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BY THEIR FRUITS: WALLACE STEVENS, HIS POETRY, HIS CRITICS

by

JOAN RICHARDSON-PICCIOTTO

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

1977

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

13 May 1977
date

Chairman of Examining Committee

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Abstract

BY THEIR FRUITS: WALLACE STEVENS, HIS POETRY, HIS CRITICS

by

Joan Richardson-Picciotto

Adviser: Professor John Hollander

This study traces the reasons for the "misreading" of Stevens' poetry by the New Critics and their descendants and offers alternative readings of the most important poems of Harmonium based on a clearer understanding of the nature of the poet's "modernism." Because what has come to be known as "New Criticism" came about in response to the work of poets like Eliot and Pound, whose "modernism" involved an intellectual substitution of European and Eastern roots for our native American Puritan one, and because it wholeheartedly rejected the "aesthetic criticism" of the end of the last century, this new critical approach failed to take into account what is most essential to an understanding of Stevens and his poetry.

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Preface

Stevens' poetry, like the poetry of any great poet, educated me. I started exploring it more than eight years ago and continue today to discover landing places on what Randall Jarrell so adroitly named Stevens' earth. As this voyage of discovery on Ariel's planet began, I became extremely curious about the differences between poetic and ordinary language and in the operation of metaphor, specifically; sailing many "strange seas of thought," I felt somewhat like Telemachus guided by Mentor. Then, after sailing in the seas of English, French and Comparative Literature, I was led to resting places which seemed strange and foreign at the time but which later proved to offer clues as to where the father-poet was to be found. I am extremely grateful to those who for me acted as Nestor and Menelaus to Telemachus.

Over this period my thesis, like Proteus, took many different shapes and, consequently, I had more than one director. As a result my reading was broad and varied. In its first form, the dissertation was to be an historical and practical investigation of metaphor, tracing its definition from the pre-Socratics through Aristotle, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, down to the present, using examples from poetry to elucidate meaning; Allen Mandelbaum acted as an unofficial director at this point. In its second form,

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it was to be a more modest study of metaphor as it operates in the poetry of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Yeats and Stevens; both Haskell Block and Henri Peyre, who inspired my confidence and has always been helpful, directed, at different times, the work at this stage. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation helped my studies at this time by awarding me a Dissertation Fellowship. However, after completing sections on Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Yeats and comparing them to what I had written on Stevens, I realized that they could not together form one work; my whole spirit responded to Stevens while only my intellect responded to those other poets. I found myself in a difficult position since I could not write only on Stevens and, at the same time, fulfill the requirements for a degree in my discipline, Comparative Literature.

The dissertation in its present form represents the solution I reached, combining a tracing of the failure and the reasons for it of Stevens' other critics to read him with my readings of certain poems. This final version, however, could not have been written without what I learned in my previous explorations: because of this, I include in a secondary bibliography some of those works read earlier which, though not cited in the present text, I know formed part of the education necessary to write what I have. My director for this last and most satisfying phase has been John Hollander whom I would like to thank for his sensitive

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reading of the manuscript in all its stages, for his unerring judgment concerning both form and content, for his enthusiastic expressions of approval, for his enriching contributions to the text, and for his thoughtful patience. To my readers, Irving Howe and Allen Mandelbaum, I am also most grateful both for their time and attention and their approval.

I would also like to thank the others who encouraged me along the way: Yvette Louria, Ruth Temple, Helaine Newstead, E. Allen McCormick, and, most recently, Mary Ann Caws, the present Executive Officer of Comparative Literature, who also read part of the manuscript and who has been extremely helpful in every way during the last, often painful, steps. In addition, there are those without whom this most certainly could not have been written: Meyer Monchek with whom I learned about "tropes as defenses;" Marina Picciotto, my half-daughter, who tip-toed through our apartment for more than a year, and my husband, Selim-Roberto Picciotto, the ephebe from whom I learned to read and feel, through whom I was first introduced to Wallace Stevens, and with whom I have come to understand "the poem as act."

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List of Abbreviations

For brevity and convenience, references to Stevens' poetry and prose are documented in parentheses within the text. The following abbreviations, now traditional in Stevens' criticism, are used:

CP--The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.

OP--Opus Posthumous. Ed., with an Introduction by Samuel French Morse. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957.

NA--The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.

L--Letters of Wallace Stevens, Selected and Edited by Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.

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"The meaning, not the Name I call."

Paradise Lost, Book VII

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Section One

The Mote and the Beam: Wallace Stevens and New Criticism

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1. An Introduction to the Problem

Harmonium, Wallace Stevens' first volume, was published in 1923, one year after the publication of both Ulysses and The Waste Land, works that became identified with the "modern" sensibility. Within a year I.A. Richards' Principles of Literary Criticism was published; this work marked the formal beginning of what has come to be known as "New Criticism."[1] Stevens' appearance on the literary horizon at a moment when poetry and prose revealed an absolute break away from their immediate pasts, and when criticism established an entirely new methodology for dealing with texts, forced on him the label of "modern" and, consequently, made him subject to the "new critical" approach.

New Criticism, having the poem or work as its only object and reference, was created in response to works like The Waste Land and Ulysses whose structure and content reflect the fragmentation, the loss of faith and tradition, the modern "dissociation of sensibility," that were a reaction to the First World War. This war exploded what was left of the nineteenth century with its Romanticism and later Victorianism in an experiential way for poets like Eliot and Pound who were, at least, on the side of the ocean where the devastation occurred.

The case was quite different for Stevens, however, from whose poetry it is impossible to discern that the First World War had taken place (and this not only because it is not

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referred to explicitly). Stevens' perception of what the War and its subsequent loss of innocence meant was always understood sentimentally from an imposed distance. As a result, his being was rent. One part, call it intellectual, understood the changes that had come and so accepted rationally the death of God and loss of faith which had sundered traditional beliefs of all kinds; another part, however, remained emotionally tied to the older forms of belief since for him there had been no direct experiencing of their destruction. For Stevens there was no interruption of life from his youth during America's puritanical Victorian period, to his middle, and later, to his old age. For a poet who writes, "His soil is man's intelligence," this will have no mean significance.

Because of the breakdown of traditional forms and values during the early part of the century, the New Critics attempted to provide an ordering principle through criticism, an access to the work at hand through a structure perceived by them but not necessarily apparent to the average reader. The form or structure provided by them had to be drawn (or, at least, the language in which it was expressed had to be drawn) from some body of tradition if it was to be understandable. However, when it appeared that the tradition which had existed unbroken for centuries was finally destroyed as it was by the First World War and the events following it, the major poets of the period, Eliot and Pound, sought in ancient and Eastern

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cultures for a tradition to pass on. Critics following Eliot attempted to re-establish a tradition by providing an analytic paradigm in their criticism for works that appeared to have no internal structure when judged by the standards of previous literary periods; the tradition from which they borrowed their language was the "objective" one of science. It was not only poets but critics as well who now made a "new" language.[2] Critics were fulfilling the role set out for them by Matthew Arnold, becoming moral arbiters in a real sense; they gave form where otherwise there was none and re-formed a tradition. Speaking for the new kind of criticism, Allen Tate defined tradition as, "a quality of judgment and of conduct, rooted in a concrete way of life" that we inherit from our immediate past and/or that we pass on, and which demands constant rediscovery.[3] This is nothing if not an ethical statement. With the death of the gods, and with them the priests, came the critics in an age when science and technology supplanted religious belief. These critics were to provide the morality that science alone could not.

Because of their new position, however, certain problems arose, among them a kind of dogmatism which prevented them and their descendants from seeing and analyzing their own relationship and reaction to the past that spawned them, particularly to the period of "impressionist" criticism and the "art for art's sake" movement. This prejudice extended to the way in which they could or could not read certain poets or texts if

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those poets or texts happened to be at the same time "modern," American, and obviously tied to the aesthetic models of the nineties and of the Romantic period; unfortunately, Stevens was one of these poets. Regardless of the evaluation of his poetry, the New Critics misunderstood Stevens, seeing him as either an extremely talented cerebral throwback or as a "dandy," affected and separated in his art from his own life and the life of the world around him. Even if never explicitly stated, these are the images of Stevens that emerge from reading the work of those who have criticized him. In addition, it must be remembered that it was not the community of poets who recognized and welcomed Stevens, but the academic community who was and continues to be responsible for his acceptance as a major figure.[4]

Stevens' poetry cannot be fully understood without recognizing in the man and in the poet the residual effects of Romanticism, Victorianism, and American Puritanism (the last element being a pervasive influence on the American experience in general). That he is tied to the Romantics very intimately, in a way that certainly Pound or Eliot is not, is obvious in his work; the protestations about "the romantic" in his letters or in the "Adagia" only serve in the end to confirm our suspicions that he is indeed their heir. That he is also tied to a code of behavior belonging to the kind of Victorianism found in New York, for example, at the turn of the century is very obvious in his letters and less obvious but

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certainly present in his poetry. It is evidenced in various aspects: in the particular personae he chooses, that of "A High Toned Old Christian Woman," for instance; in the predominating tone and diction which run throughout the poems; and most clearly in the deceptive "purely aesthetic" focus of the greatest part of his poetry, especially obvious in "Harmonium." A great deal of evidence from both the poetry and letters will be presented later in this discussion to support these statements. The point now, however, is to concentrate on why there was this strong atavistic strain in Stevens, and for this the consideration of him as an American is extremely important.

In his essay, "Poets Without Laurels,"[5] John Crowe Ransom extends the idea of Puritanism and shows how it pervades modern[6] consciousness, tracing its evolution through religion, morality, politics and finally art. "Our period differs outwardly from other periods because it first differs inwardly. Its spiritual temper is puritanical; that is, it craves to perfect the parts of experience separately or in their purity, and is a series of isolated perfections."[7] In relationship to poetry, he says:

> Modern poetry is pure poetry. The motive behind it cannot be substantially different from the motive behind the other modern activities, which is certainly the driving force of all our modernism. What is its name? 'Purism' would be exact, except that it does not have the zealous and contriving sound we want. 'Platonism' would do, provided that were time to come to an agreement about the essential meaning of Plato's act. I think the name 'Puritanism' will describe this motive.[8]

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The poet he chooses to best exemplify what he is describing is Wallace Stevens; the poem he centers on is "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."[9] Ransom has certainly perceived something very essential about the nature of Puritanism and its relationship to Stevens, but has not gone beyond the idea as abstraction, to discover the "body" of Puritanism; that is, he has not explored how this force actually does effect a "modern" American, and consequently his poetry.

Puritanism was not something Stevens perceived as an idea alone. Beginning with his very early letters and journal entries, there are descriptions of different family members in terms that define them, sometimes specifically, as inheritors of the spirit from which America grew. In a late letter to a member of the Berks County Historical Society, Stevens describes his maternal grandfather, a shoemaker: "Whatever this man was, to judge of him by what I know of his children, he himself was far above the average from the point of view of ambition and the will to get on" (L 4). An uncle, husband of his father's sister with whom he spent summers as a young man, is: "A Puritan who revels in catechisms and creeds, a hand-to-mouth man, earnest, determined, discreet--Uncle Isaac" (L 9). And his aunt, the same seventeen year old Stevens describes as: "A self-sacrificing whole-souled woman who says not much but too well--that is Aunt Mariah" (L 9).

Evidence of the strong impact made by Puritanism on the Stevens family is clearly reflected in the information found

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in the Letters concerning Wallace Stevens' father. Garrett Barcalow Stevens was born on a farm and left it to become a schoolteacher as a young man. Fulfilling the promise of the American dream, he continued working his way up to become, "a successful attorney with diverse political and business interests, including a bicycle factory and a steel plant at one time" (L 3). Garrett Stevens also wrote poetry on Sundays, but that is a point better left now for future discussion. He imbued the young Wallace with a sense of the importance of things which belonged to an American Puritan tradition. This is best seen in some of the letters he wrote to Wallace at Harvard. One in particular unmistakeably reflects this and also suggests a strong spiritual link between Garrett and his son which would later emerge, in at least one way, with Wallace's preoccupation with the sun in his poetry. Dated November 14, 1897, the excerpt follows:

> Dear Wallace
>
> . . . I am still concerned about your progress in your study and on that score you seem a trifle reticent---I should like to know whether you feel that you are really improving your power to reach proper conclusions, and educating yourself in discerning that after all the positive knowledge the best have is mightly little. You have discovered I suppose, that the sun is not a ball of fire sending light and Heat---like a stove---but that radiation and reflection is the mystery--- and that the higher up we get---and nearer to the sun the colder it gets---and a few old things like that---but you are taught and directed in your studies in a way that you must acknowledge widens your range of vision and upsets your previous notions---teaches

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> you to think---compels you reason---and provides you with the positive facts by which you know a conclusion is correct. When this comes to you---you will first begin to absorb and philosophize--and but for eccentricities in your genius you may be fitted for a Chair--- Do not be contented with a smattering of all things---be strong in something.
>
> Yours as ever
> Garrett

Garrett Stevens communicated to his son a recognition of the importance both of using reason in a way intimately connected with Eighteenth Century Rationalism, and of excelling in one area, following what Ransom has pointed out as the modern consequence of Puritanism. An American schoolteacher, or ex-schoolteacher, during the second half of the 19th Century in America, especially a man with the kind of sensibility sensed in Garrett Stevens, was probably familiar with the intellectual currents of his time. What is surprising in what Garrett writes to his son is the clarity with which he articulates what he understands to be the role of reason in life and the closeness of this view to that of the American Pragmatists, especially Charles Peirce, a philosopher who revitalized the spirit of Jonathan Edwards during the second half of the Nineteenth Century. The role of reason was closely tied to practical living for the Pragmatists as it obviously was too for Garrett Stevens and later for Wallace. In a chapter devoted to Charles Peirce in his book, The Spirit of American Philosophy, John Smith describes an aspect of Peirce's contribution to the development of

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philosophy in the following manner:

> The chief value of Peirce's insistence that we pay attention to genuine doubt and to the actual conflict of ideas within the individual consciousness lies in its forcing us to consider the role of thought in living experience. In its critical or reflective form, thought comes into play in response to certain demands of life and its success or failure comes to be estimated in terms of human needs. Were habitual action always effective in every way and were the circumstances of life such that they never contradicted our ideas or thwarted our plans, inquiry would probably never take place. For under such ideal conditions doubt would not exist and there would be no goad to inquiry. But as it happens in actual experience, our ideas are contradicted and our purposes often come to naught; many of our beliefs are false and our plans misguided. If this is so and if our rational faculty is called into play on those occasions when old beliefs and habits let us down, our reason must have practical business in our life. Instead of a power which is exhausted in the contemplation of things, it is a means of transforming them.[10]

What is remarkable is how close Garrett's layman's description of the function and purpose of reason is to Peirce's (perhaps the fact of Peirce's having graduated from Harvard and Wallace's attendance there about fifty years later was a factor in Garrett's expressed wishes for his son; or, perhaps Garrett had read Peirce's article outlining his principles in Popular Science Monthly where it appeared in 1878, the year of Wallace's birth). In Garrett's letter to Wallace the order in which the ideas are presented matches the order of Peirce. Like Garrett's example using the sun, Peirce discusses the importance of having our habitual notions upset since it is

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this aspect of our consciousness which forces us to doubt and, consequently, to reason. Garrett does not specifically mention doubt, but uses the phrase, "compels you reason," after speaking of having notions upset; implicit there is an understanding of doubt. Garrett goes on to say that reason provides one with the "positive facts" by which a correct conclusion is known; this same use of reason as an empirical tool, one which is of practical value in life, is what Peirce stresses. This is also the most important element of his philosophy. "In Peirce's thought, it is the empirical method which gives the answer."[11] It is easy to see the affinity between Peirce's thought and Stevens' thought as it is expressed in his poetry. Smith's last sentence describing Peirce's understanding of reason could just as easily describe how Stevens perceives the use of reason, the mind: "Instead of a power which is exhausted in the contemplation of things, it is a means of transforming them."

