say both Northern and Southern continents of it and the isthmus between, has been symbol and embodiment of an ancient, mostly European, dream: the dream of Paradise regained, of the Golden Age revived, a dream pastoral, utopian, primitivist and apocalyptic at once. As Alfred Kazin has described it, "America was the world's myth before there was actually a place that could be called "America"; the genuine substance of that myth was not just a new continent, abundant land, but the magic of its actuality, the consummation of a dream, a second chance for mankind (7).

The New World couldn't have materialized out of the Atlantic spray--or the fog of Cristobal Colon's navigational confusions--at a more opportune moment than it did: even in 1492, Europe was overcrowded, running low on land and natural resources.¹ With the fortunate (for Europeans) accident of its "discovery," the New World instantly became

the literal embodiment of a metaphor that had for centuries governed the European imagination.² That metaphor, writes Annette Kolodny, was finally "lifted forever out of the canon of pastoral convention and invested with the reality of daily experience" (Kolodny 6).

Because throughout history, European and otherwise, Nature has traditionally been conceived as female³ and because America seemed to its observers on both sides of the Atlantic to be nothing if not the very seat and sanctum of Nature's dynasties-- "Nature not just in America but as America was a dream from the beginning," writes Alfred Kazin (7)-- for much of that long time since 1492 the sprawling body of land Columbus barely touched has been conceived as female. As such, the continent had heaped upon it the paradoxical burdens of adulation and abhorrence, of accolade and invective that the world visits upon female bodies in general. The earliest images of nature as a powerful and nurturing, if exacting, mother had begun to be superseded, in fifteenth century Europe, by an image of nature as a still benevolent but compliant, manipulable, and passive female-- a virgin bride awaiting the improving influence of civilization.⁴ Where there are brides there must be concubines (says Nietzsche⁵); what was not readily available to human influence, what remained dark, tangled, and incorrigible in nature was regarded by Europeans as corrupt wasteland and, as a concubine, fair game for all manner of exploitation.

The American continent showed little evidence of human impact to its first European settlers (what impact it showed had been made by people Europeans in any case considered subhuman). The landscape, therefore, combined two powerful, and powerfully opposed female images of nature. The difficulty with a virgin wilderness was that it was both virgin and wilderness. While parts of the continent were "pure," abundant, promising and yielding, other parts, or the same parts at different times of year, were also dark, fierce, unpredictable, cruel, spawning beasts and heathens. Roderick Nash has written that "[t]he first white visitors regarded wilderness as a moral and physical wasteland fit only for conquest and fructification . . . " (Nash xii). To these visitors, bred on fearsome and desolate images of wilderness in the Old and New Testaments, the wild was "instinctively understood as something alien to man--an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization had waged an unceasing struggle" (Nash 8).

To a Europe in which the glories of humanism were in full swing, the image of a wild new continent was as menacing as it was exhilarating: wilderness always challenges civilization by its mere presence, by underscoring the provisional nature of all human accomplishment. Leo Marx observes that "If America seemed to promise everything that men always had wanted, it also threatened to obliterate much of what they already had achieved. The paradox was to be a cardinal subject of our

national [American] literature" (Marx 45). The more securely rooted a person or a group was in Judeo-Christian cosmology, the less appealing was the continent in its uncivilized condition. To the Puritans who arrived in the seventeenth century, the New World was particularly loathsome in its rawness. William Bradford recorded the scene that greeted the travellers disembarking the Mayflower: ". . . what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men...the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue" (58).

Because of the tremendous symbolic weight America carried as "untouched" raw material for human endeavor and "uninhabited" country, and because Renaissance Europe felt particularly self-assured about its abilities to conquer and mold that land, the colonization of America seemed the very colonization of Nature herself. The landscape presented a clean slate upon which to replay human history. Indeed, its transformation from wilderness to colony seemed an accelerated, telescoped, and more successful version of what Europeans conceived as the battle humanity had waged against wild nature since the dawn of time. As Carolyn Merchant has written, "New England is a mirror on the world. Changes in its ecology and society over its first 250 years were rapid and revolutionary. . . . What took place in 2,500 years of European development through social evolution came to New

England in a tenth of that time through revolution"
 (Revolutions 1).

The history of nature in America from the time of the Puritans to the present day is an old story. By reason of the philosophical convictions of the Enlightenment, by virtue of knowledge attained through ever more "objective" and efficient scientific methods, by aid of increasingly sophisticated and intrusive technological innovation, by hook and by crook of human whimsy and need, nature ceased to be regarded as an organic, dynamic and reciprocal entity requiring engagement and obeisance, and came to be regarded as a senseless, mindless, and inert mass of "dead matter" whose sole purpose was to serve human will and to fulfill human desire. Morris Berman summarizes the import of the Scientific Revolution in The Reenchantment of the World:

. . . in the course of the seventeenth century Western Europe hammered out a new way of perceiving reality. The most important change was the shift from quality to quantity, from 'why' to 'how'. The universe, once seen as alive, possessing its own goals and purposes, is now a collection of inert matter, hurrying around endlessly and meaninglessly, as Alfred North Whitehead put it (46)⁶.

It was in reaction to this last view that nineteenth century Romanticism arose throughout Europe and in New England, seeking to reinstate nature as the source of

religion and morality, and as the material analogue to (and evidence of) a higher, spiritual world; it even restored femaleness to representations of nature as "mother, nurse, and teacher" (Merchant 254). Enlightenment philosophy had cleaved the world into more or less neat divisions of possible human stances, with clear delineations between desirable positions (objective, empirically valid ones arrived at through abstract reasoning) and undesirable positions (subjective, irrational ones based in individual experience the physical world, itself inferior to the world of mind). Stephen Toulmin has written that the goals of the Enlightenment had been "to frame all [philosophical] questions in terms that rendered them independent of context" (21), as well as to devalue "the oral, the particular, the local, the timely and the concrete" in favor of "a formally 'rational' theory grounded on abstract, universal, timeless concepts" (75).

Romanticism, in its several European and American permutations, sought to restore lost worlds of sense and sensibility by reinvigorating the experience of nature, of the body and the senses, and of the emotional, intuitive, and irrational components of consciousness, all of which were seen as possible routes to a spiritual, transcendent reality unavailable to reason alone. In short, Romanticism sought to reverse precisely the Enlightenment trends Toulmin identifies, by reviving "the oral, the particular, the local, the timely and the concrete," and by

recontextualizing experience in the specifics of environment.

This, then, was the constellation of images into which Wallace Stevens was born in 1879: a still pastoral countryside in which to play out childhood, wilderness suggesting itself around the edges (if not necessarily in Stevens's immediate surroundings, which were given over to farmland, then in the knowledge that a good deal of it still lay to the North in New England and vast tracts of it lay to the West); the idea of nature awash in alpenglow (witness the paintings of Thomas Cole or Albert Bierstadt) even as the still distant (to Reading, Pennsylvania) rumble of the Industrial Revolution approached ever nearer. "The years of Stevens's childhood," writes Joan Richardson, "were the last years of America's innocence, years that still seemed to offer some possibility of fulfilling the promise contained in the idea of the New World" (Richardson, Early Years 18).

By the time Stevens arrived on the scene, the heyday of American Romanticism, which had sought to revive the sense of a New World--or at least a new relation to that world⁷--had faded even within the confines of its always narrow social venue.⁸ As an anodyne to the Industrial Revolution, with its increasing mechanization of both landscape and individual, both English Romanticism's and American Transcendentalism's successes had been limited. Stephen Toulmin criticizes the overall effectiveness of

Romanticism's aims for failing to resolve the fundamental duality posited by the Enlightenment in the first place:

As a 19th century position, romanticism never broke with rationalism: rather, it was rationalism's mirror-image. . . . From Wordsworth or Goethe on, romantic poets and novelists tilted the other way. . . human life that is ruled by calculative reason alone is scarcely worth living, and nobility attaches to a readiness to surrender to the experience of deep emotions. This is not a position that transcends 17th-century dualism: rather, it accepts dualism, but votes for the opposite side of every dichotomy (148).

Similarly, Carolyn Merchant, leveling her criticism specifically at American Transcendentalism, points out that one of the more ironic effects of that movement was that it "split human consciousness into a disembodied analytic mind and a romantic emotional sensibility"⁹ (Revolutions 2). This split had the oddly unexpected result of facilitating the exploitation of the very nature it worshipped:

The instrumental consciousness that manipulated nature for commercial gain found its antithesis in the romantic consciousness of personal involvement with nature. The same forests and mountains that were being exploited for lumber for the market economy were being visited, painted and eulogized

as sources of personal peace and serenity. The same middle-class couples who benefitted from the capitalist use of nature as resource also needed the antidote of weekend excursions to New England's lakes and mountains. The same men who were subjected to the stresses of competition needed the balance of nature's psychic comfort. These dualities within nature and culture were integral to the capitalist ecological revolution"

(Merchant, Revolutions 250-251).

Thus, the personal experience of revering and sentimentalizing nature (read: "the outdoors" in its more picturesque manifestations) deflected attention away from the greater destructive impact of industrialization and urbanization.

The intellectual giants of the century into which Stevens had been born--Darwin, Freud, Marx--seemed to have cast a pall not only over America's robust promise, but over that of humanity itself, dislodging rock-bottom givens to disclose the fertile, if slippery, soil of discomfiting new ideas (humanity wasn't the crown of creation; knowing thyself was no longer a straightforward matter; religion was at best a poetic fiction, at worst, an opiate; the true controlling forces in the world lay in dark places such as the unconscious or the grimy hands of the proletariat).

Because of its propensity for demystifying human nature on every possible level--individual, collective, historical,

biological--one might think of the latter half of the nineteenth century as "unearthing" truths that rendered the Western world profoundly uncomfortable. The term "unearthing" in this context is telling and ironic: the more material (not transcendent) forces came to be seen as governing every aspect of human life, the more human life came to be perceived as severed from its literal foundation and ground--thereby becoming "unearthed" in another, profoundly disturbing sense.

2. The Departing Golden Age

Elysia, these days, half earth, half mind

(CP 257)

As a boy or even as an adolescent, Wallace Stevens would have been only dimly aware, intellectually at least, of the larger cultural currents that formed his sense of the natural world. Nevertheless, from early on he seemed precociously attuned to the experience of loss associated with the love of a landscape. From his earliest journals and letters, he exhibited an acute sense of place.¹⁰ Conflicts between nature and culture were not removed, abstract issues for Stevens to contemplate as a youth. If the "New World" still existed in the physical countryside that renewed itself about him riotously and regularly, then its denigration was evident not only in the actual erosion of the physical landscape by the forces of industrialization and urbanization, but also right at home, in the unquestioned familial expectation that Stevens would go elsewhere, to urban locales, for his inductions into adulthood. (His education and the launching of his career took place, respectively, in Cambridge and in New York City.)

Once he left for Harvard, Stevens returned to Reading only for summer holidays and brief visits. This state of affairs, no doubt combined with the fact that Elsie Moll, the golden girl of Stevens's dreams to whom he was affianced for five years was also a product of Reading (Stevens kept

sending her back there for extended visits after they were married), permitted Stevens so readily to idealize the region of his youth and to foster a lifelong ardor for the sense of "elsewhere." When he was 69, he recalled in a letter, "When I was a boy and used to go home from college, I used to feel as if it was going back to mother earth and I would return to college not only invigorated in the normal way but rather furiously set up and independent" (SP 15). Idealizing the place of one's youth, particularly when it is an idyllic rural one, is a common enough phenomenon; however, Stevens began idealizing the Pennsylvania countryside even when still a youth himself, and often to do so in specifically literary terms. About one twilight stroll in the Pennsylvania countryside, for example, Stevens wrote in his journal, "I remember thinking that this must have been an old Greek day, escaped, somehow, from the past" (L 29). After a final visit to family friends one summer, he wrote

The girls were all at home and as delightful as ever. I stayed but a short time and when I went Kate stuffed a big cluster of roses under the band of my felt hat which I wore home like a garland--a coronal for the departing golden age (SP 59).

When at last he prepared to leave Cambridge for New York, he wrote "I am conscious that when I leave Cambridge I shall leave all the surroundings that I have ever lived in-- Reading, Berkeley, the mountains--perhaps the clouds. . . .

I should be content to dream along to the end of my life--and opposing moralists be hanged" (SP 71).¹¹

One detects a sort of tremulous bravado in this last remark. Stevens was not only all too aware of the opposing moralists, he also rather often and in spite of himself joined their camp. Stevens's sense of an idyllic relationship to the natural world being necessarily at odds with a practical, productive and successful life was certainly engendered, and encouraged at every turn, by the poet's father.¹² Throughout Stevens's adolescence and early manhood, Garrett Stevens took pains to temper any potential infatuation with nature (or with poetry writing) that Stevens exhibited by regularly injecting sobering advertisements for the Protestant work ethic into his letters to his son: "For life is either a pastoral dream," he wrote, "--the ideal of the tramp, or superannuated village farmer--Or it is the wild hurly burly activity of the fellows who make the world richer and better by their being in it . . . " (SP 17). Thus did Garrett Stevens champion the "incessant business" that that superannuated village farmer/tramp Henry David Thoreau had condemned a half century earlier as the "fatal blunder" of "getting a living" rather than living.¹³ In another letter to his son along the same lines, Garrett Stevens tellingly opposes a pastoral metaphor with a military one when he writes that he "shall be happy always to get the substantial evidence of your progress, for, as you are aware--you are not out on a

pic-nic--but really preparing for the campaign of life . . .
 " (L 18). As we shall see later, Stevens's father also contributed in no small measure to the poet's conception of nature, poetry and the imagination, taken together, as "female," with the practical activities of getting and spending registering as "male"; as well as to Stevens's inability to live out in his daily life that affirming relationship to nature that he articulated in the poems.

Surely it was the poet's conscience wielding his father's Puritanical bullwhip that prompted Stevens to begin a sonnet written in college with the lines, "Come, said the world, thy youth is not all play,/ Upon these hills vast palaces must rise,/ And over this green plain that calmly lies/ In peace, a mighty city must have sway" (SP 29). After the mighty city of the poem boasts further of its superiority to natural elements such as "weak and murmuring reeds," the poet retaliates:

No cried my heart, this thing I cannot do,
 This is my home, this plain and water clear
 Are my companions faultless as the sky--
 I cannot, will not give them up to you.

And if you come upon them I shall fear,

And if you steal them from me I shall die (SP 30).

Seeking a home in nature, embracing natural forces and elements as "companions," are familiar enough Romantic rhetorical stances. And of course, in one sense Stevens does eventually surrender these faultless companions for the

mighty cities of New York and Hartford and for the mighty activities of lawyering in general. However, the notion of nature as a "home" and the sense of natural elements being impersonal and uncompromisingly inhuman counterparts to the human will recur in Stevens's later poetry stripped of more sentimental, Romantic implications.

Stevens's earliest extant forays into poetry exploit common Romantic themes and dichotomies. A work entitled "Autumn," published in the Reading Boys' High School literary magazine, for example, contrasts the serenity of natural phenomena with the speaker's troubled soul.¹⁴ In an early sonnet published in The Harvard Monthly, nature's wholesome beauty acts as backdrop and foil to the speaker's despair:

I.

I strode along my beaches like a sea,
 The sand before me stretching firm and fair;
 No inland darkness cast its shadow there
 And my long step was gloriously free.
 The careless wind was happy company
 That hurried past and did not question where;
 Yet as I moved I felt a deep despair
 And wonder of the thoughts that came to me.

For to my face the deep wind brought the
scent
 Of flowers I could not see upon the strand;

And in the sky a silent cloud was blent
With dreams of my soul's stillness; and the
sand,
That had been naught to me, now trembled far
In mystery beneath the evening star (SP 29).

The speaker does not elaborate upon the nature of his "troubled soul," but it is understood that the source of his "deep despair" is thoughts--that is, consciousness that separates him from the firm, fair, shadowless landscape, in which even the wind, whose voice would grow powerful and violent in later poems, was "careless" and provides "happy company." The longing for experience, whose absence contributes to the speaker's despair, is itself ineffable and undefinable: the unseen flowers upon the strand are equivalent to Keats's "unheard melodies," always so much sweeter than heard ones, though clearly beyond the reach of sensory experience. This distant reality riding on the wind's scent (which is as much of it as the speaker is going to get to experience) makes the previously happy scene unfamiliar and alien: the cloud is silent, the sand "far," and the evening star mysterious. The longing for transcendence destroys the speaker's joy in the scene.

Just as Garrett Stevens did not invent the body/mind split, Stevens did not contrive the well-known contrasts between the worlds of nature and culture, country and city, nature and self that recur in his early poems. The theme of

sadness and self-consciousness--the former usually caused by the latter-- contrasted with nature's simplicity and freedom from care filtered into Stevens's consciousness by process of osmosis from his readings in classical and Romantic literature as well as from the very air of Victorian sensibility around him. Joan Richardson notes that his idealized descriptions "were no doubt colored by the same rosy glow radiating from most evocations of lost paradises" and "the terms comparing his birthplace to a kind of Arcadian classical ideal belonged to the Victorian vocabulary that was the first language of the cultured during the second half of the nineteenth century. . . ." (Richardson, Early Years 18).

While Stevens's evolving perceptions of and representations of nature, naturally enough, pass through the alembics of nostalgia and Romantic/Victorian literary convention, even his early writings betray those elements that constitute the unique sense of the natural world that marks his mature work. An autobiographical essay he published in The Harvard Advocate clearly depicts his nostalgia for the countryside of his origins:

He was thinking to himself that this was one of those first warm days, premonitions of Spring, which stray into the calendar now and then despite the weather bureau; and with that thought came others of a certain hill in Pennsylvania, of a certain grove of maples, and of a certain house

which he knew as home on vacations and in summer time. . . . But the wind that was so sweet to him was gone. It had blown into the dry corners, rustled the curtains, passed over his pictures, and turned over the things on his table--the things which had frightened and driven it away, things covered with economic calculations and mathematical designs. That made him remember that it was still winter (SP 27).

This otherwise adolescently selfconscious passage is notable in two of its details, at least as they are silhouetted against the backlighting of Stevens's later poems: first, in the sense it conveys of high-order intellectual activity ("economic calculations and mathematical designs") frightening away the wind, as though this sort of activity were not only inherently antithetical to the speaker's enjoyment of nature, but actually alienated nature itself; second, the passage shows the first instance in which Stevens uses the wind--an image that will be ubiquitous in his later work--to embody not only nature, but to represent the very voice of nature in its wilder, most inhuman manifestations.¹⁵ At the end of this essay, the protagonist goes for a walk, and as he heads back toward his room he muses (presumably about the mathematics) that "The work he had left seemed shallow, and he resolved that after this he would be less Faust than Pan" (SP 27).

Stevens had begun to reframe the terms of the underlying Cartesian problem: he transmutes the usual formulations opposing body and mind in the particular instance, and nature and culture in the general, to terms more useful to himself, namely, the human and non-human. As readers of Stevens recognize, "human" is a habitual word in his poetic vocabulary; "non-human," however, appears in various guises as the wind, as silence, as the rock, as speechlessness, as leaflessness.

Stevens's other observation concerning the absence of cathedrals in the woods might strike one immediately as falling into the continuum of Emersonian, Thoreauvian pantheism--as an animistic vision of all of nature enlivened by spirit. Stevens, however, altered the stakes and terms of Romantic transcendence by positing a nature which is not analogous to the mind, but with which the human must in some manner connect and combine nevertheless. Stevens recognizes nature's otherness from the human long before he has the vocabulary to speak of it, and he begins to transform his modes of thought and perception from those he learned from the Romantics to those we might characterize, as we will see in Chapter XXX, as phenomenological and ecological.

3. The First in Time and the First in Importance

The first in time and the first in importance
of the influences upon the mind is that of nature.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar"

Geography controls culture . . .

Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden

The way societies or individuals regard nature gives a good indication of the way those societies or individuals regard other seminal relationships: relationships to other life forms, to the material world, to other people, between the sexes, between individuals and their bodies, and even relationships within the self, of one part to another part of the psyche. David Wade Chambers has written that

Ideas of nature, and attitudes toward it, are among the most important components of an individual's, indeed of a society's, world view. That is to say, a society's basic beliefs about nature are closely related to that society's values. Nature, or what is thought natural, provides an abundant set of metaphors and analogies that underpin many of our value judgments--what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong" (4).

In a postindustrial society, a culture's metaphors and analogies may themselves provide the route to nature, rather

than the other way around. For a poet, however, and specifically for Stevens, the press and presence of the physical world may be the determining, seminal factor that underlies all else, provided one is open to its influence. One thinks of Emerson in "Nature": "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" (Emerson 23).

First by force of habit, chance and circumstance, later in the conscious pursuit of solace, inspiration and aesthetic pleasure, Wallace Stevens spent his whole life attending to nature. Even so, if Stevens's actual contact with "nature"--in this case meaning the outdoors in its less diminished, less human-infested forms--over the course of his life were graphed on a chart, then the line would show a high and steady frequency of contact through childhood and adolescence; it would dip a little during college years and New York when his outdoor ramblings were confined to summers and weekends; a sudden, sharp peak would show his brief but profoundly significant trip to British Columbia, and then the line would drop precipitously downward as his contact became limited to vacations and business trips in Florida, and from the time he moved to Hartford, to walks in Elizabeth Park, a municipal park.

The letters and journals of Stevens's youth chronicle the walks and activities, the botanical and atmospheric details of long, delicious summers in Pennsylvania, spent at home in the environs of Reading, or at his grandmother's in

Ivyland, or at his friends, the Wily's, in Berkeley. His earliest poetic efforts at Reading Boy's High School and then at Harvard imitate conventional pastoral and Romantic expressions of communing with nature. Even after Stevens moved from Cambridge to New York City, Lisa Steinman notes, "his journals and letters are remarkable for how little they say about what was then one of America's most modern cities. Stevens wrote much more about the weather, birds, and flowers he encountered during his long walks into the New Jersey countryside than about the city itself" (135). Finally, when he lived in Hartford and regularly walked to work through Elizabeth Park, the minutiae of that municipal park, as well as his own beflowered backyard, served as his contact with nature.¹⁶

In Stevens's consciousness, however, nature loomed ever larger, first as a pleasure, then as a force throughout his life. In a letter to Rodriguez-Feo written in 1946, in response to his friend's comment about nature's declining importance to the twentieth century, Stevens retorted:

I wonder whether you are right about outgrowing nature. Perhaps the man who has never had a chance to enjoy life, outgrows it. One of my firm beliefs is that Life and Nature are one. Consequences of boredom are, therefore, practically unknown to me. Perhaps I have been bored at Church, or at the Theatre, or by a book, but certainly, I have never been bored in any

general sense and at my ripe age, I am quite sure that I never shall be. The extent to which Life and Nature are the same, is something on which you ought to be able to throw a particular light, because you have the advantage of all those wonderful beaches" (L 533-534).

That Stevens, while on the subject of nature, should allude here to the church and to books is not at all unusual; his earliest writings show a relationship in his mind among these three elements. A strong association between nature and the church, in the sense that nature is itself sacred, a kind of a temple, is a legacy of Romanticism that Stevens inherited very likely before he even knew about Romanticism as such. A very early poem written at Harvard, beginning with the line "Cathedrals are not built along the sea" (SP 32) exploits the Romantic theme of nature's superiority to man-made places of worship. When a young and newly urbanized Stevens took to lingering in the transept of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City in, as he wrote, his "more lonely moods" (L 58), he once again pondered strength of spiritual feeling imparted by the great cathedral as compared to that he felt in nature:

An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. . . . In the cathedral I felt one presence; on the highway I felt another. Two

different deities presented themselves. . . In the shadows of the church I could hear the prayers of men and women; in the shadows of the trees nothing human mingled with Divinity (L 58-59).

When Wallace Stevens wrote that "the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself" (L 58), he echoed the Emerson of "Nature" who strove to relocate nature as the locus of revelation. When earlier yet Stevens had "wondered why people took books into the woods to read in summertime when there was so much else to be read there that one could not find in books" (L 22), he was loosely paraphrasing Emerson's commentary on that vast text, the universe, God's book. Ordinary books, according to Emerson, were "for the scholars' idle times" (Emerson 68). "When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings," he declared (Emerson 68), and exhorted his audience of American scholars to read directly from the book of nature that lay open before them replete with symbols and "spiritual fact[s]".¹⁷ Emerson vacillated on the issue of exactly how much of the original text came through in translation. There are moments in Emerson when nature approaches the brink of speech, as when Emerson writes that nature "always speaks of Spirit" (Emerson 49) or when he imputes to nature an intentionality toward the human: "It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to

the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it." (Emerson 49).

At other times, however, it seemed to Emerson that natural fact did not in and of itself suffice, and required human perception and language for its completion. In these instances, nature was for Emerson a product of human description: "Every natural fact is trivial," he wrote, "until it becomes symbolical or moral [*italics mine*]" (Emerson 143). Fact became symbolical or moral through the application of human interpretation and annotation--that is, through language. Emerson's thinking on the subject was, finally, syllogistic: words are symbols for natural facts; natural facts are the symbols of the spirit; therefore, words are symbols for the spirit.¹⁸ To put it another way, words corresponded directly to the "visible creation"; the visible creation was "the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world" (Emerson 36); therefore, words corresponded directly to the invisible world of spirit that inhabited both nature and human beings. This correspondence between word and spirit was, for Emerson, direct, palpable and essential.

Wallace Stevens, too, believed that fact became "symbolical or moral"--that is, that it acquired meaning within a human context--by way of language. It is this process of language investing fact with meaning that Stevens explores in all his writings about the imagination creating fictions to live by. The difference between Stevens and

Emerson lay precisely in the issue of acknowledging the fictive nature of the correspondence between mind and whatever "truth" lay encoded in the visible world. Emerson went so far as to concede that a poet, for example, "animates nature with his own thoughts" (Emerson 46), but once animated, nature served up its indisputable truths as well as its moral laws, models of behavior, and so forth. In contrast, when Stevens wrote late in life in his Adagia that "In the long run the truth does not matter" (oldOP 180), he was being neither flip nor cynical; he had simply come long ago to the conclusion that what nature yielded up, at best, was a sense of a rock-bottom reality, which was a matter wholly different from "truth," a production of the human imagination.

In Stevens's poems, nature never "speaks" in anything akin to human language at all, though there is a curious and recurring relationship between nature's expression of itself and written language in books. Stevens sometimes depicts the relationship between human being and natural world as that between reader and book--a metaphor that doubles itself, in creating a reader-in-the-poem and a reader-of-the poem, whenever a poem about reading is itself read by a reader!

Almost invariably Stevens undermines the human is to world as reader is to book equation by emphasizing the unreadability of the book of nature if one seeks to find a human language within it. In "The Reader," for example, the

reader of the poem can't ascertain until the third stanza that it is no ordinary book that the reader in the poem is reading, when it turns out that he is reading in the dark:

All night I sat reading a book,
Sat reading as if in a book
Of sombre pages.

It was autumn and falling stars
Covered the shrivelled forms
Crouched in the moonlight.

No lamp was burning as I read,
A voice was mumbling, "Everything
Falls back to coldness. . .

(CP 146-147)

The poem performs a verbal sleight of hand as soon as it begins. The straightforward declaration "All night I sat reading a book," without missing a beat becomes conditional in the second line, "Sat reading as if in a book." The sombre pages briefly reinforce the original impression the poem gives of an ordinary book, but the second stanza supplants the image of a page with one of a darkened sky scribbled over with the trails of falling stars. Where there ought to be letters are "shrivelled forms/ Crouched in the moonlight"--leaving the ambiguous impression of either a crippled alphabet (in contrast to the later, "ferocious

alphabets" of "The Pure Good of Theory"), or of a truly ferocious alphabet, like wild animals crouched to spring.

In the poem's last two stanzas, images of fruition and plenty lie embedded within a chilling background of darkness, leaflessness and wordlessness, anticipating themes in this tiny poem that will burgeon in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

A voice was mumbling, "Everything
Falls back to coldness,

Even the musky muscadines,
The melons, the vermilion pears
Of the leafless garden."

The sombre pages bore no print
Except the trace of burning stars
In the frosty heaven (CP 147).

The lovely late summer harvest and the falling back to coldness (in the fall) suggest familiar cycles comprehensible on a human level ("Cold things become warm, and what is warm cools," says Heraclitus; "what is wet dries, and the parched is moistened.") But the stars burning against a frosty heaven evoke a sense of the universe wheeling on a vaster, more inhuman scale, as it does in Stevens's earlier "Domination of Black" (surely one of the more anxiety-provoking poems in the English language) in

which another set of autumn leaves gather like planets gathering in the striding night (CP 9).

"[I]f a man would be alone, let him look at the stars," writes Emerson in "Nature" (Emerson 23). He concurs with Emerson that "The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible"; though Stevens is less sure of Emerson's conclusion: "all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence" (Emerson 23). There are no written words, at least not human words, in this poem about a reader reading, only spoken ones spoken mutteringly, musingly, by the reader-in-the-poem ("Everything falls . . . "). The reader of Stevens's poem, meanwhile, is left to wonder uneasily whether the poem itself reproduces a darkness on the page comparable to the one in the poem's frosty heaven, scribbled over with shrivelled forms and bright tracings (of language) which, whatever they are, amount to no lamp burning and no legible print.

In a later poem, "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," not only does a book become the world, but the reader in the poem becomes the book, equating world, book and reader.

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book (CP 358).

The book in this poem, like the one in "The Reader," is also only questionably there, is also subsumed by spoken, rather than written words: "The words were spoken as if there was no book" (CP 358).

Helen Regueiro has written that poems such as "The Reader," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "The Poem That Took the Place of the Mountain," and "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise" posit an equation between book, or poem, or work of art, and natural world. To Regueiro, these poems suggest that "Only if reality becomes fictional can the fiction of the book become real" (173). I would modify this conclusion to suggest that Stevens realizes--and expresses in the poems--the inherently fictional nature of human conceptions of reality. The poems then are the imaginative enactment of stepping outside those conceptions in order to create "a nature" (OP 192). The speaker in "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," for example, steps off the page into the scene that he has created in the poem. He is able to breathe the clear air of the landscape though the route by which he got there--the book--lies in the dust turning, it is suggested, to dust:

There is was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his
table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained
completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which
they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home (CP 512).

The poem/landscape embodies the whole process of its creation in reminding the poet of the poem's inception and tracing the steps of its creation, which were the word-by-word recreation of nature. In light of the distinctions between Stevens's tropes of seeing and hearing, however, the end of this poem is problematic. The speaker reaches a pinnacle, and, in keeping with the sensibility conveyed in those metaphors of Stevens's that constellate around the sense of sight, seems to hover above and apart from the scene rather than to join it. It is a "view" which is attained--a panoramic and picturesque view, perhaps, but a

view nevertheless that maintains a separation between the speaker and the sea, "his unique and solitary home," toward which he gazes. It does not suffice, Stevens seems to say, to fashion a fictive nature out of language; the language of the poem itself somehow has to attain to the real, to express it and be part of it.

Notes for Chapter I

1. "During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, population increases all over Europe resulted in an era of reclamation. Woodlands and marshes were converted to arable lands, and wastelands turned to pasture. Regulations over the use of meadows, pastures, and woodlands began to be tightened, and family holdings were divided and subdivided. The simultaneous growth of towns as centers for trade and crafts created new pressures to increase croplands. By the early fourteenth century, more wasteland was being used, and forests had shrunk dramatically over much of Europe" (Merchant, Death 47).

Overpopulation and low energy resources in premodern Europe must be understood within the context of a preindustrial economy and the difficult transition from an agrarian society to early capitalist society. Carolyn Merchant attributes the "breakdown of the medieval agrarian economy and ecosystem" (Death 46) to several factors, beginning as early as the twelfth century, including population pressure, technological innovation, energy use, land use, and class conflict.

For an examination of an ecosystem model of historical change between 1500 and 1700 in Europe and the effects of these factors upon the shift from an organic model of the cosmos to a mechanistic model, see Chapter 2 of Carolyn Merchant's The Death of Nature.

2. "Eden, Paradise, the Golden Age, and the idyllic garden, in short, all the backdrops for European literary pastoral, were subsumed in the image of an America promising material ease without labor or hardship, as opposed to the grinding poverty of previous European existence; a frank, free affectional life in which all might share in a primal and noncompetitive fraternity; a resurrection of the lost state of innocence that the adult abandons when he joins the world of competitive self-assertion; and all this possible because, at the deepest psychological level, the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape. And when America finally produced a pastoral literature of her own, that literature . . . took its metaphors as literal truths (Kolodny 6).

3. "In both Western and non-Western cultures, nature was traditionally feminine. In Latin and the romance languages of medieval and early modern Europe, nature was a feminine noun, and hence, like the virtues (temperance, wisdom, etc.), personified as female" (Merchant, Death xxiii). References to "Mother Nature" and "Mother Earth" are ubiquitous across many cultures and deeply ingrained in Western philosophical and literary traditions.

4." . . . while the pastoral tradition symbolized nature as a benevolent female, it contained the implication that nature when plowed and cultivated could be used as a commodity and manipulated as a resource. Nature, tamed and subdued, could be transformed into a garden to provide both material and spiritual food to enhance the comfort and soothe the anxieties of men distraught by the demands of the urban world and the stresses of the marketplace. It depended on a masculine perception of nature as a mother and bride whose primary function was to comfort, nurture, and provide for the well-being of the male" (Merchant, Death 8-9).

5. In "Something about the Future of Marriage" in Human, All Too Human: ". . . marriage, which uses the sensual, as it were, only as a rare means to a greater end, probably requires, I fear, a natural aid: concubinage. . . . A good wife . . . cannot at the same time be a concubine: this would be asking too much of her."

6. Berman goes on to say further that "The Cartesian or technological paradigm is, as stated above, the equation of truth with utility, with the purposive manipulation of the environment. The holistic view of man as a part of nature, as being at home in the cosmos, is so much romantic claptrap. Not holism, but domination of nature; not the ageless rhythm of ecology, but the conscious management of the world. . . . Nevertheless, it was the Industrial Revolution that put the Scientific Revolution on the map" (46).

7. Emerson in "Nature": "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (21).

8. "An emotive response to nature as mother was articulated by a small number of elite males who appreciated wild nature and the values associated with Renaissance naturalism and the animate cosmos. For these men, Nature was a human being writ large, an individual with whom one could develop a personal relationship. A vestige of personal animism--the "I-Thou" relationship to the land so critical to American Indians--was one ingredient of their consciousness" (Merchant, Revolutions 254).

9. "During the capitalist ecological revolution of the nineteenth century, nature--teacher, mother, and bringer of natural disasters in the animate cosmos--was split into an abstract order of mechanical forces and romanticized moral mother. The market economy that dominated nature by extracting its wealth and secrets was offset by the personal engagement of the romantic" (Merchant, Revolutions 232).

10. "The shadows of family and place are an important part of my father's soil . . . Although the tower on Mount Penn, which dominates Reading to the east, is not the same tower that was there in the nineteenth century, and the Oley Valley is hard to see today because of the smog, we will find an important sense of place in the journals of Wallace Stevens" (SP 3).

11. In the next breath, Stevens does a customary (for him) about-face and writes, "At the same time I should be quite as content to work and be practical. . . I want my powers to be put to their fullest use--to be exhausted when I am done with them. . . I do not want to have to make a petty struggle for existence--physical or literary" (SP 71).