There are also other aspects to the tradition which Peirce renewed with his philosophy which shed light on the American experience in general and on Stevens in particular. Peirce graduated from Harvard in the year of publication of Darwin's Origin of Species; he belonged to the tradition of Eighteenth Century Rationalism in the form adopted and developed by Jonathan Edwards--a form which had a very marked Calvinist backbone. Peirce attempted to bridge the gap between traditional Christian beliefs and the new scientific theory of evolution by formulating

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his own doctrine of "evolutionary love" which together with his doctrines of chance (Tychism) and continuity (Synechism) formed the bases of his philosophy.[12] The kind of use of reason fostered by Peirce was the same used by Puritan preachers and moralists like Edwards a century earlier to convince congregations of the truth of religious dogma. These preachers and later philosophers following the Eighteenth Century's glorification of reason rigorously applied logic to propagate what was, in fact, illogical by definition: those articles of faith which were the bases of their own Calvinist perception of reality. This union of reason and Calvinism produced paradoxical results; for example, it allowed a philosopher like Peirce to pick and choose elements out of the body of traditional religious beliefs and transform them into the necessary elements of his new philosophy. According to Smith, Peirce

> had his own interpretation of evolution according to which reality develops from less order to more through a process requiring both freedom and chance. He went further than most and attempted to connect evolutionary development with love, with harmony, and with creativity. The most striking aspect of Peirce's theory is its pointed opposition to the struggle and conflict almost universally associated with the evolutionary view of both human and social development. In a manner which once again illustrates the free, spontaneous, and thoroughly unorthodox manner in which essentially Christian ideas were adapted by philosophers, Peirce undertook to use the concept of Love, agape, found in the New Testament as the foundation of his theory of cosmic evolution.[13]

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Peirce's inability or unwillingness to extricate philosophy fully from religion marks him as peculiarly American, as belonging to a very strong Puritan tradition which adapted itself to science rather than lose its hold as a prevailing system of belief and behavior.

The particular strain of Calvinism which proliferated on New England soil was never confined to the pulpit, but insinuated itself into every aspect of human activity. Calvinism reached its purest forms in three locales: in Scotland, under the influence of John Knox; in England, through the clergymen and laymen of the Puritan Revolution; and in New England, through the Puritan moralists. Its doctrines were accepted and became the core of "reformed" religions such as Presbyterianism (Stevens' family religion). Its success was the direct result of one of Calvin's basic differences from Luther: whereas Luther favored a return to primitive simplicity in life, Calvin accepted newborn capitalism, encouraged trade and production, and at the same time rigorously suppressed abuses of exploitation and self-indulgence. Calvin also stressed how the development of a successful industrial economy was stimulated by the Christian virtues of thrift, industry, sobriety, and responsibility which, he preached, were also essential to the achievement of the reign of God on earth.[14] Following these strictures meant living one's life completely under the wing of religion. It was this tradition which was fostered by Edwards, later transformed by Peirce,

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and certainly felt by Stevens.

Because Calvinism pervaded every aspect of New England life, even to providing the basis for "good business sense," the consciousness of it as only a religion diminished the more effective it became. When, for example, Peirce synthesized scientific method and religious belief, he was able to do it precisely because religion had become an every-day affair, something that was part of him in what Freud would call a "pre-conscious" way, and not something mystical which could threaten the progress of science and reason in which he believed. This same covert principle guided Garrett Stevens to give the various bits of advice in the many letters written to his son while he was at Harvard and later when he was trying his hand at journalism in New York.[15] The tenacity of Calvinist tradition which found its way into the marrow of generations not even aware of "believing" accounts for its success in taming a continent of exuberant nature and wild Indians which was nothing if not the embodied antithesis of the spirit of the century which began to "civilize" it.

That these considerations are essential to an understanding not only of Stevens' poetry, but of his position in the history of American thought and letters as well, is shown by considering in their light almost any one of his poems, particularly among his most hermetic. I have chosen for this purpose "The Doctor of Geneva," but as I expect to show later on, almost

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any other would serve since the antithetical situation of Calvinism in America forms the dialectic basis of the vision in all of Stevens' poems.

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Notes to Chapter One

1 In his Foreword to Critiques and Essays in Criticism: 1920-1948 (New York: The Ronald Press, 1949), Cleanth Brooks notes that it was John Crowe Ransom who coined the name of "New Criticism," and states that this period in criticism formally began with the publication of Richards' Principles of Literary Criticism.

2 In his book The Great War and Modern Memory (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1975), Paul Fussell discusses the impact of the War on the way language was used, showing differences in use and meaning before and after the War. He points out the discrepancy between the naked brutality of the War and its description in England in the rhetorical and inflated vocabulary of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. As an example, he provides a list originally compiled by Rupert Brooke in which "to die" is "to perish," and "the blood of young men" is "The red/ Sweet wine of youth," (the list appears on pp. 21-22). Fussell, in the tradition of Orwell, deals with this historical reality in both a political and aesthetic manner, showing the enormity of the rift between reality and language during the early part of the century. He establishes the general outline and discusses in broad terms how the language at that particular moment could not and did

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not give an accurate description of reality because, with the help of technology, reality had escaped from language.

[3] R.W. Stallman, "The New Critics," in Critiques and Essays in Criticism: 1920-1948, ed. by Stallman, pp. 488-489, quoting Tate.

[4] In contrast to the reception given to The Waste Land or Ulysses, the royalties received by Stevens from Harmonium for the first half year after its publication amounted to $6.70 (as recorded by Stevens in a letter to Harriet Monroe in July of 1924).

[5] In The World's Body (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 55-75.

[6] "Modern" here must be understood as referring to the earlier part of this century. This essay was published originally in 1932.

[7] Op. cit., p. 63.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ransom's choice here and his reading of the poem will be discussed in Chapter 5.

[10] John E. Smith, The Spirit of American Philosophy (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 20.

[11] Ibid. p. 28.

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[12] Ibid. p. 33.

[13] Ibid. pp. 31-32.

[14] The Columbia Encyclopedia entries on "Calvin," and "Calvinism."

[15] Following are excerpts from the Letters which show how Garrett communicated the ethics of Calvinism to his son under the cover of advice given about Wallace's future, his stay at college, his profession--apparently simple parental concerns. Note, however, that the virtues he stresses in his letters belong to Calvinism and that they are the same virtues that Wallace Stevens will later (as illustrated in his Journal entries and letters to Elsie) admonish himself for not having.

Here, then, are the letter excerpts:

a. A little romance is essential to ecstasy. We are all selfish--Self Denial doesn't seem to be a good thing excepting in others--the world holds an unoccupied niche only for those who climb up--work and study, study and work--are worth a decade of dreams--and romantic notions--but I do not believe in being so thoroughly practical that what is beautiful, what is artistic--what is delicate, what is grand--must always be deferred to what is useful. And there is no better exercise than an effort to do our best to appreciate and describe to others the beauties of those things which are denied to the vision of the absent. (...)

Point in all this screed--Paint truth but not always in drab clothes. (L 14);

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b. Glad to get your encouraging reports--and shall be happy always to get the substantial evidence of your progress, for, as you are aware--you are not out on a picnic--but really preparing for the campaign of life--where self sustenance is essential and where everything depends upon yourself-- (L 18);

c. It will not do to put off the thought of subsistence as drone matter, ignoble+unworthy --The "Crack a Jack" is the fellow who is always ready in any emergency, and meanwhile fills his pockets with more stones+ his head with more wisdom. (L 20);

d. --I am convinced from the Poetry(?) you write your Mother that the afflatus is not serious--and does not interfere with some real hard work, (L 23);

e. ...Stick to it my boy--I know you can do whatever any other fellow did and perhaps--who knows--just a little slicker(...) (L 23-24);

f. Keep hammering at your real work [as distinct from literary aspirations--Wallace had written to his father about having achieved recognition for his literary pursuits at Harvard] however, my boy--for a fellow never knows what's in store--and time mis-spent now counts heavily. (...) (L 26).

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2. "The Doctor of Geneva"

Early in Harmonium in "The Doctor of Geneva," Stevens clearly lays out the problem of the antithetical situation of Calvinism in America. Many critics have mentioned the poem in passing and have given brief interpretations,[1] but none has dealt with the poem at length, following its images through all their associations to come out with its significance for Stevens both as a poet and as a man. Considering the poem carefully will show how Stevens' experience mirrors the seriousness of the problem of Calvinism in America, especially for the poet. Here, then, is the poem:

> The doctor of Geneva stamped the sand
> That lay impounding the Pacific swell,
> Patted his stove-pipe hat and tugged his shawl.
>
> Lacustrine man had never been assailed
> By such long-rolling opulent cataracts,
> Unless Racine or Bossuet held the like.
>
> He did not quail. A man so used to plumb
> The multifarious heavens felt no awe
> Before these visible, voluble delugings,
>
> Which yet found means to set his simmering mind
> Spinning and hissing with oracular
> Notations of the wild, the ruinous waste,
>
> Until the steeples of his city clanked and sprang
> In an unburgherly apocalypse.
> The doctor used his handkerchief and sighed. (CP 24)

This is a poem of contradictions, and America seen through it is a land of contradiction. This "doctor of Geneva" is a man of Alpine lakes, calm and regular compared

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to the "ever-hooded tragic sea," and he is the inheritor of Calvin's in the New World. It was in Geneva that Calvin was able to implement his beliefs and his philosophy which subsumed state to church. In the poem the doctor has crossed America, has experienced its breadth, and has come to its "Pacific" shore where he feels very uneasy as evidenced by his movements: he "stamped the sand," "Patted his stove-pipe hat and tugged his shawl."

The character Stevens describes here identifies his American aspect: the self as contradiction, product of an unlikely union. He wears a "stove-pipe hat," one typically American, not at all characteristic of "Lacustrine man;" his relationship to America makes him uneasy. At this point we find ourselves wondering about the source of this discomfort on the part of the doctor; we ask ourselves why the doctor behaves in the way he does. Stevens provides the answer discreetly hidden in the associations evoked by the words and lines of the poem. We remember that the doctor is from Geneva and so recall the initial association to Calvinism. We begin to account for the doctor's uneasiness when we see him "assailed/ By such long-rolling opulent cataracts" because we realize that the doctor is completely unprepared for the experience of coming to America's Pacific shore since he belonged to a place (symbolically Geneva, the home of Calvinism) where the only "long-rolling opulent cataracts" where those expressed by the Alexandrines of a Racine or a

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Bossuet.[2]

The beginning of the next line, "He did not quail" presents the first obvious contradiction in the poem since it tells us that the doctor, heir of Calvin in the New World, was not afraid when he saw the power of the Pacific for the first time, but we have already perceived his nervousness as revealed by his movements in the first stanza. After confronting this apparent contradiction, we are directed back to reexamine each of the words and images presented and discover that this is not the only contradiction in the poem. What Stevens has presented here is, on the surface, a dishonest poem or a poem which presents two opposing characterizations simultaneously; one presents the doctor as a rational being, the other as an emotional one. The rational being has a conception of the Pacific which is logical and literary and follows the etymological meaning of its name as well as its possible imaginative description by Racine or Bossuet. The Pacific to which "Lacustrine man" reacts overtly is this one, calm with long-rolling swells. But, in fact, the experience of coming to the shores of the Pacific after having crossed America does fill him with terrible awe; this is the reaction of the emotional being which as a rational man (the image to which he aspires) he feels he must deny. What we begin to understand at this point is that the contradictions exist in the poem because they exist in the doctor-poet, and that these contradictions exist precisely because of the

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intensity of the feelings involved in the poem.[3]

Puritan reason in America is understood by the poet as an oxymoron which he embodies. Following each of the contradictions in the poem will make this clearer.

The first contradiction emerges from its hiding place between the meaning and sound of "impounding" in the second line. At first it reinforces the movement of "stamped" in line one, and we imagine the waves pounding the sandy shore as the doctor, too, stamps the sand. This is soon discovered to be illusion, however, when we find, upon closer examination, that it is the sand that is "impounding" the sea swell, confining it, containing it imprisoned. The consciousness that America's shores consume the powerful Pacific belongs to Stevens in the person of the "doctor of Geneva."

The description of the man and the occasion continues with the second stanza:

> Lacustrine man had never been assailed
> By such long-rolling opulent cataracts,
> Unless Racine or Bossuet held the like.

We now begin to see that this first description of the Pacific given in the poem is in the language of one who has never experienced it as "an ignorant man;" he is "Lacustrine," belonging to "prehistoric Europe" and used to the calm swells of Lake Geneva. This description is sentimental, given by one educated in the spirit of classicism; this is Stevens in the pose of the anti-romantic he wished to be. This is the attitude of the Eighteenth Century Rationalists ("in square

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hats") and their predecessors, represented in the poem by Calvin, Racine, and Bossuet, who planted the seeds of the "dream of reason"[4] that was to become America. However, because they considered passion an infernal force which would consume those possessed by it if not controlled by reason, they could not admit passionate description into their experience. The inheritor of this attitude then confronts the Pacific and the image that emerges contradicts his actual experience; the poet is not showing "things as they are," but things seen by a certain mind, one educated by the spirit of classicism and reason--a mind afraid of being lost amidst the "ruinous waste," the uncontrolled wildness that America naturally was.

The difficulty that this mind has in describing what is actually there ("there" being both what he sees outside of himself and "there" inside of himself as well in his responding feelings) is reflected formally first in his choice of words and also, quite subtly, in the vagrant alexandrine in the poem. These formal aspects reveal that the poet is identical with the doctor who expresses his uneasiness by stamping, patting and tugging; the poet stamps, pats and tugs at language and so gets ambivalent and contradictory words and rhythms foreign to his tongue and time. These elements will be dealt with as they come up in the poem; the equivocal nature of "impounding" in the first stanza has already been pointed out.

In the second stanza, "cataracts" name the breaking

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waves in the manner of someone who is used to seeing only mountain waterfalls, like "Lacustrine man," the descendant of Calvin, Racine or Bossuet who chooses this word because of its Biblical associations; in Genesis, vii,11 & viii,2, "cataracts" denote the floodgates of heaven viewed as keeping back the rain. "Cataracts" does not, however, describe at all accurately the sea the doctor sees. But because it also has a meaning of "any violent downpour or rush of water," the association is more than appropriate to this "doctor of Geneva" as we will discover later in the poem. Stylistically, "cataracts" in this last meaning connects with the image of the "multifarious heavens" in the following stanza. There, in the third and central stanza, the contradictions reach their peak and reflect the confused and agitated state of the perceiver.

It is in this third stanza that reason and control begin to break down yielding to the more powerful reality of the sea. The stanza opens with an extremely restrained and tight statement: "He did not quail." Its rigidity is reinforced by the terseness of four monosyllables used to describe him as he is at the moment taking only half the line while the other half of the line begins the general explanation and attempted rationalization for his behavior. The second line of this stanza, also the central line of the poem, presents the most glaring contradiction of experience and at the same time reveals that the defenses of the poet are beginning to collapse.

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The contradiction begins in the previous line with the enjambed "plumb" ending; we finish the line feeling the downward pull of the word and the perceiver in the poem as he looks down at the sea. We are jolted by the next line because it gives us nothing but abstraction. It is especially confusing because of the odd union of "multifarious heavens." After straining our eyes downward with "plumb" at the end of line seven, we must suddenly gaze up at "multifarious heavens" in line eight; we are beginning to be awed by the experience of being pulled and tugged this way and that by the poem.

We ask why the poet chooses the abstract word "multifarious" as the adjective to describe "heavens" and in answering we find that it is a word belonging specifically in the lawyer's vocabulary meaning, "improperly joining in one bill distinct matters, and thereby confounding them." At this point the poet says the doctor "felt no awe," but we know this cannot be true because all of the evidence presented so far comes together at this point to deny that "he felt no awe." The poet has, in fact, begun to show himself through his guise as doctor. The doctor-poet is <u>confounded</u> and sees the heavens in a way which reflects his mind.

In attempting to describe the experience of the doctor, the poet begins to be at a loss for "poetic" words and finds himself faltering as his and the doctor's reason fails so he ends up using a word from his "professional" experience which,

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at the same time, expresses his confusion and confuses us. This inability to maintain the mask of the doctor reflects the breakdown of the poet's defenses concomitant with the loss of rational control. We now realize that the "distinct matters" which have been "improperly joined" are Puritan reason in the form of Calvinist tradition and the real, sensually perceivable soil, weather, and shore of America revealed in the nature of one born here. We understand now, too, that the odd union of "multifarious heavens" mirrors this situation perfectly on a stylistic level in the poem.

We see, at this point, that there are two different kinds of experience being recorded in the poem. One kind of experience is intellectual: the poet-doctor understands that the spirit which founded America was one that was alien to its soil. The man who grew from this heterogenous union was one who was not "the intelligence of his soil," nor was this "soil man's intelligence." Rather, he understands that <u>American-ness</u> is worn atop the head, symbolized in the poems by the stove-pipe hat.[5] The issue of this union was a man who physically belonged to and was the "monster" nature in its wildest state--exuberant, changing, and threatening--but who spiritually belonged to another kind of nature altogether.

Another kind of experience the poem reflects is the emotional turmoil resulting from this awareness that "we live in a place not our own." On this level, the poem can be understood (as can many other of Stevens' poems) as an attempted

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apology--or, at least, as an explanation--Stevens made to himself for not having taken the leap he wanted to take as a young man, for not having broadened himself by traveling and adventuring, thus making himself a citizen of the world instead of remaining the provincial he was.

Stevens finally became obsessed with a life that kept him in one place, with a life in which the only knowledge of a place not his own was imaginary. He believed, or made himself believe, that by knowing one place wholly he could join reason and nature in himself through poetry; the ultimate symbolic expression of this is "The Rock." Though content and delighted in the South, tempted by the green richness of the tropics,[6] Stevens chose to write of and be part of the North, particularly of the Connecticut of Jonathan Edwards.[7] His honesty and success as a poet lie fundamentally in his option to describe his failed attempt at unity and to express the contradictions that inhere in the essential American experience. Stevens presented the perfect metaphor for this situation in "The Doctor of Geneva." The sensitive reader perceives the deception necessary on the part of the poet-doctor when he is facing what is most primary in nature and feels afraid but is not sure of what is most afraid--the power and majesty of nature in America or his own inability to express what he feels.

After the central line of the poem, the central lie that he "felt no awe," the actual experience overwhelms the poet-

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doctor; the identities of the poet and the doctor have now begun to merge because the defenses of the poet have broken down. In the third line of this central stanza, language seems to correspond to the reality of the Pacific. "Visible, voluble delugings" replace "long-rolling opulent cataracts." The nine syllables of this second three-word description mimic the waves of the sea as the first two dactyls ("Visible, voluble") rise before breaking against the shore with uncertain "delugings" (uncertain because, depending on the reader, "delugings" could be read as a cretic, /-/, or as another dactyl, though the dactyl would not work as well as the cretic to evoke the breaking of the wave). These syllables mirror both the sound and sight of the sea, even to the pattern of the first letters, v--,v--,d--. This differs greatly from the first description of the sea which attempts, though unsuccessfully, to reflect only its rhythm; both the sound of its syllables and the image they produce stand harshly against the soft sound and face of the sea (especially "cataracts").

At this point, we realize the significance of "cataracts" describing the sea earlier in the poem. We recall the Biblical meaning of "cataracts" as the "floodgates of heaven which hold back the rain," and understand that the "cataracts" in the poem function in the same way as those Biblical cataracts and hold back the rain of the poet-doctor's tears. The poet-doctor's reason had originally provided him with that description of the sea, but when he finally gives in to his "monster"

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nature, the "deluging" comes; the floodgates are open.[8]

This line is also curious because, if read with French pronunciation, it poses as an alexandrine[9] (though there is really only one true alexandrine in the poem, "Until the steeples of his city clanked and sprang"). Realizing this, we quickly make the necessary association back to the poet's naming of Racine and Bossuet in the previous stanza. This presents yet another contradiction. The first reaction to this line is that it is genuine in reflecting an actual, felt experience of the poet-doctor since the images of the sea here communicate its reality so effectively, especially when compared to the earlier description. However, the realization that this would be an alexandrine in French pronunciation reminds us who the doctor is and how he must speak. Using this borrowed meter from seventeenth century French, which does not work in English, contradicts our own intuitive response to the line as real utterance. In order to make sense out of it in terms of the poem, our only recourse is to understand that the poet's perception is phrased in this foreign meter because the sea to which he reacts here is still being seen with an educated, intellectual eye rather than with an ignorant one; this also explains why "he felt no awe." Nonetheless, this intellectual eye is now somewhat more in tune with the natural world as evidenced by the ease with which the poet-doctor's description of the sea matches its rhythm.

In questioning the association to Racine and Bossuet in

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this context, we remember that both Racine and Bossuet used what they wrote to express religious feelings and ideas, and that both writers, like Calvin and his descendants, were devoted to the idea that passion was a destructive, satanic force if not properly channeled--and, most significantly, both writers were Catholic. This is important because in the eyes of the Calvinists, the popish Catholics were corrupt in their religious practice, allowing impurities of decoration and image in their churches and given to excesses of all kinds. Following this, the alexandrine is a much more baroque meter than the pentameter, allowing an extra foot simply for the sake of euphonious decoration. For Stevens, this opens the question of the difference between the Romance and Anglo-Saxon languages, symbolically pointing out by this equivocal metric lapse that for him the Romance languages seem more capable of mirroring the natural world. "I have never been able to see why what is called Anglo-Saxon should have the right to higgle and haggle all over the page, contesting the right of other words . . . one of the consequences of the ordination of style is not to limit it, but to enlarge it, not to impoverish it, but to enrich and liberate it" (OP 205). In any case, however, neither possibility of expression is adequate for the poet-doctor. Until this moment in the poem, he has not found words capable of voicing his true feeling. His situation reflects the situation of the American aware of his European roots: neither possibility of perception offered by these founding

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cultures is adequate to the reality of the savage shores of America, "the wild, the ruinous waste."

There is also another very significant association playing beneath the surface of this poem that is evoked most strongly at this point.[10] In his essay, "Nature,"[11] Emerson presents for examination, though in a much less equivocal and certainly not in a painful manner, the same problem that is expressed by the poet-doctor of Stevens' poem. Curiously, after reading this piece, and then looking again at "The Doctor of Geneva," it seems as though the "doctor" had read this essay and followed its words almost as a prescription for health,going to seek his cure by the shores of the Pacific. As a clergyman, Emerson describes, using very particular rhetorical devices, the effect of nature in a way that would appeal to the "doctor of Geneva," a good Calvinist. This is clear in these lines,

> At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off his back with the first step he makes into these precincts. Here is sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes. Here we find nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her. . . . Here no history, or church, or state, is interpolated on the divine sky and the immortal year. . . .
>
> These enchantments are medicinal, they sober and heal us.[12]

Further on, after stating that the difference between landscape and landscape is small, that the great difference in description depends on the "difference in beholders,"

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Emerson continues his metaphor of nature as curative and writes that whether or not man sees himself as "fallen" and nature "erect" (acting as "a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or absence of the divine sentiment in man"[13]) depends on the state of his own spirit. If the spirit is dull and selfish, we will look up to nature and fear her, but "when we are convalescent, nature will look up to us." With this in mind, we understand why it is so important for the doctor that "he felt no awe," why he contradicts his own sense experience and tells us that "He did not quail;" he wants to believe, and wants us to believe, as well, that he is, at least, a "convalescent" if not the healthy spirit Emerson was. He wants this so that we give him credence as an American poet capable of expressing what is worthy in our native element. The problem, in this light, becomes all the more serious for the poet-doctor who wants to partake of what Emerson knew without having to experience for himself as Emerson did the primary qualification for attaining this wisdom--which is, as Emerson is careful to point out (in a description which is clearly connected to Section III of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle") that,

> The smoothest curled courtier in the boudoirs of a palace has an animal nature, rude and aboriginal as a white bear, omnipotent to its own ends, and is directly related, there amid essences and billets-douxs, to Himmaleh mountain chains, and the axis of the globe.[14]

That the poet-doctor has been conditioned by what is written in "Nature" becomes even more obvious when we consider something else Emerson noted. In addition to reducing all of

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Nature to Motion and Rest (two prime qualities that in Stevens' vocabulary will become "change" and "pleasure"--following Freud's twentieth century equation of pleasure and rest), the nineteenth century poet of the Sublime writes that, "A man can only speak, so long as he does not feel his speech to be partial and inadequate." The Doctor of Geneva cannot speak; at the end of the poem he cries. This indicates that he is aware that he has not fulfilled the necessary requirement of recognizing his animal nature and so he knows, too, before he speaks, that his utterance will be partial. Therefore, he breaks down--"clanked and sprang." Paradoxically, however, the poet in the poet-doctor does write because he knows, with Emerson, that he will never find himself "near enough to his object" and that, "Alas! the same sorcery has spoiled his skill; no syllable can he shape on his lips"[15] at the moment of perceiving nature. Again, the poets return to the source, the tasting of the fruit and the knowledge after--still questioning which to prefer, the beauty of inflection or the beauty of innuendo.

In the next stanza of the poem, the yielding of control to sense, to nature, continues, but there is here a hint that there is still hesitation, albeit now less, (because he has learned from his reading of Emerson) on the part of the poet-doctor's intellect in giving up of control. This hint comes in the form of the "yet" which prepares us for a pulling in of the reins which comes when the "simmering," "hissing," and

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"spinning" of the doctor's mind as passive receiver stops at the end of the next line with "oracular," the sound of its syllables recalling the sound of "cataracts" with its hard c's. This indicates the attempted use of reason again with the doctor making "notations of the wild, the ruinous waste." Here, however, in describing the state of his mind, the poet-doctor is most successful in also describing the sea, "simmering," "hissing," and "spinning" below him. In his confusion, having gone through in his mind those learned descriptions of the sea, he is left perceiving the sea naively without knowing it, believing instead that he is observing only the agitated state of his mind. This perception is "oracular" because it passes through him without his awareness--as inflection--, and so is all the more pathetic and ironic. He has finally become one with the world around him, like Emerson's "convalescent," but prefers to say that he does not see it but sees only his mind. We realize that the poet-doctor cannot believe in the genuineness of his perception--in his "ignorant eye"--even when it exists and that this is the tragedy of the poem which will make the poet as doctor cry.

The culmination of the battle between reason and nature comes in the last stanza which reveals that what stops everything is apparently a memory: "Until the steeples of his city clanked and sprang,/ In an unburgherly apocalypse." This is not a real evoked memory, however, but a cipher for the experience which has just occurred; it is a metaphor for his loss of

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reason, and the "unburgherly apocalypse" is the term used for his crying. We know that it is not a real memory because it is expressed as an alexandrine, a clue that the poet-doctor is attempting to find genuine expression even though he cannot entirely free himself of what he has learned. His Calvinist reason has broken down, "clanked and sprang," but his passion is still expressed in a religious manner, in "an unburgherly apocalypse."[16] Following the etymology of "apocalypse," what has been hidden and is now apparent is his nature which, as it is revealed at this point, is discovered to be helpless. The last line comes anticlimactically after all of this, but is there as a final comment soberly elucidating what has taken place in case there has been any misunderstanding.

The fact that Stevens chose "unburgherly apocalypse" as the core of the metaphor is important because it brings together the two threads that have been running through the poem and which will continue to unravel throughout his entire corpus. The "unburgherly apocalypse" joins the secular to the religious as reason was bound to religion by Calvin in Switzerland and then picked up by the Puritans like Edwards and Peirce in America. It is "unburgherly" because it is expressed in the alexandrine meter of a Romance language rather than in one belonging to the Anglo-Saxon of the Calvinists. "Unburgherly" also functions to make us ask what a "burgherly apocalypse" might be. "Apocalypse" is a word with strong associations to the Bible, specifically to John and

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Revelation. A "burgherly apocalypse" might presumably be one which was reasonably controlled within the canons of religion. What the poet-doctor has experienced, however, is "unburgherly" not only because the metaphor hides a real cry, but also because the apocalypse here is extremely personal and profoundly religious in the way that Stevens described the kind of religious experience he would want to have, which, in his terms, was not religious.

On one level Stevens felt, in true Romantic pantheist fashion, that the only religion for him was to be found in a primary relationship with nature. On Sundays he did not attend church with those who were "men," but by himself, like a "god," walked the Palisades or spent time in forests and on out of the way trails. On another level, however, a "half-unconscious" one as he put it, he still participated in a religion in which he did not believe. This is clearly seen in an early letter to Elsie Moll in which he tries to convince her to attend church while at the same time he justifies why he should not:

> . . . It has always been a particular desire of mine to have you join church; and I am very, very glad to know that you are now on the road.--I am not in the least religious. The sun clears my spirit, if I may say that, and an occasional sight of the sea, and thinking of blue valleys, and the odor of the earth, and many things. Such things make a god of a man; but a chapel makes a man of him. Churches are human.--I say my prayers every night--not that I need them now, or that they are any more than a habit, half-unconscious. (L 96)

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There is the same conflict in the poem as there is reflected here in this letter excerpt. The poet-doctor like the writer of the letter wants to have his spirit cleansed by the power of his contact with nature, but there is a part of him (the super-ego in Freudian terms) which passes judgement on this seemingly pagan response. In the letter, this aspect manifests itself both in the double standard he sets for himself and Elsie and in his mechanical saying of his prayers; in the poem, it is manifested by the endless stream of contradictions that emerge and particularly with the judgement that his emotional response is "unburgherly." The poet-doctor is really torn by the guilt of no longer believing in God and participating in the religion of his forefathers.

In addition, hidden in this is something else which specifically involves his role as a poet. This poem records the poet's ambivalence at finding something native in the experience of America, something real shared by Nature and by his own nature, his "monster," that will leave him, as it does at the end of the poem, without words. The fear made explicit here which underlies much of Stevens' poetry is this: that if passion does overwhelm reason, he, as poet, will lose language. This is the realization from which he has hidden and which is now revealed in this "unburgherly apocalypse."

This is an "unburgherly apocalypse" also because a "burgherly apocalypse" is no longer possible or appropriate because the time of the developing burghers, the bourgeoisie,

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is ended. Calvin and the religions which grew out of what he taught were perfectly suited to the burgeoning bourgeois industrial society emerging as it was from an agrarian, medieval economy.[17] The qualities that were considered good and spiritually rewardable matched those necessary for material growth. This realization is made by the poet and is part of his "apocalypse" as well. In this realization he becomes receptive to something greater than himself, the movement of history; in this sense he is like John who also recognized something greater than himself, the word of God. John is overpowered by the angel who brought Revelation, and the poet-doctor is overpowered by the "monster," nature; both lose their own words and translate instead what is given them. In his mind, John saw and so wrote the word of God; in his mind, the poet-doctor sees and hears the "simmering," "hissing" and "spinning" of the sea.