12. In Ariel and the Police, Frank Lentricchia discusses the complications of Stevens's "male literary inheritance" (139) in his chapter entitled "Patriarchy Against Itself--The Young Manhood of Wallace Stevens" (136-195),

13. In "Life without Principle," Thoreau writes, "I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, to life itself, than this incessant business . . . If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen" (356).

14. The poem appears in Souvenirs and Prophecies, p. 16.

Autumn

Long lines of coral light
And evening star,
One shade that leads the night
On from afar.

And I keep, sorrowing,
This sunless zone,
Waiting and resting here,
In calm above.

15. Throughout this work, the terms "inhuman" and "nonhuman" will be used interchangeably. "Inhuman" is meant (as I believe Wallace Stevens means it) in a neutral, non-pejorative, factual sense--in terms of Webster's second definition of "inhuman," meaning "Not in accord with human needs," and not in terms of the more usual sense of "brutal," "cold-blooded," "heartless," "cruel" etc.

16. Joan Richardson poignantly describes Stevens's compensations for immobility in nature toward the end of his life: "When the length and frequency of his walks diminished. . . he became more attentive to certain favorite spots in

Elizabeth Park where he would stop to rest there he made sequential mental notes on the other 'regulars' and on the smallest changes in the flower beds. He spent more time in--and, when the weather was not congenial, watching--his garden; he recorded the dates each year on which the first snowdrops pushed out beneath the heavy spruce trees" (Early 301-302).

17. "A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. . . . the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause" (Emerson 36).

18. "Words are signs of natural facts . . . Nature is the symbol of the spirit" (Emerson 31). "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" (Emerson 35). The "immediate dependence of language upon nature" (Whicher 33). "Things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol, in the whole and in every part" (Emerson 227).

Chapter II

The Westwardness of Everything: Stevens's Ktaadn

The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
(CP 397)

This was the Earth of which we have heard, made
out of Chaos and Old Night.

Thoreau, In the Maine Woods

1. That First and Last Time of Real Freedom

A familiar itinerary through the poetry of Wallace Stevens, as well as through the demesnes of his upbringing, education and business travels, is roughly vertical along the eastern seaboard of the United States, bounded on the north by Connecticut and on the south by Florida. There are both brief and extended side trips as far north as Maine, as far west as California, and otherwise inland to Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and "Arkansaw." Born and raised in the mild Pennsylvania hills, educated at Harvard, Stevens embarked on independent adult life in New York City and later lived out the bulk of it in Hartford, Connecticut. Only in the poems and in the imagination did Stevens occasionally travel overseas to Paris, Rome, Geneva--places that he never saw in life, places to which, to take Stevens at his journalistic and epistolary word, he longed all his life to go. Even his well-documented penchant for armchair connoisseurship--ordering, by

post, trinkets and tea from Ceylon and books and paintings (unseen) from Paris--was primarily oriented in an easterly, cross-Atlantic direction. While he occasionally ranged, in his musings and in his poetry, to the Far East of China and Japan, he was more comfortable in the imaginary environs of Europe, particularly of France, and most comfortable, poetically, bodily, and temperamentally, in New England.

The last place, then, that one thinks of when thinking of the poetry of Wallace Stevens is the far western frontier of the rugged North American wilderness. But once, just before he turned twenty four years old, Stevens made a journey just in that unlikely direction, in what was to him a most unaccustomed manner. In the late summer of 1903, he accompanied his friend and employer W.C. Peckham to British Columbia for a six week hunting trip on the Kootenay River in the Canadian Rockies. The Canadian excursion was unlike any other he had ever made, and it was unlike any he would make again for as long as he lived. Yet the trip, Stevens's "first and last time of real freedom and self-sufficiency," according to Joan Richardson (Early Years 363), was to be one of the central adventures of Stevens's life and a major impetus for his work. The hunting trip not only helped to hone the young Stevens's confused and ambivalent sense of identity, virility, and authority as a businessman, it also refurbished his evolving (but still thin, at twenty-four) philosophy of nature--a philosophy foundational to all his poetry. It forced him to rethink the relationship between humans and the

rest of the natural world. Above all, it provided him with a lifetime supply of poetic images.

The official record of the Canadian adventure survives in fewer than a dozen published entries from Stevens's journals. Holly Stevens herself never heard her father speak of his Canadian experience until he was on his deathbed more than fifty years after the fact, when she was startled by the significance he attached to it:

The trip to British Columbia that my father made with W. C. Peckham left a great impression on him: not only did he keep his journal religiously, but in the last few weeks before his death he spoke of the trip frequently to me, the first time I recall his mentioning it. . . . The names and places meant little to me then, and only with the discovery of his notebook detailing the adventure did I discover its importance. . . . It took place high in unfamiliar mountains, and, primitive as conditions were, it was preparation for and prelude to his struggle to become a successful attorney One of the places where he "found himself" was in the Canadian Rockies, and his account of the trip is crucial to an understanding of his role as both poet and businessman (SP 117).

Stevens's lifelong silence on the subject of this trip is in keeping with what one has come, perhaps, to expect from this poet given over, to an extreme degree, to revelation by

indirection and to chronic reticence on matters of grave personal and emotional import. The trip's relative obscurity even among the always opaque facts of Stevens's life deepens to mystery with his daughter's provocative disclosure that an eight page section of the journals concerning the trip had been subsequently expunged (SP 125). There is nothing further in Stevens's canon beyond those scant, truncated journal entries of August and September 1903 that refers explicitly to Canada, the Rockies or to the Western wilderness. Yet, having once read them, the reader cannot help but read Stevens's views on nature and his poetic images in their light.

Holly Stevens does not elaborate in Souvenirs and Prophecies on her remark that the Canadian trip is "crucial to an understanding of [Stevens's] role as both poet and businessman" (117). To calculate the significance of the adventure for Stevens's professional life, then, one must consult the poet's agonized, youthful deliberations about an appropriate occupation for himself in his journals. And to weigh the importance of the trip to Stevens's life as a poet--especially since he published none of his major poetry until much later--one must again consult the journals and letters to survey the changes in Stevens's mental and linguistic landscape.

Stevens's choice of a career in business was predicated in large measure on personal anxieties about his effectiveness as a "man of the world" (SP 53-54). These anxieties were spurred on by his rather stern father, a devoted proponent of

the Protestant work ethic with its emphasis on personal stability and financial security. The economic uncertainties that marked the early years of the century further urged Stevens toward a life of material solidity (Richardson, Early Years 159-161).

Judging from his journals, from early on Stevens interpreted matters of professional and financial success in terms of masculinity and virility. Conversely, he saw poetry as essentially feminine in nature. Late in life Stevens confessed, "When I was younger I always used to think that I got my practical side from my father and imagination from my mother" (SP 8). Moreover, he decided that "Moral qualities are masculine; whimsicalities are feminine" (SP 114). Even while he was at Harvard, where he contributed regularly to undergraduate literary magazines and where he was president of the Advocate, he never quite got over thinking that poetry itself was perhaps a feminine whimsicality.¹ Dilettantism horrified him and he was determined to be "practical"²:

The only practical life of the world, as a man of the world, not as a University Professor. . . a Preacher, a Poet or the like, but as a bustling merchant, a money-making lawyer, a soldier, a politician is to be if unavoidable a pseudo-villain in the drama, a decent person in private life. We must come down, we must use tooth and nail, it is the law of nature: "the survival of the fittest"; providing we maintain at the same time self-

respect, integrity and fairness. I believe, as unhesitatingly as I believe anything, in the efficacy and necessity of fact meeting fact--with a background of the ideal [SP 53-53).

The poet's father, who wanted little truck with Stevens' poetry writing hobbies, expressed relief when Stevens ceased sending him poems from Harvard--"I am convinced from the Poetry (?) [sic] you write your Mother that the afflatus is not serious--and does not interfere with some real hard work" (L 23)--and encouraged his son in other directions: "Keep hammering at your real work however my boy--for a fellow never knows what's in store--and time mis-spent now counts heavily . . . " (L 26). By the time Stevens got to New York, he was issuing paternalistic injunctions to himself: "Self-dependence is the greatest thing in the world for a young man . . . " (L 44). It is little wonder that he was soon asking himself, "Is literature really a profession?" (L 39). In short, the combination of his father's scorn for poetry as well as Stevens' own recognition of his increasing penchant for material extravagance, persuaded him to embark on more lucrative careers.

By the time Stevens went to Canada with Peckham, he had forsaken one failed career as a journalist in New York, had finished his tenure at New York Law School, and was about to commence on a second career as a young lawyer. In the three years he had spent in New York since Harvard, he had continued to nurture an aspiration to write poetry, as well as other

habits of mind, taste and personality that one has come inextricably to associate with him. By day, he made feeble flourishes toward a life in journalism, and later, more vigorous ones toward the study of law. By night, Stevens performed a one-man mime of bohemianism and decadence, a bohemianism defined not by any outre company he kept (he kept almost no company), but rather by a recurrent malaise and melancholia expressed in his diaristic musings; and a decadence more gastronomic than moral or aesthetic, marked by high-cholesterol culinary indulgences. Stevens' postures in his journals during this period ranged between an affected world-weariness (usually following upon too much liquor and too many cigars) to a robust exuberance expressed in marathon weekend hikes of twenty-five miles and more in the countryside of northern New Jersey. Stevens could not decide whether he wanted to be Left Bank or Lake District, Verlaine or Wordsworth.

By the summer of the year he would go to British Columbia, he expressed disgust with the excesses and indulgences of his mode of life:

I've just been reading my journal. A month or two ago I was looking forward to a cigarless, punchless weary life. En effet, since then I have smoked Villar y Villars & Cazadores, dined at Mouquin's on French artichokes & new corn etc. with a flood of drinks from creme de cassis melee, through Burgundy, Chablis etc. to sloe gin with Mexican

cigars & French cigarroots. I have lunched daily on--Heaven's [sic] knows what not (I recall a delicious calf's heart cooked whole & served with peas--pig that I am) & on Tuesday, I start for British Columbia to camp & hunt until September in the Canadian Rockies, Quem Deus vult--

This Mexican cigar life has its drawbacks. The faces one sees through its smoke are not the faces of St. Paul or St. Francis or of Mary or Ruth. At this table sits a Saturday night fop, at that is an unaccountable fellow with a pampered looking belly, at another is a charming looking girl in tremendous spirits smiling & chattering, at another is a coarse animal & its mate. One talks. It is gossip. Then it is Durham Cathedral. Then it is Bar-le-duc jelly and Gervais cheese. Then it is gossip again. The orchestra comes in & plays-- How deathly tired one is by midnight! (SP 115-116).

The trip to British Columbia came on the cusp of a new life, professionally speaking, for Stevens. Having decided that literature--even in the watered down form of journalism--was not a real profession (or at least not one that paid), he chose to be the "money-making lawyer" of his earlier musings on what it took to be a practical man of the world. Starting in June 1902, Stevens served as a clerk in W.C. Peckham's office. The two of them seem to have hit it off personally as well as professionally, since Peckham invited Stevens to his

summer place in the Adirondacks, and, the following year, to British Columbia.

After the awkward starts and stops of his forays into journalism, the life of a law student and law clerk must have seemed gratifyingly straightforward and purposeful to Stevens. His competence in this field no doubt boosted his sense of participating in the "practical" world of manly affairs. The hunting trip to the wilds of British Columbia came to Stevens as a welcome relief from the "Mexican cigar nights" of New York. The activities of camping, tracking, hunting, and trekking were, in Stevens' mind, unquestionably virile. He clearly delighted in the cowboys-and-Indians aspect of the journey, and he recounted the sights he saw from the train on the way out West:

I have seen cowboys; I have seen prairie dogs;
hundreds of wild ducks, Indians in camp with smoke
coming through their discolored tent tops . . . (L
64)

Stevens was fascinated by the hunting party's Adirondack woodsman guide, Hosea G. Locke, a man with a "monstrous voice" (L 65) who "lionize[d] the bed-covers" (L 64). Hosea was soon "Hosey" to Stevens, and the two of them were off frequently to hunt and sometimes to shoot deer, bear, grouse, moose, and goats; to gather wild strawberries and huckleberries by the hatful; to fish for trout. In the evenings, the party ate roasted venison by the campfire, while Peckham, a lawyer with poetic inclinations of his own, read Heinrich Heine aloud.

If a reader has a firmly entrenched image of the Wallace Stevens who has come down to us through literary lore as the portly, gray-suited, suburban metaphysician, the aesthetic hedonist, the connoisseur of modernism--say, as the stern-faced poet in the group portrait of the 1955 winners of the Bollingen Prize; or as the somber looking personage posed next to his wife in front of a proper white clapboard house like a Connecticut Gothic (hat in hand instead of a pitchfork) in a 1938 photo--then it comes as an invigorating shock to read Stevens's descriptions of his hunting expedition. His robust tales of adventure and misadventure snap with humor and enthusiasm. He relished the physical demands and "primitive" conditions as much as he reveled in the daunting beauty of the landscape.

Enormous views, good climbing, goat tracks, etc.

Found a bear's den in a cliff (where I had to go on hands and knees & pull myself along with plants)

also a hedge-hog's hole filled with dung. (SP 123)

Stevens the erstwhile gastronome wryly remarked the campfire shining on the cook, "Tommy baking beans--or rather a stew of beans, bugs, dirt and twigs" (SP 119). Stevens the erstwhile dandy one day gleefully noted that they "use[d] nails to stir the tea (owing to a shortage of forks)" (SP 118) and another day reported the morning's sanguinary chores:

Hosey returned from his hunt with a big black bear to his credit. The beast has been skinned & Bob &

I used half of his hind quarters to bait traps with
today up the Vermilion [Pass]" (SP 122).

One especially detailed journal entry recounts "the best two
days of the whole trip":

Hosey & I . . . started about two o'clock on Tuesday
afternoon with the mare of Hosey's for the foot of our
Gibraltar. Near Lake No. 2 we started several grouse &
both of us rushed after them into the bush. The mare
followed. On trying to chase her back she gave us a
devil of a chase; first up-hill & then downward on the
trail towards camp. Hosey nipped her. Further up along
the trail I shot a partridge; & near the first trap,
beyond the dead-fall, pumped a bullet into a porcupine's
belly (stupid beast). We camped in some tall timber on
a foot-hill. The moon covered all the hills with a
violet haze & looked through our trees in a strangely
distant way. I was awake practically all night. At
daybreak, & after I had watched the progress of
innumerable stars, Hosey started with the teapot in
search of water. We were off about six in a great sweat.
The slope we ascended seemed interminable & we had barely
reached the last [illegible word] of rocks when Hosey
caught sight of a lion. We chased it over the summit but
without getting a shot. A moment later I caught sight of
a splendid goat watching us from the top of a higher
ridge. We crept along as well as we could & finally got
within reach. But we were by that time in a shaky

position & the goat was a good distance below. I aimed but was afraid to shoot off my gun, since I had all I could do to keep my balance-not to speak of banging away with a 45-90. Then Hosey took a hand & fired four shots, whereupon the goat gambolled away like a lamb in May. I caught him trying to get up hill & struck near him. This was our last shot³. It being bitter cold we decided to come down. I had been walking on snow and quite apropos. The air suddenly darkened & we had a ripping little storm. The trail down hill was the most terrible I have ever travelled. At no time could one have fallen more than ten feet, but it was a difficult thing not to fall ten feet every minute. I thought I had broken my left knee-cap after one jolt; but beyond weakening & stiffening the leg no harm was done. I left a good part of my shoes on the way. Well, we rereached our starting point, had some venison & prunes & cold tea & started for camp. The confounded mare had slipped her noose & so we had to carry our blankets home strapped over our rifles. We've had a happy time! (SP 124-125).

It is at this point, as Holly Stevens notes, that the eight missing pages occur.

In short, regarding his development as a businessman, the trip to British Columbia gave Stevens a chance to be a man among men. He experienced male camaraderie across social classes with both his mentor and boss Peckham (an apt role model for Stevens in being a successful lawyer, outdoorsman

and appreciator of poetry) as well as with Hosea G. Locke, a type who surely would have qualified as one of Whitman's "roughs." Stevens got to play at "survival of the fittest" and to test his "tooth and nail" philosophy. The icy night air of the Rocky Mountains cleared out a good deal of the smoke lingering from those Mexican cigars and French "cigaroots." One may even speculate that the reassuring sense of his own masculinity and "practicality" deriving from this trip freed up the portion of his nature he termed "feminine" from which he wrote poetry.

The importance of British Columbia to Stevens's development as a poet was at the same time immeasurably greater and more difficult to calculate precisely than its significance to his career as an attorney. From the time of this transcontinental journey on, Stevens would never again see, in his mind's eye, the pastoral landscapes of his youth except in double exposure, with the looming alien mountains of the far north superimposed upon the gentle, undulating hills of the East. The six weeks he spent in the wilds of Canada provided Stevens with the necessary counterpoint to the urbane and outwardly staid life he led from then on.⁴ Over time, the western mountains came to represent that promontory of experience in wild nature---"green's green apogee"(CP 373)--against which Stevens would measure the "reality" of all his later perceptions and conceptions, and the validity and purpose of works of the "imagination." The expedition left Stevens with a lifelong vocabulary of images for exploring his

relationship to the otherness of nonhuman nature. Above all, his experiences in British Columbia cast a stark new light upon Stevens's pastoral past and his tenacious quasi-Romantic notions and to evolve his own sense of the complex interrelationships between humans and nature at large.

The force of his experience in Canada may be gauged by a journal entry Stevens made the following spring when he was once again ensconced in the routines of his lawyerly urban life:

I thought on the train how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes + barrens + wilds. It still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens + orchards + fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless (L 73).

The Canadian Rockies, then, were to Stevens what Mont Blanc was to Shelley, what Ktaadn was to Thoreau--a shocking reminder of the incorrigible otherness of the vast nonhuman bulk of nature, impervious to human meanings or metaphors. Shelley recognized it in Mont Blanc, the mountain which

"dwells apart in its tranquility/ Remote, serene and inaccessible." Thoreau recognized it on Mt. Ktaadn in Maine, where an initially titillating discomposure on a remote mountain ("It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man") gave way, at its windshorn and inhospitable summit, first to awe and then to terror:

It was Matter, vast terrific,--not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,--no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,--the home, this of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites, --to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. . . . here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. . . . I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me ().

Thoreau's confrontation with the sheer stolid physicality of the earth's material--one of the things Stevens meant by "the rock" in his late poetry--jarred him into viewing his own body part of that vast entity to which Emerson refers as "NOT-ME," and to recognize it as akin to the wild presences, animate and inanimate, around him. (Stevens would regard his body as "that monster" in moments of severe self-disgust. Thoreau's

epiphany escalates to something akin to hysteria, and the final cries of his shattering experience on the mountaintop sound (to the twentieth century reader at least) like panicked transmissions from a spaceship reeling out of control:

What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,--daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,--rocks, trees, wind on our cheek! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we? (WildRdr 135).

* * * * *

Though it is futile to do so, one is tempted to speculate about the contents of those pages missing from the British Columbia journals. One wonders whether Stevens, like Thoreau, was given to any epiphanic outburst inspired by the high, cold, fearfully remote region he inhabited and explored for a few weeks of his life. In any case, the texts that are available to scrutiny, texts written before, during and after the Canadian trip, reveal, in both subtle and overt ways, Canada's effect on Stevens's language, on his evolving views of nature, on his formulation of a metaphoric geography, and, in general, to the unique weather of the poetry in which the fecund and the austere, the lush and the barren so often intermingle and combine.

The Canadian journals as a whole--or what survives of them--are jocular, high spirited and hearty, full of the records of hunting adventures and the details of campsite life. They are not reflective, meditative, or especially philosophical. They are not mindful, as current popular parlance has it, of respecting natural balances or maintaining a sense of harmony with the environment. There isn't even much rhapsodizing about awe-inspiring landscapes. As the excerpts above have already demonstrated, Stevens was excited by the wildlife around him, but was not in the least sentimental, much less empathetic, toward it. The late twentieth century reader cringes a little to read Stevens boast of having "pumped a bullet into a porcupine's belly (stupid beast)" (SP 124), and to having "hit a partridge in the body, [the] heavy bullet leaving nothing but feathers to tell the tale" (sp 126); or to read Stevens's gleeful note about how Peckham "shot a lynx in a trap!" (SP 123). Stevens relates that at one point the abundance of the party's bounty led it to forego a moose hunt because Hosey finally felt it "a sin to have a half-ton of meat in camp at the same time" (SP 126).

The expedition's general aura of boisterous and gunhappy greed notwithstanding, Stevens's Canadian journals are replete with those primal nature images and nascent with the sensibilities that his readers have come most closely to associate with Stevens's poems, most especially (interestingly enough) with his late work. It was here that the vocabulary

at its most elemental was formed, here that the pendulum between North and South, whose metaphoric swing Stevens would exploit to such profound effect, made its motion known to Stevens. Canada became for Stevens the prototypical landscape that was never again to be not there; it illuminated Stevens's other landscapes in such a way as to bring them into high relief. The harsh mountain wilderness hovered beyond the stultifying new landscape in which Stevens lived, and behind the lush and level landscape of Florida. Finally, it was in Canada that Stevens most keenly, and perhaps for the first time, felt the seductions of austerity, and here that the world confirmed itself to him as an affair of place rather than of people.

2. Naming, Taming and Framing

The words of things entangle and confuse.

The plum survives its poems. (CP 41)

The sun

Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be

In the difficulty of what it is to be.

(CP 381)

But if man is to find his way once again
into the nearness of Being he must first
learn to exist in the nameless.

(Heidegger, Writings 199)

The elements of environment that most regularly punctuate Stevens's British Columbia journals--mountain, rock, snow, cold, fir, pine, spruce, bird, river, wind, sky, cloud, sun, moon, twilight, fire, night--are the very components that will later create the familiar, often chilly, terrain and atmosphere of Stevens's poems. Many of Stevens's most frequently used nouns describing the natural world are so generic that, dislodged from the witty narrative of the journals, or later from the gorgeous surround of the individual poems, they seem the linguistic equivalents of children's drawings of circle suns or triangle mountains, sometimes employing a child's (or an Impressionist's!) palette: "The rocky range to the right of the pass was yellow

and pink & purple" (SP 122); "The sky turns green of nights" (SP 123); "The moon covered all the hills with a violet haze" (SP 124); "The upper slopes of the mountains are radiant with red & blue wildflowers & the rocks are covered with lichens--yellow, orange, red, brown & green" (SP 125). Juxtaposed against the radiant wash of color, yet embedded in a syntax so artless and spare it could have been copied from a tourist's phrasebook are nouns so bald and plain-spoken that, when they are effective they achieve the shorthand force of pictographs or hieroglyphs, and when they fail, they fail in the form of cliché: sky, moon, mountains, wildflowers, rocks; "I have seen mountains swimming in clouds and basking in snow" (SP 118); ". . . the Eastern star glitters over a hill-top" (SP 120); "A bird flew into one of the pines this morning" (SP 120); "Saw bluebirds in the burnt woods" (SP 121); "Saw a dove in a tree" (SP 121): mountains, clouds, snow, star, bird, pines, woods, dove, tree.

The diction of the Canadian journals, compared to the self-conscious, complex, and often literary language of Stevens's earlier journals, is its frequent (though not exclusive) unadorned bluntness. While Stevens's language in describing processes and events during the trip--the weather's antics, for example, or the action of sunlight on water, or the foibles of a hunting adventure--is as lush, sensuous and particularized as ever, his actual nomenclature for the most concrete and immediate elements of his surroundings is Spartan.

Presumably the Canadian journals are short on taxonomy and nomenclature at least partly because Stevens simply didn't know the names of the unfamiliar birds or flowers or even the mountains around him, whereas he was well-versed in the names of the common flora and fauna of the east. While there is nothing remarkable in a young lawyer's botanical innocence in unfamiliar territory, his attenuated vocabulary bespeaks the distance and strangeness between him and his new environment. An uneasiness deriving from the absence of human influence and human expression comes through almost inadvertently in Stevens's reflection upon a silent grove of trees: "There are certain areas of spruce and fir in the forests that take on the appearance of everglades. They are filled with a brownish gloom, still, mysterious. Here the city heart would emit a lyric cry in a bird sang. But we have no music here. The wells of song would freeze overnight" (SP 120).

Stevens's bent for the general rather than the particular has been noted and roundly criticized sometimes. Rajeev Patke, for example, writes that "Stevens's rendition of the physical presences of the inanimate as well as the animate, however vividly realized, partakes of the species or the genus, of the symbolic or the emblematic, not of the uniquely individual" (20) and goes on to identify a "discomfort with local detail" on Stevens's part (22). Helen Vendler has written:

The lively things of this world--human, animal, vegetable--do not touch him as they did Keats or

Wordsworth; . . . the minutiae of the scene pass by unobserved; the natural cast of his eye is upward, and the only phenomenon to which he is passionately attached is the weather. Natural forms, even when they are drawn from particular Pennsylvania or Connecticut landscapes, are generalized, abstracted, made almost anonymous in his poetry (Wings 47).

Those elements Vendler identifies as abstract and anonymous, those qualities that accrue to what she goes on to describe as "The entire absence of immersed attention to the details of the natural scene" (Wings 47), betoken (to this reader's mind) not Stevens's lack of attention to or feeling for nature, but rather the beginnings of an understanding of the limits of language when faced with nature in its less diluted forms. What registers as an attenuated vocabulary in the British Columbia journals, what grows sparse or spare in the poems or, conversely, billows to airy abstraction, reflects Stevens's commitment, more pronounced later in his career than earlier, to evading the evasions of metaphor.

This juxtaposition in the journals of the abstract and the specific typifies the approach that marks Stevens's poems throughout. Clearly, Stevens himself thought and wrote about the problem of abstraction and its "necessity" in both his poems and prose. B.J. Leggett hypothesizes that for Stevens there exists a distinction between advocating abstraction as a practice and recognizing it as an inevitable condition of

human language. Stevens uses the word "abstract," writes Leggett

to suggest the inability of the poet's fiction to escape the artificial and therefore abstract nature of language. The must of "It Must Be Abstract" is not prescriptive--i.e., "it should be abstract"--but a sign of the necessary condition of the symbolizing process of any fiction or myth. Contrary to the more widely accepted reading of Notes, the title of the first section says, then, exactly what it appears to say on one level, what in fact, the persona asks the ephebe to recognize--that his world is of necessity an invented world . . . " (39-40)

Stevens's vacillations between the language of abstraction and the language of particularity represent his resistance on the one hand, as Leggett writes, to the pre-existing "necessary condition" of language as abstraction, and on the other hand to the false efficiency of, as Heidegger writes, "call[ing] something into its word and giving it the appearance of fixity and presence." Heidegger writes:

When we name a thing, we furnish it with a name. But what about this furnishing? After all, the name is not just draped over the thing. . . . no one will deny that the name is coordinated with the thing as an object. If we conceive the situation

in this way, we turn the name, too, into an object

To call something--that is to call it by name.
 More fundamentally, to name is to call something
 into its word. What is so called is then at the
 call of the word. What is called appears as what
 is present, and in its presence it is secured,
 commanded, called into the calling word (Writings
 366).

Stevens wished to write a poetry on the threshold between
 naming and abstracting. If a named thing was to fall into
 object-hood by virtue of being named, then Stevens would not
 be able to fulfill his aim of writing a poetry of enactment.
 Nor could he do so if the language could never be retrieved
 from its necessary condition of abstraction. "Reality" lay
 somewhere in the mediation of these two modes of language.

* * *

While Canada was by no means Stevens's first experience
 of nature, it was his first and only experience of truly wild
 nature, from which human influence and even human idea-- and
 in his personal case human nomenclature-- was for the most
 part absent. The experience rendered Stevens speechless;
 words, "in the face of the object" (CP 174), failed him. The
 unfamiliarity of the region and his linguistic disadvantage in
 regard to it were significant elements that would make a life-
 long impression in this, Stevens's first experience of nature
 manifest as "Matter, vast terrific," where was "clearly felt

the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man" and where "not even the surface had been scarred by man, but . . . was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world" (WldRdr . XXX).

Ever since Adam named the animals in Genesis, the fundamental linguistic act of naming, or even of coming into the possession of a name, has been related to the idea of having possession or power over the thing named. Rajeev Patke, in his reading of "The Comedian as the Letter C," equates the acts of naming and taming, and describes what Stevens himself may well have experienced in Canada:

The Crispin who crossed the sea to a new continent saw that in the juxtaposition of a yet to be tamed (named) novelty and the already tamed (named) reality of the past a moral offered itself; 'the words of things entangle and confuse'" (Patke 23).

This failure of language itself served Stevens since it made him consider "hapless words" that were "the masquerade of thought" (CP 39); and it also made him seek the "Letters of rock and water, words/ Of the visible elements"--a language that, to Stevens's mind, was itself somehow a natural element.

In his earlier journals and letters, Stevens exhibits a pronounced bent toward the pleasures of particularity, scrupulously naming the things in nature that he sees. In a journal entry of 1899 he identifies the "true and lasting source of country pleasure" to be "the growth of small, specific observation" (L 30); indeed, many of the letters and

journals of this time read like the works of a besotted naturalist:

The distinction between perennial: everlasting peas and sweet peas is that the latter have a scent, frail and delicate. Larkspur is various and is to be known by the rabbit-head-like corolla Bergamot is a big husky flower or rather a weed with spiced smell. . . . [Mignonette] blooms at the top of the stem although the rest of the stem is covered with little calyxes which assist its busy, sturdy appearance. Snap-dragon, or as it is vulgarly known: the weed--"poor man's torment" is a close-knit, yellow, tumbled sort of thing which if looked at closely reproduces a man in the moon or rather a profile of a Flemish smoker (L 28).

In another instance, Stevens's records not only the observations gleaned on a day's walk, but notes the attendant pleasures of observing and recording such scenes, as "poets and other observers" do:

Just as I was starting for the pike I saw two rabbits in the road and stopped to watch them--they cocked up their ears to listen but heard only the rare, bell-like, notes of some bird high up in an apple tree--they twitched their eyes at me and watched breathlessly, until I went on and left them undisturbed. . . . Later, when I had returned I saw a barn-swallow feeding its young. . . . Once as I

looked up I saw a big, pure drop of rain slip from leaf to leaf of a clematis vine. The thought occurred to me that it was just such quick, unexpected, commonplace, specific things that poets and other observers jot down in their note-books. It was certainly a monstrous pleasure to be able to be specific about such a thing (SP 45).

In Canada Stevens was dislocated: "I could look Westward and see infinite snowy summits--the Selkirks, I think," he muses (SP 121). The inventories of plant life, so encyclopedic in the east, here in the west blur to impressionism ("the mountains are radiant with red & blue wildflowers & the rocks are covered with lichens--yellow, orange, red, brown & green"). The sweeping Canadian landscape, moreover, did not lend itself to sips of "small, specific observation" as Pennsylvania had, but delivered itself in long quenching draughts of entire vistas and effects of the weather: "There was a fine January light on the glacier and snow-fields this morning and the river dashed through the beams like running fire," he writes of a Wednesday morning in August (SP 119). Perhaps it was to scenes such as this one he harked back when he wrote later in the *Adagia*, "We never arrive intellectually. But emotionally we arrive constantly (as in poetry, happiness, high mountains, vistas)" (*oldOP* 173).

Not only was Stevens's verbal mastery over his environment compromised in Canada, but his sense of himself as

an individual and the human in general as a separate entity--or at least as the dominant entity--in the landscape was undermined. For one thing, the role of detached observer in a physically exacting and treacherous landscape was closed to him. The land demanded the body's undivided attention: often there was no jotting down of "specific things," only their immediate translation into action to save one's neck: "The trail downhill was the most terrible I have ever travelled. At no time could one have fallen more than ten feet, but it was a difficult thing not to fall ten feet every minute" (SP 125). It was an opportunity to be a "body wholly body" (CP 128). Then, too, one may imagine a taint of anxiety or disorientation touching the puny human awash in a scene such as this one: "The peaks of the South shelve off into the heavens. Snow & cloud become confused. And the blue distances merge mountain and sky into one" (SP 123). The vast, layered landscapes spread before Stevens gave an impression of both unity and confusion in which different components of land and sky lost their discrete characteristics and their boundaries dissolved. The view created a kind of white-out experience for him, as in snow. It was not a great leap between the blurring of boundaries within the landscape to the blurring of boundaries between the human observer and the thing observed--between subject and object. The human was participant more than observer whether he liked it or not.

Very likely, a landscape such as the one Stevens encountered in Canada would have shaken his faith in the

adequacy of language to "capture" reality, and in his sense of the individual as necessarily situated in the front and center of such a scene. One way to read Stevens's poetry, therefore, is as a response to his encounters with the limits of language as well as the limits of the individual's autonomy and sovereignty.

His inherent distrust of the humanist program and his growing consciousness of an essential dependence upon nature bore directly upon his language and his poetic theory. His lifelong suspicion of metaphor, his painstaking theorizing about its function and value, and his professed suspicion of it in his later poems attest to his desire to discard the blinders of anthropocentric self-reference, and to seek--however futilely--a pre-Oedipal, pre-symbolic language expressing the unity of self and world.

Metaphor, for Wallace Stevens, is the expression of an overhumanized world. A paltry substitute for what the body provides by way of perception and experience--"sense exceeds all metaphor" (CP 431)--it fails in the face of the simplest manifestation of nonhuman reality: "The plum survives its metaphors" (CP 431). Especially in the poems of Transport to Summer and The Auroras of Autumn, Stevens seeks direct experience without conceptual intervention:

Let's see the very thing and nothing else . . .

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
Without evasion by a single metaphor.

Look at it in its essential barrenness

And say this, this is the centre that I seek.

(CP 373)

In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens acknowledges the impossibility, for a human being, of seeing anything in its "essential barrenness," since all human experience is necessarily filtered through a circumscribed set of perceptions, and, more important, usually expressed in language which is paradoxically both route to and barrier between the individual and whatever is objectively "real." To reiterate Leggett's point above, Stevens's supreme fiction "Must be Abstract," not as recommendation but as a statement of an unalterable condition of human existence--because no human experience exists apart from human perception and conceptions.

Section IV of "It Must be Abstract" acknowledges both this limitation inherent in human experience and the priority of physical reality:

The first idea was not our own. Adam

In Eden was the father of Descartes

And Eve made air the mirror of herself.

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found them-
selves

In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;

And in the earth itself they found a green--

The inhabitants of a very varnished green.
 But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
 In imitation. The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
 There was a myth before the myth began,
 Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
 That is not our own and much more, not ourselves
 In spite of blazoned days.

We are mimics. Clouds are pedagogues
 The air is not a mirror but bare board,
 Coullisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

And comic color of the rose, in which
 Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips,
 Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them

(CP 383-384)

To say that Adam (who named things) was the father of
 Descartes is to say that even in Eden dualism germinated in
 the mind.⁵ To say that Eve made air the mirror of herself is
 to say that the humanizing tendency--the bent to see
 everything in solely anthropocentric terms--goes back to the
 earliest days of creation. Since we know from other poems
 ("Sunday Morning" for example) that Stevens posited the

possibility of a non-dualistic experience (whether we call that pagan, primitivist, pre-Oedipal or whatever) we can surmise that this passage from the "Notes" describes not an inherent fact of the human condition, but rather an inherent belief present within a specific tradition (the Judeo-Christian one).

Stevens sought a poetic language without metaphor, and he conceived of poetry as an instrument of prayer and meditation--a recurrent enactment of creation rather than its product. In reconceiving the poem as event rather than object, Stevens granted the poem the status of a natural event. The successful poem, then, occurs as natural exfoliation of a specific place, a specific time and existence:

There are men whose words
Are as natural sounds
Of their place . . . (CP 51)

Central to this vision once again is Stevens's understanding of the poem not as verbal artifact, not as crystallized, objective text, but as performance and activity. Stevens's experiences in Canada may well have contributed to his reconsideration of language, and to his creation of a poetry of process. The particulars of this poetry will be discussed in Chapters Five and Six below.

3. Stevens's Symbolic Geography: The Remapping of Metaphor

America was always north to him,

A northern west or western north, but north

(CP 34)

Life is an affair of people not of places.

But for me life is an affair of places, and
that is the trouble.

(OP 185)

The phenomena that most impress Stevens during the cross-continental trip out to the Rockies are "Montreal's Frenchness," "Winnipeg's cool sunnyness," "Lake Superior's austerity" and "the rock character of the mountains above the timber-line" (SP 118). Stevens remarks once more on the forbidding visage of the Rockies when he describes "the mountains near the Vermilion Pass hooded in the gray of their rocks like deathly nuns" (SP 121). (The religious allusion here contrasts sharply with the late, pre-Canadian Stevens of the debauched-poet-persona, who said of his Mexican cigar nights that "The faces one sees through its smoke are not the faces of St. Paul or St. Francis or of Mary or Ruth.") The Stevens reader recognizes immediately that the conditions of Frenchness and austerity, as well as a pervasiveness of rock to remind one of the stark, solidly physical reality of nature, mark Stevens's poetry as well as Canada's geography.

A climate of "cool sunnyness," too, is familiar in the brilliant, ostensibly "cold" (according to many readers) clarity of Stevens's meditative poems. This "cool sunnyness"

signals an aspect of Stevens's experience in Canada that, while he did not amplify upon it at the time in his journals, has come to be associated so closely with Stevens's entire mentality that it cannot be overlooked here: namely, that the conditions of snow, cold, iciness, brilliant light and wintriness occurred in what to Stevens's eastern mindset was still summer (the trip began in mid-August). It is in these terms, for example, that Stevens describes Crispin's experience of America:

America was always north to him,
 A northern west or western north, but north,
 And thereby polar, polar-purple, chilled
 And lank . . .
 The spring came there in clinking pannicles
 Of half-dissolving frost, the summer came,
 If ever, whisked and wet, not ripening,
 Before the winter's vacancy returned.
 The myrtle, if the myrtle ever bloomed,
 Was like a glacial pink upon the air.
 The green palmettoes in crepuscular ice
 Clipped frigidly blue-black meridians,
 Morose chiaroscuro, gauntly drawn (CP 34).

The polar north, where the spring clinks icily and wet summer never ripens, where even the flower called a pink, in being a "glacial pink," evokes the sense of a cold sunset on a mountain, infect Stevens imagery so much that even the

palmetto, which is normally associated with Florida, is lodged in "crepuscular ice."

The notions of a chill and short-lived summer and of a glacial iciness overcoming one in youth pervade Harmonium, the poet's first volume of poems, published when he was 44, particularly in poems such as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "The Comedian as the Letter C." The themes of the unities of summer and winter, sun and snow, cold and clarity recur throughout the rest of Stevens's work as well, though after Harmonium he puts that set of related images to uses other than to describe his midlife crisis and his disappointment in marriage. In "The Auroras of Autumn," for example, in which Stevens explores the decreative function of imagination, he attributes a wintriness to the imagination itself, which, "grim as it is benevolent. . . in the midst of summer stops/To imagine winter[.]" (CP 417). He continues his query about the nature of the imagination in images that, not accidentally, suggest an icy, snowy, star-studded mountain night, even to the near-comic detail of a goat, which evokes both a shivering Pan and the actual animals Stevens saw (and pursued!) in Canada:

When the leaves are dead,
Does it take its place in the north and enfold
itself,
Goat-leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting

In highest night? And do these heavens adorn

And proclaim it, the white creator of black, hettied
By extinguishings, even of planets as may be,

Even of earth, even of sight, in snow,
Except as needed by way of majesty,
In the sky, as crown and diamond cabala?

The images constellated around this winter-in-summer motif--a motif lying somewhere between carpe diem and ubi sunt--suggests that they, like so many of the focal images in Stevens's poetry, had their gestation in Canada.

The height and distance of the mountains, their bare, forbidding "rock character," the severity of the lakes and glaciers, the fiery dazzle of the snow and ice, the brilliant patches of lichens and wildflowers in contrast to the snow, the soundless groves of ancient trees devoid of birdsong, the paucity of human language in such surroundings, the presence of so many wintry elements in what to Stevens was technically still summertime--all of these impressions accrued to that conglomerate of ideas, images, and sensations that Stevens comes to associate with the North in the symbolic geography of his poetry.

Critical consensus has it that the significance of North and South in Stevens's poetry breaks down more or less neatly into categories contrived by Stevens's spiritual and intellectual mentor at college, George Santayana, who "associated with North its barren Protestantism. . . the comprehensive symbol of all that was grievously wrong with the

business of modern life" and the South, where "form, cultural pessimism, strong authority, and beauty for its own sake were admired" (Coyle 21).⁶ Santayana's influence notwithstanding, the symbology of the North as a place of hardship, sobriety, profit and (consequently) spiritual exaltation, and the South as a place of comparative indolence, indulgence, and a congenial aesthetic has ruled America's mental geography from the settlements of Jamestown and Plymouth onward. Traditionally, then, if North was the place of workaday gloom and sexual repression, South was the place of lushness, freshness, floweredness, and physical freedom. If the North was masculine, then the South was feminine.⁷

Even in the informal context of letters or conversations, Stevens frequently resorted to the shorthand of the conventional North/South dichotomy. If his was the realm of intellect and business (North), then Elsie's was that of warmth and sensuality, as well as feminine inconsistency (South). Wooing Elsie, he wrote once, "I want to steep myself in you, if I may use so extraordinary a term--as if you were a South wind and as if I were--well, a dingy fellow, as I am" (Richardson Early 312). After Holly was born, Stevens wrote to William Carlos Williams that the baby was "as well-behaved as a south-wind" (L 245). (The application of "wind" as an endearment toward the two most important women in Stevens's life leads one to all sorts of provocative, if irrelevant, speculation, since "wind" in Stevens's poetry comes quickly to represent the howling, inhuman voice of uncontrollable

nature!) Improvising wryly on the theme of the North's meanness one late October, he wrote to his Cuban friend Rodriguez-Feo, "The moon which moves around over Havana these nights like a waitress serving drinks moves around over Connecticut the same nights like someone poisoning her husband" (L 655). Rodriguez-Feo himself recalled to Peter Brazeau conversations with Stevens about Havana, Florida and other points South:

He always talked with nostalgia about the South and south Florida. And the climate, too. Of course, this is typical of the people who live in the cold country, but to him it was not going to Florida [or] going to Havana to get away from the cold. It was something sensuous in his appreciation of being in Florida: what he felt in the skin. He said that [there] you live in your senses more than [you do when] you live in a cold place (Brazeau 141).

Stevens's earliest poetic associations with the North and South conform to this pattern, and for good reason, biographically speaking. Both Stevens's businessman's career and his suffocating home life achieved their full momentum in white-clapboard Connecticut. Meanwhile, from the time of Stevens's first employment at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in 1916 through the 1940s, Florida (and occasionally other points South, including Cuba) became the locus, however intermittently and in whatever circumscribed a

fashion, of his brief periods of freedom from home, wife and child as well as from the New England winters.

Given that the fictive "South" of Stevens's poems throughout Harmonium suggests human experience in a pre-civilized context and human solitude against a background of alarmingly lush jungles and beaches, it is ironic that the importance of the actual Florida in Stevens's life was largely social. Peter Brazeau has written that Stevens's "relationship with the South. . . was very much an affair of people. . . largely through his thirty-year friendship with Arthur Powell, head of the Atlanta law firm that often represented the Hartford on bond-claims cases in the South [with whom] Stevens enjoyed the closest friendship of his mature years" (Brazeau 94). Stevens's excursions to Florida in some ways reproduced the invigorating primitivism of Canada--"It was bowl and pitcher and outside toilets, just really rough. There was no water down there, no lights" recalls the wife of a friend who accompanied Stevens to Long Key Fishing Camp, one of the places Stevens stayed (Brazeau 98). Food, drink and camaraderie flowed copiously in Florida; and Florida was the site of the famous Stevens-Hemingway brawl (Brazeau 98; Richardson, Later Years 124). Many of Stevens's Florida friends were not even aware that he wrote poetry, so in that respect, too, the experience of Florida was removed from the solitary and cerebral activity of poetry.

It is curious, therefore, that the poems in Harmonium and in Ideas of Order regarding, or merely influenced by, Florida

reflect no such lively sociability or confraternity (as, for example, the Canadian journals had) but rather often depict a speaker stranded in a stiflingly hot and solitary night, or on a beach listening to the sea drone on senselessly ("There will never be an end/ To this droning of the surf" writes Stevens in "Fabliau of Florida"). Harmonium, the volume of Stevens's poems most overgrown with tropical foliage, dampest and rankest with overwrought, unfulfilled sexuality, indeed portrays the South as both the tangled landscape of impenetrable wilderness (as much of Florida literally was in the early part of this century) and as the taunting and unattainable seductress, a female Tantalus bearing the honey of earth that both comes and goes at once. The title, "O Florida, Venereal Soil," identifies Florida with the goddess of love at the same time that it suggests disease. Indeed the poem depicts a state of extreme sexual dis-ease. The speaker asks Florida for some revelation of the real--"A few things for themselves,/ Florida, venereal soil,/ Disclose to the lover," (CP 47) only to witness a procession of figures who disclose "The dreadful sundry of the world" and somehow presage death:

The Cuban, Polodowsky,
 The Mexican women,
 The negro undertaker
 Killing the time between corpses
 Fishing for crayfish . . . (CP 47).

Here as elsewhere the tropics explode with an almost revolting profligacy, a senseless fecundity that engenders the world's "dreadful sundry." When the speaker addresses Florida as "Virgin of boorish births" in the next line, he suggests a depraved mother, spilling forth a steady onslaught of births and a flux of corpses, who nevertheless remains somehow virgin and unpenetrated, as a wilderness might be.

Then:

Swiftly in the nights,
In the porches of Key West,
Behind the bougainvilleas,
After the guitar is asleep,
Lasciviously as the wind,
You come tormenting,
Insatiable,

When you might sit,
A scholar of darkness,
Sequestered over the sea,
Wearing a clear tiara
Of red and blue and red,
Sparkling, solitary, still,
In the high sea-shadow.

Donna Donna, dark
Stooping in indigo gown
And cloudy constellations,

Conceal yourself or disclose

Fewest things to the lover--

A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,

A pungent bloom against your shade (CP 48).

Florida, the insatiable mother, does not cease to produce or to consume. When the speaker wishes to make of this lascivious and tormenting being a "scholar of darkness," he describes her in terms of a starlit clarity and brilliance that, in Stevens's poems, are more often associated with North: she is to wear a "clear tiara" (which one assumes is a figure for the night sky) that is "sparkling, solitary, still." The last stanza makes of this harpy a madonna "stooping in indigo gown," and asks that she temper her fecundity and disclose "[f]ewest things" instead of a dreadful sundry--a hand or a single bloom.

The frightfulness of nature as a production/consumption machine is conveyed with less finesse by Stevens in a poem whose title alone says it all: "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs" (CP 78). In this poem, the world is a mouth that does not speak, only eats. The last stanza of this poem dispels the illusion that men are at the top of this grotesque food chain by depicting humans as the prey of time. The man "who erected this cabin, planted/This field, and tended it awhile" doesn't know

That the hours of his indolent, arid days,

Grotesque with this nosing in banks,

This somnolence and rattapallax,

Seemed to suckle themselves on his arid being,
 As the swine-like rivers suckled themselves
 While they went seaward to the sea-mouths (CP 78).

"Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shore," another poem that addresses Nature's indolent, intoxicating effect, portrays the mind as stupefied by Nature: "The mind roamed as a moth roams,/Among the blooms beyond the open sand" (CP 22). This mind, which like a flower "had lain folded against the blue/ And the colored purple of the lazy sea," awakes, and in awakening becomes a "monstered moth" (CP 22). Against a background of senseless seashore noises --"the blather that the water made"--to which the mind is in any case oblivious, it plunges toward flowers as though it were plunging toward an obliterating flame. It

Rose up besprent and sought the flaming red

Dabbled with yellow pollen--red as red

As the flag above the old cafe--

and roamed there all the stupid afternoon (22).

Stevens suggests that a mind that awakens only to such indolence in Nature would have been better left asleep. The mind's monstrousness resides in a half-sleep, when, partly awakened and conscious, it floats through, and apart from, either bodily or transcendental experience.

Florida as physical embodiment of Nature as eternal repetition and reproduction may have been disturbing to Stevens, but it was not nearly so disturbing as Florida in its

guise as a kind of Eden. Judging from the depiction of Eden in a poem such as "Sunday Morning," Stevens, it seems, thought that the Fall of Man was just as well. (Joseph Riddel makes the point that "Stevens' Satan is more naturally he who has given man his selfhood" [Clairvoyant Eye 216]). In "Sunday Morning", Eden is, if anything, the place where nature is removed from natural process, where nothing ever changes, and which is suspended forever in a parody of fruition.

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang? (CP 69).

When Adam and Eve fell from paradise, they were effectively hurtled into the world of process: birth and death, fruition and decay, joy and suffering. Eden before that was static and stagnant: no development or discovery was possible. The lack of dualism in Eden was not the result of a fruitful binding of opposites into a whole, but rather the truncating of potential and the atrophying of human capacity for experience. The wholeness that Stevens sought embodied opposites and encompassed paradox. Moreover, it situated human life within a greater context of all life. A strictly human paradise was bland and uninteresting to Stevens, as was a paradise presided over by a patriarchal anthropomorphized

deity. Given the Twilight Zone vision of heaven depicted in "Sunday Morning," it is no wonder that Stevens comes late in his career to prefer the total leaflessness of New Haven on the brink of winter.

In contrast to the changeless tropics, the North was the ever-present reminder of natural cycles, process and change. Even its winter dormancy was a promise of summer--always more enticing to Stevens than the crude heat of summer itself. In another letter to Rodriguez-Feo, evidently written on a stifling July day in 1949, Stevens wrote:

Midsummer is a suffocating time and I long, not for Cuba, but for a cottage, say, in Sweden on a lake surrounded by dark green forests in which all the trees talk Swedish. . . . (L 644).

The lake, the cottage and the dark green forest (speaking Swedish) compose the Northern landscape Stevens longs for. The aesthetic and physical pleasure the South offered paradoxically seemed a barrier to the full experience of the place. The North demanded more, and in doing so, engaged body, mind--and poet--more fully. Crispin, in his travels, thinks

Perhaps the Arctic moonlight really gave
The liaison, the blissful liaison
Between himself and his environment,
Which was, and is, chief motive, first delight,
For him . . . (CP 34)

Joseph Riddel writes that " North and America. . . were alien worlds for a poet in search of the congenial: vulgar and cold yet enticingly virgin, unploughed and --to pick up another of ['Ploughing on Sunday's] strange allusions--in need of a 'Remus.'" (Eye 70) It must be remembered, however, that the exploration of an "alien" world--and the acknowledgement that for the physical world to become "real" to a human being in Stevens's time it had to be made "alien" again first--was Steven's project and goal. Riddel follows up his observation with an interesting question: "Does Stevens mean here the old American mythmaker, or the mythical founder of cities, or both?" (Eye 70). Stevens, who felt that there were enough cities to press upon a person ("We are close together in every way. We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no distance" [NA 18]), no doubt alluded to the more earthy and folkloric figure.

The North is the region of snow, ice, cold, leaflessness, barrenness, and dormancy rather than fruition. Yet these elements of the weather do not necessarily demonstrate any negative aspect of Nature or the human mood, and in fact to think so would be to fall into the pathetic fallacy that Stevens goes to some lengths to avoid. The North in hibernation, for Stevens, is always the promise and the proof of Nature's processes.

If the North was desirable, it was not because it represented human achievement in the face of nature's own ever-threatening, unreasoning fecundity; nor was it either

attractive or repugnant by virtue of any stance toward "reason" that the North (with its necessary associations with New England) may have represented. Rationalists in square hats were objects of ridicule, it is true, but they were sillier in sombreros. Puritan responses to those aspects of Nature that the North represented were manifestations of a possible human response that Stevens rejected. Surely, the northern cold struck the fear of God, or at least the fear of freezing to death in an inhospitable universe, in the hearts of men, but it invigorated and delighted as well.

Conversely, while the South is in fact associated with lushness and those manifestations of nature most congenial to human beings--warmth, abundant fruit, an Edenic atmosphere--Stevens's rejection of the South is not so much a rejection of a wild and primitive nature that threatens to obliterate human achievement and consciousness, not the fear that a too-thriving natural world would subsume the human, as it is the rejection of an environment too congenial to the human: so congenial that it afforded no opportunity to experience real "otherness."

Just as the word "inhuman" in Stevens is neutral and not negative, those words most closely associated with the North, as "snow," "cold," "barren," etc., signal unmitigated and unmediated Nature. The wind that howls through the wilderness for example is the raw, neutral voice of that Nature. Cold is the universe not seen through human eyes; it may be cold to the human, but it is at least "real" and therefore desirable.

Snow is figure for Nature's silence and the blanketing (blanking) aspects of time and process. The rock is nature at its harshest "real." That same rock, too, is what is most permanent about nature; what is unchanging and unchangeable beneath the "iridescent changes" (CP 279), the "permanence composed of impermanence" (CP 472), to which Stevens's poetry aspires.

Notes to Chapter II

1. Years later, in 1913 when Stevens wrote to his wife Elsie about "trying to get together a little collection of verses again," he expressed chagrin at the activity: "Keep all this a great secret. There is something absurd about all this writing of verses. . . my habits are positively lady-like" (SP 257).

2. "I must try not to be a dilettante--half dream, half deed. I must be all dream or all deed" (SP 71).

3. Holly Stevens inserts the following bracketed note at this point in the entry: " [On the page above this Stevens has drawn a diagram showing the position of the goat in relation to Hosey and himself, and a note: 'If Hosey had gone to B & cut off the goat's escape up A & if I had gone via D to C, we might have had a better chance. We both went to B * the goat went to C & down to E & we had to fire down a precipice & missed.']" (SP 124-125).

4. When Stevens was preparing to be married, he acquired a deer's head to place over the mantle in his and Elsie's prospective apartment. About this purchase, Joan Richardson notes, ". . . perhaps he expected his memories of British Columbia to continue to be prompted by this addition. Specific recollections and images born during that first and last time of real freedom and self-sufficiency kept presenting themselves over these days" (Early Years, 363).

5. Hines writes, "The efforts of both Adam and Descartes resulted in their seeing the world as a reflection of their own mind. Hence, 'Eve made air the mirror of herself' instead of attempting to see it in the 'first idea' of it. The initial impulse of the mythical first humans was the same as that of Descartes. Both constructed a dual world, one of the mind and one of reality (the earth and 'the second earth'). The point of the parable of Adam and Eve and Descartes is that the implied difference between mind and world is a false difference that is erroneously imposed upon a world whose origin and source are the same as those of the mind" (169).

6. "Nature's vital rhythms are potentially the lure of imagination and may deceive even as they delight. . . . reason is Northern, imagination Southern--or so it is in the early poems. Reason resists change, abstracting absolutely, imagination dotes on it, abstracting proximately. Reason reduces to form; imagination discovers the life of forms. Associated with the frigid North are the personae of rationalist and religionist who, along with the ascetic, are the early anti-selves of Stevens' world. . . . [In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"] elegance and rhetoric disport together at the expense of dreary asceticism" (Riddle, Clairvoyant Eye, 71-72).

7. Joseph Riddel writes that "reason is Northern, imagination Southern--or so it is in the early poems. Reason resists change, abstracting absolutely, imagination dotes on it, abstracting proximately. Reason reduces to form; imagination discovers the life of forms. Associated with the frigid North are the personae of rationalist and religionist who, along with the ascetic, are the early anti-selves of Stevens' world . . ." (Clairvoyant Eye 71-72). Stevens's Cuban friend, Jose Rodriguez-Feo, the founder and editor in Havana of the literary magazine Origenes, with whom Stevens conducted an avid correspondence from 1945 to the end of his life, "bitterly observed from his own experience and his close reading of Santayana [that in the North] all doors opened on routine, enterprise, strict if unhappy monogamy, and life of dull, repetitive work" (Coyle 21).

Chapter III

"Notations of the Wild": The Case for an Ecological Poetic

What is man that thou shouldest magnify him?
and that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him?

Job 7:17

1. A Restatement of Romance

Air is air,
Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.

(CP 137)

Wallace Stevens's inheritance from Romanticism has been well documented and it is still generally true that "most of Stevens' critics see him as a theoretical romantic" (Lentricchia, *Gaiety* 120). Stevens's work has been read as an exponent of visionary humanism¹ and of the Romantic sublime²; and numerous critics have discussed Stevens's debts to Emerson, Shelley³, Keats,⁴ Whitman,⁵ and Wordsworth.⁶

Given the plethora of works devoted to explicating the similarities between Stevens and his Romantic predecessors, it would be well to consider Ricardo Quinones's sensible reminder concerning literary legacy (itself a variation on Eliot's witty observation about "us" knowing more than dead writers knew precisely because the dead writers are what we know)⁷:

. . . to overestimate the presence of Romanticism
in the struggle of the Modern is to deny history
itself. . . . the Moderns had one component the
Romantics could not have had--they had Romanticism

itself. They not only shared in the fundamental reaction to the Enlightenment, but they had to contend with Romanticism as well (Quinones 127).

Specifically, Stevens had to contend with Romantic assumptions about the seamless continuum between mind and nature, and about language's ability to express that continuum. However, if Romanticism had failed, as a movement, to right imbalances effected by the Enlightenment because it continued to operate on the basis of Enlightenment dichotomies, it was even less equipped to meet the needs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, since it could obviously not anticipate all the changes wrought by history, science, technology, chance and circumstance. Frank Lentricchia has described Stevens's aims in writing a new nature poetry for the twentieth century capable of answering to the momentous changes of his time:

The modern poem, for Stevens, must rest on a theoretical foundation that owes much to the philosophical naturalism that helped bury romanticism in its pristine form. It will be a poem of process itself; it will be made of the particulars (the pleasant and the horrible) of modern experience; the modern poem will mirror Darwin's reality (Lentricchia, Gaiety 172).

What Darwin's reality demanded was no less than a revision of the human sense of identity. Creation, it turned out, was an ever-evolving, continuous process that appeared to work on a

suspiciously trial-and-error basis, and had apparently been going on for a long time without human participation (Moorehead 83). When The Origin of the Species was published in 1859, codifying and formalizing theories that had been circulating for two generations, it upset accepted values of stability and hierarchy, and it appeared to favor such not very ennobling traits as diversity, adaptability, and to some degree, even chance.

In one fell swoop, human presence was unceremoniously jettisoned from both the center and the apex of creation. Nature, it seemed, accorded humanity no special status within the teeming crowd of creation, a vast number of which had in succession put in brief appearances and then vanished into oblivion. Moreover, Darwinism simultaneously planted physical human presence squarely along the continuum of evolving biological life forms on earth and uprooted metaphysical presence in the cosmos.

Darwin's reality was a commonplace by the time Stevens was born. It was during his own lifetime, however, that the "new physics" effected a similarly cataclysmic upheaval in accepted notions of the composition of the material world and the human role within it. Stevens followed the developing science of his time with great interest and incorporated it into his own poetic theory.⁸ (Stevens was considerably less interested in the more accessible technological developments going on around him.⁹) The new view of "Nature as a constant flux or flow of energy transformations" required the revamping

of the unquestioned acceptance of simple, linear, cause-and-effect relationships in the material world, as well as a revised understanding of the scientist's (or any observer's) role in the behavior of the phenomena observed (Devall 88).

The scientific accuracy of Stevens's understanding of quantum theory or relativity is less important than what he made of these theories in his essays and poems. The similarities Stevens perceived between the worlds of science and poetry elevated his regard for science--"The imagination is not the only co-relation of reality. Science etc." he jotted (OP 197)--and seemed to verify that, even by "scientific" standards, poetry was a valid analogue for reality.¹⁰ Thus, Stevens adapted "Einstein's redefinition of reality as energy or process" (Steinman 60) to evolve his own understanding of material reality as well as of the role of human perception in creating that reality. The material world, on the most fundamental physical level, exists in a state of flux; appearances are indeed deceiving, as Eastern and Western philosophy had long contended; objectivity in any pure sense is impossible; and the mind is a participant in the creation of "reality."¹¹ Stevens translated these ideas into a statement of his poetics in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

The subject matter of poetry is not 'a collection of solid, static objects extended in space,' but the life that is lived in the scene that it

composes; and reality is not that external scene
but the life that is lived in it (NA 25).

Out of his sense of the "life that is lived" in a world of flux, energy transformation, and the ongoing metamorphosis of matter, Stevens evolved a poetry of process.

The incorporation of scientific ideas into his poetry, rather than the resistance to them, was only one of the important ways in which Stevens differed from his Romantic predecessors.¹² The second and yet more important way that Stevens differed from the Romantics also grew, at least in part, out of the new science and the philosophical naturalism it seemed to underwrite.¹³ If the new science confirmed the continuity of human beings as a species with the rest of the material universe, then it also implied the discontinuity between human perception and "things as they are" (CP 165). Given a despiritualized universe in which matter stands apart from the human perception of it, Stevens was unable to accept the humanizing tendency that some of his Romantic predecessors had embraced.¹⁴

Stevens needed to reconceive the place of the human being in a natural scheme that did not reflect human values or desires. He did not, for example, hear in nature "the still, sad music of humanity" as Wordsworth had at "Tintern Abbey." And while Stevens provisionally accepted Emerson's assertion that "Every natural fact is a symbol for some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind" (32), he accepted the correspondence as one of humanity's

supreme fictions. Spiritual facts, Stevens knew, are not inherently embedded in nature for the benefit of human instruction. Stevens was far more attuned to the negative sublime of Shelley's "Mont Blanc," in which the terrible power of nature "dwells apart in its tranquility/ Remote, serene, and inaccessible"; yet Stevens nevertheless escaped Shelley's revulsion at the idea of a nature indifferent to human values, at the same time that he announced that "It is the human that is alien,/ The human that has no cousin in the moon" (CP 328).

Stevens's legacy from Romanticism, then, may be seen as a combined adaptation of, and resistance to, a particular stance toward nature. The poet's youthful efforts, discussed in Chapter I, demonstrate the liveliness within him of the Romantic impetus to naturalize the human--to return the human to its proper grounding in reality. As Stevens develops into a mature poet, however, he increasingly resists those elements in Romanticism that tend to humanize nature. It is these same tendencies that D.H. Lawrence ridiculed when he scoffed that Wordsworth had turned the Great God Pan into Lucy Gray, and that Whitman had turned him into Lucifer Gray¹⁵!

The worst injustice humanity can perpetrate upon the natural world, in Stevens's view, is to attempt to see itself and its own values reflected in it. Such a program robs Nature of its inherent power--which lies precisely in its otherness--and renders it a paltry and diminished version of the human world. Seen in this light, it inevitably comes up short: an anthropomorphized world is ironically a dehumanized

world. It is just such a diminished, not to say repulsive, world that the earnest Mr. Homburg posits in "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly":

. . . a mechanical

And slightly detestable operandum, free

From man's ghost, larger and yet a little like,

Without his literature and without his gods . . .

and he goes on to speculate that

No doubt we live beyond ourselves in air,

In an element that does not do for us,

So well, that which we do for ourselves . . .

(CP 518)

Nature in this passage, a spiritless operandum, appears in its worst possible manifestation, as something distorted by human mind and will: it is anthropomorphized and dehumanized at once. Somehow a projection of the human (it is "Larger and a little like"), it is nevertheless incapable of the productions of the human spirit ("Without his literature and without his gods"), and is therefore like a vulgar and brutish human.

What worries Wallace Stevens is that Nature, his fat girl, his terrestrial, his summer, his night, might be a bimbo or a bitch. While the whole of Stevens's poetic project is the systematic unravelling of that relatively recent Western humanist view that renders Nature passive, mechanical, senseless and mindless, Stevens nevertheless gives vent to

this negative view of Nature both to disparage it and, more often, to acknowledge its tenacious hold on his own imagination. As we have seen in "Fabliau of Florida," "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shore," "O Florida, Venereal Soil" and other poems in Harmonium, the South is Stevens's Siren, embodiment of Nature at its most profligate, concupiscent and smothering; these poems record the effort of prying the South's grip off of Stevens's senses. Long after he succeeds in bidding farewell to Florida, Stevens returns to the theme of Nature's brutishness.

Elsewhere, too, Stevens describes the distastefully repetitive, even vulgar, but powerful forces of Nature. The crowd of bethouing and ke-keing birds in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" ("Change": VI) clamor stupidly, relentlessly.

The yammering of bloody wren, felon jay, jug-throated robin produce an "idiot minstrelsy" amounting to "a single text, granite monotony" (CP 394), a glaring, blaring undifferentiated cacophony that Stevens sums up in the terrifying images of "Eye without lid, mind without any dream" (CP 394). Stevens fears this fractal world "in which the first leaf is the tale/Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird//Of stone, that never changes" (CP 394)-- that is, Nature without development, progress or modulation. In this passage, Nature's sacred cycles are mere repetitions that come to nothing. The birds in "The Notes" produce a sound like any other sound: "It will end" (CP 394).

In "Puella Parvula," too, seemingly great things are undone by Nature's insatiably niggling creatures:

Every thread of summer is at last unwoven.

By one caterpillar is great Africa devoured

And Gibraltar is dissolved like spit in the wind

(CP 456).

The caterpillar is metonym for the conditions described in "Frogs Eat Butterflies etc." (CP 78). The poem goes on to inventory a series of phenomena standing for Nature's spiritual vacancy, all boisterousness and brute power: the wind and "the legends of its roaring,"

The elephant on the roof and its elephantine

blaring,

The bloody lion in the yard at night or ready to

spring

From the clouds in the midst of trembling trees

Making a great gnashing. . . (CP 456).

The poem boasts that "Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs/Like a trumpet" Yet to say that the imagination triumphs like a trumpet implies merely that it proclaims itself, while its actual triumph remains a matter of speculation. The imagination orders nature to silence itself while the human master composes its elements into an intelligible tale:

Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch. O mind

Gone wild, be what he tells you to be: Puella.

Write pax across the window pane. And then

Be still. The summarius in excelsis begins . . .

Flame, sound, fury composed. . . Hear what he

says,

The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale

(CP 456).

The masterfulness of the dauntless master is severely undercut by the vocabulary of the poem's last stanza, which recalls the sound and the fury of another tale--one told by an idiot.

Stevens's way out of the paradox of loving and revering nature, yet fearing those aspects of it that seem the antithesis of all that human judgment regards as good or valuable, was to acknowledge nature's unmitigated otherness and the inapplicability of human values to it. One example of Stevens confronting this dilemma in the poetry is in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," in which, throughout the first third of the poem, Stevens posits a "first idea"--a physical universe, pristine in its otherness and prior to all human conception--and explores both the nature of what such an idea might be and the possible methods of arriving at it. The fifth poem in the "Notes" describes a process of taming Nature to fit human expectation, and the pitiable results:

The lion roars at the enraging desert,
Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise,
Defies red emptiness to evolve his match,

Master by foot and jaws and by the mane,
Most supple challenger. The elephant
Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares,

The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks,
Shattering velvetest far-away. The bear,
The ponderous cinnamon, snarls in his mountain

At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow.
But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,
Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

Yet voluble dumb violence. You look
Across the roofs as sigil and as ward
And in your centre mark them and are cowed. . .

These are the heroic children whom time breeds
Against the first idea--to lash the lion,
Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle

(CP 384-385).

This domestication of powerful lives--those of the lion, the
elephant and the bear (the first of whom also appears in
"Puella Parvula") parallels the process of human domestication

and imprisonment. The "ephebe," a caricature of the suffering Romantic poet who wrings poems from his suffering, is confined, like a madman, to an attic. Even his instrument, the piano, is rented and not his own, and in any case he isn't playing it but is lying on the bed, clutching the pillow. "Writhe" and "writhing" are words that in sound and appearance resemble a lisped version of "writing," suggesting that the oxymoronic "voluble dumb violence" is the product of the ephebe's writhing/writing. This violence, however, is as sorry as the lashed lion, the caparisoned elephant, and the juggling bear. It is not the "violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36); it is merely violence wreaked mutually upon Nature and human nature. The adjective "heroic" here is heavily ironic.

* * * * *

The paradox of Wallace Stevens's poetry is this: that in order to reinstate nature as the fundamental power and foundation for human life, Stevens did not try to demonstrate an identification or continuity between nature and the mind or spirit, but did precisely the opposite: he regarded nature to be unmitigatedly other. For self and other to be reconciled, it was the difference that had to be acknowledged. The relation needed to be established on a new footing. As Helen Reguiero has written:

The first step toward this transformation of
consciousness, as Stevens has been suggesting

intermittently since Parts of a World, is the affirmation of a reality outside the realm of the imagination, a reality that remains untouched and unapproachable. . . . The naming of the objects creates an absence, a disjunction between the concept and the thing (201). . . . Yet there remains, beneath the objects, named, an undefinable reality. . . . (202)

It is in allowing the discontinuities between mind and nature that Stevens most prominently differs from his Romantic predecessors and most forcefully refuses the panaceas of transcendence. Thus, in "Re-statement of Romance" (CP 146) Stevens writes, a bit ruefully one feels,

The night knows nothing of the chants of night.
It is what it is as I am what I am:
And in perceiving this I best perceive myself

And you.

In asserting that the night "is what it is as I am what I am," Stevens declines to puzzle over questions of the mind's priority over nature, or vice versa. The question itself is irrelevant because unanswerable within the context of available human experience. What exists is this: "The night knows nothing of the chants of night./ It is what it is and I am what I am."

What the night does not know is the same thing the sea does not know in "The Idea of Order at Key West": it doesn't

know the human songs it engenders; nor does it know its own wild, wordless songs, since, being a natural phenomenon, it lacks consciousness of itself. Nevertheless, just as the singer's song in "The Idea of Order at Key West" made "the sky acutest at its vanishing" (CP 129), so this difference between the night and me (says the speaker) allows me best to "perceive myself/ And you." In perceiving this unbreachable gap--the gap which is the font of all human desire toward anything--I best perceive myself and you not (only) because we two are lovers joined against the blankness of the world, but because you, too, are other: you, too are what you are as I am what I am. This double difference--between the speaker and the night, and between the speaker and the person he addresses--makes the experience of oneness acutest at its vanishing. Not only is the night "other" but other people are "other" too in so far as they are as Emerson wrote, part of the NOT ME that I call Nature.