It is extremely significant that the association to St. John and the Apocalypse emerges as strongly as it does as this point because of the context which it evokes. By using "apocalypse," a word immediately identifiable as religious, Stevens covertly asked his audience to place him in the tradition of English poets in which Milton is central. Milton, the preacher-poet, is the opposite of Stevens' doctor-poet. Milton transcended his religion by making Satan, the embodiment of <u>his</u> "monster," a hero; Stevens, on the other hand, cannot free himself enough from his religion to "tame the

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monster" as he would like[18] and so is left instead drying his eyes and sighing at the end of his poem. Stevens battled the same Calvinist tradition which Milton had battled and defeated three centuries earlier emerging victorious as a "strong poet" carrying the palm Stevens hoped to find "at the end of the mind." In an article entitled "The American Critic,"[19] J.E. Spingarn perceives Milton's success in the same way saying that Milton was a great poet because he began writing Paradise Lost still a believing and practicing Christian condemning Satan, but as he wrote he recognized in Satan an heroic, angelic nature and so created him anew in this spirit.[20]

At the same historical moment when Milton was creating his hero and breaking away from tradition, that same tradition was finding a new home in a savage land from which it would draw nourishment and flourish,becoming more powerful even if less open as a religion. America was a place where the morality of the burghers was to expand and prosper. This was to produce an extremely paradoxical situation, especially for those who believed America to be the site of the New Jerusalem but also sensitive enough to perceive that the dream had an underside. In a review of Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence,[21] John Hollander,in describing the "mistake America has from its dawn of conscience made about itself," cites Satan's mistaken perception of Eden from Book IX of Paradise Lost: "O Earth, how like to Heaven if not preferred/ More justly. Seat worthier of Gods, as built/ With second thoughts, reforming what was

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old!/ For what God after better worse would build?" Stevens understood the dialectic resulting from the movement between the intended dream of reason and the realized monsters it produced precisely because he was among those whose ancestors would have him believe in the mistaken vision of America, but he could not participate fully in this vision because of his intellectual awareness of history and his place in it.

Three hundred years after Milton's apocalyptic adventure which freed him from the hold of Calvinism, Stevens attempted another, but failed to "tame the monster" as Milton had. When Milton in his poetry broke with his religious tradition, he consciously or unconsciously knew that there was an earlier tradition in his language, tied to his soul, from which he could draw if necessary; this provided him with an assurance unavailable to any American poet wishing to break with his tradition. The American poet has two choices: the first is consciously to adopt the tradition of his forbears across the ocean, an attachment which will always be literary and sentimental,like the doctor of Geneva's perception of the Pacific; the other possibility open to him is to break completely with that borrowed tradition which developed on American soil and hope that he will "fall" as did Milton with Satan and find new words. The fear that attends this choice is overwhelming since America offers nothing on which the poet can fall back, no older form of language or tradition that is naturally American and at the same time intelligible. Unlike Pound and

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Eliot who picked sherds from other traditions, Stevens attempted to discover something native in his experience as an American which could serve as a model for future generations. Unfortunately, it is first necessary to surrender to the "monster," to perceive the nature of America as "an ignorant man" before this can become possible. "The Doctor of Geneva" records the poet's experience; he surrenders to the monster and fears that he will find himself with no words.

This poem is important because it offers a concise explication of the fundamental conflict in Stevens' experience as a poet who was quintessentially American and who felt in himself the tension resulting from an inherited spiritual tradition belonging to a soil that is not America. As he writes, "We live in a place not our own." Through "The Doctor of Geneva" Stevens illustrated how the posture of the Rationalists and their heirs must break down because it cannot deal with the reality of America, a savage place, the land of Florida's "venereal soil."

The implicit solution pointed to by the poem is that the only way the poet, who ideally represents the sensibility of all Americans, can survive in America is to yield to Romanticism, to the expression of his inner self, his monster, since that self is the only source of a purely American utterance.[22] There is a serious problem to be overcome before the poet can give in to his romantic impulse, however; that is, that the inheritance of Calvinism with its basis in Rationalism does

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not easily allow the free expression of the self identified with Romanticism.

"The Doctor of Geneva" is a poetic contemplation on the part of a poet with a highly developed sensibility of this paradoxical experience. The result of contemplating it are the fear and feelings of impotence and confusion expressed by the doctor-poet in the poem. The cause of this situation is tied to the essentially Puritan ethic which founded and dominated America. It was mentioned above (Ch. 1) that one of the aspects of this Calvinist tradition, the fact of its being extremely secularized, allowed it to become a necessary element of experience without its being recognized that there was a controlled ethic which dominated almost all, even the simplest, actions. Another aspect of this tradition responsible for the condition described in "The Doctor of Geneva" is the interpretation of grace and predestination laid down by the Calvinists which covertly attributes a state of loss of grace to any expression of freedom.

Unlike Lutheranism and Catholicism, Calvinist belief holds that man's redemption must be accomplished through regeneration by the work of the spirit of God "in the souls of the elect and of them alone." A free gift of God's grace is made to those predestined to receive it and if unmerited by them, it cannot be won by good works which are, rather, the result and fruition of grace. Examining this tenet reveals a most insidious situation; when seen in conjunction

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with the general outlines of Calvinism as described above, the particularly contorted contours of the American ethic begin to emerge.

Since grace cannot be merited by good works (as it can be in Lutheranism or Catholicism) but is a condition of predestination, the individual apparently does not have the freedom to choose to act for his salvation. But since good works are "the result and fruition of grace," once the individual becomes aware that he has performed even one good work or realizes for some reason that he is good, he automatically recognizes himself as one of the elect and consequently has an image of himself to which he must constantly aspire if he wishes to attain the salvation for which he was predestined. With this recognition comes the snapping shut of one of the most sinister psychological traps ever laid by one mind for others.

Religious and/or ethical training, if it takes place at all, begins at an age when reason is not sufficiently developed as a tool to deal with projecting and analyzing the results of actions or ideas (as Peirce and the Pragmatists would have us do as adults) that are impressed upon the young mind.[23] A child systematically learns a number of modes of behavior which he is told are "good;" however, these he learns not by understanding but by conditioning. It is only later as an adult that he can begin to apply reason as a tool for understanding even practical life, as Peirce realized.

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Unfortunately, there are certain aspects of behavior which are not usually questioned if one has been brought up under the wing of religion; one of these aspects is what is considered "good," the awareness of which has already been made a part of one's ethical nature in a pre-conscious, pre-rational way. In a religious tradition not as secular as Calvinism and its later "reformed" offshoots, what is "good" is confined to moral and metaphysical realms, in decisions that affect personal relationships and individual spiritual development. Calvinism, however, functions as effectively as it does on the practical level because what is "good" applies to the political and professional aspects of life as well. Rather than being joined to truth and beauty as it was for Aristotle, what is "good" becomes joined to the economic development of the polity and so success in that area can easily be translated as the measure of the "good" of the man. Because a secularized religion like Calvinism, or Judaism for that matter, is so diffuse and because it is unlike other religions like Catholicism in being paternalistic and based on what is "right," there is no possibility of successful rebellion within it; in order to free oneself from the hold of such a religion, it is necessary to leave the place where it is practiced and so risk losing an essential part of one's identity.

When a child reared in a family that belongs to this tradition (as Wallace Stevens was brought up a Presbyterian, even participating as a choir boy in services), he reaches maturity

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believing that even the act of reading, for example, is good only if it is connected with the idea of progress toward the goal of becoming an active participant in a community devoted to achieving (achieving what becomes unclear at a certain point since it is ultimately possible to equate practical economic success with the spiritual attainment of heaven's promise), but he surely does not reach maturity believing that anything remotely resembling self-indulgence, whether it be physical or spiritual, is "good." In this context, it is more than coincidence that one of Stevens' clearest expressions of being caught in this trap is a wish to be like St. Augustine:

> The feeling of piety is very dear to me. I would sacrifice a great deal to be a St. Augustine but modernity is so Chicagoan, so plain, so unmeditative. I thoroughly believe that at this very moment I get none of my chief pleasure except from what is unsullied. The love of beauty excludes evil. A moral life is simply a pure conscience: a physical, mental and ethical source of pleasure. At the same time, it is an inhuman life to lead. It is a form of narrowness so far as companionship is concerned. One must make concessions to others; but there is never a necessity of smutching inner purity. The only practical life of the world, as a man of the world, not as a University Professor, a Retired Farmer or Citizen, a Philanthropist, 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, fairness. I believe, as unhesitatingly as I believe anything, in the efficacy and necessity of fact meeting fact--with a background of the ideal.(...)

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> I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force. Don't, therefore, look at facts, but through them.
> (L 32)

It was in large part from the teachings of Augustine that Calvinism grew. It was Augustine who saw evil as a perversion of the will so that in order to conquer and destroy evil, it was necessary to strengthen the will by practising certain virtues; these Calvin adopted as the virtues necessary for both spiritual and material growth: industry, thrift, and sobriety. It was also Augustine who in formulating the first philosophy of history, City of God, provided a model Calvin could use for joining Church and state.[24] It is easy to see the residue of these virtues which promise economic and material success to both individual and state in the spirit of the young Stevens who makes the above entry in his Journal while on holiday in Pennsylvania during the summer before his last year at college. Fostered by his father, certainly, and probably by what he had read and been exposed to at Harvard as well, Stevens' intention here to become not a "University Professor," "Poet," "Retired Farmer," or the like but a "money-making lawyer," or a "bustling merchant," someone who believes in the evolutionary "survival of the fittest" (his rationalized explanation to himself for this desire), reflects the profound effect on him of this Puritanical strain. He is so taken by it, in fact, that he is able to dismiss the life he might really want, one which would pursue what is "good" in the realms of what is physically

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beautiful and ethically sound and true, as being "an inhuman life to lead." He goes on, instead, to instruct himself in what he "must" do, stressing the "must."

The strength with which Stevens expresses these admonitions becomes somewhat suspect when the above-quoted excerpt is put back into its context. What precedes it is a series of "Thoughts for Sonnets" which are not really thoughts but impressions; in addition, there is a very revealing comment about how birds sing, followed by this ambiguous statement: "as I may have written above." This last statement leaves it unclear as to whether he means the way he has just written, that is "thoughtlessly," or the way he might have intended to develop the ideas for Sonnets which he was recording.

> (...)Thought for Sonnet: Frost in a meadow. Is there no bird to sing despite this? No song of Love to outquench the thought of Death?
>
> Thought for Sonnet: No lark doth sing in yon foreboding cloud, etc. but it is growing dark and nothing can be heard but the last low notes of sleepless sleeping birds.
>
> Thought for Sonnet: Oh what soft wings will close above this place etc. (In the Garden) picture angels, roses, fair world etc. on last day.
>
> Birds sing at edge of field at sunset--thoughtlessly; as I may have written above; with some development this might be made the seed of a song. Simple earthly happiness; singing for delight in beauty, or more sympathy of beauty for beauty. A Full-hearted, thoughtless lilt.
>
> Thought for Sonnet: Birds flying up from dark ground at evening: clover, deep grass, oats, etc. to circle + plunge beneath the golden clouds, in+about them, with golden spray on their wings like dew. Produce an imaginative flutter of color.(...) (L 31-32)

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After this bit of self-indulgence in a Keatsian mood (compare, for example, both the images and cadence of these lines from Keats' "The Poet's Music:"

> So the unnumber'd sounds that evening store:
> The songs of birds--the whispering of the leaves--
> The voice of waters--the great bell that heaves
> With solemn sound,--and thousand others more,
> That distance of recognizance bereaves,
> Make pleasing music, and not wild uproar.),

a mood derived from English and European Romantic sensibilities rather than from an American one, comes the wish to be like St. Augustine, the desire to translate pleasure into piety. This desire is understandable for one raised and bred as Stevens was, wholly a part of an American tradition and so unable to accept simply writing poetry as "good."

What Santayana points out referring to Dickens' relationship to Romanticism and religion in England in the nineteenth century[25] describes Stevens' situation in America in the twentieth century. The philosopher understands the success of Dickens to rest on the fact that he discovered "that in spite of the romanticists, it is not virtue to rush enthusiastically along any road,"[26] and that he perceived this because though he (like Stevens) outwardly rejected religion and its outworn metaphysical forms, replacing them with human ones--"simply kindness and full of good cheer"--, he inwardly lived under its power. As Santayana writes, "Religion lay on him like the weight of the atmosphere, sixteen pounds per square inch, yet never noticed nor mentioned."[27] In other words, his

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traditional religious backbone allowed him to remain "erect" and strong so that he was, at least, always the equal of Nature, in Emerson's terms, and never in the position of the over-exuberant Romantics who, in "looking up to Nature" and aspiring to become like her, forgot their human shapes and the comedy of their forms. What Santayana recognized in Dickens, we can also see in Stevens: that healthy moral check provided by a religious tradition once it has been internalized and subjectified in an individual spirit--this state of being is pious in the most profound sense because it makes man with his comic spirit on "a human scale," not an idealized romanticized Nature, the measure of "goodness." Stevens' swing, then, from the attitude of the Romantic poet to that desired one of the pious St. Augustine represents this intuitive adoption of morality into poetry at a point in his life when he did not <u>think about</u> how poetry should be, but made it spontaneously--inflected it--because it expressed the harmony of his being. In this way, this modern poet was able to enjoy the true native spirit of America, what Santayana described in an essay of the same name as "classic liberty"[28]--a spirit freed from the demands of external structures to <u>unconsciously</u> pick and choose elements from culture ("Culture is a triumph of the individual over society. It is his way of profiting intellectually by a world he has not helped to make. . . . And its moral side--for everything has its moral side--lay in the just judgments it fostered, the clear sense it awakened

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of the different qualities and values of things."[29]), reality, Nature, as accorded with his individual yearnings.

What preserves Stevens' spirit from being entirely inbred is the "liberal education" he received at Harvard. Stevens' college transcripts record numerous courses in English, German and French literature, tracing their histories and developments completely, but no courses in American literature. In addition, he took courses in European History from the Middle Ages to the then present, and Fine Arts from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, but the only American history courses listed are those having to do with Constitutional Government and Law (perhaps due to the fact that there might not have been course offerings as yet in American literature and cultural history, American Studies programs being a phenomenon of the middle of this century rather than of the end of the last). The experience of this education had a great deal to do with Stevens' intellectual and affectual development. Besides exposing him to the European imagination through literature and history, it provided him with the contrast of this imagination to that of America by introducing him to the philosophical ideas of the Pragmatists because of the tradition at Harvard established by men like Charles Peirce, William James, and George Santayana.

The aspect of Stevens' personality which he identified with being a poet was "Romantic" regardless of what he found to be inadequate about the "romantic" as evidenced in his letters, journal entries, and in the "Adagia."[30] It is this aspect

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which is revealed in the above-quoted passage where the "Thoughts for Sonnets" are recorded. He became acquainted with this aspect of himself during his years at Harvard though he was never entirely willing to accept it, preferring to see his literary aspirations leading him toward Journalism, a field he could consider "useful and productive." At the one moment when he did desire to become "the poet" and go off travelling in France, his father provided the voice of reason he had temporarily lost and advised him to remain, work, and become something.[31]

> I recently wrote to father suggesting that I should resign from the Tribune + spend my time in writing. This morning I heard from him +, of course, found my suggestion torn to pieces. If I only had enough money to support myself I am afraid some of his tearing would be in vain. But he seems always to have reason on his side, confound him. (L 53)

If Stevens had gone to Europe, perhaps his definition of himself as a poet, especially a "modern" poet, would have been different, and perhaps he would have been able to accept this role with more ease. Instead of openly indulging his desire, however, Stevens attended Law School in New York for three years during which time his feelings about being a poet became more clearly defined even if less explicit. Throughout this period the Journal entries show the young lawyer-poet to be oscillating between a quiet devotion to things "poetic" (which became associated with what the older Stevens would see to be self-indulgence) and a wish to cultivate in himself those virtues of Puritanism--hard work, diligence, and measure--which

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his father had so often encouraged. To the poet in him Stevens attributed sentiment, to the Puritan, "ambition and energy."[32] In the process of "becoming something," Stevens internalized certain attitudes about himself as poet which were to condition what his later focus would be.

By choosing to become a lawyer, Stevens realized the contradictory potential he experienced as a young man in America at a certain moment in history. He became a lawyer at a time when all foundations were being shaken, when everything was beginning to be understood as relative,[33] including Truth. The young Stevens, however, had been raised to believe in the power of reason to arrive at what was "true;" this belief in the power of reason was, of course, part of Calvinist tradition and based ultimately on the sanctity of the word. What had ensured the sacred nature of the word was the belief in God. When this belief was called into question, a man like Stevens from a religious family bound in with Puritan tradition, longed deeply within himself to have God or gods or belief of some kind restored. ("I wish that groves still were sacred--or, at least, that something was: that there was still something free from doubt, that day unto day still uttered speech, and night unto night still showed wisdom. I grow tired of the want of faith--the instinct of faith" L 86.) He perceived that without this insurance of the truth of the word, all values--both personal and societal--would be threatened. Stevens, the lawyer who participated, at least nominally, in the search

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for Truth, must have been keenly aware of the absurd effect of the "loss of belief" on all aspects of reality, especially language, the shaper of reality.[34]

Stevens, the lawyer who wrote poetry, however, never lost his Romantic inclination even in the face of this disillusionment. His romanticism was to manifest itself in a constant longing for a world which no longer existed and for a self which never existed except in imagination. This romanticism is perceived in various ways in his poetry: it is sometimes understood in the sentimentality reflected by the poet's speakers; it is sometimes counterpointed or contrasted to a description of what in fact is in reality--here the difference between "things as they are" and "things as they seem on the blue guitar" is played out throughout the corpus; it is most generally evident in Stevens' relationship to the nineteenth century poets. In all these aspects Stevens separated himself from poets like Eliot and Pound and fleshed out the meaning of being an American poet in the Twentieth Century. Because he was not witness to the effects of the First World War and what it meant in terms of the tradition which many believed was responsible for it--namely, that the war was a culmination of the excesses of Romanticism--Stevens remained attached to the Romantics and became their heir. At the same time, because of his background, he could never wholly accept the value of writing poetry, especially as a Twentieth Century Romantic--the extreme of self-indulgence--so he made

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it appear on the surface of his poems that what he was doing was attempting to define the nature of poetry and language. This could at least be understood as a useful aim. Of course, on one level, Stevens' poetry does reflect this attempt, but on a deeper level it reflects the actual experience and feelings, often sentimental, of a man very much a part of America during a very difficult period of crisis when the dream of reason exploded into the nightmare of World War I.

America is the only nation founded as the embodiment of an idea--the Eighteenth Century idea of Reason. Stevens realized the ambivalence inherent in this idea in a way unlike any other American poet of his generation. He saw both the dream and its underside and experienced both in his flesh. Following the consideration of this ambivalence, we should now look again at "The Doctor of Geneva," a key poem in the understanding of Stevens' perception of the American experience.

From Freud comes the awareness that a particular symbol or image in the unconscious has at least two meanings and that these two meanings are antithetical.[35] Following this principle, the "doctor of Geneva" could easily be identified with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in Geneva and later to be named "citizen of Geneva" after his reconversion to Protestantism after a previous conversion to Catholicism. Although the reading of the doctor's experience in the poem does not change whether he is Calvin or Rousseau, it is extremely important to understand the additional level of meaning which emerges with

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Rousseau as protagonist, since in the imagination he offers the perfect opposite to Calvin.

The ideal which Rousseau envisioned became identified with American for most Europeans who saw the virgin continent across the Atlantic as a place where all aspirations could be realized. Unlike Calvin, Rousseau saw man as essentially good, becoming corrupt only in measure of the extent of civilization exerting pressure on him. The tragedy of the poem with Rousseau's heir as the doctor lies in its tracing of the realized impossibility of the dream of goodness and freedom America promised. Stevens, inheritor of Rousseau's and Calvin's, has experienced the pain of actualizing America as "the wild, the ruinous waste" precisely because he perceives the ironic impossibility of either aspiration. He is caught in the middle, knowing that neither philosophical projection can be realized in this over-idealized land. This understanding affects the way in which Stevens apprehends his relationship to his own imagination.

If the imagined possibilities for America embodied in either extreme of the heirs of Rousseau or Calvin result in such a "wild and ruinous waste," what can the individual hope in attempting to translate the possibilities offered by his imagination into reality? The eventual result will be to keep the workings of the imagination confined only to the realm of imagination, in poetry, and not to attempt an integration of the imagination with the rational, intellectual

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aspect which is responsible for the workings of practical reality. For Stevens this meant being a lawyer by day and a poet by night--accepting this as the only possible solution for a man of imagination on American soil.

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Notes to Chapter 2

1 Daniel Fuchs in The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1963), p. 80; Henry W. Wells in Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 101-102; and, Adelaide Kirby Morris in Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 14 and pp. 58-59 all mention the tie to Calvin, but none develops the parallel to full advantage.

2 Stevens read Bossuet's Lettres spirituelles while on a camping trip in British Columbia in August of 1903 with W.G. Peckham. It might have been on this trip that Stevens first saw the Pacific.

3 Stevens uses contradiction as a device in this poem, and in others as well, in much the same way that medieval poets, like the author of Pearl, used complex rhyme schemes and patterns as buffers against the intensity of emotion felt. In both cases, a ratio could be positied whereby the stronger the emotion experienced, the more complex the rhyme scheme or the more covert and difficult to perceive the contradictions, as in this poem.

In an essay entitled "Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism" (collected in Selected Writings: Poetry and Criticism, New York:

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Horizon Press, 1964, pp. 98-116), Herbert Read makes the same point, stating that, "meaning and intelligence tend to be remote in the degree that they are profound."

4

The metaphor of the "dream of reason," from the title of Goya's etching, "El sueño de la razon produce monstruos," from the series, Caprichios, 1793-99, is useful for us because it suggests the ambivalence of reason of which Stevens was aware, and suggests, too, that on the other side of reason is that same "monster" Stevens feared. In Spanish, the ambivalence is clearer because "sueño" translates both as "sleep" and as "dream." Stevens understood America, founded on Reason, in the same ambivalence. Through him, through the "glass man" he projected, we come to understand the tensions of America, "a place not our own," and of Eighteenth Century Rationalism. The tension is that understood between the two possible interpretations of the title of Goya's etching: is reason the dream, its products monsters? or, should the sleep of Reason be feared because without it, we will be beset (or we will be as) the monsters of our ancestral dreams, purely instinctual and violent? The answer is either or both.

The suggestion of Goya's etching is important historically, as well, because it reminds us of what the experience of French Rationalism was for the Spaniards during the Napoleonic Wars. They saw its monsters and lived the nightmare. In this way, this prophetic historical reminder indicates how Rationalism

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gave birth to the excesses of Romanticism, just as the poet's rationalism gave way to his own romanticism.

5 In Ulysses, James Joyce used Bloom's bowler hat in the same way to identify Blooms' separation from the values of the society in which he lives, but of which he partakes. The passage where this is clearest in Ulysses follows:

> He stood aside watching their blind masks pass down the aisle, one by one, and seek their places. He approached a bench and seated himself in its corner, nursing his hat and newspaper. These pots we have to wear. We ought to have hats modelled on our heads. They were about him here and there, with heads still bowed in their crimson halters, waiting for it to melt in their stomachs. Something like those mazzoth: it's that sort of bread: unleavened shewbread. Look at them.

(New York: Vintage Books, 1961, pp. 80-81.)

6 As evidence of his fascination with these locales, here are a few excerpts from letters to his wife while he was travelling in Tennessee, Florida, and Havana, Cuba:

> "I know well that I love the far South along the Gulf. (L 206);

> of Long Key, Florida, "The beauty of this place is indescribable . . . we are drowned in beauty" (L 233);

> "Of course, I feel rather sinful about running over here to Havana. But it is not a very great sin, if you really wanted me to have a vacation in my own way, I have had it, for I enjoy nothing more than seeing new places and this one is new and strange from top to bottom" (L 235).

7 Jonathan Edwards was born in Northampton, Mass., but

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practiced in New Haven, Connecticut for most of his life until he was dismissed in 1795 when he went to Colebrook, Connecticut.

[8] Symbolically, the deluge in the Bible comes to cleanse away the sins of the flesh, of nature, of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Stevens feels sinful and is afraid of losing his nature because it is connected with his sexuality.

[9] I had originally read "Before these visible, voluble delugings" as the first of two alexandrines in the poem, but John Hollander pointed out to me that this line would not be an alexandrine unless read with the French pronunciation. I am grateful for this because it adds another element to the reality of the persona of the Doctor of Geneva.

[10] I am also indebted to John Hollander for this association to Emerson.

[11] Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1926, pp. 380-401.

[12] Ibid., p. 381.

[13] Ibid., p. 387.

[14] Ibid., p. 399.

[15] Ibid., p. 399.

[16] This clothing of an extremely moving experience in metaphor is exactly the same thing that happens in the closing

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of the first stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," where the "deep up-pouring from some saltier well/ Within" him finally "bursts its watery syllable."

17 In his book, The Revolution of the Saints: A Study of the Origins of Radical Politics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), Michael Walzer deals with this tie between Calvinism and economic growth. "The diligent activism of the saints--Genevans, Huguenots, Dutch, Scottish, and Puritan--marked the transformation of politics into work and revealed for the first time the extraordinary conscience that directed the work." (p. 2); and, "Indeed, the new spirit of the Puritans can be defined as a kind of military and political work-ethic, directly analogous to the 'worldly asceticism' which Max Weber has described in economic life, but oriented not toward acquisition so much as toward contention, struggle, destruction, and rebuilding. Calvinist conscience gave to war and to politics (and if Weber is right to business as well) a new sense of method and purpose. It is this above all that distinguishes the activity of the saints from that of medieval men, caught up in the unchanging world of tradition, fixed in their social place and loyal to their relatives; and also from that of Renaissance men, pursuing a purely personal ambition." (p. 13).

18 Stevens identifies the "monster" with his body in an early letter to Elsie Moll: "Certainly my feelings do not wither--whatever may be said of that monster, the body" (L 176).

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Later in his life in a letter to Renato Poggioli, he speaks of taming the monster:

> Monster=
>
> nature, which I desire to reduce: master, subjugate, acquire complete control over and use freely for my own purpose, as poet. I want, as poet, to be in that nature, which constitutes nature's very self. . . . I want, as a man of imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. . . . (L 790).

19 Collected in Creative Criticism and Other Essays, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931, pp. 123-147.

20 Ibid., p. 137. "This is what we mean when we say that this 'leaping over' is the test of art, that it is inherent in the very nature of the creative imagination. . . . It explains, for example, how Milton the moralist started out to make Satan a demon and how Milton the poet ended by making him a hero; and from this 'hymning of the devil' we learn how our moralistic critics cannot understand even a Puritan poet."

21 "The Devil's Party," Poetry, vol. CXII, No. 5 (August, 1973), 298-303.

22 This is very close to the solution reached by Emerson in the Nineteenth Century. As Harold Bloom in "Emerson and Whitman: The American Sublime," Poetry and Repression (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 235-266) points out:

> . . . Emerson first considers the scholar as as problem in influence. The main influence

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> directed upon the scholar--who for Emerson, as for Stevens, comprises also the poet--are (1) Nature, (2) Books, (3) Action. But Nature is revealed to be only the print of the scholar's seal. As for Books: "One must be an inventor to read well." Finally, Action turns out to be "instinct," the world of will and drive. The three percursors of the scholar thus fade away, leaving "self-trust," freedom or wildness. His ground is cleared, Emerson attains to the center of his oration: "It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago." The wild or free notion is that: "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it." From this follows the prophecy that made possible the drastic grandeur of the American Sublime: "A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.
>
> It is noteworthy, and has been noted, that Emerson's two great outbursts of prophetic vocation coincide with the two national moral crises. . . . I want to illustrate this connection by a close reading of relevant entries in Emerson's Journals of 1837, so as to be able to ask and perhaps answer the invariable question that antithetical criticism learns always to ask of each fresh instance of the Sublime. What is being freshly repressed? What has been forgotten, on purpose, in the depths, so as to make possible this sudden elevation to the heights?

Unlike Emerson, however, Stevens did not succeed in repression because he was of the Twentieth Century and too aware; he could not become the complete Romantic and soar on heights. As T.E. Hulme points out about the classic poet, Stevens always remained tied to earth, to the "Rock."

23

In an historical context, we have Locke's, Albertus Magnus', and Aquinas' description of the mind as tabula rasa

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following Plato's comparison of the soul to a wax tablet which Aristotle later extended to mean the state of the mind before it applies itself to an object of cognition.

24 City of God also provided Stevens with a description of harmonia that adds yet another level to his choice of "Harmonium" for his controlling metaphor:

> But what I have in mind is the rhythm of relationships, the harmonia, as the Greeks would say, whereby the whole body, inside and out, can be looked upon as a kind of organ with a music all its own [italics mine].

25 "Dickens," from Soliloquies in England, 1922, reprinted in Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, vol. I, ed., Norman Henfrey, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 188-202.

26 Ibid., p. 202.

27 Ibid., pp. 190-191.

28 Collected in Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, vol. II, pp. 15-18.

29 From "Liberalism and Culture," in Soliloquies in England, reprinted in Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, vol. II, pp. 21-22. I am indebted to John Hollander for referring me to Santayana in the above context.

30 A few excerpts:

> Harvard feeds subjectivity, encourages an all consuming flame+that, in my mind, is an evil in so impersonal a world. Personality must be kept secret before the world. . . . (L 44);

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> The ideal is the actual become anaemic. The romantic is often pretty much the same thing. (OP 164);
>
> The ordinary, everyday search of the romantic mind is rewarded perhaps rather too lightly by the satisfaction that it finds in what it calls reality. But if one happened to be playing checkers somewhere under the Maginot Line, subject to a call at any moment to do some job that might be one's last job, one would spend a good deal of time thinking in order to make the situation seem reasonable, inevitable and free from question. (L 346);
>
> Romanticism is to poetry what the decorative is to painting. (OP 169);
>
> If you went to the Delacroix show, what did you think of it? It is curious how subject the romantic is to change: tremendously alive one day and a curiosity the next. It seems to me that what sustains the prestige of Delacroix is the fact that in his work there was something that was not at all romantic: an exciting intelligence that was able to formulate and study its ideas. (L 478).

In all these excerpts, we see that Stevens does not reject the Romantic completely, but that he finds it insufficient in some way. This stems from his father's characterization of himself as "unromantic;" when Stevens was still at Harvard, his father sent him a letter asking him to send copies of his literary work so that he could examine them "through his unromantic sieve" (L 24). This suggests that to the extent that Stevens did indulge and understand the "romantic" in himself, he freed himself from his father's expectations and succeeded in some kind of rebellion. At the same time, he shared with his father the attachment to Reason which always made the poet demand more of the "romantic" and so able to

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extend the concept effectively into the Twentieth Century in America.

31

These excerpts from Stevens' Journal illustrate this:

> Went home for a few hours on Xmas day. Talked with father--who is kept busy holding me in check. I've been wanting to go to Arizona or Mexico, but do not have any good reason for doing so [italics mine]. I am likely to remain here until Spring, at least. Europe is still on the other side of the ocean. (L 49);

> Went home last Thursday for a few hours--first time since Christmas. Reading looked the acme of dullness+I was glad, therefore, to get back to this electric town which I adore. I had a good long talk with the old man in which he did most of the talking. One's ideas don't get much of a chance under such conditions. However, he's a wise man. We talked about the law which he has been urging me to take up. I hesitated--because this literary life, as it is called, is the one I always had as an ideal + I am not quite ready to give it up because it has not been all that I wanted it to be. (...) (L 52-53).

Thirty-six years later, he wrote this concerning his decision:

> . . . a good many years ago, when I really was a poet in the sense that I was all imagination, and so on, I deliberately gave up writing poetry because, much as I loved it, there were too many other things I wanted not to make an effort to have them. I wanted to do everything that one wants to do at that age: live in a village in France, in a hut in Morocco, or in a piano box at Key West. But I didn't like the idea of being bedeviled all the time about money and I didn't for a moment like the idea of poverty, so I went to work like anybody else and kept at it for a good many years.
>
> If you could do that sort of thing, it would not mean anything more than turning away temporarily. . . . One does not change a great deal; you would not be the same person, but you would be pretty much the same person. (L 320).