The poem, then, is indeed a restatement of romance in that it declines the promise of Romantic transcendence by denying an inherent unity or identity between mind and nature. The poem continues to propose oneness and mutuality between the humans by virtue of the very difference between human and universe: yet at the same time the poem repeatedly undermines its own assertions of unity even between the humans in the tugs of doubt and ambiguity suggested by its language :

Only we two may interchange

Each in the other what each has to give.

Only we two are one, not you and night,

Nor night and I, but you and I, alone,

So much alone, so deeply by ourselves,

So far beyond the casual solitudes,

That night is only the background to our selves,

Supremely true each to its separate self,

In the pale light that each upon the other throws.

(CP 146)

Despite the assertion that "we two are one," the speaker's emphasis on solitude-- "alone,/So much alone, so deeply by ourselves"--leaves even the human bond tenuous. What remains "Supremely true each to its separate self/ In the pale light that each upon the other throws" remains ambiguous, in that the description modifies "selves" as much as it modifies the sense of night vs. selves.

Stevens came to the question of this absence of the human in the greater part of nature by first considering, as so many poets of his time did, the absence of the gods. Romanticism had relocated the gods in nature; Stevens had to do without the gods altogether. The section that follows considers the question of belief and how it contributed to Stevens's ideas on humanism.

2. "Self Pity's Kin": Stevens, Humanism, and Anthropocentrism

A too, too human God, self-pity's kin. . .

(CP 315)

He disposes the world in categories, thus:

The peopled and the unpeopled.

(CP 323)

Like many poets of his time, Stevens recognized the question of religious belief and its decline in the twentieth century to be a central one.¹⁶ The distinction Stevens felt between the deity in the church and the deity in the woods interested him as a poetic subject, but what interested him far more was humanity's relationship to these deities, and humanity's position in light of their respective demises in the twentieth century. That religion was no longer generally available as either faith or as metaphor was an issue that troubled Stevens all his life. In 1906 he wrote in his journal, "I grow tired of the want of faith--the instinct of faith" (L 86). In 1940 he wrote to a friend, "I ought to say that it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of a substitute for religion" (L 348). And in an essay entitled "Two or Three Ideas" he described the central experience of the twentieth century in this way:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been

overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. Since we have always shared all things with them and have always had a part of their strength and, certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise in this experience of annihilation.

It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude. . . . (OP 260).¹⁷

The consequence of the gods' demise, Stevens goes on to say, is that it left "in every man the increasingly human self . . . [and] left it for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms" (OP 260).

What is striking in Stevens is his fierce resistance to the customary humanistic solutions to the failure of faith. In a letter dated 1940, Stevens wrote, "Humanism would be the natural substitute, but the more I see of humanism, the less I like it" (L 348). Stevens was adamant in his rejection of humanism as a full-fledged philosophy, as an adequate substitute for religion, or as a useful way to conceive the human being's role in the natural world. Returning to the subject three years later, he wrote in 1943, "The trouble with humanism," he wrote, "is that man as God remains man" (L 434). As Stevens saw it, the flaw in the notion of man as god--that is, of an increasingly human self--is that the universe in which humans must dwell and by which they are engulfed remains relentlessly non-human. "The chief defect of humanism," he

wrote elsewhere, "is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction" (L 449)

On the issue of what this something else might be, Stevens was rather definite. In one notebook entry, he takes exception to an author's view that "The philosopher could not love the indefinite and impersonal principle of order in the universe any more than he could love atmospheres and oceans." To this, Stevens, retorts:

For myself, the indefinite, the impersonal, atmospheres and oceans and, above all, the principle of order are precisely what I love; and I don't see why, for a philosopher, they should not be the ultimate inamorata. The premise [which Stevens rejects] is that the universe is explicable only in terms of humanity (qtd. in Morse, xxxiii)

For Stevens, the true object of belief, and even of love, is the impersonal principle or order in the world: this is Emerson's Necessity and Fate, Thoreau's "Matter, vast, terrific,"; Kant's "enormous a priori" (a phrase Stevens adopts). Stevens accepts nature as the center of human experience at the same time that he rejects Emerson's notion of any "radical correspondence between visible things and human thought" (Emerson 33). When Stevens wrote to his friend Henry Church (as part of a gloss on "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery") that "An anthropomorphic god is simply a projection of itself by a race of egoists, which it is natural

for them to treat as sacred" (L 349), he was referring not only to a Judeo-Christian deity, but to all expressions of anthropomorphizing nature as well, including the pantheism of the Transcendentalists. The pathetic fallacy of a humanized god is what Stevens objected to when he wrote:

. . . we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic. . . . The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty

(NA 138).

Making use of the liberty of the imagination for Stevens mean unflinchingly acknowledging bare reality, in all its "distance, change or nothingness" (CP 397).

Stevens saw the overwhelming obstacle in his time to finding a center to human experience to be the insistence upon a human universe. For this reason, Stevens comes to regard "the increasingly human self"--with, in the humanist tradition, mind and imagination as its great distinctions--to be part and parcel of the problem of belief. For Stevens, man was not, contrary to Protagoras, the measure of all things; man was the measure of human things. The imposition of human values and ideals upon the universe at large only diminishes constructs (fictions) that work well enough within a human context but are in no way reflected or validated by the natural world. The only kind of god that Stevens is able to envision is, like nature, permanently silent. To this god,

Stevens addresses a prayer in the form of a poem called "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit":

If there must be a god in the house, must be
Saying things in the rooms and on the stair,

Let him move as the sunlight moves on the floor,
Or moonlight, silently, as Plato's ghost

Or Aristotle's skeleton. Let him hang out
His stars on the wall. He must dwell quietly.

He must be incapable of speaking, closed,
As those are: as light, for all its motion, is;

As color, even the closest to us, is;
As shapes, though they portend us, are.

It is the human that is alien,
The human that has no cousin in the moon.

It is the human that demands his speech
From beasts and from the incommunicable mass.

If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,

A vermilioned nothingness, any stick of the mass

Of which we are too distantly a part.

(CP 327)

This poem refutes the idea that humanity is created in God's image, and it celebrates the contrary. "Less and Less Human" is a refutation of Romanticism in general and the pathetic fallacy in particular.¹⁸ In rejecting a human-centered view of the universe, Stevens invokes the spirit of a god who is no more conscious of humanity than it is of the other vestiges of its own elusive presence (all of which are physical phenomena perceivable to the sense): sunlight, moonlight, color and shape. If this god "must be/ Saying things in the room and on the stair (as Stevens rather wishes it wouldn't), then it must paradoxically "be incapable of speaking" too; that is, it must be incapable of speaking in human speech, though it may speak the way light speaks--quietly, by being there, by adding nothing but itself, as Stevens elsewhere says the imagination does.

The pivotal irony of the poem is that for the prayer to be answered, it must go unheard: "If there must be a god in the house, let him be one/ That will not hear us when we speak." The Savage Spirit to whom this invocation is addressed is the personification of non-human nature, "the mass/ Of which we are too distantly a part." The poem's last line puns on the contradiction of human life in relation to the reality of nature: it is distantly a part of the incommunicable mass which comprises nature, at the same time that it is all too distantly apart from it.

This desire for a silent god arises in Stevens not so much from any "distrust" of language (which for a human being is an element like air), but from the recognition that language is a function of the very consciousness that isolates the human in the first place.¹⁹ The most useful function of the imagination, then, for Stevens, is not so much to bridge this distance, and not to attempt futilely to humanize the universe, but rather to rid human perception of its "stiff and stubborn man-locked set" (CP 496)--that is, to relocate itself within nature without benefit of pathetic fallacy.

One of Stevens's most explicit statements of this human need to realize and participate in non-human nature occurs in a letter in which he offers a gloss on his poem, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans"--the poem in which the angel comes to the door and says, "I am the necessary angel of earth,/ Since, in my sight, you see the earth again/ Cleared of its stiff and stubborn man-locked set" (CP 496). Stevens explains the poem to his correspondent in this way:

. . . in Angel Surrounded by Paysans the angel is the angel of reality. This is clear only if the reader is of the idea that we live in a world of the imagination in which reality and contact with it are the great blessings. For nine readers out of ten, the necessary angel will appear to be the angel of imagination, and for nine days out of ten that is true, although it is the tenth day that counts (L 753)

* * * * *

Critics have long been split on Stevens's stance toward humanism, and he has been both championed and condemned for what has been perceived as either his heroically humanist or his virulently anti-humanist position. Detractors of Stevens as far back as Louis Untermeyer and Yvor Winters have considered Stevens to be somewhat inhuman himself, and certainly anti-humanist. His champions, on the other hand, have too often championed him on the basis of art-for-art's sake arguments that Stevens himself rejected.²⁰

Helen Vendler's criticism referred to in the previous chapter concerning Stevens's detachment from "the lively things of this world" (Wings 47) has been expressed in many permutations by many critics throughout the history of reading Stevens. G. S. Fraser's 1955 comments exemplify a pejorative interpretation of Stevens's alleged aloofness from life. "[S]ome element of human experience or range within it traditionally thought of as central is left out. . . . The world, for Mr. Stevens, that the poet lives in is the world that he chooses to shape by the arbitrary emphasis of detached attention--an attention not itself shaped by the compulsions, for instance, of hunger or love"(qtd. in Schaum, 92-93).

On the other end of the spectrum, to critics such as F.O. Matthiessen, Hayden Carruth and Randall Jarrell, Stevens represented the "humanist par excellence" (Schaum 94-95). Joseph Riddel, too, early on wrote that Stevens's conception of art is that by which humans can "resist and reconcile the

vicious 'otherness' of reality" (qtd. in Schaum 121). Roy Harvey Pearce has written of "Stevens' early poetry [as] an endless exploration of the dilemma that one cannot know anything 'unsuffused by the light of humanity'" (qtd. in Schaum 104). And Marjorie Perloff has written of Stevens as proponent of a "'desperately triumphant poetic humanism'" (Perloff qtd. in Schaum, 131), which "valorizes the lyric voice and the 'organic unity' of Stevens' verse and which implicitly seeks out a romantic 'mythologizing of self' that 'replaces history' and an 'inwardness' leading to the apprehension of personal poetic truth" (Schaum 131).

Some critics have perceived Stevens's desire to create "a nature" without fully exploring the necessity, as Stevens saw it, of metaphorically stepping outside the accepted norms of the human psyche for a revitalizing immersion--by way of imagination--in the non-human. One early critic, Marjorie Allen Seiffert in a 1923 review wrote that "Mr. Stevens doesn't mean to be any more illuminating than life itself" (qtd. in Schaum 42-43). More recently, J. Hillis Miller has described Stevens's poetry as he might describe a hurricane or other natural disaster: "the authentic voice of Stevens as a poet is not touched by [explanations of metaphysical concepts]. That voice is something unpredictable, savage, violent, without cause or explanation, irrational . . . Continuously present, it is nevertheless a principle of discontinuity" (qtd. in Schaum, 115).

William Bevis has offered a contrasting and highly fruitful reading of those qualities of Stevens that have at times been interpreted as anti-humanist and which he identifies more simply as "detachment," as that stance is understood within the context of Buddhist meditation. "Many of Stevens' problem passages, his enigmatic interest in nothing, and indeed an entire tendency of his mind toward distance without irony, are very well explained by a meditative paradigm" (7). Bevis writes that the "nonfeeling mood" exemplified by Stevens's poem "The Snow Man" is often translated from Hindu and Buddhist sources as "detachment," but it is a state of mind quite different from the detachment of Western objectivity, or Western irony. This detachment is not a distancing of the intellect but a total disappearance of intellect, and it is variously reported as containing all emotions or none . . . (32-33).

The import of Stevens's rejection of a humanist doctrine (as we shall see below) is that, in Stevens's belief system and in his poetry, nature is nature and is primary, and the human is human and one of many parts of nature. Stevens points out the destructive consequence of thinking otherwise in "Things of August":

The world? The inhuman as human? That which
 thinks not,
 Feels not, resembling thought, resembling feeling?

It habituates him to the invisible,

By its faculty of the exceptional,

The faculty of ellipses and deviations,

In which he exists but never as himself (CP 493).

Stevens's poetry seeks to create an experience of the human as human without any more ellipses and deviations than those necessarily built into perception and language themselves. Acknowledging outright that "It is the human that is alien,/ The human that has no cousin in the moon" (CP 328), however, does not diminish human experience but allows it to be more fully itself, and in being itself, to fully appreciate the material world which is its home:

To say more than human things with human voice,
That cannot be; to say human things with more
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
To speak humanly from the height or from the
depth

Of human things, that is acutest speech (CP 300).

Stevens was specific and articulate about his understanding of humanism and its inadequacies. It is worth exploring, as the following section does, how he evolved his sense of the human within the larger world and how he expressed it in the poems.

3. Oikos

The Universe is the externization of the soul.

Emerson, The Poet

The soul, he said, is composed
Of the external world.

(CP 51)

The world is of a piece. Its cloth is always whole. Language is a thread that runs through the fabric of fact, is perhaps the very woof and warp of "fact" itself. Thus, the shared etymology of the words text and textile, from the Latin texere, to weave, and textus, meaning (according to Quintilian) the style or tissue of a literary work, or literally that which is woven, a web or a texture.

Ecology is both a web and a text: or perhaps more accurately it is a text that represents a web. A science whose subject is no animal, vegetable or mineral but rather the complex interrelationships among these things, ecology concerns, writes Hugh Kenner, "dynamisms interchanged" and is "the nineteenth century's intellectual achievement and characterizing paradigm" (Kenner 126). Despite its origins in Romanticism and its ideal of "fructive interaction"²¹, the web imagery that ecology exploits is not one that the Western mind always finds appealing: think of Arachne, or "The Arachne integument of dead trees" (CP 234), or Little Miss Muffet; think of the tangled web we weave when first we

practice to deceive; think of the web as symbol of entrapment, entanglement, constraint--or mere flimsiness. Other cultures, the Laguna Pueblo, for example, conceive the web as representing orderly interconnection and interdependence. The spider is a storyteller: the web she weaves, made of language, is the story of the world--a story in which all the threads tie together. Stevens, understanding that the web can be an ordered structure or a dusty cobweb, wrote to Elsie, "We are like spiders spinning an immense web (in our letters) that glistens sometimes, and sometimes is all pitiful confusion" (L 107).

To Wallace Stevens, "[t]he light is like a spider" that "crawls under your eyelids/ And spreads its webs there" because light--the sense of sight, intermediary that it is--both comes between the viewer and the world as a cobweb might, and at the same time ties the observer and the things observed together:

The webs of your eyes
Are fastened
To the flesh and bones of you
As to rafters or grass.

There are filaments of your eyes
On the surface of the water
And in the edges of the snow. (CP 81)

"Tattoo," like all of Stevens's poems, is a "statement of a relation between a man and the world" (OP 197), a relation

whose filaments, in Stevens's case, usually run between the poet's mind, or eye, or ear, and both the animate and the inanimate aspects of the natural world--what Stevens calls his "ultimate inamorata" (Morse xxxiii). The tattoo in the poem is both the visual impress, like an etching, of the eyesight searing the world; and it is the poem itself beating out a tattoo, like a drumbeat or an anthem, attesting to the condition humans live by. In both cases, here as elsewhere in Stevens's poems, the primary relation is not so much between the self and other people, and not even between a self and its own consciousness, as in the case of introspective Romantic poetry, but between the self and non-human nature. As the preceding sections of this chapter have endeavored to convey, this relationship to nature defines and provides a context for all other relationships in Stevens's poetry--including the poet's relationship to language. Ecology is an analogue for Stevens's poetry not only because of his explicit pursuit of interrelationships, interactions, and wholeness throughout the poems, but also because he regarded the process of his poetry to be part of, and analogous to, the processes of nature.

* * * * *

To say that the universe is the externization of the soul, as Emerson does in "The Poet," and to say that the soul is the internalization of the universe, as Wallace Stevens does in "Anecdote of the Men by the Thousand," are two different things. The difference is the same as that between Crispin's initial observation in "The Comedian as the Letter C" that "man is the intelligence of his soil" (CP 27), and his later realization that "his soil is man's intelligence" (CP 36). The distinction rests on the question of primacy between human intelligence, or human reason, imposing itself upon the external world, or another, non-human "intelligence" inherent in the totality of the physical world imprinting itself upon the human. To this latter intelligence, humans may make themselves receptive through perception; it then becomes "man's intelligence" as well. Significantly, Stevens does not say that "his soil forms man's intelligence," or contributes to or influences it; he equates the two: "his soil is man's intelligence" [*italics mine*]. The ground of experience is the ground of knowledge as well.

Of this last epiphany Crispin judges "That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find" (CP 36), an assertion that tells the reader how Crispin--or Stevens--conceives the process of discovering a New World, as Crispin-Columbus does. Finding--discovering rather than imposing--is the crux of knowing. Stevens's maxim that "Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential" speaks to this same distinction

between exerting the human idea by force of will upon the physical world, and permitting the physical world to reveal itself to the individual literally, bodily, by way of the senses (OP 191).

In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens winds back to and clarifies this point when he shows the faculty of human reason, with its insistence on an exclusively human order, as an obstacle to experience and (therefore) to true knowledge of the world:

He imposes orders as he thinks of them,
As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair.

. . .

. . . But to impose is not
To discover. To discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
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. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come ...

(CP 404)

While Stevens understands that humans can no more escape human consciousness--and bravely set about ordering the world accordingly--than the fox or snake can escape fox or snake

consciousness and act fox- or snake-wise, he posits an attitude of receptivity toward nature that allows for epiphany and revelation. As human agency diminishes, so the agency of natural forces increases, so the human in the poem above, who refrains from actively ordering or imposing, fortuitously "discover[s]" and "come[s] on" the real.

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" Stevens returns to the external/internal distinction when he observes that

It is the philosopher's search

For an interior made exterior

And the poet's search for the same exterior made

Interior (CP 481).

Here one wonders whether Stevens had in mind Emerson as the philosopher, himself as the poet. In his great essays written before 1842--in "Nature," "Circles" and "Self-Reliance," for example--Emerson makes of Nature a wheel whose hub is humanity; he makes of Nature a mirror, a symbol, a book, a shadow, a temple whose walls are covered over with a humanized graffiti. Humanity, as force and presence, is Nature's equal; indeed, when suffused with divinity, its better. At its best, Nature reflects the most "divine" features of humanity: it "never wears a mean appearance" and "always wears the colors of the spirit" (Emerson 23, 25). The human is drawn to nature at least in part because "In the tranquil landscape. . . man beholds somewhat as beautiful as

his own nature" (Emerson 24). The philosopher finds his interior reflected in the exterior landscape.

Like Emerson, Stevens addressed and praised the larger context that gives rise to human categories of thought and action--namely, the dynamic relation between the physical world and individual human beings, or, on the larger scale, between Nature and Culture. However, Stevens deliberately effected a figure/ground shift in focus, and in doing so, not only rewrote Romanticism, but proleptically--and prophetically--forecast a vision evolved by "deep ecologists" today. Deep ecology, like traditional environmentalism, is a response to the environmental crisis. Unlike traditional environmentalism, which is anthropocentric and utilitarian in pursuing wise use of natural resources for human benefit, deep ecology bases itself on philosophical, religious, and ethical reconsiderations of nature's intrinsic value and "right" to self-realization.²²

Carolyn Merchant summarizes such an ecological perspective when she writes:

An ecological approach to history reasserts the idea of nature as historical actor. It challenges the mechanistic tradition by focusing on the interchange of energy, materials, and information among living and nonliving things in the natural environment (Revolutions 7). . . . Nonhuman nature is an actor; human and nonhuman interactions constitute the drama" (Revolutions 23).

In this regard, Stevens's sense of relationships can be described as ecological²³. Stevens reinstates the physical world as a primary actor in the human drama, or in the greater drama of which the human is only a part, rather than sole protagonist against a backdrop or setting made of nature.

The idea of Wallace Stevens as a literary ecologist is less bizarre than it may at first seem when one recalls that the Greek word oikos from which "ecology" derives meant a house or a dwelling, namely, that place which Stevens tried constantly in his poetry to find or to construct. Our own word ecology, according to the OED, "deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and their modes of life." More important than its literal definition, oikos encompassed the conception of a "household" in the sense of the communal relationships, the division of labor, the use of materials and goods, and the overall smooth running of all operations within a household. The word "economy" derives from the same root. Certainly by this definition, Stevens repeatedly arrived at both ecological and economical realizations of interrelatedness throughout the poems as well as the prose.

The fundamentals of ecological thinking, then, may be seen as analogues for Stevens's poetic theory and practice. Stevens's conception is ecological in his faith in process and cyclical development; in his representations of nature as presence rather than as a collection of objects and mechanical operations; in his view of "reality" as comprised of the mind

combined with the phenomenal world²⁴; in his depiction of the human as participant in rather than observer of natural process, whose very consciousness is a form of participation²⁵; and in his view of the human as an integral, not dominant, part of the natural world.

The most familiar aspects of Stevens's work readily lend themselves to an ecological reading:

Emphasis on Relationship and Interrelationship

"Nothing is itself taken alone," wrote Stevens in his Adagia. "Things are because of interrelationships or interactions" (OP 189). The philosopher Arne Naess has written that deep ecology implies "Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image" (95). This total field image is conveyed in Stevens's poetry.

Not only Stevens's poetry, but his poetic theory, too, shows Stevens's concern for the role of art within such a "relational, total-field" context. He denounced art-for-art's sake precisely because he felt that it decontextualized art, removing it from an environment of which it was a necessary, not ornamental, part: "Art for art's sake is both indiscreet and worthless. It opposes the common run of things by simply existing alone and for its own sake because the common run of things are all parts of a system and exist not for themselves, but because they are indispensable" (*italics mines*) (L 24).²⁶

Emphasis on Process

Stevens's processive poetry renders the play of the ever-changing sequence of thought, perception and feeling in mind and body meeting the particulars of human existence. Since the basic conditions of mortal life--the limitations of the body and existence in time--are seen as giving rise to the very processes that bring Being (to use Heidegger's term) into its full and proper expression, these conditions are seen not as tragic constraints but as expressions of earthly life.

Redefinition of Subject/Object Relations

Stevens created the experience of "original participation" by reinstating bodily experience--what Morris Berman calls the "sensuous intellect"--as a legitimate, not inferior, way of knowing the world (Berman 76). In representing the body, as part of nature, also to be a part of what is known, Stevens put to work some of the ideas he had obtained from his readings in the new science and quantum physics, both of which "seemed to heal the gap between the subjective and objective worlds" (Steinman 65) and thus questioned the separation between observer and observed.²⁷ Morris Berman has written, "a systemic or ecological approach to nature would have as its premise the inclusion of the knower in the known" (139).

Redefinition of the Self

Stevens's poems exhibit a surrender of individualized ego-consciousness in favor of an enlarged sense of self. "Self" is regarded as a process--a verb rather than a noun--which includes others and the Other in its self-identification. Self is expanded to include all aspects of the environment. "I am what is around me," wrote Stevens (CP 86).

Questioning Technology

The subject of modern technology in Stevens's writings is conspicuous mostly for its absence, from which the reader might deduce, at best, a lack of enthusiasm on Stevens's part. Lisa Steinman observes that "Only rarely did Stevens participate in the widespread identification of American modernism with the aesthetic of technology" (134).

Joan Richardson more definitely shows Stevens's position to be one of disapprobation:

Stevens bemoaned each new advance of the machine age, especially when it encroached on the pristine solitudes where he liked to walk. In the city he seemed to enjoy seeing and contemplating the new machines, as if they were toys invented for the pleasures of his imagination But in spite of this fascination, just the thought of machines trespassing on his sacred groves was enough to keep him from indulging in his walks. . .

This conservative strain in relation to modern technology set Stevens apart from other major contemporary American figures, like William Carlos Williams, who appreciated these advances and translated the speeded-up pace of life into the forms and meters of his work (Early Years 385).

Richardson goes on to point out that Stevens was troubled by "the disruption brought to integrated family and community life" by technological advances, and that he alluded in his journals to "the contamination of the countryside" (Early Years 386).

Aside from the aesthetic offenses technology visited upon Stevens's beloved countryside, technology must surely have struck Stevens as a further exhibition of the human machinery that shuts out "the face of the giant" (SP 134). Heidegger (whom Stevens so uncannily resembles in so many instances) shows technology to be an instrument of domination and a means of subjugating nature. According to Heidegger, technology forces nature to reveal itself in particular, circumscribed ways, and blocks off the possibility of nature revealing the unexpected--the wild.²⁸ Nature by this definition has no intrinsic value; it is simply the raw material for a "standing reserve" of energy. Technology challenges nature to "unconceal" its energy so that humanity may lock it up for its own purposes.²⁹ "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so

that it may be on call for a further ordering" (Heidegger, Writings 298).

One insidious effect of regarding nature in this way is that humans are themselves in danger of eventually being regarded as part of "standing reserve."³⁰ The other is a danger very similar to the one Stevens anticipates in "the increasingly human self":

. . . the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself (Heidegger, Writings 308).

Looked at in this way, technology is potentially another impediment to experiencing "reality."

Saving the Earth

In only one sense can the earth be "saved," and that is to save it for human beings from the "stiff and stubborn man-locked set" humanity imposes (CP 497). This Stevens endeavors to do in the poems by striving, within the limits of human imagination and by means of human imagination, to set earth "free into its own essence, " as Heidegger says, to permit nature to reveal itself on its own terms (that is, to permit it to be wild).

Heidegger has written:

Mortals dwell in that they save the earth . . . Saving does not only snatch something from danger. To save really means to set something free into its own essence. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even to wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from boundless spoilation.

Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and the moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency; they do not turn night into day or day into a harassed unrest (Writings 328).

The chapters that follow will consider the ways in which Stevens makes himself receptive to the revelations of earth--and also the ways in which he coaxes, prods and seduces earth into revelation. "Dwelling" in earth, in Heidegger's sense, takes place in many ways, three of which the rest of this dissertation will examine.

Stevens "dwells" on earth by making of earth a home, by regarding nature as his house and household. Chapter Four examines the idea of oikos in Stevens's poems, in terms of the dwellings his poems build (and at times demolish) and in terms of his poetic economy. Stevens "dwells" within the body, the human being's most intimate house. Chapter 5 will examine Stevens's pursuit of a physical poetry in his representation

of sensory experience and in his endeavor to make a poetry of enactment that recognizes language itself to be a product of nature and a means of dwelling. The final chapter will examine how Stevens evolves a sense of self within the context of non-human nature.

Notes to Chapter III

1. Melita Schaum identifies Marjorie Perloff, Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, Helen Vendler, and Frank Kermode as critics who read Stevens as the proponent of, in Marjorie Perloff's words, "the great tradition of Romantic visionary humanism . . . with a slight influx of French Symbolisme to add piquancy" (Perloff, qtd. Schaum, "Misprision" 33).
2. Joseph Carroll in Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism writes: "In his pursuit of visionary fulfillment, Stevens situates himself within a central Romantic tradition. The normative mode of Stevens' visionary poetry is that of the Romantic sublime--both the elegiac sublime associated with Keats, Tennyson, and Whitman, and the sublime of celestial grandeur associated with these three figures and with Wordsworth, Shelley, and Emerson" (5).
3. See Harold Bloom's The Poems of Our Climate.
4. Helen Vendler discusses Keats's influence on Stevens in both On Extended Wings and in Words Chosen Out of Desire.
5. See Diane Middlebrook's Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens and Thomas Byers's What I Cannot Say: Self, Word and World in Whitman, Stevens and Merwin.
6. See Helen Requeiro's The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats and Stevens.
7. T.S. Eliot wrote in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know" (40).
8. Lisa Steinman writes that Stevens's "essays from the 1940s and 1950s increasingly repeat the affinity he felt between his view of poetry and quantum theory" (155).
9. Lisa Steinman has written that "Stevens may be the American poet who made the most serious use of the new physics, especially quantum theory, although he paid less attention to technology or to the commercialism associated with American industrialization than many of his contemporaries" (134).
10. "The ability to show how the world celebrated by poetry was the same world arrived at by physics proved the defense of poetry's value for which Stevens was looking. . ." (Steinman 154-155).
11. Ricardo Quinones writes that "unlike the Romantics, [Modernists] had a philosophy (Bergson, Whitehead, Ortega) and a science (Einstein, Bohr, Mach and others) to support their positions. While Romanticism depended upon feeling, Modernism

had recourse to analysis and expanded consciousness--that is, a larger frame of reference that could include the data of science (120).

12. Judith McDaniels writes that Stevens "did not need to react against the scientific outlook of his day as did Wordsworth, but simply react to this outlook which provides the observer, the poet, with an adequate expression of his understanding of reality. It is my feeling that in all his world Stevens expresses a distinctively 'scientific' imagination, much in the sense that Donne's poetry grows out of a specific scientific world view (222-223).

13. "[P]hilosophical naturalism holds that the universe of matter is the whole universe: that it is self-existent, self-explanatory, self-operating, and self-directing. An encompassing spirit, the transcendent unification of self and world, is denied, and the totality of objects and events in space and time becomes the proper study of poet and scientist alike" (Lentricchia Gaiety 20).

14. Frank Lentricchia explains, "No longer continuous with spirit in nature--as in romantic theory--the self is now but a discrete particular, alone and unrelated and unresolved in cosmic design and purpose. Locked in space and time, and without access to any universal currents of being, we are faced with natural facts that are simply natural facts, with a world in which the law of change or process is the law of material reality. The romantic could find objective form and value in external reality because his world of natural objects was coherent with a world of spirit" (Gaiety 23).

15. Lawrence's send-up of Romantics and Transcendentalists reads in part:

. . . and there were many pantheists, Wordsworth one of the first. They worshipped Nature in her sweet-and-pure aspect, her Lucy Gray aspect. . . . Lucy Gray, alas, was the form that William Wordsworth thought fit to give to the Great God Pan.

And then he crossed over to the young United States: I mean Pan did. Suddenly he gets a new name. He becomes the Oversoul, the Allness of everything. To this new Lucifer Gray of a Pan Whitman sings the famous Song of Myself: "I am All, and All is Me." That is: "I am Pan, and Pan is me."

The old goat-legged gentleman from Greece thoughtfully strokes his beard, and answers: . . . All Walt is Pan, but Pan is not Walt" (417).

16. "The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God." (qtd. in Morse xv).

17. Frank Kermode points out that Stevens showed an avid interest in the poet Holderlin, and that through Holderlin he may have found his way to Martin Heidegger, though there is no certain evidence for this. Kermode writes, "Heidegger called Holderlin the poet of the Time Between--between the departure and the return of the gods--the midnight of the world's night. Stevens is consciously a poet of the same time" (264).

See also Heidegger's "What are Poets For?": "To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods" (Poetry 94).

18. "God is the centre of the pathetic fallacy" (L 444).

19. On the subject of a mute god, Gordon Kaufman in Theology for a Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) writes:

We might, then, attempt to think of God in terms defined largely by the natural processes of cosmic and biological evolution. This would result in a God largely mute: one who, though active and moving with creativity and vitality, was essentially devoid of the kind of intentionality and care which was characterized by the heavenly father of tradition (85; qtd. in Christ, 67-68).

20. See Introduction, pp. 26-31, for a discussion of Stevens's position on aestheticism and art-for-art's sake.

21. "Clearly the end of Europe in the nineteenth century is struggling to encompass an intelligible form for its own past and present; clearly the image biologists call ecology--fructuive interaction--comes to govern its visions" (The Pound Era, 377).

22. Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered by Bill Devall and George Sessions (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985) succinctly and thoroughly outlines the principles, objectives, sources and manifestations of the deep ecology perspective.

23. Hugh Kenner applies the word "ecology" to poetics in The Pound Era when he writes: "Ecology--interest in transactions with an environment--is a romantic discovery, in poetics as in biology. (Thoreau was an ecologist.) Symbolisme was poetic ecology made scientific: whole poems existing as systems of linguistic interaction . . ." (125).

24. Gregory Bateson, in Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity set himself a scientific task that closely parallels Stevens's aesthetic task: ". . . the immediate task of this book is to construct a picture of how the world is joined together in its mental aspects. How do ideas, information, steps of logical or pragmatic consistency, and the like fit together? How is logic, the classical procedure for making chains of ideas,

related to an outside world of things and creatures, parts and wholes? Do ideas really occur in chains, or is this lineal structure imposed on them by scholars and philosophers? How is the world of logic, which eschews 'circular argument,' related to a world in which circular trains of causation are the rule rather than the exception? (21).

25. Carolyn Merchant writes "Humans negotiate 'reality' with nonhuman nature" (Revolutions 23). This idea is also, of course, the foundation of the phenomenological perspective.

26. About the importance of context and relationship in Stevens's poetry, Dana Wilde has written: "The contextual relationship of man to the natural world is apprehensible in the contextual relationships of words in poetry. . . Contextuality implies a unity of parts. Each part must have its own identity as well as be part of the ecology. The original problem, posited here for Stevens, was that he felt himself apart, alienated from the world: he felt the need to make himself part of the physical poetry--he wanted to feel an ecological interconnection (Wilde 50).

27. Werner Heisenberg has written, "While in observing everyday objects, the physical process involved in making the observation plays a subsidiary role only, in the case of the smallest building particles of matter, every process of observation produces a large disturbance. We can no longer speak of the behaviour of the particle independently of the process of observation. As a final consequence, the natural laws formulated mathematically in quantum theory no longer deal with the elementary particles themselves but with our knowledge of them. . .

When we speak of the picture of nature in the exact science of our age, we do not mean a picture of nature so much as a picture of our relationships with nature" (446).

28. Heidegger wrote, "What is modern technology? It too is a revealing. Only when we allow our attention to rest on this fundamental characteristic does that which is new in modern technology show itself to us.

And yet, the revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a bringing forth in the sense of poiesis. The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such" (296).

29. "The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting upon, in the sense of a challenging forth. Such challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and

switching about are ways of revealing. But the revealing never simply comes to an end. Neither does it run off into the indeterminate. The revealing reveals to itself its own manifoldly interlocking paths, through regulating their course. This regulating itself is, for its part, everywhere secured. Regulating and securing even become the chief characteristics of the revealing that challenges" (Heidegger, Writings 297-298).

30. "As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall, that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve. Meanwhile, man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth" (Heidegger, Writings 308).

Chapter IV

A House Built for the Body: Nature as House(hold)

1. A House Built By and For the Body

According to Michelet . . . "[A] bird's tool is its own body, that is, its breast, with which it presses and tightens its materials until they have become absolutely pliant, well-blended, and adapted to the general plan." And Michelet suggests a house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, in an intimacy that works physically. The form of the nest is commanded by the inside. . . .

Michelet goes on: "The house is a bird's very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering."

-- Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

Wallace Stevens had a nesting instinct. From an early age he thought in terms of house and home. In the poems, the ideas of "house" and the dwelling that took place in it grew to include prodigious images of buildings and structures--structures even of ideas. In his life, his homing instinct frequently sluiced into onrushes of nostalgia for the region of his childhood--Reading, Pennsylvania and environs, a "kind

of earthly Paradise," as he recalled it in his thirties (Richardson, Early 346). "I lost a world when I left Reading," he wrote in a letter to Elsie in 1907 (L 98); and in another:

I have been away from home for eleven years, half your life. Yet it remains the only familiar spot in the world. My little sleepless trips home every little while do not get me in touch" (L 108).

And he avowed, "Life is a very, very thin affair except for the feelings; and the feeling of home waters the richest garden of all--the freshest and sweetest" (L 108).

In Elsie Moll herself, Stevens found a convenient icon onto whom to displace his sense of home; of her he created, in the long letters of their courtship, the genius of his as yet nonexistent and infinitely postponed household. "I must find a home in the country--a place to live in, not only to be in," he declaimed to her in one letter (L 58), and shortly after wrote "the very animal in me cries out for a lair" (L 69). A frugal and ascetic economy governed Stevens's pre-nuptial projections of his and Elsie's domestic-life-to-be. "The idea of a neat, clean, sweet contented poverty--I confess that seems one of the best things in the world," he wrote to his future wife, and urged that "to be poor, so long as you can be as rich as the richest in having leisure and the feeling of home, is no deprivation. My earnest wish is that you remain at home and do just what you are doing now" (Richardson, Early 289). Stevens's dream house scheme

featured Elsie herself meticulously attired in slippers, ribbons and gowns specified by Stevens, plates of cakes in hand.¹

Once Stevens was actually married, he preferred, oddly, that home, with Elsie in it, be perpetually elsewhere from where he himself was.² It seemed once the idea of home was finally lodged in an actual place (the apartment in New York, the houses in Connecticut) and in an actual wife, Stevens longed to reestablish the conditions of solitude that had governed his first home, with his family in Reading, where silence, reading and isolation had been part of the household economy, where

Books were like additional family members. As Stevens later recalled, what most characterized the home life of his family was that each member would be 'in a different part of the house reading'. . . (Richardson, Early Years 43).

Often when Elsie was at home, Stevens was not. Starting in 1916, when his long employment with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company began, his work took him away frequently on long business trips. On these trips, he referred to the hotels he stayed in as "home," a measure of how far afield his sense of where he belonged had fallen from where he lived. The "neat, clean, sweet contented poverty" to which he had aspired as a young man dwindled to the emotionally impoverished marriage to which Stevens consigned himself, and to the uncongenial home to which he could bring no friends,

and in which he could not even keep a library to which to retreat.

Stevens, however, had another home, one in which he would dwell and to which he could return all his life. His references to the more heartfelt home he actually inhabited implied a more far-reaching and wider definition of "home" than the house he was to share with Elsie: "I have always one ally at home," he wrote, "--Lady Nature, whose children we are, both of us, so completely" (Richardson, Early, 285). Whether Elsie would have concurred with this assertion is doubtful. What is clear is that Wallace Stevens's first and only real home was the house of nature.

"Philosophy is really homesickness, it is the urge to be at home everywhere," wrote Novalis. What philosophy was to Novalis, poetry was to Wallace Stevens. More than an urge, poetry was his tool and blueprint, compass and T-square by which he sought a way home, designed a way of being, and with the raw materials of his body, his perceptions, his imagination, and the world itself, built himself the dwelling that was his life and art.

* * * * *

The image and idea of "house" recur throughout Stevens's poetry, encompassing an ever-widening circle of connections and connotations. In poems such as "The Comedian as the Letter C" or "Ghosts as Cocoons," the cabin or the house

suggests the conventional domesticity, married love and family to which Stevens aspired but which he never entirely attained. When Stevens writes, in "Ghosts," "The grass is in seed. The young birds are flying./ Yet the house is not built, not even begun" (CP 119), it is a fairly straightforward matter to discern the panicked fear of life's vigor passing, with no house or bride or "those to be born" secured.³ In other poems, the house refers to a construct of ideas, beliefs and emotions that comprise the human sense of the world. In the "Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician" (CP 62), the house is the metaphysician's cranium, into which filter, through the filmy curtains of perception, nature's activities: the "changing of light," "dropping/ Of the silence, wide sleep and solitude/Of night" and other effects that change and rearrange the metaphysician's sense of the world.

Always, a house is a life-support system, whether it refers to a building, a structure of ideas, the human body, the mother's body, the mind, language, or the earth. In his play on house metaphors throughout the poems, Stevens considers the Heideggerian question of how to build a structure (that is, evolve a stance toward the world and a language out of that) in which a human being may dwell. Dwelling, in Heidegger's sense, is a special kind of inhabiting, a complex of habits for living within (with and in) the world, attentively. It is a way of being "at home" on the earth both by being at ease and comfortable, and by being wholly present to the conditions of human Being required by

the earth. Dwelling demands "keeping house" as well, in the sense of maintaining and attending to the demands of one's earthly environment. In his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," Heidegger wrote:

. . . [bauen] means to dwell. This signifies to remain, to stay in a place. . . . The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is bauen, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. . . . [T]his word bauen, however, also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care--it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord (Writings 325).

The relationship to the world expressed by Heidegger's word "dwelling" appears in Stevens's poems as a cluster of metaphors that fit each other like nesting boxes, though in Stevens's phantasmagoric transmutations of images within images, the smallest box (the poem) at the center ends up containing all the others. In Stevens's poems, houses are expressions of being within, of experiencing something from inside, subjectively, not objectively. Thus, "If we live in the mind, we live with the imagination" writes Stevens (as though imagination were a housemate) [*italics mine*] (NA 140). The mind, housed in the body, is itself a construction whose foundations lie within the earth. ("We live in the upper

story, and are only dimly aware that our lower story is somewhat old-fashioned. As to what lies beneath the superficial crust of the earth we remain quite unconscious," wrote Jung [19]). The world itself is a house composed of the sun (CP 465), of ourselves (CP 466), and of words (CP 465). For all that it houses, "the earth," Stevens reminded us, "is not a building but a body" (OP)--the body that contains the mind, that contains the imagination, from which the poem issues.

Aside from the body, which always comes first, it is language that the human being inhabits most intimately and it is language that permits all other dwelling. "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home" (Heidegger, Writings 193). Language, conceived in the imagination but finally containing the imagination, is itself a structure, and poems are like houses or rooms: so as stanza in Italian means a chamber or a room, the poem provides a place of habitation and dwelling. At a particular juncture in "Esthetique du Mal," for example, the poet's "firm stanzas hang like hives in hell" (CP 315), tiny chambers intended for the "honey of common summer" containing instead the emptiness of a world ("O terra infidel") made hellish by "an over-human god" (CP 315). Elsewhere, the sea is described as "many-stanzaed" (CP 268), a description that conveys the sense of the sea concealing many chambers and housing many mysteries,

as well as suggesting that the sea itself is a vast poem (CP 268).

In the concluding lines of "The Man on the Dump"--a poem about the poet's place atop the discarded detritus of a wasted world--the poet's outcry of "stanza my stone" compresses together the images of the poem as the poet's only home as well as the poem as tombstone or memorial (his stanza is his stone). The cry also calls toward the image that emerges in Stevens's late poems of the rock, itself a conglomerate image for bare earth and for the poet's tomb (as bare earth will finally, and literally, be the poet's tomb). As Stevens's poems resonate against and echo each other, a series of equivalences emerge suggesting that the poem (the house of Being) is equivalent to the earth (the house of mortal dwelling), which in turn is equivalent to both the womb (the body's first house) from which life emerges and the tomb to which it returns (the body's final house).

The poet's function is periodically to reconceive language when the old constructs become uninhabitable. Stevens's poem "Architecture" describes the cyclical process by which human constructs founded in language are erected and then dismantled.⁴ The poem considers the process of building and inhabiting a dwelling. The poet begins by asking, "What manner of building shall we build?" (OP 37). The poem's opening section describes a human-designed and human-constructed fortress that has become a prison of thought, a

structure "deployed" as a weapon might be deployed, whose construction by slaves continues:

Let us design a chastel de chastete.

De pensee. . . .

Never cease to deploy the structure.

Keep the laborers shouldering plinths.

Pass the whole of life earing the clink of the

Chisels of the stone-cutters cutting the stones.

(OP 37)

The castle, it appears, has degenerated into (to use Fredric Jameson's phrase) a prison-house of language:

In this house, what manner of utterance shall there
be?

What heavenly dithyramb

And cantilene?

What niggling forms of gargoyle patter?

Of what shall the speech be,

In what splay of marble

And of obedient pillars? (OP 37)

Forms of lyric, living speech--dithyramb and cantilene--ossify to "gargoyle patter," marble and obedient stone holding up the edifice, which in the following stanza is depicted as a sort of temple for tourists. No one dwells in this museum-like structure (in Heideggers sense of "dwelling"). Visitors come dressed in vestments like priests; they climb the stairs; they survey the grounds; they are spectators; they do not live there; they are not worshippers. What's more, they gawk

without understanding at a "Flora Coddling Hecuba," the floral nymph coddling the raging witch, wildness in the lap of pastoral:

And how shall those come vested that come there?
 In their ugly reminders?
 Or gaudy as tulips?
 As they climb the stairs
 To the group of Flora Coddling Hecuba?
 As they climb the flights
 To the closes
 Overlooking whole seasons? (OP 37)

The closes overlooking whole seasons provide a small, closed-in vantage point unworthy of the vastness of what it views. The two closing lines of the stanza, suggesting that the building affords a view of whole seasons, removes this non-dwelling from the context of the spatial to the temporal, dislocating it yet more thoroughly from any grounding in a particular place. (Poetry, one recalls, must "learn the speech of the place" [*italics mine*] [CP 240]).

The tone of the first three stanzas is bitter, scornful, heavily ironic. The language is full of diversionary tactics: French phrases and high-flown vocabulary ("dithyramb," "cantilene"). With the fourth stanza the poem shifts in tone to relative clarity and calm. The proposed new structure is likened to a palm, a holy tree in Stevens's vocabulary. It is to be an organic edifice composed of light:

Let us build the building of light.

Push up the towers
 To the cock-tops.
 These are the pointings of our edifice,
 Which, like a gorgeous palm,
 Shall tuft the commonplace.
 These are the window-sill
 On which the quiet moonlight lies (OP 38).

The fifth stanza plays a variation on the theme Stevens will exploit to such effect in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" when he asks "Of what is this house composed if not of the sun [?]" (CP 465). Stanza V depicts the construction of a house founded on reality, built from blocks of the sun, composing a ruddy palace (red, in Stevens, is associated with the real). This gorgeous structure, spangled with color, hacked out of the sun and moon is pierced throughout with shafts (presumably from the sun). But it too pierces: its buttresses and timbers themselves pierce the sky so that there is a mutual infusion between natural world, from which the materials of the house come, and the house, which thrusts back at the world:

How shall we hew the sun
 Split it and make blocks,
 To build a ruddy palace?
 How carve the violet moon
 To set in nicks?
 Let us fix portals, east and west,
 Abhorring green-blue north and blue-green south.

Our chiefest dome a demoiselle gold.
 Pierce the interior with pouring shafts,
 In diverse chambers.
 Pierce, too, with buttresses of coral air
 And purple timbers,
 Various argentines,
 Embossings of the sky (OP 38).

The joy and aplomb of the fifth section, in which the house composed of sun is built, quickly deteriorates. Once the gorgeous house is built, it is set about with doctrinaire guardians and grumblers who, in a twist on the conventional, keep out the solemn, pale ones in order to guard a "kremlin of kermess": a citadel in which takes place a rowdy fair.

And, finally, set guardians in the grounds,
 Gray, gruesome grumblers.
 For no one proud, nor stiff,
 No solemn one, nor pale,
 No chafferer, may come
 To sully the begonias, nor vex
 With holy or sublime ado
 The kremlin of kermess (OP 38).

The final stanza depicts a structure different in appearance but not different in its strictures from the edifice described at the beginning of the poem.

Only the lusty and the plenteous
 Shall walk
 The bronze-filled plazas

And the nut-shell esplanades (OP 39).

While "lusty and plenteous" may at first suggest that it is the strong and robust who inhabit this dwelling, the point is left ambiguous. The sun-blocks have again ossified to bronze, and the bronze-filled plazas reek of artificiality. The mess of nut-shell esplanades suggests a rowdy crowd of low-lives scattering trash. Again, a new structure will need to be built--or a new way devised of living in the old one. Since this is the inevitable course of events in the life of a human construct, Stevens, as we shall see, concerns himself not only with dwelling, but also with leaving the dwelling.

Comic Dwelling

Poetic dwelling requires first and foremost an affirmation of things as they are. The journey that Crispin, the introspective voyager, makes from the sea to his cabin in the Carolinas, and the landlubbing life Crispin embraces in the penultimate section of that poem, is an early experiment, for Stevens, in such poetic dwelling. The poem celebrates, as Joan Richardson describes it, a "secular sacrament of praise" in which "Not God but experience itself would be celebrated. . . ." (Early Years:521).

As his wandering draws to a close, Crispin speculates briefly, in the terms of the North/South dialectic Stevens found so useful, about whether the north country wouldn't be more conducive to achieving "the relentless contact he desired" (CP 34):

Perhaps the Arctic moonlight really gave
 The liaison, the blissful liaison,
 Between himself and his environment (CP 34).

Not ready to commit himself to the more exacting dwelling the north implies--"Crispin knew/ It was a flourishing tropic he required/ For his refreshment" (CP 35)--he heads for the Carolinas. But even as he approaches his destination, he finds he must revise the idealized image in his mind:

And thus he tossed
 Between a Carolina of old time,
 A little juvenile, an ancient whim,
 And the visible, circumspect presentment drawn
 From what he saw across his vessel's prow (CP 35).

The "moonlight fiction disappeared" (CP 36) and Crispin, "pure and capable/Dwelt in the land" (CP 40). Crispin's ability to dwell remains contingent upon his ability to surrender idealized expectations "Of was and is and shall or ought to be" (CP 40) to face the reality he sees before him. When Crispin-Columbus, freshly a realist, reflects upon his project of seeking a new world, he concludes that

Whoever hunts a matinal continent
 May, after all, stop short before a plum
 And be content and still be realist.
 The words of things entangle and confuse.
 The plum survives its poems. (CP 40).

A plum instead of a continent may not be a bad trade, but the significant thing is that Crispin accepts the plum as plum

devoid of metaphor. This plum is nothing like the grain of sand in which Blake saw eternity; it is nothing but itself, "good, fat, guzzly fruit" bringing Crispin finally to recognize "shall or ought to be in is" [italics mine] (CP 41).

Helen Vendler has written of "The Comedian" that the poem demonstrates that "Stevens is not a poet of antinomies, but a poet of the midworld between them, a world not of infinite Miltonic dimensions but of limited space" (Vendler Wings 48). A reading of this poem from an ecological perspective would concur with Vendler's assessment, though not with Vendler's disparaging tone, suggesting that these traits in Stevens bespeak a diminished or a paltry vision. Coming to terms with "limited space" is precisely what human dwelling on the earth as home demands. To say that Stevens's midworld precludes Milton's tragic sense is simply to say that it precludes the arrogance of the classically tragic perspective which puts humanity in a perpetually adversarial position against nature.

Joseph Meeker has suggested in The Comedy of Survival that some literary genres are more consonant with an ecological sense of the world than others. "Comedy and ecology are systems designed to accommodate necessity and to encourage acceptance of it, while tragedy is concerned with avoiding or transcending the necessary in order to accomplish the impossible" (44). Tragedy operates on disjunction and presumes a hostile relationship between humans and nature:

The tragic view of life, embodied in the hero
of the Greek tragedy, is based on the deep

conviction that man has no part of nature, that he is not subject to natural laws but, quite on the contrary, to a set of emphatically extra-natural or preternatural laws, to moral laws to which his behavior must unconditionally conform. The fundamental theme of all literary tragedy is given by the conflict between moral and natural laws (16).

Comedy, on the other hand, "illustrates that survival depends upon our ability to change ourselves rather than our environment, and upon our ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting us" (Meeker 49). Framed in this definition, Stevens's sense of the world is essentially comedic in its portrayal of a malleable, elastic self able, through imagination, to adapt itself to necessity and able to embrace its whole environment.

The "[r]econciliation of opposites and adaptation to environment" which Meeker calls "the essential values which guide comic behavior" (17) is the form and intent of "The Comedian as the Letter C," a poem which from its very title forward highlights a comedic stance toward life and the world. Crispin parodies his own bent toward tragedy. Upon surrendering his grander schemes, and reconciling himself to locating "shall or ought to be in is" (CP 41), Crispin self-mockingly embarks on a litany of lamentations culminating in the demolition of the classically tragic stance. In disparaging the notion of the tragic hero, Stevens also

disparages the very "mythology of self" (CP 28) that Crispin had set out to create:

Was he to bray this in profoundest brass
 Arointing his dreams with fugal requiems?
 Was he to company vastest things defunct
 With a blubber of tom-toms harrowing the sky?
 Scrawl a tragedian's testament? . . .
 Because he built a cabin who once planned
 Loquacious columns by the ructive sea?
 Because he turned to salad-beds again?
 Jovial Crispin, in calamitous crape?
 Should he lay by the personal and make
 Of his own fate an instance of all fate?
 What is one man among so many men?
 What are so many men in such a world? . . .
 For realist what is is what should be (CP 41).

Crispin's experiment in poetic dwelling does not entirely succeed since he never manages to bring together the disparate elements of his life in Carolina into a coherent whole (as one gathers that Stevens was not at this stage of his life able to bring his profession, his marriage and his poetic activities into a coherent whole). The poem also maintains, however, a sufficiently sardonic stance toward its protagonist Crispin, toward Crispin's "prismy blonde" (CP 42) and toward the daughters with curls that a recurring glint of bitterness belies its light-opera aspects. (This was, it must be remembered, one of Stevens's last poems before the long

silence between Harmonium and Ideas of Order fell.) However self-mockingly, Crispin continues to lament that "the quotidian saps philosophers" (CP 42). Crispin has not learned to dwell poetically yet: he can't abide that his duenna and the curly daughters having come between him and his poems; and Crispin warns at the end of the poem that "So may the relation of each man be clipped" (CP 46).

* * * * *

Stevens expands the complex of ideas contained in Heidegger's sense of dwelling as meaning "to remain . . . to stay in a place" by incorporating the act of leaving and abnegation as well.⁵ Dwelling is cyclical; and while it implies a state of receptivity and adaptation to the constant changes that describe earthly life, the experience of change for a human being is not so seamless or smooth as never to require closure, completion, or, as Stanley Cavell writes, a "realization of abandonment" (138).

It may be that a peculiar mobility pervades the American project of building a home in the wilderness. Emerson himself wrote, "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit" (). Dwelling fully incurs its opposite--an eventual leaving, a relinquishment of the painstakingly built structure, an abandonment of the house. Stevens wrote:

We stand looking at a remembered habitation. All old dwelling-places are subject to these transmogrifications and the experience of all of us includes a succession of old dwelling-places: abodes of the imagination, ancestral or memories of places that never existed (OP 258).

Like so many other antithetical relationships in Stevens's poems, the processes of dwelling and leaving form a dialectical relationship to each other. When Stevens writes of the inability permanently to inhabit any humanly-constructed dwelling, and of the impossibility of going home to any home other than earth itself, it is not the Romantic attitude toward mutability that the reader feels but rather an intense desire toward the act of abnegation itself. Coming to terms with leaving, in all its forms, is a necessary part of human experience, always prefiguring that final leaving--death.

Swanless Dwelling

One of Stevens's abandoned dwellings figures in "Academic Discourse at Havana," a poem showing the transitional state in a culture when the old myths have died but have not yet been replaced by the new. The casino in the poem is a summer house, though the term resonates with its alternate meaning as a house of gambling--and of decadence. The poem's title once again suggests Stevens's north/south dichotomy as Stevens sets the stolid activity of an "academic discourse" against a

tropical background, as he considers what to do about a starker, demythologized reality.

Life, as Stevens describes it in the opening lines of the poem, used to be something between a garden party and a circus. "Canaries in the morning, orchestras/ In the afternoon, balloons at night" (CP 142)--these colorful entertainments were heightened by the "indolent progressions of the swans" (CP 142). The casino has since, however, been abandoned, and the swans have died. The question Stevens raises in the poem is what is the role of the poet in a world gone to ruin?

If it is true that the poet is "part of nature" (CP 144), and if it is nature that encroaches upon the old estate, then one of the more ironic roles of the poet is to contribute to ruin; to invite the wilderness in. The casino, a palace for social amusement, leisure and frivolity, had been "A difference, at least, from nightingales,/ Jehovah and the great sea-worm" (CP 142); that is, it had at least been a welcome change from Judeo-Christian constructs (alluded to in the image of Jehovah), as well as from the nightingales which populated the poetry of the Romantics, whose own nature-oriented mythology proved finally insufficient.

The casino even in its prime had been a problematic place. The image contains the implication that a life devoid of traditional constructs is reduced to frivolity--"a peanut parody/ For peanut people" (CP 142). What was at stake in the casino was a mythology giving a context for human life. The

casino's inhabitants had not made up their minds entirely whether to reject the myths, and Stevens disparages their attachment to them in the image of the swans. The swan's song traditionally presages death, and its beauty is attributed to its having learned from Apollo of the joys of the afterlife. The swans' indolent progressions "made earth come right" in two ways: as though their indolence put off the inevitability of death, and as though the death they symbolize still held its traditional promise of eternal happiness.

The swans "arrayed/ The twilight of the mythy goober khan"; that is, they adorned the declining period of the peanut people's peanut king. Goober khan itself recalls Coleridge's Kubla Khan, the architect of another kind of pleasure dome, and the perversion of the name indicates Stevens's anti-Romanticist sentiments. "The centuries of excellence to be" (CP 143) whether they are construed to refer to the promise of the Romantic vision or the more decadent promise of the goober khan, becomes the cajoling but disembodied and senseless music "Of trombones floating in the trees" (CP 143). This music is punctuated by the gruff drums which yet do not "alarm the populace" (CP 143). If music in this poem is a metaphor for art, and specifically for poetry, the trombones and the drums are a metaphor for the art that is no longer grounded in a belief in a traditional order in the world, and which fails to move its hearers. It is the same sound about which Stevens asks, uneasily, "Is the function of the poet here mere sound. . . To stuff the ear?" (CP 144).

Reason, "the toil of thought" (CP 143) which rendered traditional belief unacceptable to the modern mind, led to disturbed "peace eccentric to/ The eye and tinkling to the ear" (CP 143). "Serener myth"--another reference to old myths, particularly those of religion--in its once "perfect plenitude" (CP 143) had once contained the paradigms and archetypes for human nature, and it struck "the longest resonance" (CP 143). Ultimately it did not fare better than the toil of thought. It too "Passed like a circus" (CP 143). Stevens's statement that "Politic man ordained/ Imagination as the fateful sin" (CP 143)--a description that evokes once again the poet's father--points out that while the modern world had discarded what were once the most shining examples of imagination it had failed to replace the old constructs with a sufficiently compelling new one. The poem's second section indicts the modern inability to reconcile reason with imagination, and of the subsequent devaluation of imagination and its processes. This attitude dictates that the present world must make do with "Grandmother and her basketful of pears" (CP 143), an enigmatic image evoking a diminished version of Eve robbed of her mythic powers. "The ivory wench/ For whom the towers are built" (CP 143) is both a no longer functioning muse and a representative of the art of the past which is now relegated to the esoteric ivory towers that have no direct bearing on the present.

At this point in the poem, the old casino has shut down and the wilderness is encroaching upon it. The park has

returned to woodland: in the poem's second section, "Life is an old casino in a park" (CP 143); in the third it has reverted to being "an old casino in a wood" (CP 144). And if "The air/ Is not so elemental nor the earth/ So near" to us as it was to the originators of Jehovah, the sea-worm and the nightingales; if the natural world is neither so frightening nor so poetic as it was to previous myth-makers, neither does the "sustenance of the wilderness. . . sustain us in the metropolises" (CP 142). The swans, a final vestige of an older symbolism as well as a newer decadence, are themselves dead, and now "a grand decadence" (CP 142) devoid of all content "settles down like cold" (CP 142).

The poem's final section asks what the poet is to make of a ruined world. It is Frost's question of "What to make of a diminished thing". If Stevens's answer to the question he poses in this section's first lines--

Is the function of the poet here mere sound,
Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,
To stuff the ear?--

is not quite a definite, resounding "no," there is, nonetheless a hesitance in restricting the function of the poet to "His infinite repetition and alloys/ Of pick of ebon, pick of halcyon" (CP 143). The material is rich, but in danger of being decorative, a superficial imitation of the light and darkness of the mind. This explanation merely "weights him with nice logic for the prim" (CP 144).

In contrast to this view of the poet's role as being ornamental, Stevens proposes that the poet--and poetry--has a considerably more useful purpose to fulfill:

As part of nature he is part of us.
 His rarities are ours: may they fit
 And reconcile us to our selves in those
 True reconcilings, dark, pacific words

(CP 144)

The "adroiter harmonies" of the poet's "dark pacific words" are more harmonious than former theistic visions, based on dualisms, had been.

"Close the cantina," Stevens entreats. The cantina is another dilapidated version of the casino, civilization's summer house. A public house, a place for drinking that leads no doubt to the "liquorish prayers" of the preceding stanza, "cantina" contains subtle shadow-puns on different versions of speech, and different kinds of music, ranging from the religious or occult resonances in the terms incantation, canticle, and canto, to cant, the worst kind of "mere sound."

"Hood the chandelier," says the poet: put out the wholly artificial light of tired human reason constructs. What is left to confront is the moonlight, a light considerably icier than the golden light of the chandelier:

a white
 That silences the ever-faithful town.
 How pale and how possessed a night it is,
 How full of exhalations of the sea . . .

All this is older than the oldest hymn,
 Has no more meaning than tomorrow's bread (CP 144)
 What is left beneath myth and artifice is the world itself,
 indifferent, pulsating and pre-human ("older than the oldest
 hymn"), and wholly necessary to the human. In point of fact,
 tomorrow's bread has all the meaning in the world for someone
 hungry for sustenance--or sacrament.

Stevens does not deify the poet here in any way.
 "Academic Discourse" ends on a warning note: the poet's
 occupation "may be benediction, sepulcher,/ And epitaph" but
 his incantations still rely on nature: they recast into words
 what "the moon defines/ By mere example opulently clear" (CP
 145). The advantage of this to the world at large is that the
 poet awakens the world to what the moon wordlessly says:

But let the poet on his balcony
 Speak and the sleepers in their sleep shall move,
 Waken, and watch the moonlight on their floors.

"Academic Discourse" is an early poem of Stevens's. It
 appeared in "Ideas of Order" but was written at the time the
 poems in Harmonium were written (Holly Stevens dates it at
 1923 in The Palm at the End of the Mind). The poet lingering
 on the moonlit balcony, like Juliet, on the edge of other
 people's dreams, posing hypotheses about his place in the
 world, is a relatively passive and marginal dweller, compared
 to the speaker in such fully mature poems of dwelling as "The
 Auroras of Autumn" (1947), "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"
 (1949), and "To An Old Philosopher in Rome" (1952). These

later poems do not focus on the role of the poet per se, but rather on the experience of perceiving the world poetically that is available to every(wo)man. Partly by virtue of their greater length (especially in the cases of "Auroras" and "New Haven"), these poems render the nuances, details, and textures of thought and feeling that make up the activity of dwelling.

Threshold Dwelling

In a world of ongoing change, human presence exists largely on the brink, or the threshold, between different experiences of dwelling. The most momentous change is the final one, from life to death. "To An Old Philosopher in Rome," the poem Stevens wrote for his mentor, George Santayana, (but which Frank Kermode says he might have written for Heidegger⁶) is a poem about the state and conditions of dying--and dying well by one who has prepared himself to do so. Stevens represents this state as paradigmatic for that moment of suspension between the completion of one form of dwelling and the start of another when two worlds become "alike in the make of the mind" (CP 508) and "Two parallels become one" (CP 508). Thus:

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the
street

Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing with smaller and still smaller sound. . .

(CP 508)

As largeness is associated in the poems with physicality, here smallness reflects a receding physicality. A curious reversal occurs in that the philosopher doesn't perceive this diminishment as his own perceptions failing--in fact, those have taken on a preternatural intensity--but rather as the outside world dwindling into itself.

The philosopher, "alive/ Yet living in two worlds" (CP 509), experiences a constant superimposition of the physical world he knows on to the approaching afterworld, which, uncannily, it seems he knows almost as well. Death arranges itself around the objects visible to Santayana in his room, translating them to "enlarged" versions of themselves. These last days of the philosopher represent, the poem says,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the
extreme of the unknown (CP 508).

Yet "the extreme of the unknown" translates itself with rather surprising symmetry into objects and perceptions not only easily recognizable in themselves, but ones that the Roman Catholic Santayana may have been expected to expect. Not only do "the figures in the street/ Become the figures of heaven" but Rome becomes "that more merciful Rome/Beyond"; "the blown banners change to wings . . ."; "The newsboys' muttering/ Becomes another murmuring"; the smell of medicine grows as delectable as incense; and the immediate furnishings of the room--bed, books, chair, even "the moving nuns" become first

"the shapes of happiness" (CP 508) and then coalesce to something ethereal, transcendent and sacramental:

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
 The candle as it evades the sight, these are
 The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome . . .

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
 On the chair, a moving transparency on the nuns,
 A light on the candle tearing against the wick
 To join a hovering excellence, to escape
 From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

(CP 509)

Frank Kermode describes this process of superimposition and willed metamorphosis as illustrating the following lesson in dwelling⁷:

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, the more so as death approaches. . . . For the art of dying depends on our having dwelt poetically on earth (262).

Indeed, in the peculiar economy of the imagination, Santayana's "poverty" or imaginative need at the time of death can be met only by the intensification and transformation of

the very components that consign him to poverty and suffering
in the first place:

Impatient for the grandeur that you need

In so much misery; and yet finding it
Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead...

.

It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most
It is older than the oldest speech of Rome

(CP 510)

Santayana's room, his final dwelling place if not his final
resting place, continues to undergo its transformations,
incorporating the increasingly naturalized components of
Rome's streets--"bird-nest arches and rain-stained-vaults" (CP
510)--as the room grows increasingly dim, candle-lit, ambered,
filled with the sound of bells, until

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns. . .

These lines balance with exquisite precariousness on the verge
of the ecstatic and the visionary, and descend with equally
exquisite tenderness back into the ordinary ("No more than a
bed . . ."); then at the last minute swoop up into the

Total grandeur of a total edifice
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. . . (CP 510)

The motion described by the imagination's sweep from the visionary to the ordinary to the gradeur of the last realized structure is like that other motion described so long ago by "casual flocks of pigeons" making

Ambiguous undulations as they sink

Downward to darkness, on extended wings (CP 70).

In that room in Rome, however, the imagination halts the final sinking downward to darkness by interposing a glimpse of the beautiful structures of the mind: the "total edifice," the design and form and frame of the imagination:

He stops upon this threshold,

As if the design of all his words takes form

and frame from thinking and is realized (CP 511).

Frank Kermode has suggested that the subject of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" is "the moment when accustomed reality provides a language for death, invents it, as it invents its own angels, by analogy" (263). This assessment seems strikingly accurate, and strikingly problematic as well. "[T]o impose is not/ To discover" (CP 403), Stevens has said elsewhere; yet it is certainly no "beast disgorged, unlike" (CP 404) that dwells beyond the threshold upon which the philosopher's imagination, saturated with the images of Christianity, lingers. How, then, is the reality of death--which is part and parcel of the reality of nature--revealed if the imagination is so busily filling in the blanks of the unknown with the shapes of the known? For the philosopher to be fulfilled in the moment of death, the ordinary cannot

remain ordinary: it must be transmuted into that of which the ordinary is (only) the symbol.

"To an Old Philosopher in Rome" presents a view of the imagination that seems at odds with Stevens's stated intentions for the imagination elsewhere, where the aim is "to find,/ Not to impose. . . ." (CP 404). The salvation the poem delineates so beautifully is a circumscribed salvation at best: what is saved is the Christian fiction so complete in itself that finally, in Santayana's final dwelling, there is no room for the phenomenal world--and the true alien otherness of death--to reveal itself. Every aspect of Rome "is part of the life in your room./ Its domes are the architecture of your bed" (CP 510). Santayana is--heroically, in some respects--"Unwilling that mercy should be a mystery/Of silence. . . ." (CP 510). Unfortunately, this unwillingness, in precluding mystery, precludes revelation as well. The imagination in this poem does not "let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (Heidegger, Writings 82).

"To an Old Philosopher in Rome" describes the limitations of living by analogy as well as the inherent limitation of metaphor. Heidegger describes this problematic nature of metaphor when he writes of the potential for concealment contained in seeing everything "as something" else: "What no longer takes the form of pure letting be seen, but rather in its indicating always has recourse to something else and so always lets something be seen as something, acquires a structure of synthesis and therewith the

possibility of covering up" (Writings 81). "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" begs the question of whether the unknown-death, in this case--can only be seen in terms of previously constructed fictions (in which case Santayana's vision is a vision of fulfillment); or whether it is possible to confront the Other without imposing one's fictional apparatus, and thereby experience a truly new relation with the Other.

Charles Berger, in his reading of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," has suggested that the poem illustrates the role Stevens assigned to philosophy, which is different from the role he assigned to poetry. Berger asks,

Does Stevens privilege the stance of the old philosopher as a reflection of his own, or does he distance himself implicitly from the very figure he eulogizes? In other words, do the very terms of praise for the philosopher's way describe a set of impossibles for the poet (139)?

That critic's answer to this last question is "yes"; he judges "Stevens' praise, finally, to be eulogistic of another, rather than prescriptive for himself" (CP 140).

What Stevens might have desired for himself is the open and dynamic activity of dwelling depicted in such poems as "The Auroras of Autumn" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." As we shall see, those poems render versions of dwelling in which the poet is willing to suspend his constructed fictions, and allows the Other to truly enter into his house.

Auroral Dwelling

This world. . . was ever, is now, and ever
shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures of
it kindling, and measures of it going out.

Heraclitus

It was I and Fire that lived there. . .

Thoreau, Walden

"The Auroras of Autumn" depicts a full-fledged dwelling on earth within earthly limits. More than "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," it shows mind and body standing on the threshold of otherness, many times over in fact, yet remaining willing to exist in uncertainty, willing not to impose, and thereby able to discover a new relation with each new necessary change.

The poem dramatizes a series of dwellings and departures from dwellings, starting with the smallest house, the egg, and ranging to the vastest house, the sky--the all-encompassing "house of evening" (CP). In between are other houses and house-like dwellings, progressing in size, distance from the body, complexity and abstraction: the sloughed off skin, the cave, a nest, a maze, a cabin, the room filled with the mother's face, a crumbling house, the mother's house (again), the father's indeterminate no-place suspended in mid-air, the house of the mind. Each of these was once inhabited, once offered shelter; each of these necessitates abandonment. The

familial relationships harbored in the houses also end, dissolve, and transmute into something else.

The only permanent roof over one's head in the poem is the sky, whose permanence here erupts into conflagrations. The economies of permanence and impermanence (or as "New Haven" will have it, "the permanence composed of impermanence" [CP]), and the trade-offs between appearance and reality are such that the figures who have vanished one by one--the serpent, the mother, the father, the father's pageantry--remain embossed ineradicably on the memory; while the entity that never leaves and never changes, the sky, appears to heave, erupt, explode, and undergo cataclysmic change.