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And forty-nine years later, in 1950:

> Of course, I have had a happy and well-kept life. But I have not begun to touch the spheres within spheres that might have been possible if, instead of devoting the principal amount of my time to making a living, I had devoted it to thought and poetry. Certainly it is as true as it ever was that whatever means most to one should receive all of one's time and that has not been true in my case. But, then, if I had been more determined about it, I might now be looking back not with a mere sense of regret but at some actual devastation. To be cheerful about it, I am now in the happy position of being able to say that I don't know what would have happened if I had more time. This is very much better than to have had all the time in the world and to have found oneself inadequate. (L 669).

32

From his Journal, October 20, 1903:

> . . . On Sunday I stretched my cramped legs--doing my twenty-five miles with immense good cheer. Fetched home a peck of apples in my green bag. The wind pounded through the trees all day long. At twilight I picked my way to the edges of the Palisades + stretched out on my belly on one of the dizzy bosses. Overhead in the clair de crépuscule lay a bright star. I've grown such a hearty Puritan + revel in such coarse good health that I felt scarcely the slightest twinge of sentiment. But tonight I've been polite to a friend--have guzzled vin ordinaire + puffed a Villar y Villar and opened my dusty tobacco jar--and my nerves, as a consequence, are a bit uneasy. To-morrow, however, I shall reassume the scrutiny of things as they are. [Henry] Fielding, in "America," rightly observes that our wants are largely those of education and habit, not of nature. My poverty keeps me down to the natural ones; and it is astonishing how the tongue loses a taste for tobacco; how the paunch accomodates itself to the lack of fire-water. Indeed, sound shoes, a pair of breeches, a clean shirt and a coat, with an occasional stout meal, sees

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> one along quite well enough. Only, at the same time, one must have ambition and energy or one grows melancholy. Ambition and energy keep a man young. Oh, treasure! Philosophy, non-resistance, "sweetness and light" leave a man pitiably crippled and aged, though pure withal. (L 68).

33 After Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859, the discussion on his theory continued in this country well into this century. The debate centered at Harvard and involved, among others, William James and Charles Peirce (who did not agree with Darwin though he had his own theory of evolution) whose thought influenced Stevens. (See Cynthia Eagle Russett, Darwin in America, 1865-1912: The Intellectual Response, San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976). In other fields, relativism was expressed by Marx's and Engels' work in political economics in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, continued by Marx's Das Kapital first published in 1867 (translated into English in 1887). And, of course, relativity in the physical world was expressed by Einstein's work begun in 1905 and available in English translation in 1920; and in the "metaphysical" world of psychology by Freud's work on neurosis, hysteria and the personality; Freud explored the relative nature of the self and destroyed the myths of free will and self-determination by showing how the self was a product of biological and circumstantial accidents.

34 J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

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[35] "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," collected in On Creativity and the Unconscious, New York: Harper & Row, 1958, pp. 55-62.

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3. The Doctor Meets His Critics or "His soil is man's intelligence."

The source of America's paradoxical situation lies in her relationship to a past not her own, to a past belonging to a European imagination, an imagination of a Rousseau or a Calvin. It is in America where the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons because if there is to be any imagination, it must partake of that of Europe, at least for a few hundred years more. Another American poet, Williams Carlos Williams, expressed this predicament openly in a passage from "The Great American Novel:"

> . . . So that to realize the futility of American men intent upon that virtue to be found in literature, literature, that is, of the traditional sort as known in France and Prussia--to realize how each serious American writer in turn flares up for a moment and fizzles out, burnt out by the air leaving no literary monument, no Arc de Triomphe behind him, no India subdued--To realize this it is necessary to go back to the T'ang dynasty where responsibility rested solely on the heads of the poets--etc., etc. Or better still why not seek in Aleppo or Jerusalem for the strain to save us.
>
> America is lost. Ah Christ, Ah Christ that night should come so soon.
>
> And the reason is that no American poet, no American man of letters has taken the responsibility upon his own person. The responsibility for what? There is the fire. Rush into it. What is literature anyway but suffering recorded in palpitating syllables? It is the quiet after the attack.[...]
>
> Why man, Europe is yearning to see something new come out of America.
>
> In a soup of passion they would see a little clam. Let us smile. This is--

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> The danger is in forgetting that the good of the past is the same good of the present. That the power that lived then lives today. That we too possess it. That true novelty is in good work and that no matter how good work comes it is good when it possesses power over itself. Europe's enemy is the past. Our enemy is Europe, a thing unrelated to us in any way. Our lie that we must fight to the last breath is that it is related to us.
>
> We are deceived when they cry that Negro music is the only true American creation. It is only true from the European point of view. Everything is judged from this point of view.[...]
>
> It is not necessary for us to learn from anyone but ourselves--at least it would be a relief to discover a critic who looked at American work from the American viewpoint.
>
> We are a young nation and have not had time or opportunity to catch up with nations that had ten centuries start on us. We still labor under the handicap of our Puritan lineage. . . .
>
> We shall not be able to plead childhood any longer.[...]
>
> We are only children when we acknowledge ourselves to be children. Weight of culture, weight of learning, weight of everything such as abandon in any sense has nothing to do with it. We must first isolate ourselves. Free ourselves even more than we have. Let us learn the essentials of the American situation.[...]
>
> We are kings in our own right.
> We care nothing for the complacent Concordites?
> at all
> We can look at that imitative phase with its erudite Holmses, Thoreaus, and Emersons. With one word we can damn it: England. . . .[1]

More directly that Stevens, Williams expressed at the same time the problem of the American poet and his own rationalization for writing solely in the present, consciously without an echo from European fathers. Stevens shared with Williams the desire to isolate what was peculiarly American as well as the

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frustration felt about poets like Eliot and Pound who had abandoned their native soil. In the Prologue to "Kora in Hell," Williams recounts Stevens' reaction to his own "damning [of] those who run to London." Stevens' reply was, "But where in the world will you have them run to?"[2] In his self-contained answer, Stevens showed himself to be the wiser of the two in his implicit acceptance of the conditions which led other poets to seek a place in the land of their spiritual forbears. Of a more passive, female nature than Williams, Stevens sought to free himself and the American tradition from the force of the past by accomodating and encompassing that force. His meters are historically English; he did not attempt as did Williams to break completely free. The associations in his poetry, too, reveal his ties not only to the English tradition, but to whatever had been passed down through Europe to America in the established historic and literary canon.

In his essay, "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens,"[3] Marius Bewley makes the same point about Stevens' work--that it reflects his tie to a "European past" and so is part of the "main current" and shows his relation to "the great traditional non-American poets." In the next breath he goes on to note that Stevens' particular significance for our time is his painful awareness of "the cultural disintegration that has closed in with such vehemence since the end of World War I." As evidence for Stevens' sensitivity to this fragmentation,

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Bewley focuses on the poet's belief in "the unifying power of the imagination" which he interprets as the poet's offered remedy for reality's damaged spirit. Coleridge, however, a century before had stressed the importance of this fusing, synthetic power of imagination (albeit, as Bewley states, in theory rather than in his poetry--leaving Stevens to complete the task), and there had been no catastrophic war to prompt this perception. But Bewley does not ask the crucial question about Stevens: why did he not react like the other poets of his time, like Eliot, Pound, or even Williams? Why did he remain heir to Coleridge and to the other ghosts of the nineteenth century even though he was intellectually aware of the effects of World War I?

In "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,"[4] Freud wrote in 1915 of one of the most obvious effects of the disillusionment brought with the First World War. Freud postulated an imaginary traveler who up until the time of the War had thought himself free to roam throughout the civilized nations of Europe and the world ignoring national boundaries in the interest of seeking to be a part of and one with all past cultures, feeling himself a citizen of culture rather than of a particular and arbitrarily bounded country. According to Freud, the world had been a kind of museum in which one could wander and from which one chose examples with which he established his own personal "Parnassus" or "School of Athens."

Unlike Pound or Eliot who crossed to England and the

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Continent in an attempt to reintegrate what was, in fact, disintegrating, Stevens remained in America. As if in response to the situation which Freud described, he imagined first a Rousseauian traveler, a Crispin who would search a still virgin soil, not stained with the blood of a war so cataclysmic that it destroyed the power of illusion belonging to imagination. As a poet, because he had not been witness to the actual devastation of World War I, he was able to remain spiritually tied to the Nineteenth Century tradition which was destroyed for those poets and artists who had more than an intellectual apprehension that the War had occurred. This is responsible for the critically essential difference between Stevens and the other poets of his generation including Williams, who for his own reasons had cut himself off from the European past. This difference is contained in a matter of belief. Stevens was still able to believe in the power of the imagination to uncover the mysteries of reality. The English and European sensibility of the Nineteenth Century had learned this and was beginning to explore this in its reaction against the excesses of Eighteenth Century Rationalism. In contrast, Pound and Eliot and their heirs relied on the intellect to reconstruct reality out of the fragments of the post-war world because they had experienced the war which appeared to have been the consequence of the century which had ignored the power of reason and extolled instead that of imagination. The point of reference for Pound and Eliot was primarily

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intellectual rather than imaginative; it belonged to the mind rather than to the emotions. Precisely this intellectual predominance marked the work of these poets as modern.

In tracing what it is in the work of certain Renaissance painters that makes them appeal to the modern sensibility, Herbert Read says the following:[5]

> Piero is a precursor of modern sensibility: an artist who gives his sensations a predominantly intellectual organization. . . .
>
> It is this intellectual quality in painters like Piero della Francesca and Uccello that constitutes their appeal to modern sensibility. For the main tendency of modern art, in spite of certain expressionistic excesses, has been towards a reintegration of the intellect. . . . But what is meant by the reintegration of the intellect? Merely the right to use the intelligence as a basis for art. Intellectual concepts can never be regarded as the primary material of art; nor can the unorganized emotions of the subjective painter. In painting, as in poetry, concepts or emotions serve rather as points of departure for that complete organization of sensibility which is a work of art. That organization is either deliberate or instinctive; in either case it is a complete whole capable of engaging the whole range of our feelings.

As Read points out, the artist or poet can make his art beginning with either an intellectual concept or an emotion as a point of departure; in one case the attempt will be deliberate while in the other it will be instinctive. There is no value judgement made as to one kind being better or worse than the other; Read says only that the particular works will be different in intention.

Pound and Eliot chose not to begin with an emotional

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starting point. In order to survive in the presence of such atrocities as the war produced, it was necessary that the emotions and instincts be anaesthetized. It was not an *a priori* decision on their parts to be *unlike* their fathers, the Romantics, but a necessary after-effect of a very real situation.

In contrast, Wallace Stevens, who remained in America because of the force of circumstances stressed by his father's promptings to "make something of himself," did not have his emotions so brutally numbed. He was still free to roam through the imaginary museum Freud described, even if this wandering was "sentimental," that is experienced emotionally even though there was an intellectual apprehension that certain events had occurred which prevented him from making the actual journey. What emerged from this was an automatic irony apparent in his poetry as an inability to take seriously any posture or persona belonging to a spirit still attached to the Romantics and their heirs. Stevens emotionally belonged to the Romantics and couldn't help but express their sensibility; at the same time he knew rationally that a Rousseauian naif could not long survive "the wild and ruinous waste" that America was. This tension is contained paradigmatically in a poem like "The Doctor of Geneva," but it exists throughout the poems of *Harmonium*, as well as in his later volumes, though a more unified and accepting voice does attempt to make itself heard with and after *Ideas of Order*.

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Pound and Eliot exploded the Romantic "self" into a thousand fragments strewn throughout past and present, projecting no future but uncertainty. The irony apparent in their poetry develops from the interplay between these various fragments plus an additional tension which comes in the form of an assumed disembodied intelligence which comments implicitly on the futility of voicing anything at all. Pound's fifth poem from "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly (Life and Contacts)," for example, expresses this and the reasons for it most concisely:

> There died a myriad,
> And of the best, among them,
> For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
> For a botched civilization,
>
> Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
> Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,
>
> For two gross of broken statues,
> For a few thousand battered books.

Here in a few short lines Pound expressed in poetry what Freud described in "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," even expanding as did Freud the reasons for the devastation, finding them in the nature of the civilization itself. This is an awareness from which Stevens wanted to hide; and in hiding he expended an enormous amount of energy avoiding the conclusion that for Pound and Eliot was necessary. It is from this game of "hide and seek" that Stevens' irony developed. Stevens wanted to solidify the Romantic "self," extend its spirit; his final metamorphosis into "The Rock" is the perfect figure for

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this desire. Stevens finally used intelligence--Reason--to thread together emotional reactions belonging to his Romantic spirit. This is the obverse of what Pound and Eliot did, expecting the emotions of the reader or listener to be the mortar holding together the various pieces of intellectual percepts or constructs.

For Pound and Eliot there was no longer an "I." For Stevens there was most definitely an "I," one sufficiently developed and autonomous to discern other possibilities of being, one not shattered by the direct experience of the war and its effects. This "I," however was overly self-conscious for obvious reasons, the most striking of which is simply that there was still a self which existed. Stevens' often-voiced fears of cultivating "personality" bespeak this self-consciousness. The effect of this in his poetry can be seen in the tentative "as if" constructions and their variants. When the self is sufficiently mature and sophisticated, as was Stevens', other possibilities of being constantly present themselves. This mirrors the relativity so predominant in consciousness during the first quarter of the century. With Stevens we have for the first time the positing of an autonomous "I" in the face of the loss of tradition and values. It, too, will flatten out historical perspective but in a very different way from Pound and Eliot.

An image or symbol characteristic of either Pound or Eliot carries with it and is based on a complex intellectual

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framework. Eliot's being considered a modern Metaphysical poet grows from this kind of use of image. Eliot's definition of an "objective correlative"[6] offers a perfect description of what is meant here:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative;" in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion: such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

This is a more than adequate and enlightening perception on the part of a critic who examines a particular work from a particular viewpoint, one which attempts to judge the success of a poet's intent on the basis of the preservation of a certain unity or harmony within a balanced work. As a piece of criticism written by one who was also a poet, it is even more enlightening.

This excerpt comes from Eliot's essay on Hamlet, a play which he designated as being less successful than either Macbeth or the later tragedies of Coriolanus or Antony and Cleopatra because we come from the play to an understanding or questioning of, "an experience which . . . exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself,"[7] in order to answer the questions that the play proposes. This reveals that Eliot, poet-critic, would have had his ideal maker be in complete control of his material and meaning so that the "tropes" which he would use would not be "tropes" at all in the true sense,[8] but ciphers

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for a concept or meaning already known to the maker. The essence of "trope," however, lies precisely in its having been chosen or used because it attempts to express what is unknown, what cannot otherwise be named either out of fear or out of a very wise ignorance.[9] For Eliot, it seems that "trope" meant what it had meant for the Eighteenth Century--a figure, simply a "manner of saying something" which could be said in another way; it was, in other words, "True wit to advantage dressed." This interpretation of "trope" yields poetry which is primarily intellectual, poetry which deals with the Romantics by ignoring or repressing them, and covertly turns back instead to a century devoted to the exercise of Reason over all.

Instead of rejecting Hamlet as an imperfect and unbalanced work, it is worth considering that Hamlet points ahead to the future and is Shakespeare's first "modern" play and character precisely because it asks its audience "to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself." In this way, the audience is able to participate in an artistic process which is no longer static but dynamic. The critic or reader who attempts to discover what Shakespeare did not know himself has the benefit of having developed something peculiar to the twentieth century, that is an "I" who has learned what "relativity" means to the individual. This "I" is like the "I" Stevens developed in his poetry. It is an "I" capable of detaching itself from the accidents of a particular situation and

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functioning in the same way as the "eye-I" of the psychoanalyst, later assumed by the patient when he is cured to look at himself. This "I" is able to supply the intellectual understanding of a pattern offered by a dream, for example, to the mute body still suffering the emotional pain carried by individual dream images; in this way, the pain is eventually relieved by using reason which acts to protect the individual from the chaos of his unconscious. The astute critic of Hamlet will complete the play in the same way.

As a poet, Eliot did not want his readers to know anything about himself that he didn't already know. Finding an "objective correlative" for an emotion is the obvious extension of an "Impersonal Theory of Poetry." Using this theory and this device, the poet protects himself from really trying to find adequate expression, keeps him from confronting the power of emotion that might leave him wishing to be a "thinking stone" rather than "a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

When we read Eliot's lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," we must imagine what and how he felt in order to understand his desire; we supply "imagined feeling." When we read Stevens' line from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (coming as it does after the opening quotation veiling anger and immediately after the central question, "Or was it that I mocked myself alone?"), we feel the weight of his emotion directly. We have not had to imagine what he must have felt like; we

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imagine, rather, what must have occurred before the utterance. Our imaginations provide nothing to the poem but to a discoverable previous contextual experience. We still have the lyric "I," but now crying out its "occasion" as well as its feeling.

This distinction between an instance of Eliot's "objective correlative" and one of Stevens' images weighted as it is not only with his emotion but with significance in his personal history, best elucidates the difference between poetry that takes an emotion as its starting point and poetry that begins from an intellectual starting point. This is not to judge between them but only to stress their great difference. Understanding this difference is central to this discussion since it is to the latter kind of poetry that New Criticism addressed itself; it was this kind of poetry that was understood to be "modern." In addition, poetry which did not belong in this category was analyzed and discussed as though it did. The perception on the parts of these critics of Stevens' work, for example, as being cerebral and over-intellectualized, or else of its being the work of a hedonist, can be understood as a misreading resulting from the projection of what they expected to find rather than what is in his poetry.

Since the starting point for poets like Eliot and Pound was intellectual, the unity of their works is provided outside of the work by the varying emotions of each of its readers. In response to works of this kind, critics attempted to be as "objective" and scientific as possible. This response grew

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out of a total rejection of the subjective and impressionistic criticism of the nineties which they thought had overemphasized enjoyment.[10] The New Critics thought that the way to achieve their "objective" goal was to turn away completely from the "interpretation" of a work because they feared this approach might be mistaken as "impressionistic." They focused instead simply on defining the discrete parts of a work much in the same way--they thought--as their model, Aristotle, would have had them do. Aristotle dealt with categories, however, not with individual works.

The kind of criticism which has grown from this New Critical approach focuses on individual aspects of the work under examination, substituting the analysis of the part for the analysis of the whole. This kind of criticism could be called "synechdochal," centering as it does on one aspect or symbol in the work. Northrup Frye, in the glossary to his Anatomy of Criticism,[11] defines "symbol" as "any unit of any work of literature which can be isolated for critical attention. In general usage restricted to the smaller units, such as words, phrases, images, etc." Following this definition, analyses of themes, images, meter, rhyme, and style dissociated from context can be seen to come under the heading of "synechdochal criticism." Useful as this kind of criticism is either to the casual reader who wants to understand one particular aspect of a work, or to the critic who immerses himself in the entire corpus of one poet and uses synechdochal criticism as

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an invaluable repository of names for particular phenomena he has perceived while reading the work, it does not deal with the work as a whole. New Criticism fostered this method in its zeal to be scientific.

Reading a work subjectively was taboo for the New Critics. But the only way of discovering what informs the content of a poet's work, what gives the form body, is to read subjectively--to allow one's spirit to be taken over by the "obsession"[12] of the poet. Only in this way can the work as a whole be considered, with each poem seen in its place within the corpus. The way to discover an obsession is through careful attention to the poet's controlling metaphors and images. In order for this to be possible, however, the metaphors and images must be drawn from a living tradition which forms part of the reality of both poet and reader-critic. In the cases of Eliot and Pound and the modern poets who followed in their wake, a subjective reading and the consequent discovery of their obsessions is impossible since the greater part of their images, metaphors, and symbols are drawn from traditions which are foreign to the experience of their reader-critics.[13] The only possible outcome, then, is the kind of criticism which searches each of the parts for the meanings which it lends to the work.

The blind spot of the New Critics and their descendants who look at the work of a poet like Stevens derives in part from the fact that they have looked at his work as though it

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too was the product of the same experience as Eliot's or Pound's when, in fact, Stevens was attempting something completely different from what either of those poets had done and were doing. It also derives in part from the fact that Stevens' poetry demands that it be read subjectively by a modern heir of the impressionist critic. This kind of critic will not substitute the study of a part for that of the whole, but will willingly immerse himself in the "fluent mundo" in which Stevens lived. The New Critics could not read him in the way he had to be read because of their rebellion against their own critical fathers.

Stevens was heir to the Romantics and Symbolists in a much more profound way than those critics who have pointed out his ties to them have realized. Because he did not experience the war directly, he was still free to roam the imaginary museum made of the language of the Romantic and Symbolist poets. Unlike many other poets of his time, Stevens did not feel that this language was artificial. What he shared with the Nineteenth Century poets as well was the idea of the organicity of his work, with each poem understood as part of and one with the entire corpus. This idea of the work considered as one book descends from Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and is connected to the English tradition through Coleridge with his theoretical stressing of "organicity," and tied also to the American Nineteenth Century through Whitman with his Leaves of Grass[14] (an aspect which will be taken up in the next chapter).

In his wish to call his collected work The Whole of

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Harmonium, Stevens implicitly asked his reader-critic to consider the entire body of his work as one poem. In this way, the critic would be able to understand the language which is identical with Stevens' reality.[15] Speaking for the New Critics, Cleanth Brooks seemed to call for a "full reading of a work" based on what appeared to be an understanding of the impulse behind Stevens' desire to have all his work seen as a unit. Brooks wrote:[16]

> Modern critics, it is perfectly true, tend to force attention back to the text of the work itself: that is, to look at the poem as a poem, not as an appendage to the poet's biography, nor as a reflection of his reading, nor as an illustration of the history of ideas. Such an emphasis naturally stresses a close reading of the text, and, since poems are written in words, careful attention to language. But, though the text must provide the ultimate sanction for the meaning of the work, that does not mean that close textual reading is to be conceived as a sort of verbal piddling. Words open out into the larger symbolizations on all levels--for example, into archetypal symbol, ritual, and myth. The critic's concern for 'language' need not be conceived narrowly, even if his concern leads to an extensive examination: it can be extended to the largest symbolizations possible.

Unfortunately, because the New Critics had not learned--or had not allowed themselves--to read the work subjectively, so to discover the poet's "obsessions" by considering the entire corpus as one poem, finding the largest symbolizations of words took them away from the text instead of further into it. In addition, it is possible that the New Critics strong definition of themselves as American precluded them from

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defining what was American as having derived from a European sensibility of the Nineteenth Century. Understanding Stevens' proclivity for purely aesthetic models would have meant understanding their own position in relation to that same European tradition which had, in fact, spawned them as critics. Perhaps this can be best understood by applying Harold Bloom's patterning to criticism and seeing that the New Critics' position represented a clinamen, a turning away from, a repression of, and an ultimate attempted destruction of their critical fathers. In short, critics like poets suffer the "anxiety of influence;" so, for modern criticism, too, we can plot a "map of misreading" using Stevens as a model.

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Notes to Chapter 3

1 In Imaginations, New York: New Directions, 1970, pp. 208-211.

2 Ibid., p. 27.

3 In The Complex Fate: Hawthorne, Henry James and Some Other American Writers, New York: Gordian Press, 1967, pp. 171-192.

4 In On Creativity and The Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion, ed., Benjamin Nelson, New York: Harper & Row, 1958, pp. 206-235.

5 In The Meaning of Art, New York: Praeger, 1972, p. 135.

6 In "Hamlet and His Problems," The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism, London: Methuen, 1966, p. 100.

7 Ibid., p. 103.

8 By "tropes in the true sense" here I mean "trope" as defined by Harold Bloom; in his definition he makes explicit the unconscious origin of tropes because they are defenses as well as means of persuasion. In Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 123-124, Bloom writes,

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> The fundamental principle of an antithetical or Kabbalistic criticism is that, in poetic texts, tropes are best understood as psychic defenses, because they act as defenses, against the tropes of anteriority, against the poems of the precursors. Similarly, in poetic texts, the poet's (or his surrogate's) psychic defenses are best understood as tropes, for they trope or turn against anterior defenses, against previous or outworn postures of the spirit.

To this I would like to add that often tropes act as defenses only against personal repressed material and not against "tropes of anteriority, against the poems of the precursors."

9 As Bloom writes in his chapter on "The Necessity of Misreading" in Kabbalah and Criticism, New York: Seabury Press, 1975, pp. 111-112:

> . . . poems are apotropaic litanies, systems of defensive tropes and troping defenses, and what they seek to ward off is essentially the abyss in their own assumptions about themselves, at once empirically reifying and dialectically ironizing. A theory of poetic influence becomes a theory of misreading because only misreading allows a poem to keep going in its own philosophical contradictions. Schizophrenia is disaster in life, and success in poetry.

In Poetry and Repression, Bloom points out his historical ties to Vico and agrees with him and Kenneth Burke that, "the trope comes from ignorance" (p. 8). This is an aspect of "ignorance" of which Stevens was aware when he wrote, "The poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man." The quotation which Bloom cites from Vico is, "ignorance, the mother of wonder, made everything wonderful, to men who were ignorant of everything" (p. 7).

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10 In one of his late essays, "The Frontiers of Criticism," (On Poetry and Poets, New York: Noonday, 1967, pp. 113-131), Eliot traces the reasons for the failure of modern criticism up until that time (1956). He finds that it is the "pursuing of criticism as if it was a science, which it can never be, "which is at the core of the problem. He points out how this kind of criticism based on explanation and the elucidation of each of the many parts of a poem or work of art, loosing sight of the work as a whole, grew directly from the rejection of the subjective, impressionistic criticism of the nineties which had over-emphasized enjoyment. Perceptively, Eliot states that this over-reaction of criticism was due, in large part, to his own notes to The Waste Land:

> Here, I must admit that I am, on one conspicuous occasion, not guiltless of having led critics into temptation. The notes to The Waste Land! I had first intended only to put down all the references for my quotations, with a view of spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems who had accused me of plagiarism. Then, when it came to print The Waste Land as a little book--for the poem on its first appearance in The Dial and in The Criterion had no notes whatever--it was discovered that the poem was inconveniently short, so I set to work to expand the notes, in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter, with the result that they became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship that is still on view today.

11 New York: Atheneum, 1968, p. 367.

12 In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens states, "M. Charles Mauron says that a man may be characterized by his

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obsessions" (OP 225). I don't know which text of Mauron's Stevens had read, but in Des Métamorphoses obsédantes au mythe personnel: Introduction à la psychocritique (Paris: Corti, 1962), Mauron writes of studying Baudelaire's "obsessions" in order to understand the poet and his poetry. See pp. 58-63 and 131-147.

13 For example, in their early poetry Pound and Eliot consciously borrowed from the Nineteenth Century French poets, Gautier and Laforgue. From Gautier they borrowed the idea of the classical "hardness" of form suggested even by the title of "Emaux et Camées." This idea was best exemplified in the use of the quatrain form: in Eliot we see this in the poems of 1920 like the Sweeney peoms or like "The Hippopotamus," among others; in Pound this is most evident in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly." From Laforgue they borrowed the persona with the ironic eye who saw the potential for parody offered by the quatrain form. Unless the reader-critic goes back to each of these sources to discover what it is in these earlier poets that the "moderns" used, the significance of the form will remain hidden. This is not true for Stevens whose forms are transparent because they grow out of the tradition of which he was a part. Whatever he did borrow "unconsciously," as he said, from other poets, like the Symbolists, was expressed in these accessible forms.

14 In her book, Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974, pp. 17-18), Diane Wood Middlebrook writes:

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> Whitman and Stevens write, in the early Leaves of Grass and the late Collected Poems respectively, what can be best described as a mythology of imagination. Mythology, because for each poet the heroic "I" was a fictive being, one who magnificently transcended the "malady of the quotidian" (CP 96) and fully expressed the poet, but only during rare moments of vision. Mythology of imagination, because the very design of this fictive self derives from Coleridgean ideas about the mind, and because in characterizing that self, the poets emphasize the discontinuous nature of imaginative acts.

What is not explored in her book is the relation of this idea of the creation of a mythology to the idea of the one book of Mallarmé and the Symbolists who understood that the work could only be considered as one book, or as a mythology, if the debt to Coleridge was made more explicit and the necessity of the integrating power of the reader's imagination in creating the "body" of the poet was taken into account as essential to the completion of the poetic act.

15 Marius Bewley makes the same point in his article, "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens" (collected in The Complex Fate, pp. 171-192). In his opening remarks, Bewley states that it is Stevens' later work which informs the early work with meaning, and that his work, like Eliot's, can be read "forward and backward," because it is of one whole. Bewley cites Marianne Moore who wrote, "Wallace Stevens: the interacting veins of life between his early and late poems are an ever-continuing marvel to me."

16 In his Foreward to Critiques and Essays in Criticism: 1920-1948, ed. Robert Wooster Stallman, pp. xix-xx.

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4. Practice on the Harmonium

Before beginning the analyses of the reactions of Stevens' major critics to his work, it would be useful to go back a few steps and consider what the effect would be of applying the techniques of New Criticism as indicated above by Brooks coupled with a subjective eye which has followed the poet's "obsessions" to only the intended title of The Whole of Harmonium. It is accepted among Stevens' critics and scholars that the choice of the name of "Harmonium" for his first volume (just as his intended title of "The Whole of Harmonium: Preliminary Minutiae") reflected the poet's often stressed preoccupation with order and harmony as well as his fascination with different types of musical instruments. Michel Benamou and others[1] have noted the link joining Stevens' project for "The Grand Poem" with the expressed wishes of Mallarmé and other Symbolist poets to see their poems not as separate units but as parts of a larger unitary work or book. The book as finished object was extremely important to Mallarmé just as it was for Stevens.[2] What has not been considered about this intended title is the relationship it bears to each of the individual poems and each of the volumes contained in the Collected Poems as well as the relationship it has to both an historical and personal past for Stevens.

To begin according to the "objective" rules of New Criticism

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and returning to etymological roots: following the OED definition, the harmonium was invented around 1840 by a Frenchman named Debain. It is "A keyboard instrument the tones of which are produced by free metal 'reeds,' tongues, or 'vibrators,' actuated by a current of air from bellows usually worked by treadles; a kind of reed organ." In addition, it is "strictly distinguished from the American organ by the fact that the air is driven outwards through the reed pipes whereas in the latter it is sucked inwards; but the name is sometimes extended to include the American organ" (emphasis mine).

Following further, The Columbia Encyclopedia traces its descendency from the Chinese sheng, a gourd into which is fastened a set of graduated tubes with free reeds which are set in motion by the player's breath blown through the mouthpiece. The sheng was introduced into Europe during the eighteenth century. The harmonium and other types of reed organs (another of which is called the orgue expressif) became popular after the introduction into Europe of the Chinese instrument and soon found their way to America where they found wide uses in churches and homes.

To these objective facts about the harmonium, we should add one or two minor personal facts. At the time when Stevens became enamoured of the young Elsie Moll, she played the piano (not a harmonium, but a keyboard instrument nonetheless) in a local Reading department store; Stevens' mother played the piano as well.[3] In addition, we should bear in mind that Stevens

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inherited the Symbolists' propensity toward synaesthesia. He used this device consciously in a different--perhaps less poetic and more intellectual--manner when he used "Harmonium" as the title of his first volume (keeping in mind that he would have wanted the whole of his work to come under an expanded version of this title). From the name of the instrument, Stevens evoked its sound in the imaginative inner ear of his reader.[4] Because the sound of the harmonium could be described as "rinky-tink," there is always an awareness on the part of the reader of "Harmonium" of an underlying tone of non-seriousness even in those poems which do, in fact, deal with extremely serious, and often painful, subjects.