It is clear from the start of "The Auroras" that, serpent notwithstanding, this is no paradise:

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.

Or is it another wriggling out of the egg,
Another image at the end of the cave,
Another bodiless for the body's slough?

The serpent identifies this as the land of knowledge hard won--the knowledge of good and evil, the old schools would have called it; the knowledge of process, of the body, of eternal change, Stevens shows it to be. This serpent is familiar from "From Decoration in a Nigger Cemetery": it is an aspect of Ananke (CP 152), bodiless because not a creature or an object

in a world of objects, but the living process and condition of earthly change in a world of change.

Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,
 Another image at the end of the cave,
 Another bodiless for the body's slough?

The question ("Or is it another wriggling . . . ?"), launched by that startling "or," suggests that perhaps one may have mistaken this place as a center, final source, or origin (This, finally, is where the serpent lives); but that an alternative is tenable, that this is one of the dwellings of the serpent, one of the wriggings, one of the images . . .

When "Eyes open and fix on us in every sky," it is as though the human were observed by the universe in a mutual blurring of subject and object, of observer and observed, of knower and known. Like the serpent, the human dweller must break out of its dwellings--out of the egg, out of Plato's cave, out of the skin confining the body (but not into death yet--just into a new skin, elsewhere called a "new knowledge of reality" [CP 534]). Form gulps after formlessness because all earthly form is a momentary pause on the threshold of change. The serpent, symbol of metamorphosis, a kind of disappearance over a threshold, disappears into the grass.

The one who witnesses, perceives and experiences all of this is a blank man, a white figure as white as the snow man only he isn't in the snow; he is white on a white beach, leaving behind his white cabin with the white flowers against the wall:

Farewell to an idea . . . A cabin stands,
 Deserted on a beach. It is white,
 As by a custom . . .

.
 The wind is blowing the sand across the floor.

Here, being visible is being white,
 Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment
 Of an extremist in an exercise . . .

.
 The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand.

(CP 412)

Nature is already beginning to reclaim this former dwelling by its agencies of wind and sand. The dialectic of dwelling is that if the dweller dwells fully--if indeed the boundaries between him and his environment grow increasingly blurred and indistinct--then the danger arises of disappearing into a brilliant nothingness. Then the dweller must leave and recreate himself, and build a new dwelling. The condition of nothingness, however, is a necessary stage in the cycle: Thomas Hines has written that "The function of nothingness (and the images associated with winter) is to set apart and make possible the appearance of Being" (262).

As usual, both nothingness and the Being bodied forth from it are in the north:

He observes how the north is always enlarging the
 change,

With its frigid brilliance, its blue-red sweeps
 And gusts of great enkindlings its polar green,
 The color of ice and fire and solitude (CP 412-413).

The blank man is compelled to bid farewell to a few more ideas, each one requiring a different imaginative act, each one comprised of losses and gains, partial destructions, compromised redemptions. In poem III, the mother's face, is dissolved and destroyed, and with her fall the whole house falls, though it remains "sheltered" in the mind:

The house will crumble and the books will burn.
 They are at ease in a shelter of the mind

And the house is of the mind and they and time,
 Together, all together (CP 413).

Despite the mind's saving grace, the final image in this section is a chilling one. "The windows will be lighted, not the rooms" (CP 413), because the house is empty, dark, and the windows only reflect the flashing auroras outside.

The fourth and fifth poems focus upon a Jove-like father, and his godly machinations. Majestic, dignified and distant in the fourth poem, in the fifth he takes on the character of a circus master. The mother reappears in poem V as an earth mother contrasted with the sky-father. "The mother invites humanity to her house/And table" (CP 415). The father, however, distracts humanity from the mother's simple, solid,

nourishing fare; he "fetches pageants out of the air" (CP 415), fetches tellers of tales, musicians, dancing negresses. This noisy theatre of the mind is a circus of abstraction and activity, a panoply and a parody of culture which winds downs to the realization that "there are no lines to speak [.] There is no play" (CP 416). This particular theatre of ideas has fallen apart.

The sixth poem unleashes the full force and glory of the aurora borealis onto the pathetic scene of the crumbled theatre. This pageantry, in contrast to that of poem V, is wholly inhuman, a display of pure energy, clouds, misted rock, mountain, water, waves and light suggesting the first days of creation, or the day after the Big Bang. It is impossible to tell whether this holocaust of creation is flying apart or coalescing. It is nature, extravagant and purposeless:

It is of cloud transformed
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change,
As light changes yellow into gold and gold
To its opal elements and fire's delight,

Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence
And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space.
The cloud drifts idly through half-thought-of forms.

The theatre is filled with flying birds,
 Wild wedges, as of a volcano's smoke, palm-eyed
 and vanishing. . .

But it does solidify. Suddenly there's a structure, an
 edifice--again, it's unclear whether rising or falling--but it
 requires a man in it to complete the scene:

A capitol,
 It may be, is emerging or has just
 Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed ...

This is nothing until in a single man contained,
 Nothing until this named thing nameless is
 And is destroyed. . . . (CP 416).

The completion that single man brings to the scene is
 paradoxical. His participation in the natural scene is needed
 for the denouement, but not in the usual way that humanity is
 needed to impose "meaning" onto meaningless nature; in fact,
 his function, like that of the imagination, is to destroy and
 reimagine, not to pin down and name: the scene is "Nothing
 until this named thing nameless is/ And is destroyed" (CP
 416).

The scholar of one candle emerges from his house to find
 the world on fire:

He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
 The Artic effulgence flaring on the frame

Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.

(CP 417)

The scholar's terror notwithstanding, he musters a reaction to this experience of fire that is quite different from ones we've seen before in, for example, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" or in "Credences." The "candle tearing against the wick" in "To an Old Philosopher," it will be recalled, aspires

To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible (CP 509). The philosopher, whose hope is imaged in that candle flame, presumes the fire to be symbol of a transcendent and celestial consummation, not this wild, physical, convulsive conflagration (which could characterize hell as much as heaven). The philosopher thinks he knows what fire symbolizes and fails to recognize that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy.

The speaker in "Credences" takes a bolder, more reckless and certainly more self destructive tack in his confrontation with fire, from which he wishes to remove all mediation and metaphor. To make self and sun one, he urges us to "see the very thing and nothing else" knowing full well that the sun will "Burn everything not part of it to ash" (CP 373). The scholar of one candle seeks neither transendence over nor absorption into the auroras. He watches and attends, fully facing, despite his fear, the otherness before him.

What follows this scene is a series of meditations upon the auroras. First, the scholar speculates whether an impersonal, universal mind holds sway over the spectacles before him:

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent . . .

.

And do these heavens adorn
And proclaim it, the white creator of black . . .

(CP 417)

What is frightening here is the idea of intentionality, of an imagination set apart from its embodiments in the physical world.

The eighth poem shifts attention from the auroras to possible perspectives the human mind may devise toward them. The fifth stanza of this poem is a revision of the seventh poem of "It Must Give Pleasure" in the "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," in which the speaker expresses the fervent, nearly feverish hope to discover life-giving hope in winter,

Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible. . . (CP 404)

In the auroras, this admonition to reality is rephrased in terms of assertion and conviction:

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,

It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.

(CP 418)

The poem's culmination in attributing innocence is a declaration of complete acceptance of nature on its own terms (in its innocence) and not as portent of some human construct. Oddly enough, the wonderful surprise of the poem is that once nature is seen in this clear way, it imparts holiness and peace that the human participants "partake thereof" (CP 418); and it even brings the mother back. The feeling of this is conveyed in terms of music and voice, so frequently the agents of joy and reconciliation in Stevens's poems:

So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,

A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.

An innocence of the earth and no false sign

Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,

Lie down like children in this holiness,

As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark

Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,

Created the time and place in which we breathed...

This recovery of the mother is followed by a poem of pleasure, community and camaraderie in celebration of a renewed dwelling. "We were Danes in Denmark all day long/ And knew each other well, hale-hearted landmen . . . " (CP 419): the speaker who proclaims these words is at home in the world. He

doesn't overly concern himself with imminent disasters ("Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring? [CP 419]), though in voicing the question he shows that he knows that the day will come when this home, too, will be left. For now, there are the auroras:

The stars are putting on their glittering belts.

They throw around their shoulders cloaks that flash

Like a great shadow's last embellishment (CP 419).

The poem's final stanza recedes into contemplation. After the upheavals experienced in the preceding nine poems, the speaker withdraws to speculate upon the nature of human happiness. He considers "An unhappy people in a happy world" (CP 420), "An unhappy people in an unhappy world" (CP 420), "a happy people in a happy world" (CP 419), and finally

Turn[s] back to where we were when we began:

An unhappy people in a happy world (CP 419)

and from there devises the forms of happiness available to human beings. These lines, in their rhythm, vocabulary and repetitions, recall that earlier calculation on Stevens's part in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" concerning the proper domain of human speech, in which he concludes that the purpose of speech is "To speak humanly . . ./Of human things" (CP 300) (see Chapter II, section 2 above). The "Auroras," too, joyfully affirms human nature, while allowing nonhuman nature its own integrity and domain.

2. "A Kind of Total Affluence": Stevens's Economy

Money is a kind of poetry.

(OP 191)

The conception of oikos leads to the idea of economy as well as to ecology. Ecology itself has been described as an "organic economy" (Heinzelman 47). The two terms are closely connected etymologically and conceptually. Carolyn Merchant writes, for example, that "The dominant paradigm in ecology draws heavily on economic metaphors such as producers, consumers, productivity, yields and efficiency. Nature is cast as a computerized network of energy inputs and information bits" (Revolutions 9). The terms economy and ecology are both useful in discussions of language and literature as well, since both provide vocabularies for expressing the interrelationships within, and among, literary bodies of work. Marc Shell explains that

Economy has been an important term in literary theory since Aristotle, but it is usually ignored by literary critics and omitted from the dictionaries and histories of poetics. "Economy" refers etymologically to the conventions (nomoi) of, and distribution (nemesis) within, the household (oikos). Domestic economy concerns production and distribution in the household, the relations between master and slave, husband and wife, and father and son. Political economy concerns production and distribution in the polis,

and relations between political groups, such as tyrants and subjects, and citizens and slaves. Literary economy concerns similar problems of production, distribution and relations (406).

Stevens's abiding and at times consuming interest in the economics of his personal, material life was paralleled in the poetry, when he addressed issues of the credits and debits of running the world, the way things interact, the way energy is exchanged and transformed, and the way materials and themes are recycled and reused.⁸ He had his own version of Thoreau's calculation in Walden that "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (27).

The primary terms in Stevens's economic vocabulary are poverty and necessity on the one hand, and affluence and abundance on the other. Stevens rewrote the early Emerson's formulations of "the dialectic of imaginative autonomy as against Necessity" [*italics mine*] (Bloom, Figures 63) and revived the late Emerson's reconciliations with Ananke in his own work.

To the Emerson of "Nature," "Self Reliance" and "Circles," the mind was the human being's power over nature's limitations. Emerson wrote in "Circles":

The life of a man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. . . . There is no outside, no

inclosing wall, no circumference to us (Emerson 169-170).

He concluded that "The only sin is limitation" (Emerson 171), a maxim useful in conceiving the abilities of the imagination, but potentially dangerous when applied too literally in relations with the material world. In "Fate," Emerson's truly "ecological" essay in the sense in which that term is used today, Emerson effects a reconciliation with Necessity, Fate and Ananke. Recognizing that the laws of nature are coterminus with what humans conceive as "fate" and, therefore, limitation ("Fate, or the laws of the world" [Emerson 331]), Emerson writes, "The element running through entire nature, which we popularly call Fate, is known to us as limitation. Whatever limits us we call Fate" (338)⁹. Sounding virtually Thoreauvian in "Fate," Emerson writes that "Nature is no spendthrift, but takes the shortest way to her ends. . . nature makes every creature do its own work and get its living,--is it planet, animal or tree. The planet makes itself." (347).

It is to this latter version of nature as Fate and as Necessity that Stevens wishes to reconcile himself. If nature is plenitude, then human nature is a kind of poverty: its limitation is not just the sum of physical laws that circumscribe the human, but the human point of view, as well, which limits human perception of reality.

In the state of imaginative need which defines the human condition--what Stevens meant when he spoke of "poverty"¹⁰--

the pertinent questions for a poet are these: What is the most efficient use of my internal resources? If words are the currency of exchange between humans and the world, how best to spend them wisely without squander or devaluation? What exchange value does my poetry--what I produce--have in the world, so overwhelmingly wordless when I step beyond the confines of the human? What compensation is possible for my never being able to step beyond those confines (wherein lies my poverty)?

As Thoreau had done in Walden, Stevens kept a running account of his losses and gains, a record of what he had to pay out in terms of his inherited ideas about self, belief, value, and tradition in exchange for fresh supplies of perception, experience, insight and sensation¹¹. This record-keeping took form not only in the poems, but in Stevens's letters and numerous notebooks as well, in which he jotted down fleeting thoughts, perceptions, and fragments from his reading. Joan Richardson has described the "monklike habits" and "Puritan thrift" (Later Years: 145; 146) Stevens practised in transcribing loose notes into notebooks, and then editing and modifying them over time as he repeatedly cycled through his materials in a spirit of literary conservation:

In his room after dinner, in winter's early darkness, he sat and copied from small pieces of paper that it had been his habit to keep in his pockets since his youth. . . sentences and paragraphs that had impressed him while reading.

Going through these, as he also periodically went through his early journals and letters, he sifted out those that still "mattered". . . and entered them, often adding his comments and modifications of the views presented (Later Years: 145-146)¹².

For Stevens, then, as for Thoreau, "'economy' expresses multiple forms of commerce between man and God, between man and man, between man and nature, and, most volatily, between man and language" (Heinzelman 33).

The wealth Stevens received in exchange for his poetic output, which he calculated in richness of imaginative experience, was a wealth that would not accumulate. Life is change, and change demands an ongoing, ceaseless poetic activity. But, as Kurt Heinzelman points out, the classical idea of what today would be called a sustainable economy has nothing to do with profit or accumulated wealth: "Aristotle believed that the basis of any economy must be sufficiency," and that proper economic exchange is "gainless" (Heinzelman 40). This conception of economy reflects nature's own conservatism in manipulating relationships within the whole in order to maintain the overall balance of the whole.

For Stevens, too, sufficiency is all, and is expressed in the "poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice" (CP 239). This same concern with totality prevails throughout Stevens's poems, in his familiar theme of the relation of parts to whole. In terms of his own poetic production, Stevens considered the body of his poems to be

part of a greater unified whole (and had at one time wanted to call his complete works The Whole of Harmonium, returning to the title of his first volume). The terms "total," "whole" and "complete" are common in Stevens's vocabulary; and even the penchant for arcane superlatives that pepper the poems-- "the vividest repose" (CP 375), "profoundest shadows" (CP 235), "the exactest poverty" (CP 310), "the brilliantest descriptions" (CP 344)-- in their excess express a constant straining toward totality.

One way of fulfilling "the daily necessity of getting the world right" (OP 201)--in the interest of which was pursued all the record keeping and account taking in the writings--was to perceive things, as far as possible, in their totality. The trouble with totality--as I have tried to show in my reading of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"--is that it entails extracting the moment of totality from the flow of time, process, and development, and imposing an artificial structure onto what is otherwise a lived and live moment. Be that as it may, poetry's role is nonetheless to "find what will suffice," and to effect what Robert Frost calls "a momentary stay against confusion." Stevens's most complex and fully realized poems (of which, again, "The Auroras" and "New Haven" are the best examples) successfully play off the moments of rest against the background of flux, process and even chaos. Within the flow are moments when this life which is "a permanence composed of impermanence" (CP 472) coalesces, however briefly, into coherence, when the proper relation of

all things is felt and known--and in Stevens's case, expressed in poetry:

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold

The academies like structures in a mist (CP 386).

In keeping with an economics of sustainability and sufficiency, Stevens conceived of the human imagination itself as a process of daily accounting, in which the words needed to add up and balance out, instead of numbers. Poetry met necessity and assuaged poverty; but a surfeit of language, or of one kind of language, could dull the senses, too, and bloat humanity with its sense of itself. In the economic system that Stevens's language models, luxuriance and renunciation ebb and flow in tandem depending on the necessity--the imaginative need--of the whole of the mind at a given time.

Stevens emphasized that the imagination does not--must not and cannot--change the bottom line, the final equation, the sum of human or non-human nature:

The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the

expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives (NA 36).

The imagination adds nothing because it is an integral part of a complete whole, inherently factored into the self-balancing, self-fulfilling, self-articulating totality which is nature. Imagination is a form of energy within that whole—as money is a form of energy, valueless in itself, valuable as it is exchanged. Stevens wrote that "a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed" (NA 35). Similarly, the relationship of mind/imagination to the physical world is that of wave to water: the water, shaped and transformed by energy, takes the form of a wave that moves and is capable of moving other things; but nothing is added, the volume of material is not changed. Like the energy that makes waves, imagination changes and charges perception:

Words add to the senses. The words for the dazzle
Of mica, the dithering of grass,
The Arachne integument of dead trees,
Are the eyes grown larger, more intense (CP 234)

What grows larger and more intense is one's feeling for the world. The imaginative faculty, properly used (that is, used for accepting and processing the world, not to escape the limitations imposed by earthly life) "adds" nothing, uses everything (as nature does). It allows resemblances and equivalences; it broadens the capacity to identify with others and the Other. It enlarges human identity, reconciles difference, and changes the self and conceptions of the self.

The imagination pays homage, abeyance and dues to what Emerson calls "the Beautiful Necessity" (Emerson 352). Ideally, it produces neither excess nor waste:

. . . the imagination never brings anything into the world but . . . on the contrary, like the personality of the poet in the act of creating, it is no more than a process . . . Like light, [the imagination] adds nothing, except itself (NA 61).

The imagination's role was, again, "to discover. . . to find/Not to impose. . . " (CP 404), as he had advised in the "Notes."¹³

Because of this rather idealized view of the unobtrusive function of the imagination, the very fact that poetry's currency is metaphor became problematic for Stevens in the later poems. Language, by its very nature, arises out of a split consciousness between self and world. This was what D.H. Lawrence meant when he wrote that "when humanity was born into a separate idea of itself, it said, Pan (418). . . Speech is the death of Pan" (420)¹⁴. (If complete identification existed between human consciousness and "objective" world, there would be no need for language.) Thus, Derrida writes in his essay, "White Mythology," metaphor operates on the basis of resemblance but not of identity.

Helen Reguiero has addressed the problem Stevens faces in attempting to keep the imagination from "adding" anything to that which the poet tries to perceive in its purity:

Without imagination it is impossible to approach the "thingness" of the object. Yet this transforming power of the imagination is itself problematic. For the imagination transforms the object into something other than itself, and instead of being a mode of experience of reality it becomes an impediment, a zone of consciousness in which the mind sees nothing that is there (148).

A metaphor, then, is both economical and profligate at once. Its efficiency lies in conveying a concept by way of an image (or other sensory evocation); its profligacy lies in that excess that spills over. The fit is never perfect in transferring a set of criteria from one term to another; part of the image remains a little inappropriate, a little excessive, a little disjunctive--what Derrida calls "an energy-carrying absence, this mysterious break" (40).

This excess of meaning contained in metaphor (and therefore, in all words, in all language) always threatens to erupt into a kind of wilderness¹⁵: herein lies both the danger and the power in language.

The Effete Vocabulary of Summer: "Credences of Summer"

Pardie! Summer is like a fat beast, sleepy in mildew...

(CP 62)

It is not good for men to get all they wish to
get. It is sickness that makes health
pleasant; evil, good; hunger, plenty;
weariness, rest.

Heraclitus

Stevens's poem, "Credences of Summer," brings together the themes of fecundity and barrenness, and of language's expressive as well as excessive qualities. The poem renders a moment when the imagination is sated--in fact, engorged. A festive and celebratory poem, "Credences" elaborates the scene of pagan, orgiastic ritual projected so much earlier in the seventh poem of "Sunday Morning," in which "a ring of men/ Shall chant. . . Their boisterous devotion to the sun" (CP 70) and "Their chant shall be a chant of paradise" (CP 70).

"Credences" completes what "Sunday Morning" set out to do: it achieves that moment when human song perfectly replicates and matches nature's wordless expressions of itself. The desired moment when world and language finally meet is depicted as a moment of high inflation in the imagination's spiritual economy. The poem demonstrates that this satiation of imaginative need comes about at a high cost. "Credences" answers in the affirmative the troubling questions posed about paradisaal perfection in "Sunday Morning":

Is there no change of death in paradise?

Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
 Hang heavy in that perfect sky,
 Unchanging . . . (CP 69).

The heaviness conveyed in this passage from the early poem pervades "Credences" as well, beginning with the ponderously oratorical, drone-like sonorities of the opening poem:

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
 And spring's infuriations over and a long way
 To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
 Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
 Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers.
 The fidgets of remembrance come to this.
 This is the last day of a certain year
 Beyond which there is nothing left of time.
 It comes to this and the imagination's life.

There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt
 And this must comfort the heart's core against
 Its false disasters--these fathers standing round,
 These mothers touching, speaking, being near,
 These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass.

(CP 372)

Helen Vendler has discussed the tension between the positive and negative qualities juxtaposed in this first poem, so that "warmth and feeling . . . emerge from the heavy toll of the

mind's trouble, the disasters (even if false) of the heart's core, the fidgets of remembrance, the slaughtering, even of fools, and the repetitive knell of negative phrases" (Wings 236). Not only that, but the inhabitants of this paradise enjoy a kind of stupefaction: the fathers stand around, the mothers barely move, the lovers wait. What are they waiting for?

Instructions, perhaps, which arrive in the hortatory and didactic second poem in a series of imperatives. "Postpone," "burn," "trace," "look," "say," "fix," "exile," instructs the speaker, in order to disclose reality "in its essential barrenness" (CP 373).

Let's see the very thing and nothing else
 Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
 Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
 Without evasion by a single metaphor.
 Look at it in its essential barrenness
 And say this, this is the centre that I seek.
 Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
 Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
 Of change still possible. Exile desire
 For what is not. This is the barrenness
 Of the fertile thing that can attain no more

(CP 373)

The glory of seeing "the very thing and nothing else" is compromised by negative or questionable qualities here as in the first stanza: the center is fixed, peace is arrested, joy depends on ignorance, and desire-for-what-is-not is exiled as surely as Adam and Eve were from Eden. Moreover, the unmediated vision of the thing itself consumes the seer. Seeing "the gold sun about the whitened sky/Without evasion by a single metaphor" (CP 373) implies the unity of seer and sun, of language and world. The effect of this experience is like the effect Zeus had on Semele when she insisted on beholding him bare: she was burnt to a crisp. Similarly, this "hottest fire of sight/ Burns everything not part of it to ash" (CP 373).

After the conflagration of the second stanza, the third stanza arrives at another point of rest on the "final mountain. . . the refuge that the end creates." On this final mountain

is the natural tower of all the world,
The point of survey, green's green apogee,
But a tower more precious than the view beyond,
A point of survey squatting like a throne,
Axis of everything, green's apogee . . .

(CP 373)

This tower appears to be situated temporally, since the final mountain itself seems more to be a pause in time than a place (the sun is at rest, it is "the end"; the first poem proclaims

"there is nothing left of time); in that sense the tower is the summer day of perfect oneness and completion itself.¹⁶ In Stevens's poems, the end of time is never an auspicious event, not even when it is associated with ultimate satisfactions. The end of time means the end of the element in which human life plays itself out; thus, it also means the end of language (a temporal faculty). Indeed, "the last day of a certain year" suggests the completion of apocalypse as well as of fulfillment. Termination is further echoed in the finality of the mountain and in the halted sun of the third poem:

It is the final mountain. Here the sun
Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
This is the refuge that the end creates.

(CP 373)

The seventh poem in "Credences" looks to some time previous to this time when "direction stops and we accept what is/ As good" (CP 374). The woods of this stanza are juxtaposed against the rock--"the visible rock . . . this present ground" (CP 375)--of pure reality. The inhabitants of those woods sang "unreal songs" (CP 376) and "had to avert themselves/Or else avert the object" (CP 376). This disunity between singers and world had dire effects:

The thrice concentered self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate

Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
 The meaning of capture, this hard prize,
 Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

(CP 376)

Surely the unities attained in "Credences" is superior to the relationships of manipulation and enslavement described above. The poem that follows the one describing the "thrice concentered self" is a song of joy, "[t]he trumpet of morning" blowing through the clouds perhaps blown by the necessary angel of reality herself. This joyful song, however, is followed by a poem describing an abandoned world:

Fly low, cock bright, and stop on a bean pole. Let
 Your brown breast redden, while you wait for warmth.
 With one eye watch the willow, motionless.
 The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener is gone
 And last year's garden grows salacious weeds.
 A complex of emotions falls apart,
 In an abandoned spot. Soft, civil bird,
 The decay that you regard: of the arranged
 And of the spirit of the arranged, douceurs,
Tristesses, the fund of life and death . . .

(CP 377).

The end of human language seems somehow reflected in a languour in the rest of the scene. Granted, there is a bird who makes "a sound,/ Which is not part of the listener's own sense," but the cat is dead, the willow is motionless. Since the wind is Stevens's figure for wild, nonhuman nature, the

stillness of the scene gives the effect of being devoid not just of the human, but of nature in its wild version as well.

"Credences of Summer," for all its gorgeousness, is a poem about the addled satisfactions of attainment. It is like a stagnant economy, in which all commerce between necessity and desire, barrenness and fecundity, summer and winter, sound and silence, have halted. The result is an enervated totality. For Stevens, the times and conditions of transition are more interesting than any condition is in and of itself. If "Credences" illustrates the "barrenness of the fertile thing that can attain no more," then "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" contemplates the fertility of the barren thing that has everything to attain. In the spiritual economy of Stevens's poems, the flux between barrenness and fecundity, sound and silence, poem and wordlessness fulfill each other: there is no true fulfillment without both.

Notes to Chapter IV

1. "In Elsie, Stevens had found someone 'at home' in Reading who did not fit the mold, someone he hoped to mold himself. He wanted to provide her both with the wardrobe she needed to inhabit the imaginary world he was creating (in letters he often asked her to be wearing a certain dress, hat, ribbon, or slippers when he arrived to see her on one of the two-day visits that punctuated their five-year courtship) and with books from which she could learn to be, at the same time, the pastoral "Faery" princess and the revolutionary woman of the age" (Richardson, Early Years 240).

2. Joan Richardson writes that after their marriage, Stevens "preferred returning, it seemed, to an empty apartment. He encouraged [Elsie's] absences so strongly that she came to feel forbidden to come back from more than occasional visits to Reading. And after years, when they finally moved into the spacious house on Westerly Terrace, its family rooms remained empty as Elsie, Holly, and he each retired to separate rooms after meetings at dinner . . . " (Early Years 365).

3. In The Palm at the End of the Mind, Holly Stevens sets the publication date of this poem as 1936, that is, long after the birth of Stevens's daughter. Though the poem's lament for house, bride and child should be taken figuratively, not literally, the emotion is clear enough.

4. For a psychosexual reading of "Architecture," see Richardson, The Early Years, pp. 492-493.

5. Stanley Cavell, in his essay on the treatment of Heideggerian dwelling in the works of Emerson and Thoreau, has commented that the difference between the American authors and Heidegger is that for the Americans "the achievement of the human requires not inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving. Then everything depends upon your realization of abandonment. For the significance of leaving lies in its discovery that you have settled something, that you have felt enthusiastically what there is to abandon yourself to, that you can treat the others there are as those to whom the inhabitation of the world can now be left" (138).

6. "Reflecting on Santayana's death in a letter. . . [Stevens] thinks again of one who abandoned poetry for thought but made this imaginative gesture, the choice, for a long old age, of a Roman convent, of a kind of poverty. . . of an image of oncoming death founded in the accustomed reality of prayer, liturgy, and the earthly city, which, being the heart of one world, may be the figure of another, the more so, if in dwelling poetically, we dwell in analogy. So the poem he might have written for Heidegger became a poem for Santayana" (Kermode 263).

7. Kermode derives his conclusion from Stevens's own comments in the essay "Effects of Analogy":

Take the case of a man for whom reality is enough, as, at the end of his life, he returns to it like a man returning from Nowhere to his village and to everything there that is tangible and visible, which he has come to cherish and wants to be near. He sees without images. But is he not seeing a clarified reality of his own? Does he not dwell in an analogy? (NA 129).

8. As one example, Joan Richardson interprets "Lions in Sweden" from an economic point of view: "brilliantly playing on the uses of 'sovereign' in the poem, Stevens pointed to the important connection between money and the needs of the soul, a connection extremely pertinent to the inheritors of the Calvinist spirit and more pertinent now that the center had already fallen out of Germany" (Early Years: 98).

9. In the same essay, Emerson clearly spells out that "Fate" is also biological necessity: "An expense of ends to means is fate; -- organization, tyrannizing over character. The menagerie, or forms and powers of the spine, is a book of fate; the bill of the bird, the skull of the snake, determines tyrannically its limits. So is the scale of races, of temperaments; so is sex; so is climate; so is the reaction of talents imprisoning the vital power in certain directions. Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit" (333). By this criterion, fate includes the forces of biology, physics, and the force of the environment upon the individual.

10. Harold Bloom traces Stevens's idea of "poverty" back to Emerson, who discusses poverty in relation to Fate and the humanity's need for self-reliance in the face of Fate (Climate 9).

11. Kurt Heinzelman writes that in Walden "Thoreau uses the language of economic process in order to illuminate our concepts of economy and then to dissect our preconceptions about language itself" (23).

12. Joan Richardson goes on to characterize Stevens's habits in economic terms when she observes that "In putting these down, Stevens exhibited the same Puritan thrift that he practiced in saving burned-out light bulbs to return to the electric company for their five-cent-apiece reduction on his bill or in using for the small pieces of paper that he kept in his pockets the backs of laundry bills and other odd leftovers, cut into two-by-four inch size. Just as in his everyday life there was not a moment wasted, so there was nothing thrown away that could in some way be recycled. Only one generation removed from his farming roots, he adapted the good husbandman's attention to conservation. This was not a

blanket conservatism, but an expedient one that operated selectively" (Later Years:146).

13. Stevens condemned surrealism as an artistic perspective for the same reason: "The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover" (OP 203).

14. Helen Reguiero expresses the same idea when she writes that "consciousness and imagination are the alienating entities that separate the poet from the natural world . . ." (211).

15. Thus, Derrida writes, "Metaphor is therefore classified by philosophy as provisional loss of meaning, a form of meaning, a form of economy that does no irreparable damage to what is proper, an inevitable detour, no doubt, but the account is in view, as within the horizon of a circular reappropriation of the proper sense" (Derrida 73).

16. This peculiarly squatting throne also suggests the body. As "point of survey," as "Axis of everything" which is "more precious than the view beyond" (because without it there would be no view) it is the locus of perception and being around which the scene ranges. Merleau-Ponty has written, "We find that the spatial forms or distances are not so much relations between different points in objective space as they are relations between these points and a central perspective--our body" (5).

Chapter V

"The Genius of the Body, Which Is Our World":

Nature as Bodily Presence

My giant goes with me wherever I go.

Emerson

And my body, the old animal. . .

(CP 46)

1. Wild Wallace Stevens: Thinking with the Body, Feeling with the Mind

In literature it is only the wild that attracts us.

Thoreau, "Walking"

. . . O wild bitch. O mind

Gone wild . . . (CP 456)

Stevens's sudden immersion in wild nature in British Columbia galvanized his sense of the world's physicality. He returned back east with a heightened awareness of the wilderness that still engulfed human habitation, no matter how much "an affair of cities" man had become (SP 134). In the same journal entry he made the year after his trip, in which he refers to the "shut out" face of the giant (SP 134), he described the force or presence of nature in terms of an enormous human body:

. . . the giant is there, nevertheless. And it is a proper question, whether or not the Lilliputians have tied him down. There are his huge legs,

Africa & South America, still, apparently, free;
and the rest of him is pretty tough and unhandy.

(SP 134).

Holly Stevens draws attention to the similarity of the figure in section XI of "A Primitive Like an Orb" (SP 134) to the early image in Stevens's journal:

Here, then, is an abstraction given head,
A giant on the horizon, given arms,
A massive body and long legs, stretched out,
.
. . . a close, parental magnitude,
At the centre on the horizon, concentrum, grave
And prodigious person, patron of origins

(CP 443)

The "giant" in the poem, echoing Stevens's earlier description of the continents as a vast body, evokes the physical earth as well as the sun--the orb on the horizon of the poem--seen in its "first idea" (as Stevens had urged the ephebe to do in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction").¹ As combined sun and earth--which is to say, as the physical universe that is father and mother to creation--the giant exists in a relation of "close, parental magnitude" to humanity. As "patron of origins," this giant engenders not only the created world, but the poem as well. The theme of "A Primitive Like an Orb" is the earth itself as the "central poem," out of which all other poems issue. The "central poem" the poet seeks to write emerges from the "central poem" of earth.

Stevens illustrates the double nature of this "central poem" by balancing the two interpretations on either side of a stanza break, and then at the end of the stanza denying separation altogether:

It is
 As if the central poem became the world
 VI
 And the world the central poem, each one the
 mate
 Of the other, as if summer was a spouse,
 Espoused each morning . . .

 . . . denouncing separate selves, both one.
 (CP 441)

At the close of "A Primitive Like an Orb," the poet has become part and "tenacious particle" (CP 443) of "the giant of nothingness. . . /. . the giant ever changing, living in change" (CP 443)--that is, the giant of brute reality to which poet and poem belong. The giant's very element is change, because the giant, being the physical universe, exists as flux, as process.

The parental relation of the physical earth to the human being is also the subject of the late lyric, "The Irish Cliffs at Moher" (CP 501). The poem, part of Stevens's last volume, The Rock, makes of this world a house once again, and of the rocks at Moher, progenitors of the human:

Who is my father in this world, in this house,
At the spirit's base?

My father's father, his father's father, his--
Shadows like winds

Go back to a parent before thought, before speech,
At the head of the past.

They go to the cliffs of Moher rising out of the
mist,
Above the real,

Rising out of present time and place, above
The wet, green grass.

This is not landscape, full of the somnambulations
Of poetry

And the sea. This is my father or, maybe,
It is as he was,

A likeness, one of the race of fathers: earth
And sea and air. (CP 501-502).

The idea of oikos inhabits this poem, which ponders the
familial relations in creation's house, and ranges back into
the immemorial past to glimpse humanity's inhuman ancestors.²

The present time and place, verdant with its "wet, green grass," rests on the rock of earth, suspended between sea and air. "The real is only the base," wrote Stevens. "But it is the base" (OP 187).

For Stevens, tracing the roots of mind, imagination, and language back to the physical world meant tracing those faculties to the most immediate, most present manifestations of the physical world: the body and the senses. Since the relationship between individual and world is articulated in acts of perception, attending to and participating in the phenomena of the physical world by way of the senses is Stevens's way of disclosing the basic structures of human consciousness: for Stevens, perception is the prime category of thought.

Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential (OP 191).

Stevens's emphasis on perception bespeaks his overriding concern for the physical as the foundation of all experience, even that which is conventionally thought of as spiritual or metaphysical. Frequently, Stevens conflated physical experience with the loftier, more "cerebral" experiences associated with abstraction, intellect, and mind as opposed to body. For example, in "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Stevens reversed the Platonic as well as Christian teaching of ideal

beauty existing in transcendence and not in the life of the body when he wrote

Beauty is momentary in the mind--

The fitful tracing of a portal;

But in the flesh it is immortal (CP 91).

To Stevens, the phenomenal world of nature is the only expression of ideals such as beauty; only in its cyclical recurrences in nature does beauty exist at all.

Conversely, to Stevens mind was a faculty "incorporating" (i.e. bringing into its body and making bodily) a wider realm of experience than that usually associated with thinking as a purely intellectual activity. Thought in Stevens is sensual and sensory. For example, in the "Notes" he writes of "thought/ Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came" (CP 382). Similarly, categories of experience usually considered products of reason--morality, for example--Stevens expressed as sensory activity. In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet " Stevens wrote that "The morality of the poet's radiant and productive atmosphere is the morality of the right sensation" (NA 58).

The fundamentally physical connection between human and world that Stevens felt is evident yet again in his many declarations of love for the world that were framed in terms of sexual desire. "A poet looks at the world somewhat as a man looks at a woman" (OP 192), he wrote. In a 1948 commentary on the work of John Crowe Ransom, Stevens surely revealed his own emotion in the following passage, in which

the crescendo of voiced passion and the vocabulary evoke sexual longing:

One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that one loves, to which one is really and essentially native, to demand that it surrender, reveal, that in itself which one loves. . . . one's cry of O Jerusalem becomes little by little a cry to something a little nearer and nearer until at last one cries out to a living name, a living place, a living thing, and in crying out confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience (OP 248).

* * * * *

The human body, then, is analogous and parallel to the otherness in nature. (Thoreau wrote, "I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me" ["Ktaadn" 135]). Another analogue within the individual to the wilderness Stevens encountered in British Columbia, besides the body (though part of the body), is the unconscious. In his essay, "The Irrational Element of Poetry," Stevens wrote that "The irrational bears the same relation to the rational that the unknown bears to the known" (OP 231). "The irrational" was Stevens's way of exploring what is wild in mental and physical human experience. Not only did Stevens express his faith in the irrational and in the poems that spring from it in that essay, he also, in an oblique way,

acknowledged the physical, biological--that is, bodily--roots of the impulse to the irrational:

While there is nothing automatic about the poem, nevertheless it has an automatic aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though I knew before it was written what I wanted to do. If each of us is a biological mechanism, each poet is a poetic mechanism. To the extent that what he produces is mechanical: that is to say, beyond his power to change, it is irrational" (OP 226).

The irrational element of the human being's makeup is directly related to the "enormous a priori" of nature itself. If, in the physical universe "There was a muddy centre before we breathed" (CP 383), then in the individual there was the "mind gone wild," "Life's nonsense" that "pierces us with strange relation." "[T]he hum of thoughts evaded in the mind" is a sort of wild thinking that conducts itself without conscious acknowledgement. Moreover, this wild thinking is directly rooted in that other largely unexplored territory, the body.

Stevens's sense of the body in connection to the irrational may usefully be juxtaposed for a moment with a recent work by Gary Snyder, who in overt and explicit terms defines the same bodily connection to wilderness that Stevens does in more oblique terms. (The similarity of vision in this regard illustrates Stevens's uncanny forecasting of current

"deep ecological" principles.) In his essay called "The Etiquette of Freedom," Gary Snyder has described the body and the unconscious as the two analogues to wilderness in the physical world that are most immediately present to individual human experience, and most present within the individual human self.³ Snyder has written:

Our bodies are wild. The involuntary quick turn of the head at a shout, the vertigo at looking off a precipice, the heart-in-the-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath, the quiet moments relaxing, staring, reflecting--all universal responses of this mammal body. They can be seen throughout the class. The body does not require the intercession of some conscious intellect to make it breathe, to keep the heart beating. It is to a great extent self-regulating, it is a life of its own. Sensation and perception do not exactly come from outside, and the unremitting thought and image-flow are not exactly outside. The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us. There are more things in mind, in the imagination than "you" can keep track of--thoughts, memories, images, angers, delights, rise unbidden. The depths of the mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas, and that is where a bobcat is right now. I do not mean personal bobcats in personal psyches, but the bobcat that roams from dream to dream. The

conscious agenda-planning ego occupies a very tiny territory, a little cubicle somewhere near the gate, keeping track of some of what goes in and out. . . and the rest takes care of itself. The body is, so to speak, in the mind. They are both wild." (Wild 16).

In his equation between world and consciousness and in his sense of a vast mind whose territories remain largely unexplored, Snyder echoes Emerson in "Nature," in the passage in which Emerson depicts language as issuing, literally, from the life of the body and the material world:

Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. Right means straight; wrong means twisted. Spirit primarily means wind; transgression, the crossing of a line; supercilious, the raising of the eyebrow. We say the heart to express emotion, the head to denote thought; and thought and emotion are words borrowed from sensible things, and now appropriated to a spiritual nature (Emerson 31).

In the poems, the association of language and thought with physical forces and elements in nature render them wild. To return once more for a moment to "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," after Stevens disparages Mr. Homburg for making of Nature a senseless operandum, he goes on to depict thought as an instinctual, spontaneous, active

force: "We think, then, as the sun shines or does not./ We think as wind skitters on a pond in a field" (CP 519). When Stevens equates "What we think" with "a breathing like the wind" (CP 518), the association of thought with wind--Stevens's figure for the wildest voice in wild nature--renders thought a natural element whose locus and medium of expression is the body.

A human being perceives the world by means of senses which quite literally permit the world to enter the body. Stevens believed in the body, and he believed that the roots of language rest deep within the body--the human body and the world's body. This body is, Stevens wrote, "what we are, beyond mystic disputation,/ In the tumult of integrations out of the sky" (CP 518). Poetry is a revelation of nature because it is nature speaking to the poet through his body, and through the poet to the world when the poet creates a poem out of those perceptions.

Increasingly throughout his career, Stevens manipulated his renderings of sense perception to express different relations to nature, the body, and the unconscious. As the following section will discuss, sound comes to predominate as the trope of human presence and participation in the physical world (as silence, the absence of sound, serves as the trope for the nonhuman a priori). Stevens's overall movement from the acoustically vivid poems of Harmonium, which often resemble jazz improvisations, scat singing and beebop (one thinks of "Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan/Of tan with

henna hackles, halt!"[CP 75]) to the austere rhythms of his late volumes, which recall chants, prayers and meditations, reflects his deepening immersion in, and reconciliation to, the processes of nature, in which silence plays such a great part.

2. "Transparencies of Sound": From Tropes of Seeing to Tropes of Hearing

From the vestibule we arrive at the semicircular canals, those turning tubes so essential to the equilibrium of the body. The ears keep the body stable and are essential for our sense of balance and orientation. And if we are "unbalanced" and "disoriented" we call that madness.

Russell Arthur Lockhart⁴

Merleau-Ponty has written that "to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body" (42). Naturally enough, different ways of perceiving the world imply different ways of rendering oneself present to the world.⁵ A corollary of this same premise is that different ways of perceiving the world also imply different uses of language. For this reason, it is useful to attend to the shifting balances in Stevens' sensory system between visual and auditory schema. The contrast between the tropes of seeing

and tropes of hearing in the poems embodies a contrast between two roles the human being can play in the world: objective alienated spectator on one hand, subjective integrated participant on the other.

Stevens' first inheritance from Emerson was the belief in the significance of the visible. For Emerson, the central trope of human presence in the natural world is the act of seeing. "The eye is the first circle," he wrote in "Circles." Emerson's strongest tribute to revelation through (in)sight arises in the earlier "Nature," in the well-known transparent eyeball passage:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,--no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God (24).

While Stevens retained Emersonian tropes of seeing throughout his poems as representations of one possible interaction between humans and nature, the act of seeing troubled him. "According to the traditional views of sensory perception," he wrote, "we never see the world except the moment after. Thus, we are constantly observing the past" (OP 272).

Certainly there is a physiological basis for thinking this way. The phenomenon we observe when we "see" an object does not usually originate with the object itself, but is rather the effect of light reflected off its surface. Walter Ong has shown that sight, which requires distance between the eye and the thing seen, emphasizes separation and relies on objectification. Ong writes that sight "can operate very well even at distances measurable in light years" (Ong, Interfaces 138). Similarly, Hans Jonas has written that "sight is the only sense in which the advantage lies not in proximity but in distance" (517). And there is the ancient caveat, that appearances are deceiving. Heidegger calls appearance the "emanation of something that makes itself known but conceals itself in the appearance." (Writings 77).

The specific requirements of the sense of sight are significant in other ways as well. At any given moment, sight can only see from one of many angles; it necessitates fragmentation; it can only illuminate surfaces and exteriors. Being a spatial sense, sight removes the seen phenomenon from the flow of process, and potentially cuts it off from context in time, if not in space. Evelyn Keller has shown that these qualities of visual experience yield "an atemporal description of truth and reality" (219) and a "disengagement from action, experience, and dynamic interaction" (219). These are precisely the traits that incite, writes Keller,

. . . a model of truth which transcends
the more body bound, materially contingent senses.

And, of course, the possibilities of perspective it grants us, and the gain the visual sense derives from distance further contribute to a model of truth based on distance between subject and object, knower and known (220).

This describes precisely the model of truth that Stevens's did not portray in the poems.

The separation implied in visual experience is present even in the earliest of Stevens' poems. The small, very early poem of Stevens's called "Valley Candle," is a tiny allegory of a failure of vision:

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
 Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
 Until the wind blew.
 Then beams of the huge night
 Converged upon its image,
 Until the wind blew (CP 51).

The poem depends upon the candle that in Steven's iconography signifies the human imagination. The huge night converges upon the image the candle leaves behind when it goes out, as does silence, as well. A reader may at first be tempted to view the candle burning alone in the immense valley as a figure glorifying the solitary self attempting valiantly, even tragically, to illuminate an inhospitable universe. But the expediency with which Stevens snuffs out not only the candle but its very memory undercuts this interpretation. "Valley Candle" finally depicts the perishability of human image and

the natural world redeemed from the imposition of a human point of view.

The poem also shows shifts and balances between visual and acoustic experience. The visual movement in the poem is from darkness to a greater darkness. What illumination the candle gives cannot possibly light the immense valley: it serves only to set off a small, localized pool of light that more distinctly marks its separation from the surrounding environment. Significantly, when the human presence in the poem is left in the dark to confront the starker, barer reality of the immense valley, there is nothing to look at.

A sensorium arrayed around a sense other than sight, then, would imply a different conceptual construct of the world. "Knowledge likened to a sense of hearing," Keller suggests, "could not have made the same claims to atemporality, and might well lend itself more readily to a process view of reality" (221).⁶

Stevens's shift in primary emphasis from tropes of seeing to tropes of hearing is crucial to the sense of the world, and the human being's place in the world, that Stevens articulated. Sound is temporal and emerges in time; it is "related to event and not to existence, to becoming and not to being" (Jonas 509). Where seeing confirms the difference between subject and object, between self and other, hearing requires immersion in one's environment. Sound surrounds: it blurs distinctions between self and what is outside the self. The heard phenomenon does in fact originate with the thing

heard; sound is a vibration, a motion, in the air. Walter Ong explains that, unlike sight,

Sound . . . reveals the interior without the necessity of physical invasion. Thus we tap a wall to discover where it is hollow inside, or we ring a silver-colored coin to discover whether it is perhaps lead inside. To discover such things by sight, we should have to open what we examine, making the inside the outside, destroying its interiority as such. Sound reveals interiors because its nature is determined by interior relationships. The sound of a violin is determined by the interior structure of its strings, of its bridge, and of the wood in its soundboard, by the shape of the interior cavity in the body of the violin, and other interior conditions. Filled with concrete or water, the violin would sound different (Ong, Presence 117-118).

Stevens diverges from the Emersonian version of perceiving the world by evolving his own tropes of hearing. For Stevens, seeing is knowing, but hearing is feeling: he locates "What we know in what we see, what we feel in what/ We hear" (CP 518). As Helen Vendler has observed, "Sound for [Stevens] is the locus of the primitive, as sight was for Pound. What an image was to Pound, a syllable was to Stevens" (Vendler NYRE 42).

Sound, then, immerses the listener in the ongoing processes of the world. The tropes of human presence in the natural world for Stevens, particularly in the poems after "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," become the act of listening and the sense of hearing. Sound in the poems conveys feeling which is, again, a primary way of knowing for Stevens. Especially in its incarnations as music and song, sound is the medium for art and for poetry ("the cry of its occasion"). And sound is the agent of epiphany and revelation.

One poem in which Stevens juxtaposes the different senses of knowing carried by sight and sound is "The Comedian as the Letter C." That poem is, among other things, an ingenious improvisation on the sense of sight, of seeing (C-ing), the sense by which Crispin seeks his destiny. For example, the description of Crispin in the opening poem hinges on eye-puns:

An eye most apt in gelatines and jupes,
Berries of villages, a barber's eye,
An eye of land, of simple salad-beds,
Of honest quilts, the eye of Crispin, hung
On porpoises. . .

.

[whose mustachios were]

Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world.

(CP 27)

Crispin in his loneliness is, contrary to John Donne, an "eye-land," and he is also the "eye of land," speculating on the inscrutable, "A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass" (CP

28). This introspective voyager recognizes his blindness: "It made him see how much/Of what he saw he never saw at all" (CP 36). In this way, Crispin's manic searches are described largely in ocular terms.

His moments of revelation, however, and his most direct interactions with nature, occur in terms of sound. When high comedy recedes briefly into some more heartfelt revelation, Crispin hears rather than sees. As he sets out on his journey, "The whole of life that still remained in him/ Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear" (CP 28). The sea (C), through which Crispin comes to know himself, is also expressed in terms voice and sound.

Could Crispin stem verboseness in the sea...

.

A wordy, watery age

That whispered to the sun's compassion . . .

(CP 28).

Crispin's confrontation with phenomenal reality comes to him as an overlay of sound and vision, the speech of the sea rendered (frighteningly) as a "visible thing":

Here was the veritable ding an sich, at last

Crispin confronting it, a vocable thing,

But with a speech belched out of hoary darks

Noway resembling his, a visible thing (CP 29).

The tentative peace Crispin finally achieves in his "Nice Shady Home" comes to him as sound as well:

So deep a sound fell down

It was as if the solitude concealed
 And covered him and his congenial sleep.
 So deep a sound fell down it grew to be
 A long soothsaying silence (CP 42).

Aside from the innumerable explicit references to sound in this poem overwhelmingly concerned with seeing is the sound of "The Comedian." A volcanic eruption of Stevens's psyche and soma, the improvisations of the poem spew forth in a torrent of profound lexical excess, so much so that the acoustic brilliance of the poem actually works to further convey Crispin's confusions. The density of sound obfuscates and convolutes Crispin's quest.

"Le Monocle de mon Oncle," Stevens's rumination on the ruination of the body, expresses thwarted desire in both visual and acoustical terms. As in "The Comedian," the locus of despair, however, is primarily in the eyes. The monocle in "Le Monocle" is a parody and desecration of Emerson's transparent eyeball image. Emerson's sphere--the whole world--is here reduced to a single flat lens. The poet's vision is one of disillusionment at forty, an age that has brought no sexual bond with the beloved, much less a mystical bond with the universe, only a scoffing hindsight. The monocle is the glass that magnifies failure.

Both the visual and the aural similarity between "monocle" and "mon oncle" induces the identification of the object and the person: the uncle is Stevens, the nuncle, the fool, the one-eyed spectacle, the giant, the cyclops. The

monocle is for a single eye--the single I--who has no part in any mystical marriage. One eye implies no depth of vision, a flattening of dimension. In the poem's first stanza, the beloved herself is spumed forth from a froth of thought, "the radiant bubble that she was" suggesting that she could have been the poet's transparent eyeball, the universe gathered into her, his vision and his world, if only she herself would see. The tears (small transparent bubbles themselves) that burst from the poet's eye are transformed into words--"watery syllables" (CP 13). By the end of the stanza the monocle is a teardrop, which (being a watery syllable) is the poem; the poem is the monocle through which the distressing reality of the speaker's life is visible.

The monocle's sphere recurs in other images throughout the poem: the apple and the skull in poem IV, as well as "the book in which to read a round" in that section; the amorist's bald head as well as the "compass and curriculum/Of introspective exiles" in stanza VI; the circles described by the pigeons in stanza XII, and in the poem's most striking image of the wrecked sphere of the eye/world, the rotted gourds of stanza VIII:

Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.

We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
The laughing sky will see the two of us

Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains (CP 16).

In this stanza, the lovers in whose eyes ruin lies themselves become objects gazed upon, impassively, by the sky.

Some early stanzas for this poem, which did not make it into the final version, appear in both editions of Opus Posthumous; in the first edition, the stanzas are given the title "The Naked Eye of the Aunt" (Morse 19). This version of the poem is more explicit in revealing the woman, the object of the speaker's desire, to be the source of disgust and disappointment: "It is enough she comes upon the eye./ A maid of forty is no feathery girl" (Morse 19). The poem in its final version, published in the Collected Poems locates ruin not in the former object of desire, but within the subject, the poet's self. ("The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eyes," wrote Emerson [55]). All that nuncle sees through his monocle is within, internal, self-disgust.

If ruin is in the eye, then the satisfactions of desire are in the ear. In many instances throughout the poems, Stevens conveys the deepest emotion in terms of sound. The mother, for example, most frequently appears in the poems as a voice: "Already the new-born children interpret love/ In the voices of mothers" (CP 4); in the "Auroras" the "innocent mother sang in the dark" (CP 419). In "Esthetique du Mal," a sense of familial unity is expressed, interestingly enough, as

appearing in the father's eye, but appearing in the mother's throat as a word:

So great a unity, that is bliss,
 Ties us to those we love. For this familiar
 This brother even in the father's eye,
 This brother half-spoken in the mother's throat...

 . . . we forgo

Lament . . . (CP 317)

Imaginative, creative human presence within the silence of nature is expressed as music, an analogue for poetry. The fourth poem in "It Must Change" of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" expresses its rapturous unities in terms of music:

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
 A passion that we feel, not understand.
 Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple
 And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
 That walk away as one in the greenest body.

In solitude the trumpets of solitude
 Are not of another solitude resounding;
 A little string speaks for a crowd of voices.

(CP 392)

As the poem cited above illustrates, the immediacy and intimacy of the sense of sound suggests that acts of speech

and of listening are fundamentally erotic. In another section of the "Notes" following shortly after the one cited above, Nanzia Nunzio asks her lover to answer to her desire in terms of words:

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
In its own precious ornament. . . (CP 396).

A much later version of Nanzia Nunzio, Penelope, the contemplated/contemplating spouse in "The World as Meditation," expresses all of her suppressed, never fulfilled eroticism in utterance as well:

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her
hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so
near (CP 521).

In its reliance on a motion of the air that actually enters the body; in the way sound holds the hearer in thrall even against his will⁷; in the way sound couples speaker and listener (whereas someone seen need not see the seer); in its revealing of interiors (as Ong suggests above), the sense of sound is closely related to the sense of touch.⁸ The eroticism of sound pervades all of Stevens's poetry. However,

Harmonium is the volume in which Stevens's expressions of sexual desire and sexual dissatisfaction are perhaps more overt than in later volumes, and frequently stated in connection with music. For example, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" frames its several variations of desire in terms of music. The speaker's desire in the first section, Susanna's solitary eroticism in the second section, and the elders' violence and brutality of the third section are all acoustically expressed.

In the opening lines, the speaker's fingers on the keys making music enact a caressing of the beloved by means of the sound of the piano. Music is feeling; the fingers making the music touch the hearer:

Just as my fingers on these keys
 Make music, so the selfsame sounds
 On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound:
 And thus it is that what I feel,
 Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
 Is music. (CP 89-90)

This ingeniously subtle form of touching then inspires a wilder desire in the speaker, which he frames in the Biblical anecdote of Susanna, whose body, when witnessed by the

voyeuristic elders, made the "basses of their beings throb" and their blood "Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna" (CP 90).

The pleasure Susanna takes in her bath, before she is brutalized by the elders, is also expressed as melody:

In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.

She searched the touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.

She sighed

For so much melody (CP 90).

Disaster arrives as a chaos of percussion: "A cymbal crashed/
And roaring horns" (CP 91). The criminal Byzantines flee
"with a noise like tambourines" (CP 91).

The poem's last section, as was mentioned above, disparages Platonic idealism and conveys the paradox that, while the body is transient, all art and whatever form of "immortality" is available to human beings relies wholly on this transient body for its expression. "The body dies, the body's beauty lives" (CP 92)--in the poem, that is. So evenings, gardens and maidens all die, too; but their beauty bodied forth again in the poem--a construction of sound--lives.

3. The Sound of the Wind

And, behold, there came a great wind
 from the wilderness . . .
 . . . and how long shall the words of thy
 mouth be like a strong wind?

Job 1:19; 8:2

In Walden, Thoreau wrote that "while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard (101). In Stevens's poems, the prolific utterances of the human being are always contrasted against a background of nature's wordless utterances, and more often than that, against nature's silence. The wildest voice in nature, beyond which there lies only silence, is the sound of the wind.

In the poem "Valley Candle," cited above, the wind in the immense valley obliterates both the candle's light and the memory of the candle's light. The sound of the wind, however, remains. This wind is the same wind that the listener in "The Snow Man" hears when he discovers he is able "not to think of any misery in the sound of the wind/In the sound of a few leaves/Which is the sound of the land" (CP 10). In that famous poem, the human figure in the poem alternately regards and beholds (is a spectator to) the vestiges of winter, that

season which in Stevens represents the most stoic and most real relationship a human being may have to nature. The moment of epiphany, however, occurs in the apprehension of sound. The speaker hears the "sound of the wind," the "sound of a few leaves," and the "the sound of the land": in not hearing any misery in these sounds, he realizes and fulfills the condition of being a snow man--a participant in the landscape, a part of his surroundings, his body of the same substance as his environment. Stevens himself wrote that "'The Snow Man' is about the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (L 464).

In "The Snow Man," for example, the listener beholds, in a flash of insight, the dehumanized reality of nature-- "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (CP 9). The nothing that is not there may be regarded as the void one first perceives upon surrendering one's painstakingly constructed fictions of resemblance (that is, metaphors) surrounding self and mind. Stevens describes the initially terrifying chill of this vision in "Esthetique du Mal":

. . . How cold the vacancy

When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist

First sees reality. (CP 320)

The nothing that is there, however--fertile, revenant nature-- is "the centre that I seek" (CP 373), "the bright obvious" (CP 351), "the thing final in itself and therefore good" (CP 405). To perceive this good, to behold it as the Snow Man does, is to annihilate the consciousness of separation. The shift in

awareness from the early to the late poems of Stevens is the shift in focus from the "Nothing that is not there" to "the nothing that is." One may read the former of these nothings as the nothing of existentialism⁹, which engenders an heroic and adversarial relationship between the human being and the world; and the latter of these nothings as the nothing of Buddhism, a fructive void from which the world springs.

"Autumn Refrain," while dated ten years later than "The Snow Man," shows a falling away of the snow man's acceptance and detachment. The moon and nightingales in this poem hark back to "Academic Discourse at Havana," in which they represent flown fictions.

The skreak and skritter of evening gone
 And grackles gone and sorrows of the sun,
 The sorrows of sun, too, gone . . . the moon and
 moon,
 The yellow moon of words about the nightingale
 In measureless measures, not a bird for me
 But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless
 air
 I have never--shall never hear. And yet beneath
 The stillness of everything gone, and being still,
 Being and sitting still, something resides,
 Some skreaking and skrittering residuum,
 And grates these evasions of the nightingale
 Though I have never--shall never hear that bird.

And the stillness in the key, all of it is,
The stillness is all in the key of that desolate
 sound (CP 160).

The moon is named twice in "Autumn Refrain"--once to name the natural phenomenon known as moon, once to name the complex of ideas that falls under the rubric of moon. The wind, which is not named, is pervasive in the skreak and skritter, the "skreaking and skrittering residuum" (CP 160). This speaker, however, lacks the subdued joyfulness of seeing things as they are. Twice, he mourns the nightingale which he has "never--shall never hear." Far from not hearing any misery in the sound of the wind, this speaker invokes the sorrows of the sun and hears the wind in "the key of that desolate sound" (CP 160).

"The Course of a Particular" is a companion poem to "The Snow Man." The poem opens with a virtual synopsis of "The Snow Man," though minus the visual glitter. The scene is expressed utterly flatly and with a profound indifference.

As in "The Snow Man," the pivotal sense in the poem--following upon a scant description of the scant scene-- is hearing. The word "cry" in Stevens's poetry is important not only because "the poem is the cry of its occasion" (CP 473). Throughout the poems, the cry emerges from an experience prior to language, not to say almost pre-human. It is often violent, sometimes shattering, the more so when it represents the force of an epiphany, contentless, pre-verbal, for which there simply are no words.

"The Course of a Particular" locates this meaningless, inhuman cry in the leaves of a season well on its way to leaflessness. And then he questions his own cries (his poems):

And though one says that one is part of everything,

There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;

And being part is an exertion that declines:

One feels the life of that which gives life as it
is (OP 123).

Part of this declaration casts into doubt the very activity of poetry ("And though one says . . ."), as though the cynical speaker were weary of the vigorous human effort to participate in the inhuman world, which is full of cries (like his) concerning someone, but not him, and finally no one at all. What is more disturbing still is that, since Stevens has written that the poem is a cry, the fact that the cries he hears do not concern him seems to bespeak a certain alienation

from his own previous work--as though he felt no connection to the "leaves" of his books.

The poem's final stanzas appear to reinforce this desolate sense:

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

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.

(CP 124).

This poem, like "The Snow Man," however, yields a more affirmative sense of the world as well, in the context of Stevens's aspirations to confront bare reality. There is, again, the rejection of pathetic fallacy, though it could be argued that that in itself is a grim sort of victory, given what's left. However, an alternate reading of the poem is possible if one focuses on the oddly juxtaposed two lines almost at the poem's exact center:

And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which give life
as it is (OP 123).

The fact may be that the exertion declines because the poet, in his maturity, achieves the relation that he seeks more freely, without exertion, having grown, through the habits of

dwelling he has nurtured all his life, attuned to "the life of that which gives life as it is." He hears the voice, "in the final finding of the ear," without trying so hard. He need not try so hard; he no longer has to decide. He is part of the cry of the leaves that do not transcend themselves; he is a participant in the phenomenal, natural world, by virtue of being a human being. It is his nature and his inheritance. In this poverty lies his fulfillment. It is because of this realization that the late poems of Wallace Stevens move more and more toward nature's own silence.

Notes to Chapter V

1. Harold Bloom interprets "primitive" to be used throughout Stevens's poetry "in its etymological sense of 'first'" (Climate 294).

2. "[T]he distinction between 'life' and 'lifeless' is a human construct," writes John Seed. "Every atom in his body existed before organic life emerged 4,000 million years ago. Remember our childhood as minerals, as lava, as rocks?" (Devall 243).

3. Elsewhere, Synder has written, "Class-structured civilized society is a kind of mass ego. To transcend the ego is to go beyond society as well. "Beyond" there lies, inwardly, the unconscious. Outwardly, the equivalent of the unconscious is the wilderness: both of these terms meet, one step even farther on, as one. ("Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique." Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse toward an Ethnopoetics. Jerome Rothenberg & Diane Rothenberg, eds. Berkeley: U Cal Press, 1983. 93) Similarly, Morris Berman writes that "unconscious knowledge is essentially body knowledge" (Reenchantment 172).

4. This passage from Psyche Speaks: A Jungian Approach to Self and World. (Wilmette, Il: Chiron Publications, 1987) is quoted in Thorpe.

5. Merleau-Ponty has written that "The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world" (3).

6. "It is interesting to note in this regard that Heraclitus our earliest temporal ontologist, evidently had a different metaphor in mind. In fact the verbal form of "know" used by him, ksuniemi, originally meant 'to know by hearing'" (Keller 221).

7. "Aristotle made two observations about seeing and hearing that have some bearing on this discussion of the mighty world of ear. He pointed out that we can choose to see or not to see. We can turn our heads or close our eyes. But we cannot as easily choose not to hear. The ear is always in touch. Further, he said, the loss of sight is a calamity for which we can compensate, but the loss of hearing is an irremediable calamity because it cuts the individual off from discourse and thus from participation in the cognitive life of the community" (Gifford 54).

8. "Touch and hearing agree in this respect: that their primary objects, the qualities sensed, have process character and are thus essentially time-entities" (Jonas 510). Evelyn Keller suggests that sight, in contrast, in its implication of "the radical division between subject and object," is forever de-eroticized and "safeguarded from desire" (220).

9. Paul Shepard writes that "The existentialist division of man and nature is a reaction to the use of science on man's thinking about himself, to its generalizing and abstracting, to depersonalizing, to finding norms and averages and generally 'reducing' humanity to statistical traits. The existential judgment is that these abstractions are irrelevant. It holds that therefore only what I experience for myself is real: events unique to me, about which no generalizations are important or any real descriptions are possible. Only specific contacts with other individuals are considered significant. Every moment I face the prospect of a choice, which I am actually free to make. I am free only in this. Such is the excruciating sickness of self-consciousness.

The proponents of this fanatic individualism retreat from a hostile and absurd world to an inner life whose only values are personal and subjective. By valuing only the unique and individual they rightly oppose mass man and the treatment of human beings as replaceable machines--at the price of ecological nihilism (Man in the Landscape xiv).

Chapter VI

The Impersonal Person:

The Self in the World/The Self of the World

The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself.

Paul Valery

I have said no
To everything, in order to get at myself
(CP 249)

1. A Self that Touches All Edges

Stevens's conceptions of the self evolve in tandem with his conceptions of nature. Stevens sought to create a self able to live by its immersion in physical reality, defined by its environment, part of the whole but differentiated from it, too, by virtue of consciousness and the limitations of perception. As Chapter Three demonstrated, he rejected the notion of a self undifferentiated from the world, or of a mind undifferentiated from nature. He understood ideas of "self" to be human fictions as provisional and adaptive as any other cultural fiction (thus he refers to "The warm antiquity of self" in one poem [CP 139]). Up to and including the "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens vacillated between a model of a self forged by an exertion of the will, mastering nature

and reality, and an alternate conception of an egoless self dwelling "in its wholeness within a concrete and sacred physical universe" (LaGuardia 158). The latter vision prevails in Stevens's strongest poems.

Throughout the poems, Stevens experimented with selves through a series of familiar personae: rabbi, scholar, ephebe, major man, central man, man number one and hero. Stevens derived these figures in large measure from Emerson. The scholar, for example, was modeled after "The American Scholar"--the scholar was the "world's eye" and the "world's heart," and, Emerson wrote, "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them fact amidst appearances" (73)--certainly goals with which Stevens identified. Stevens's heroic figures of major man, central man, man number one and the hero himself emulate Emerson's "new individual" who must "work out the whole problem of science, letters and theology for himself. . . ." (135). Major man is powered by the principles Emerson delineated in "Self Reliance," and he owes something to "The Poet," as well, who is a "representative man," who "stands among partial men for the complete man" (223) and who "turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession" (230).

The project of evolving a self in the poems was fraught for Stevens with obstacles, dilemmas and contradictions. For one thing, he flinched at anything that smacked of literal personal revelation, at the same time that he believed in, and

practiced, a poetry growing out of particularity of perception and experience. "Poetry is not personal" (OP 186), Stevens insisted uneasily; and repeated, "Poetry is not a personal matter" (OP 189). In "Effects of Analogy," however, he was compelled to concede, "It is often said of a man that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise" (NA 121).

In this respect, Stevens's guiding maxim in the making of his poetry--"Poetry is the statement of a relation between a man and the world" (OP 197)--was problematic in the "man" part of the equation. Had his maxim been that poetry was the statement of the relation between man and the world, and had Stevens been a philosopher rather than a poet, selfhood would have been simpler. However, poetry is the statement of the relation between a man and the world--an individual, a person, him.

The "world" part of this relation was rather clearer and less difficult for Stevens than the "man" part was. The world was the "fluent mundo" (CP 407), his terrestrial, fond compadre ("We like the world because we do" [OP 201]), his sister and mother and diviner love. He sang the world's praises: "The most beautiful (the only beautiful) (beautiful is an inadequate and temporizing improvisation) thing in the world is, of course, the world itself" (OP 193). And he rose to its defense, even from himself: "The world is at the mercy of the strongest mind in it whether that strength is the

strength of sanity or insanity, cunning or good-will" (OP 199).

Stevens's mythology of self emerged, then, as a series of solutions to these two paradoxical demands of poetry: that poetry not be "personal," and on the other hand that poetry is inevitably autobiographical. The personae cited above exhibit Stevens's first way of making poetry "not personal" (that is, by making it representative of particular stances, outlooks and roles). His later poetry, as will be discussed shortly, was both "not personal" and "autobiographical" at the same time.

The mythology of self mutated in response to his evolving conceptions of--and relations to--nature. Stevens's fundamental problem in describing a self was the same as the problem of belief described in Chapter 3 above--how, in the absence of absolutes, to evolve a self that could "resolve life and the world on his own terms" (OP 207). Stevens's earlier poems were Romantic in their calculation that only a deified self could replace deity. The woman in "Sunday Morning" concludes that "Divinity must live within herself" (CP 67). The dandy-as-pasha speaker in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (CP 65), Stevens's mouthpiece for the clearest statement to that date of his early poetic, asserted the omnipotence of the imaginative self and blurred all distinction between self and world. After the speaker establishes himself as the sun (" . . . in purple I descended/ The western day. . . ") as well as a kind of priest ("What was the ointment sprinkled on my

beard?"), and possibly a god ("Out of my mind the golden ointment rained"), he intones

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more
strange (CP 65).

Possible interpretations of this poem fall along a continuum: it may be read as a display of profound arrogance, as a declaration of robust self-confidence and self-reliance (in Emerson's sense), or as a statement of the acutely obvious (where else would my perceptions and sensations come from but myself?). In other writings, too, Stevens identifies self and world: "The world is myself. Life is myself" (OP 198) he wrote in the Adagia; and to recall another poem cited earlier, the ecologically interpretable "Theory" declared "I am what is around me" (CP 86). "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" poses a problem of directionality: "what I saw etc. . . came not but from myself" [italics mine]; so where is "what is around me"? If it is in me then there is no "around," and if there is no "around" then there can be no relation and no world¹.

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens proclaimed that the project of poetry is to evolve a man. In this poem, too, he tried out a version of the artist as Emersonian "man number one" (CP 166), who artistically forges "A substitute for all the gods:/ This self. . . ." (CP 176). He aims to accomplish an Emersonian feat: to "reduce the monster to/

Myself," (CP 175), where the monster represents god, nature and external reality.

Even as he was writing panegyrics to the hero and to major man, however, Stevens wrote poems questioning the power and validity of a human-generated, human-centered reality. His questioning did not take the form of seeking ultimate answers or absolute truths; as always, he considered the nature of human need as determined by the spirit of Ananke in deciding what to make of the self in the specifics of its world, the earth. Stevens feared the potential solipsism of a Hoon; one poem in which he voiced a warning told the tale of a prosaic creature with an inflated sense of self, "The Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" (CP 209). The rabbit has difficulty thinking from the start, a bad sign given that in Stevens's world this means he isn't feeling, isn't paying attention, isn't present to knowledge in general:

The difficulty to think at the end of day,
When the shapeless shadow covers the sun
And nothing is left except light on your fur--

(CP 209)

The sun of reality has dimmed temporarily and only a little leftover light lingers (the light of the Hoonian imagination?). The rabbit ruminates on the "cat slopping its milk all day" (CP 209), then drifts into a reverie:

To be in the grass, in the peace fullest time,
Without that monument of cat,
The cat forgotten in the moon;

thing" was "enlarged" (CP 510); the mountain Chocorua in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" is described as "large in space" and is part of "large earth, large air" (CP 296). So the rabbit grows large and statue-like and the cat dissolves into the grass.

The pale light of imagination on rabbit fur, insufficiently engaged with "the real," as well as the rabbit growing statue-like or icon-like, prove to be the rabbit's undoing. (Statues in Stevens's poems are figures for monumentalized ideas and petrified conceptions: the image of Ozymandias frequently shadows Stevens's statuary.)

The punchline of the poem is in the title: presumably the rabbit got to be a ghost because the cat did not regard himself as a bug in the grass. Imagination and reality bypassed each other in this case. Harold Bloom ascribes a sort of Pyrrhic victory to this heroic but no longer alive rabbit: it seems more likely, in the context of the final direction of Stevens's poems, that all that burgeoning rabbit selfhood required confirmation from the sun of reality, and that the poem is to be read as a cautionary tale rather than as a fable of a hero.²

Overt figures of heroism and majority in Stevens's poems subside in time. David La Guardia has pointed out that by the time of the "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens "subdues his notion of heroism and returns to the common man in a processive world as the appropriate figure for the poet" (81). Moreover,

After "Notes," Stevens discards the notion of the hero. . . . The late poems avoid emphatic statements concerning what the mind can, should, or must do, and become instead exquisite illustrations of the process of doing it (La Guardia 86).

Even within the "Notes" themselves Stevens questioned the value of a major man, as is evident in the mild derision of this passage:

The major abstraction is the idea of man
 And major man is its exponent, abler
 In the abstract than in his singular,
 More fecund in principle than in particle.

(CP 388)

From the middle 1940s on, in his great poems affirming earth and its natural presences and processes --"Chocorua to its Neighbor" (1943), "Credences of Summer" (1946), "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (1947) and "The Auroras of Autumn" (1947)-- Stevens more and more sang a self subsumed under a greater natural order. His quest shifted from "central man" to the "muddy centre" of physical reality. The imagination's function, in the late poems, changes from construction of a heroic self to virtual annihilation of self as individual entity: ". . . the absence of the imagination had/ Itself to be imagined. . . . /Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge/ Required, as a necessity requires" (CP 503).

The profound poignancy of the last poems lies in their revealing the two conflicting directions the desire for

selfhood took in Stevens's old age. One desire was the desire to become the snow man, vanished and invisible. In the beautifully honed poems of Stevens' old age--"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949), "The Rock" (1950), "The Course of a Particular" (1950)--the self, so transparent as to be invisible, resides in "a world in which, like snow/ He became an inhabitant, obedient. . . ." (CP 523). In this mood, the poems were seen as part of the ephemeral, cyclical process: "Ariel was glad he had written his poems. . . ./It was not important that they survive" (CP 532)³.

The other desire was to see his life in its wholeness, as a distinct moment brought to closure, and to leave behind an identifiable legacy. Charles Berger has written that "The poems of Stevens's last phase--everything from 1950 onward--can all be considered versions of the tombeau in that they devise figures for the poet's own legacy after death" (143). At the same time, Berger continues,

. . . it would be wrong to imply that Stevens achieves--or even intends--resolution in these poems, for no unified vision of the imagination's end can be deduced from the perspectives of the last phase . . . the late lyrics as a group seem to be aimed against the very idea of satisfactory closure (145).

Similarly, Joan Richardson has written of this unresolved conflict in Stevens's molding of a self when she contrasts

Stevens's efforts toward a totally subsumed self with those of T.S. Eliot:

Eliot's immersion in the lessons of the East truly did make possible his modification of his Western tradition. Stevens, on the other hand, in spite of continued attempts to transcend his preoccupation with self, did not succeed at this, so that in the end one can't escape a sense of tragedy--the fall of a hero. Through the stoic intoning of Stevens's last poems we can still hear the mournful lowing of the human animal being carried to his death without ever having known what it was to have lived beyond the edge of his fate, beyond the limits set for him by his past (Later Years 304).

To frame this conflict within the ecological terms posited so far throughout this dissertation, Stevens's self needed to fulfill itself in terms of a processive world in which systems and wholes were more important than any individual member. The whole world of the human being--thought, perception, the body's life--is part of this process. The rub lies in human consciousness of itself, always double and apart, aware of itself and its own demise. Charles Berger points out that death is not the issue for Stevens: "what concerns him is the end of imagination, its destination and duration" (144).

What kind of self could live in the processive world, be put through its paces by the metaphysical changes, not miss a

beat, yet still survey its own past and its patterns and not long for a shape, not look for "the obscurity of an order, a whole" (CP 524)? The model for selfhood, then, in the later Stevens, changes from a central self residing in a major man, to yet another dialectic between possible poles of selfhood: between plurality and unity, between plentitude and poverty, between the flux of eternal process and concomitant ephemerality on one hand, and on the other hand, definition, completion and closure.

2. Intelligent Men at the Centre of the Unintelligible

The evilly compounded, vital I . . .

(CP 193)

So many selves, so many sensuous worlds . . .

(CP 326)

In poem VIII of "It Must Give Pleasure" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (in the poem following the one in which the speaker realizes that "to impose is not to discover"), Stevens questions, "What am I to believe?" The answer to this question comes in the form of an angel. The same angel who appears in "Evening without Angels," it is the necessary angel of the earth:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
 On his spreaden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
 Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
 Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
 Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this?
 Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
 Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
 Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
 And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time
 In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
 I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

These external regions, what do we fill them with
 Except reflections, the escapades of death,
 Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?

(CP 404-405)

The poem strains toward fulfillment in the poverty of
 constant imaginative longing. The angel "needs nothing but
 deep space," but the man needs time, a moment awash in

moments, but which still stands apart as "an hour/ Filled with expressible bliss." The mind imagines the moment of having found what suffices in the absence of what is desired. What the speaker has not ("I have not but I am . . . ") is an object of belief. He may not even have the experience of belief since he asks "Is it he or is it I that experience this?"

The poem that follows continues the robust praise for things as they are. Once again the speaker repeats "I can do all that angels can. I enjoy like them" (even more since he can enjoy the angels, too):

These things at least comprise

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good . . .

(CP 405)

The poet in this poem knows the answer that he seeks: he knows that what is important is not what is believed--not an object of belief--but the commitment to belief, belief as an act of the mind, belief as a process of thought, an imaginative creation. This assertion of acceptance of nature's ongoing process is compromised by the suspicion of mockery tainting the tone of the last stanza in its monotony

and in the repetition of the adjective "merely." Necessity and desire haven't yet met in this poem. Desire desires to meet necessity, but has not done so yet.

It wasn't until "The Sail of Ulysses" that Stevens transformed "I have not but I am," from the "Notes," to "As I know, I am and have. . . ." (OP 99). In the later instance, knowing, being and having are equivalents to each other. What is had is a new knowledge of Being--of the rock-bottom nature of Being, of the wholeness and completion of a self in flux, existing as part of the "amassing harmony" in spite of itself, the I that is as natural and present as a rock.

To arrive at "The Sail of Ulysses" (1954) Stevens first wrote his great poems of the processive self, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949) and "Things of August" (1949). Both of these poems achieve self-realization by accepting the highly provisional and fluid nature of the self. "Things of August" assumes a series of attitudes and stances toward such a self; "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" demonstrates its activity.

"Things of August" is a collection of the ruminations of a man who, in the fullness of his maturity, pauses and reflects, long into the late summer night, to the sound of crickets, just weeks before the first chill falls. Helen Vendler has called "Things of August" a "great and heartbreaking poem of self-evaluation" in which the poet "forgives all his selves, remembers them all, accedes to the unintelligibility of the world, and celebrates the new text of it he has created" (Desire 26). The idea of the multiple

self, which Stevens reflects upon in the poem, is what is at issue here.

In the eight poem of "Things of August," Stevens begins to ask questions about self seminal not only to that poem, but also to "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and to his last volume, The Rock.

When was it that the particles became
 The whole man, that tempers and beliefs became
 Temper and belief and that differences lost
 Difference and were one? It had to be
 In the presence of a solitude of the self,
 And expanse and the abstraction of an expanse,
 A zone of time without the ticking of clocks,
 A color that moved us with forgetfulness.

When was it that we heard the voice of union?

This is a double-edged poem, since Stevens's position on the desirability of the unified state he describes is ambiguous⁴. "Tempers and beliefs" coalescing into "temper and belief" may signify the ordering of chaos, the effecting of synthesis and resolution. However, in the context of Stevens as a poet of moods, adaptations and variations within the whole, this reduction of plurality sometimes signifies a convenient fiction believed at the expense of both self and world. The first line of this poem, in which the particles become the whole man, recalls the "major man" in "Note Toward a Supreme Fiction" who is an object of derision, the man "More fecund in principle than in particle" (CP 388).

Moreover, the "zone of time without the ticking of clocks" is a land we've passed through before in Stevens's poems, never to truly satisfying effect (see my discussion of "Credences of Summer" Chapter IV). The voice of union implies the arrival of a longed for oneness--or it implies the erasure of texture in experience, particularity, vicissitude--the very elements Stevens's poems so lovingly describe.

The second stanza of this poem places the origin of this unified self in the figure of a woman-goddess who appears in the clouds, then disappears.

Was it as we sat in the park and the archaic form
Of a woman with a cloud on her shoulder rose
Against the trees and then against the sky
And the sense of the archaic touched us at once
In a movement of the outlines of similarity?
We resembled one another at the sight.

(CP 494)

That fled goddess with the cloud on her shoulder is one of the number of vanished gods who have left us to resolve things on our own. At the sight of her "we resembled one another at the sight." Forgetfulness in Stevens's vocabulary carries a different charge from clarity or clearness, as when he speaks of "A Clear Day and No Memories." The latter suggests that paradoxical state of Buddhist-like detachment combined with total presence and awareness in a moment when the mind is clear and nothing is missing. Forgetfulness, on the other hand, is a less willing relinquishment, the loss of something

worth remembering. The color that moves the speaker with forgetfulness is mentioned twice in the poem. The end result:

The forgetful color of the autumn day
Was full of these archaic forms, giants
Of sense, evoking one thing in many men,
Evoking an archaic space, vanishing
In the space, leaving an outline of the size
Of the impersonal person, the wanderer,
The father, the ancestor, the bearded peer,
The total of human shadows bright as glass (CP 494).

This impersonal person and wanderer is Ulysses, the figure in search of a new knowledge of the world who works out in argument and syllogism some of the reflections on self of "Things of August":

"If knowledge and the thing known are one
So that to know a man is to be
That man, to know a place is to be
That place, and it seems to come to that;
And if to know one man is to know all
And if one's sense of a single spot
Is what one knows of the universe,
Then knowledge is the only life,
The only sun of the day,
The only access to true ease,
The deep comfort of the world and fate

(OP 126)

Long before "Things of August," as a young man in 1906, Stevens made a journal entry in which he questioned the notion of self as a unified entity, and wittily and self-mockingly pointed up the arbitrariness of most traits associated with self-definition:

When you first feel the truth of, say, an epigram, you feel like making it a rule of conduct. But this one is displaced by that, and thus things go on in their accustomed way. There is one pleasure in this volatile morality: the day you believe in chastity, poverty and obedience, you are charmed to discover what a monk you have always been--the monk is suddenly revealed like a spirit in a wood; the day you turn Ibsenist, you confess that, after all, you always were an Ibsenist, without knowing it. So you come to believe in yourself, and in your new creed. There is a perfect rout of characters in every man--and every man is like an actor's trunk, full of strange creatures, new & old. But an actor and his trunk are two different things (SP 166).

Like Emerson, Stevens seems to be saying here that "Our moods do not believe in each other" (171). "Things of August" not only believes in shifting moods, but has come to accept them as the necessary condition for meaningful response to the world.

In "Things of August," the variety of the world expresses itself as variations of sounds and silence: the poem hinges

on these aural shifts (appropriately enough as Stevens approaches the time in his life when he will consider the worthiness of his poems and begins to move toward the silence of nature). Knowledge in this poem is a voice uttering "things" (of August) all around: in the sound of the insects, in "interior intonations" (CP 490), in the "stern voices of its necessitous men" (CP 491), in the wordlessness issuing from the grass "as we lie on the grass and listen/To that which has no speech" (CP 492). The perceiver in the poem is engulfed by his senses as by an element: "He is the possessed of sense not the possessor" (CP 492), and he gives himself over to this knowledge that seems to simply reside in things. "The knowledge of things lay round but unperceived" (CP 493), writes Stevens, as though knowledge were a natural element or a force of nature available as air, there to be breathed.

In this regard, the process of thought (which, I have tried to establish, incorporates a gamut of mental and physical activity) becomes an answering force of nature. William James, in the Principles of Psychology, describes the kind of thought capable of knowing "the knowledge of things" that lay round in "Things of August":

The first fact for us, then, as psychologists, is that thinking of some sort goes on. I use the word thinking . . . for every form of consciousness, indiscriminately. If we could say in English 'it thinks' as we say "it rains" or "it blows," we should be stating the fact most simply and with the

minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that thought goes on (225).

Out of this sense comes the poem,

A new text of the world,
A scribble of fret and fear and fate,
From a bravura of the mind,
A courage of the eye,

In which, for all the breathings
From the edge of night,
And for all the white voices
That were rosen once,

The meanings are our own . . .

(CP 495).

The place from which the poem issues, "A text of intelligent men/ At the centre of the unintelligible" (CP 495).

* * * * *

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" renders the flow of a self in constant contact with its environment, in a state of acute awareness and responsiveness. C.G. Jung, in his essay on "the conditioning of mind by the earth," writes that

. . . we can regard the mind as something growing out of causes, and built up by effects. . . . The mind would then be understood to be a system of adaptation formed by the conditions of an earthly environment (99).

Jung's definition of the mind's activity is also a definition of poetic dwelling. "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is a demonstration of workings of the adaptive mind, and Stevens's most brilliant exercise in poetic dwelling.

It is as though Stevens were walking in his neighborhood on a rainy, blustery night, perhaps glancing at the lit windows he passes, and pondering the nature of dwelling in houses. He describes his neighborhood, and in describing it transforms it. And in doing both, he both describes and transforms himself. The poem is an illustration and elaboration of the assertion "I am what is around me" (CP 86).

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the human "house"--a trope referring both to the earth as human dwelling and the self as the human's manner of dwelling--is no longer an edifice that basks in a separate sun of external reality. Here Stevens asks, "Of what is this house composed if not of the sun" (CP 465). Certainly on a literal, biological level, the sun engenders all life on the planet. In Stevens's poem, human mind, human body and the product of these, the poem, are all of the very substance of the sun itself. Comprised of equal parts "external" reality and human contrivance, the poem, though still referred to as a house, takes on the complex and paradoxical qualities of things in nature:

These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances,
Words, lines, not meanings, not communications,

Dark things without a double, after all,
 Unless a second giant kills the first--
 A recent imagining of reality,

Much like a new resemblance of the sun,
 Down-pouring, up-springing and inevitable,
 A large poem for a larger audience. . .

(CP 465)

Houses, which are normally inhabited and are known from the inside, are disconcertingly objectified--they become "difficult objects." A hall of mirrors ("Appearances of what appearances"), they yet remain primary and inimitable ("Dark things without a double"), unruly as thunderstorms ("down-pouring"), profligate as plants ("up-springing") and as "inevitable." The house in this poem is the sort of natural object that Stevens aspires to make of poems themselves; indeed, a poem is a kind of house for Stevens, a structure to build and in which to live, a place to be at home, which is itself a room in the greater house of language, in the world of nature.

The second poem quickly reverses the objectification in the first and identifies the poet with the place, New Haven, so that the inhabitant and the habitation become one in the act of inhabiting:

Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,
 So that they become an impalpable town, full of
 Impalpable bells, transparencies of sound,

Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self,
 Impalpable habitations that seem to move
 In the movement of the colors of the mind . . .

(CP 466).

Poem II, tellingly, makes sound the prominent sense, though sound and vision are overlaid in the phrase "transparencies of sound." From this point forward the poem alternates between the senses of vision and sound, the eye harboring desire ("It is desire, set deep in the eye" (CP 467); the ear creating from desire's cries an answering harmony, "A matching and mating of surprised accords,/A responding to a diviner opposite" (CP 468). As sound vibrates the air, so these impalpable houses, themselves bell-like (announcements), begin to move like live things in and around the center of this seething roil of sensations, the self.

The self in "Ordinary Evening" is only a self in so far as it is a locus or a vortex for apprehending the life of New Haven. From the start it is never unified, nor does the poem seek to make it so. Rather, it is a "scene," in the sense Thoreau described the self as scene in Walden:

I only know myself as a human entity; the scene so
 to speak of thoughts and affections; and am
 sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can
 stand as remote from myself as from another (122).

The converse of this statement is that, if I can stand as remote from myself as from another, then (at other times) I can stand as close to another as I can to myself--that's the

virtue of doubleness. "Ordinary Evening" plays out the permutations possible in Thoreau's statement

Why then inquire
Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur?
No man. The self, the chrysalis of all men

Became divided in the leisure of blue day
And more, in branchings after day.

(CP 468)

Like a tree, the self grows out of the day, and even its pursuit of "moonlit extensions" of central earth and central sky are branchings of the same tree (CP 469). Division is the natural agenda, it seems (or seems so in one of its seemings).

This division and doubleness toward both the self and other permits a newness of vision. Just as it is necessary to see that nature is not the reflection of the self, to see that it is irrevocably alien and nonhuman in order to see it for what it really is (and then to see the self in true relation to it), it is worthwhile to see other human beings as phenomena, too, sometimes--as phenomena in a world of phenomena, as objects in a world of objects. This leveling effect is not dehumanizing in the normal negative sense of that word: it is a way of adjusting the focus. One thinks of D.H. Lawrence, who wrote in a letter:

. . . what is interesting in the laugh of a woman
is the same as the binding of the molecules of
steel or their action in heat; it is the inhuman

will, call it physiology, or like Marinetti--
 physiology of matter, that fascinates me. I don't
 so much care about what the woman feels--in the
 ordinary usage of the word. That presumes an ego
 to feel with. I only care about what the woman is--
 -what she IS--inhumanly, physiologically,
 materially. . . what she is as a phenomenon (or as
 representing some greater, inhuman will), instead
 of what she feels according to the human conception
 (Letter 436).

Thus, the I in "Ordinary Evening," in the role of spectator
 now instead of listener, says

The objects tingle and the spectator moves
 With the objects. but the spectator also moves
 With lesser things, with things exteriorized

Out of rigid realists. It is as if
 Men turning into things, as comedy,
 Stood, dressed in antic symbols, to display

The truth about themselves, having lost, as things,
 That power to conceal they had as men,
 Not merely as to depth but as to height

As well, not merely as to commonplace
 But also, as to their miraculous,
 Conceptions of new mornings of new worlds,

The tips of cock-cry pinked out pastily,
 As that which was incredible becomes,
 In misted contours, credible day again

(CP 470)

This ability to regard the world in terms of phenomena is one of the requisites of "love of the real" (CP 470). One of the vortexes of meaning in this essentially centerless poem lies in the triad of poems comprised of sections IX, X and XI of "Ordinary Evening," the group making up a love poem to reality, celebrating the "love of the real" but without the bloatedness of "Credences" because nothing stops, even for a second. Poem IX celebrates reality in its object-hood; poem X effects a marriage of reality and imagination, and poem XI then returns reality, the transformed object, to its original power. Poem IX transforms the passage in "Credences" which calls for "the very thing and nothing else" (CP 373). In "Ordinary Evening" the outcry is not for thing-itself but for the poem able to express it:

We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
 By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
 Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself . . .

(CP 471).

Poem X celebrates the apprehension of this reality as it resides in the poet's language, and puts it in terms of a

marriage song, celebrating in "feast" and "festival" the approach and arrival, the faithfulness and permanence of reality:

It resides

In a permanence composed of impermanence,
In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept,
So that the approaching sun and its arrival,
Its evening feast and the following festival,

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,
This tendency and venerable holding-in
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces

(CP 472).

In Poem XI, the poet releases this reality back into its own power (i.e. the human does not appropriate) and reacknowledges his own poverty. Reality appears in feline form, as it does in "The Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," only here it is a lion once again:

In the metaphysical streets of the physical town
We remember the lion of Juda and we save
The phrase . . . Say of each lion of the spirit

It is a cat of a sleek transparency
That shines with a nocturnal shine alone.
The great cat must stand potent in the sun

(CP 473).

A passage in Charles Taylor's Sources of the Self describes the same flexibility of self required by experience that "Ordinary Evening" enacts. Taylor describes a version of subjectivity that doesn't impose, but that joins the self to the world:

. . . a turn inward, to experience or subjectivity, didn't mean a turn to a self to be articulated, where this is understood as an alignment of nature and reason, or instinct and creative power. On the contrary, the turn inward may take us beyond the self as usually understood, to a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question. . . or beyond that to a new kind of unity, a new way of inhabiting time . . . (462).

This passage describes accurately the fragmentation of experience in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which, as Taylor writes, "calls our ordinary notions of identity into question"; it also points to what Stevens sought to achieve in the poems that simultaneously explore the self/explode the self by pointing to that place "beyond the self" that Stevens himself alluded to in his prose. At the base of the shifting shapes of consciousness, the dazzle of perception and thought, lay another geography of the self--not an "essence" in the traditional sense, but a basis beyond the individual. This

bedrock foundation of selfhood is, of course, one of the implications of the title of the last volume, "The Rock."

A passage from Francois Mauriac that Stevens copied into a notebook illuminates his idea of the rock below the self:

The essential virtue of the writer lies, in our view, in a certain attitude toward the real, an attitude forged from honesty to scruples and candor, in the eagerness to excavate the rock of an individual until reaching the water-table, the deepest source" (qtd. in Richardson, Later Years 148).

The self in this sense is both smaller and larger than Stevens had at first thought.⁵ The personal part of it is small; what is "large" is, again, the force of the presence of the "impersonal" which the above passage describes, a force due to its connection to all other human beings and to all other earthly phenomena as well.

There are many descriptions for the bedrock self Stevens sought⁶, and the Mauriac passage is especially reminiscent of Jung's description of the collective unconscious: founded upon the rock of the earth; forming the basis of time; the bottom of the self (the house imagery in the passage is no accident):

. . . the deeper we descend into the house the narrower the horizon becomes, and in the darkness we come upon the nearest and most intimate things, till finally we reach the naked rock-floor, down to that early dawn of time when reindeer hunters

fought for a bare and wretched existence against
the elemental forces of wild nature (119).

Section XXX of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" introduces
the theme of the rock that will be played out in the last
volume. In this poem, barrenness that does not indicate
absence or lack, but rather the presence--and the visibility--
of the very foundation for human existence⁷:

The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.

.

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.

It is not part of what is absent, a halt

For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.

It is a coming on and a coming forth.

.

The glass of air becomes an element--

It was something imagined that has been washed
away.

A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.

It is a visibility of thought,

In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.

(CP 488)

The passage Stevens cited from Paul Valery in The Necessary Angel -- "The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself"--is as apt a description of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" as is possible: the poem depicts the universe completing itself in the mind of the poet wandering its purple streets, but the individual poet's expresses experiences reflecting a more basic self. The poem emerges from the tension between personal and impersonal aspects of the poem, and aspects of perception itself for that matter. To cite Charles Taylor again, Taylor shows how crucial the individual vision--the poem--is to the emergence of the "water table, the deepest source" of human experience:

. . . the timeless, the mythic, and the archetypal. . . may be transpersonal. But our access to it can only be within the personal. In this sense, the depths remain inner for us as much as for our Romantic forebears. They may take us beyond the subjective, but the road to them passes inescapably through a heightened awareness of personal experience (481).

What Stevens finds within, but also beyond, the personal is what Stevens calls "the impersonal person."

3. Kinetic Poetics: The Impersonal Person's Lyric

To read a poem should be an experience, like
experiencing an act (OP 191)

If the activities of thought and perception, to Wallace Stevens, are part of the natural, bodily being of humans, then poetry, as a product of those activities, must also be a part and product of Nature. A partial list of Stevens's definitions of poetry in the Adagia shows the degree to which he described poetry in terms of natural phenomena:

A poem is a meteor (OP 185)

An evening's thought is like a day of clear weather
(OP 185)

A poem is a pheasant (OP 194)

Description is an element, like air or water.
(OP 196)

Thought tends to collect in pools (OP 196)

Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush
(OP 198)

Like the elements and objects in this list, poetry "need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have" (OP 201).

A poem has been described as an ecosystem by more than one writer.⁸ William Rueckert has written that

A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a
living thing, a swirl in the flow. . . . Poems are

part of the energy pathways which sustain life. . . Properly understood, poems can be studied as models for energy flow, community building and ecosystems (74-75).

. . . literature is an enormous, ever increasing, wonderfully diverse storehouse of creative and cooperative energy which can never be used up. It is like the gene-pool, like the best ecosystems (81).

What Stevens brings to the traditional lyric poem is this sense of kinetic energy transferred from poem to poem (within the ecosystem of Stevens's poetry⁹) and between poem and world (the ecosystem at large, of which the poem is part). Thus, Stevens brings an added dimension to the lyric that Northrope Frye, for example, describes as "the genre in which the poet turns his back on his audience" (271).¹⁰ For instance, many of Stevens's poems exemplify that "oracular rhythm [which] seems to be the predominating initiative of the lyric" (271), and much of Stevens's canon fits Frye's translation of ta mele as "'poems to be chanted,' for chanting . . . is an emphasis on words as words" (273). These prosodic characteristics of the lyric are bolstered by a particular stance in relation to that audience which is always presumed, in John Stuart Mills's formulation, to be "overhearing" rather than hearing the poetic utterance:

The lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else: a spirit of nature, a Muse . . . a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction, or a natural object. . . .

The radical of presentation in the lyric is the hypothetical form of what in religion is called the "I-Thou" relationship (249-250).

To a greater degree than is implied in this passage, however, Wallace Stevens conceives of the poem's function as a dramatistic one: it should be "an experience, like experiencing an act" (OP 191). The act is specifically the verbal enactment, the making come to life, of the I-Thou relationship Frye describes. It is a way of conjuring forth the absent or lost beloved, an earlier, more youthful self, the mother/must and so on. That this utterance occurs in solitude is also a convention of the lyric. Stevens remarks on this characteristic when he comments that "poetry is like prayer in that it is most effective in solitude and in the times of solitude, as, for example, in the earliest morning" (OP 189).

In addition to this creative aspect of poetry, Stevens attributes to poetry a destructive aspect as well: poetry is, as the title of one of Stevens's poems suggests, a destructive force (CP 192). What it destroys is not only human conception and preconception, but, as has been discussed in the preceding section, the fiction of a unified self expressing a unified sensibility of which the lyric is usually considered to be the expression. Stevens "decreates" the self and reconceives it as event rather than entity. William Bevis writes, for example, that in Stevens the "self is as much a verb as a noun." The purpose of reconfiguring the self in this way is

to bring about, through the poem, the unity of the self/non-self with a frequently non-human, and in human terms, a non-responsive "Thou."

The modern poem, wrote Stevens in his famous phrase, is "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice" (CP 239). Stevens's lyric is made to suffice in several ways, and one of the most important is that it is that class of human utterance in which the human comes closest to being non-human. When the self's unity is disrupted, it comes closest to being like reality (that is, nonsentient, non-human nature):

It is not in the premise that reality

Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses

A dust, a force that traverses a shade (CP 489)

Bevis identifies in Stevens an "anti-intellectual envy of nonsentient, nonhuman life" (54). It is this "non-sentient awareness" that Stevens's poems attempt to create and emulate. Stevens leads us to this conclusion when he describes the activity of poetry as a resistance to and a defense against the self insofar as that self is contained in "mind." "The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself," he writes (OP 199); and elsewhere he writes that "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (OP 197). These ideas are related to Stevens's conception of an irrational element in poetry, of the wildness to which the only connection is poetry.

In this way, poetry allows the mind to touch--and to dwell in--the wildernesses that are part of it: the body and the unconscious. The "Thou" of the I-Thou relationship in Stevens's poems is the natural world. And as wildness penetrates the human being freely from without and seeps out freely from within, the poem is the cry of the occasions of that flow. As the violence within which protects us from the violence without, it also joins us to the same violence; in fact, it could be argued that it protects by joining.

Like the body, like the unconscious, and like wild nature, language is also primary and wild. Heidegger expresses this primacy of language and its connection to the irrational in this way:

Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. Perhaps it is before all else man's subversion of this relation of dominance that drives his essential nature into alienation (Writings 324).

In this passage, Heidegger inadvertently discloses the connection between language and ecology, and the need to reconceive the use of language (as the primary power relationship the human being experiences) in order to reconceive our relationship to the natural world¹¹. Stevens's line in "Things of August" about the senses possessing the human, rather than the other way around, could be rewritten to describe language, and the way Stevens

permitted it to possess him, in the sense that a lover or a demon "possesses": "He is the possessed of words, not the possessor" (CP 492). However, being a relation and an ecosystem of sorts, the energy flows both ways, cyclically. And one remembers "Academic Discourse," and how the poem, too, came to possess the night and the sea--

How pale and how possessed a night it is,
How full of exhalations of the sea . . .

(CP 144).

--if only momentarily.

When does the poem suffice? It suffices when the nature does not; that is, when it supplies a response in human language that nature cannot supply. Stevens's poem speaks not only to that which cannot speak in a human tongue, but it speaks for that which cannot speak for itself, nor needs to, though we need it to: for the sun, for the elements, for rocks, sky, light, birds, for the weather. In speaking this way, the poems helps us to identify the inhuman in the human--and thereby to be the more human for that. We discover what Ulysses discovers in his wanderings:

A part of the inhuman more,
The still inhuman more, and yet
And inhuman of our features, known
And unknown, inhuman for a little while,
Inhuman for a little, lesser time.

(OP 131)

Notes to Chapter VI

1. Harold Bloom argues against the accusation of solipsism: Hoon "is not a solipsist, because the 'there' of his world is an arena in which he is at work finding himself, more truly the more he expands. . . ." (Climate 65).

2. Harold Bloom describes "The Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" as the record of "a major battle between being-without-consciousness and consciousness-without-being" and identifies the "largest clue to the poem" in "the repetition of the Emersonian-Whitmanian formula 'for you.' 'Everything is meant for you etc. . . .'" (Climate 138-139). He goes on to write that "The rabbit of consciousness-without-being is the tendency within Stevens to seek an expansion of self, beyond all bounds, and everything in Stevens that fears such expansiveness speaks the poem as an ironic warning. Yet the rhetoric of the poem is hyperbolic, and the rabbit wins his Pyrrhic victory" (Climate 139). Such Pyrrhic victories, depending as they do on the denial of human dependence on nurturing but exacting earthly reality, disappear in the late poems.

3. In light of this bent for disappearance, it is fascinating to see that back in his New York days, in 1907, Stevens made the following note while reading in the Astor Library:

Pliny the younger wrote to Lucretius--'Pass through Life unnoticed;" -- "do not wish to be known even while living." That seems worth noting. How one wishes one could pass through life unnoticed--unnoticed by Necessity--by Nature itself! (SP 183).

4. Mark Halliday writes that in this poem "Stevens postulates a happy epiphany of the union of all selves in the central man, 'the impersonal person,' but the word 'impersonal' and the reference to 'a solitude of the self' and the invocations of timelessness and forgetfulness all reveal, the emotional goal of the epiphany is not really a uniting of many selves together but rather a vanishing of other selves, a relief from multiplicity" (75). I believe that Halliday reads "impersonal" in a pejorative sense here--the way it is so easy to read "inhuman" in Stevens's poems in a pejorative sense. "Impersonal" is the individual equivalent of the rock in nature--the basic, bottom-story reality.

5. Mark Halliday writes that Stevens "carries to an extreme lyric's tendency to exclude individualized others for the sake of focusing on the poet's self or The Self. . . . Stevens stresses the subjective and solitary quality of the poetic event as it occurs wholly within the mind, performed by and for the mind" (10). What Halliday interprets as subjective and solitary, I would call foundational. The experience of this foundation within the individual is of necessity solitary, though the poem that emerges from the experience includes

other people and attests to the relationship between self and world (and is therefore not "by and for the mind" alone).

6. D.H. Lawrence describes this same bottom-of-the-self in a letter to Edward Garnett in 1914:

There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element (436).

7. Thomas Hines offers a related interpretation of the barrenness, and points out the earlier manifestations of this idea in Stevens's fluctuations between North and South:

The vital confrontation of the mind and reality requires . . . the rejection of an overabundant reality in favor of a simplified and less complex reality of the North. Here, Stevens achieves a simplification of reality through a spatial movement from South to North. In later poems, this simplification will be symbolized by a seasonal change from summer to winter, for as Stevens comes to realize, it is in time, not in space, that both the mind and reality change (40).

8. Charles Taylor frames his discussion of language and art in ecological terms:

The work of art as vortex is a cluster; it is a constellation of words or images which sets up a space which draws ideas and energy into it. Or we could say that it concentrates energies that are otherwise diffuse, and makes them available at one spot/moment (475).

9. Charles Berger describes the self-reference in Stevens's poems almost as though Stevens had created his own linguistic ecosystem: ". . . the degree of self-allusiveness in the last poems indicates that there may be no tradition for this poet outside his own works. For Stevens, tradition resides within his oeuvre, rather than the other way around. Survival of the literary self and survival of the tradition become synonymous (147). Of course, all ecosystems exist within, and in relation to, other ecosystems. Even the non-tradition of inventing your own tradition has its precedents: witness William Blake, for one.

10. I use the term lyric in the usual sense of lyric poetry as distinguished from dramatic or narrative poetry, though of course much of Stevens's poetry is, if not "dramatic" in the strict sense, certainly dramatistic. The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics lists the other attributes of the lyric as being brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality, and particularity of image (461). Moreover, "In its modern meaning, a lyric poem is a

type of poetry which is mechanically representational of a musical architecture and which is thematically representational of the poet's sensibility as evidenced in the fusion of conception and image" (PPE 462)--a useful definition though it suggests a more pronounced split between "mechanical" and "thematic" aspects than one finds in Stevens's poems.

11. John Gruen, whom Peter Brazeau interviewed in Parts of a World, relates Stevens's description to him of writing poetry. Stevens describes language almost as a bubbling up out of the earth or the sea; his description moreover resounds of Heidegger's sense of appearance, disclosure, and concealment:

He spoke more about the experience of how it is to make a poem. He told me that he didn't know what his poetry meant at times, that he really had to think hard as to what he meant by that image or that phrase or that word, even. He talked something about submersion, about words being submerged and then rising out, that they seemed to have been hidden and then revealed themselves, if I remember correctly. He then put the word down, and that revelation was then forgotten (John Gruen quoted in Brazeau 207).

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