The fact that the word "harmonium" derives from the Greek word for joy, delight, pleasure, plus the fact that the instrument derives from the Chinese sheng ties the poetic meaning of the word to a broad and significant historical background. We know how important the aspect of "giving pleasure" through poetry was for Stevens--he titles one section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" "It Must Give Pleasure." There are also innumerable hints within individual poems, such as the lines in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" which describe the wished-for poets, "Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade" who "May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves/ A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres." (CP 59). The fact is, however, that the harmonium is a modern mechanical corruption of the original instrument. It substituted for the human breath moving over

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the reeds air forced through bellows activated by treadles. What is historically significant here is that the sheng was transformed from an instrument having its "tongues" activated and controlled by the human breath to the harmonium during the Eighteenth Century when Reason was applied to everything. The result was an instrument which was able to be reproduced mechanically rather than one which used a natural fruit, a gourd, for each instrument. In the latter instance, no two instruments were identical and each instrument represented and expressed a unique relationship between man and nature. In short, the harmonium was one of the first indications of the modern sensibility, a sensibility controlled by something no longer primary, unique and human.

The implication derived from this is that modern attempts to give pleasure through poetry must go through something separated from the spirit or the breath; the language we use is not pure but corrupted and extended by the many admixtures of other languages. In addition, the language has been banalized by the masses in the way that Mallarmé indicated when he stressed the difficulty of the poet who tries to sift a language for his poems out of the language of "the tribe."[5] Stevens' choice of the harmonium as the metaphor for his work, then, contains in it the idea of poetry as something which attempts to give pleasure while taking into account all the difficulties inherent in the modern American consciousness. He separated himself from Mallarmé and the Symbolists in accepting

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the state of language and reality as he found it rather than trying to find a "pure" poetic language. Implicit in this, Stevens expressed that America, like its language, like the harmonium, had suffered a change from its original intended ideal--just as the harmonium is a rather crass derivative of the sheng--, but that its language can give pleasure nonetheless, a pleasure tied to an actual reality.

The fact that the harmonium is sometimes confused with the American organ is interesting because Stevens continually played on the ambiguity of what it meant to be American and how America and its experience was to be defined. The instrument's having been invented by a Frenchman ties in with one of Stevens' statements from the "Adagia:" "French and English constitute a single language." The choice of the harmonium is a constant reminder of the complexity Stevens perceived in his experience of being American. The harmonium found its way to America bringing with it something of the spirit of the country where it had originated.

It is not unlikely that the poet became acquainted with the instrument when he assisted at religious services as a boy since the harmonium was very popular in churches in America. As a mature poet, this association must have played in his mind connecting poetry with religion. There are many poems in Harmonium which reflect this union; "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "Sunday Morning" are two examples.

The last minor associations to both Elsie's and his mother's

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playing the piano should also be kept in mind when considering what Stevens intended by "The Whole of Harmonium" (emphasis mine) since "while" refers not only to all the poems but to the entire range of meanings and flickering allusions in the mind of the poet. Elsie and Mrs. Stevens represent two opposing forces in the imagination of the poet. His mother becomes associated with those same puritanical traits stressed by his father, while Elsie, during the early years of her relationship with the poet, becomes associated with the "Romantic" aspects. To her Stevens in his younger years attributed the function of Muse.

Extending our methodology even further to include more associations and impressions, we must also connect Stevens' use of "Harmonium" to Whitman's use of "Leaves of Grass"--a connection of major importance.[6] Using this title Whitman conceived, and made his readers conceive, of each of the pages on which his poems appeared as individual "leaves" or "blades" of grass, individual yet similar outgrowths of himself, as Nature, as life-giving soil warmed by an American sun and nourished by native elements. In a Romantic spirit, these "Leaves" were organic expressions, and, as such, beautiful and good, evidences of an heroic life force which would be constantly renewed while still preserving their identity in season after season with each new generation. When Stevens used "Harmonium" as his controlling metaphor, he implicitly adopted Whitman's conception and changed it to express his

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particular sensibility. This rooted him firmly but gently in the soil of an American past and allowed him to extend both America's sense of history and poetry. The harmonium, after all, is made from "leaves of grass," grass reeds activated by air forced through them by very human, not heroic, feet. Stevens took Whitman's romanticized concept and transformed it so that it could express, in everyday, homely tones, the American spirit. At the same time, because of its associations to the Greek idea of harmony (later re-expressed in Christian terms by Augustine in City of God), this metaphor carried over as part of its meaning the reduction of the Greek ideal to a manageable human scale, able to be played, enjoyed, either as in the home or as in the church, to evoke that spiritual health poetry alone can provide in our time, not as a glorification of an heroic Nature as Whitman would have it, but as a direct, even if slightly comic, description of the melodies of human existence.

Finally, as to the central importance of the metaphor of the harmonium, the whole of the Collected Poems must be imaginatively conceived as that instrument. The harmonium is symbolic of the change from man's unique relationship with Nature, signified by the gourd, to a relationship mediated by the interference of applied reason which substituted for the gourd a mechanical device precisely constructed and reproduceable. In the same way, "The Whole of Harmonium" symbolizes the change in a spirit originally tied to Nature in a way which

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expressed the ideal--even if that expression was a yearning for a lost ideal contact with Nature which the poet in true Romantic fashion voiced almost magically--to a spirit educated in the uses of Reason. This Twentieth Century Romantic can no longer naively people his imaginary world with the magical myths of the past, nor even hope to invent even a personal, unique myth which will sustain him because his reason always interferes and tries to point out that these myths are not "true." Stevens dictum that "The ultimate poem must be a poem of fact in the language of facts" is an expression of this reality.

With the poems conceived as the instrument comes another realization essential to understanding Stevens' relationship to his work and to his readers. If the corpus as a whole is the harmonium, then each of the poems is a key. Once we learn to play the instrument, we can play not one, but many melodies: there is not one meaning to be gleaned from reading the poems, but many, and each of these meanings will be expressive of the individual who is reading. This sounds very much like the danger of impressionistic criticism feared by the New Critics.

There is always something which is under the control of the maker-poet, however, and that is the range of possible sounds that the instrument can produce and the quality of the sound of which the instrument is capable. The key to understanding what this signifies is found in the opening lines of "Peter Quince at the Clavier:" "Just as my fingers on these

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keys/ Make music, so the selfsame sounds/ On my spirit make a music, too./ Music is feeling, then, not sound." What Stevens extracts from the one who plays his instrument is feeling, controlled by the sound of the notes--the keys that are the poems. The sound of the harmonium which echoes as an undertone throughout the reading of Stevens' poetry constantly reminds the reader of its source. Once feeling is evoked, the poet is identified in the reader, and meaning is controlled. We understand because we perceive as Stevens did. The source of the sound cannot be forgotten--it is extremely American in its never-tragic yet often plaintive cry (a cry which cannot be taken completely seriously because of its hurdy-gurdy quality) which means to entertain and give pleasure even to Sunday congregations who want so much to keep poetry "sacred."

Even if he did not succeed, Stevens attempted in his imagination to make poetry accessible to those who live in everyday reality. In this sense, too, using the vehicle of the harmonium reflects this conscious desire to make of poetry something that could symbolically replace the harmonium in "churches and homes." Stevens expressed this directly once in The Necessary Angel (p. 156) where in "The Imagination as Value" he closes with this statement: ". . . the chief problem of any artist, as of any man, are the problems of the normal and that he needs, in order to solve them, everything that the imagination has to give;" and once in an interview: "I prefer to think I'm just a man, not a poet part-time, businessman the rest."[7] He

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wrote not as a poet descending from the lofty heights of imagination, but as a man, a lawyer, an American businessman who had not lost what is human--a spirit which travels in time if not in space.

His poetry is of his everyday experience in his world which includes both reality and imagination--"Poetry is the statement of a relation between a man and the world"--both a dish of peaches and the necessary angel. In his poems he records chronologically those moments in his everyday experience when his being attempted to make harmonious all the disparate parts of his experience as a certain kind of man in America at a particular time. He is most significantly "modern" in presenting to himself and his readers "fragments" of this experience,[8] but fragments which reflect him as he is at a specific moment rather than fragments from an historical experience not his own and not felt by him (as do Eliot and Pound).

Stevens' modernity can only be understood in the active attempt on the part of his reader to reconstruct the life of the man who wrote the poems he left. This can only be accomplished by reading the poems subjectively, "reading with one's nerves," understanding them to be part of an orgue expressif. In this way by listening to the resonances of the keys that are played the impact of the whole can be felt. This is done by seeing each rest or pause between each of the poems or keys as an ellipsis for which a context must be provided. This concept of poetry comes directly from the Symbolist poets,

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especially Mallarmé (although he confines the tension to be controlled as existing only between words in poems)[9]; Stevens extends this to a tension which he set up between poems.

Stevens clearly belongs to the century of Freud in his awareness that the real meaning of the whole is never uttered directly--indeed cannot be uttered directly both because of the nature of language and because of our own inability to face openly what is most meaningful, which is often what is most painful--without the use of trope. Tropes are like defenses, but necessary defenses, protecting what is most human in our experience. When in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" Stevens wrote, "There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,/ Like the clashed edges of two words that kill," he wrote both of the immediate experience of which this is the cry, but also of his understanding that it is between the "clashed edges" of words, of poems, that meaning lies hidden. That meaning is not verbal but actual; that is, it is acted out in the bodies of both the poet and his reader--it is feeling. Stevens restored to "aesthetics" what belonged to it originally and what it has lost gradually over the centuries, most strikingly at the beginning of our century with World War I--namely, its primary identification with feeling as its etymology from the Greek signifies. Stevens went back to the Nineteenth Century unconsciously, in a way unlike any other "modern" poet. He salvaged what Eliot and Pound lost, the necessary subjective expression of the poet, and he extended the concept of the lyric

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"I" by applying what the Romantic and Symbolist poets had not--Reason. This concept of Reason was modified, too, by the experience of what had happened to Reason in America. He recorded this in his poems which represent the constant interaction of reason with expression.

Stevens followed his imagination reasonably, rationally, like an analyst following the vagaries of associations. His implicit committment to America, to remaining in one place in America, allowed him to observe the changes in his own being and his own place in a way that is of central importance to understanding what the experience of American means. What he wanted was ultimately un-poetic; that is, he longed for the kind of permanence that would ensure Truth and deny the need for trope. His wish to be a "thinking stone" early in "Harmonium" and his final self-description as "The Rock" both indicate the strength of this need, the yearning to be of a whole in a place where a word might correspond finally to fact. His success lies in recording this odyssey toward Truth--his home--and in his discovery, which ultimately brings him a kind of joy and peace, that even when permanence is achieved there is still change, "The fluctuations of the self within the rock." He realized that having this permanence as a base is what ensured further explorations for him: "The rock is the gray particular of man's life,/ The stone from which he rises, up-and-ho,/ The step to the bleaker depths of his descents."

His most important discovery concerns what he learned about

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what "facts" really are: not the banal exigencies of everyday reality, but "the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, . . . the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making."[10] This quotation from William James, with whom Stevens shared more than Harvard, best defines what Stevens meant by "fact," and opens the door to a reading of Stevens which will explore fully what Stevens pointed to when he wrote that "Poetry must be irrational." It is the reader-critic who must express in rational terms what is irrational, and this can only be done by including the subjective element in criticism. The poetry of Stevens, more than that of any other modern poet, allows the reader-critic to plumb the irrational because it is based firmly in America, the Rock (associations to Plymouth Rock here are not extraneous), and is part of an inherited tradition which it continues.

The following chapters of this section will examine the work of Stevens' major critics, beginning with John Crowe Ransom, one of the first New Critics. Their contributions to the understanding of Stevens' poetry will be evaluated on the basis of how much of the whole work they take into account when analyzing his poems. When and where they fail to illuminate the text meaningfully will be related back to the particular prejudices of modern criticism which prevented their understanding of the work in its fullness rather than to the failure of the individual critics, since the problems which exist

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belong not to them but to an historical reality, as well as to certain ambiguous aspects of Stevens' work which contributed to its being misread. In this way, hopefully, service will be done not only to Stevens but to criticism as well.

The second section of this study, after its opening prologue tracing the progress of criticism since the New Critics, will offer my readings of some of Stevens poems in light of what has been presented. These readings will attempt to incorporate what we have learned from the New Critics and the subjective eye we lost with their methodology.

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Notes to Chapter 4

[1] Benamou in Wallace Stevens and The Symbolist Imagination, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, in his chapter on "Baudelaire and Mallarmé;" and, Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965, p. 7.

[2] Mallarmé and Stevens both paid a great deal of attention to the setting of their poems in their collections; for both, the space around the poems was almost as important as the words in the poems themselves. In Mallarmé this is clearest in "Un Coup de Des," where it reached an extreme. However, in addition to this concrete aspect of "setting" the poems and the words of the poems like jewels, was the idea of the whole behind it. Mallarmé makes this idea clear in his letters. Two excerpts will illustrate this:

> Je souffre beaucoup depuis quelque temps et d'une facon inquiétante--pour ceux qui m'aiment et surtout pour mon Oeuvre, que j'esquisse entièrement en ce moment et qui peut être magnifique si je vis. Je parle de "l'ensemble de travaux littéraires qui composent l'existence poétique d'un Rêveur" et qu'on appelle, enfin, son oeuvre (Stephane Mallarmé, Correspondence, 1862-1871, Paris: Gallimard, 1959, p. 226);

> Pour moi, la Poésie me tient lieu de l'amour par ce qu'elle est éprise d'elle-même et que sa volupté d'elle retombe délicieusement en mon âme; mais j'avoue que la Science que j'ai acquise, ou retrouvée

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> au fond de l'homme que je fus, ne me suffirait pas, et que ce ne serait pas sans un serrement de coeur réel que j'entrerais dans la Disparition suprême, si je n'avois pas fini mon oeuvre, qui est L'Oeuvre, le Grand Oeuvre, comme disaient les alchimistes, nos ancêtres (Correspondance, 1862-1871, pp. 243-244).

The "whole work" is "a portrait of the artist;" the involvement of the poet with his poetry is like being in love. Both of these aspects are found in Stevens, though not as explicitly. The clearest statement for him is perhaps "Planet on the Table;" there is also his statement, "A poet looks at the world the way a man looks at a woman," which reflects this same kind of involvement.

3 Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 78 and p. 173.

4 For example, this aspect is used in individual poems like "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Asides on the Oboe," or "Piano Practice at the Academy of Holy Angels" where the sound and nature of the instrument are used as elements of style to help in "objectifying" (see p. 838 of Letters) the subject, controlling the tone of the poem by the imagined sound of the instrument. This use of the instrument grows out of Mallarmé's observation that, "Toute âme est une mélodie, qu'il s'agit de renouer; et pour cela, sont la flûte ou la viole de chacun" (Oeuvres Complètes, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 363). The chosen instrument is what establishes the "tone" and "quality" of the melody at a certain point.

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5 This comes originally from Mallarmé's poem, "Le Tombeau D'Edgar Poe." The line is, "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu." In 1877, Mallarmé translated the poem into English for Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman; the translation of that line is, "To give too pure a meaning to the words of the tribe." This idea remained with Mallarmé throughout his life and was in accord with his belief that poetic language was like a system of hieroglyphs, a magic language used to create "fictions:"

> Le langage lui est apparu l'instrument de la fiction: il suivra la méthode du langage (la déterminer). Le langage se réfléchissant. Fnfin la fiction lui semble être le procédé même de l'esprit humain--c'est elle qui met en jeu toute méthode, et l'homme est réduit à la volonté. (Mallarmé notes that this explication to himself comes from having read Descartes' Discour sur la Méthode.) (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 851).

We can see the affinity here between Mallarmé and Stevens who both wanted to join the fantastic fiction-making capacity of language with a rational basis, here indicated by the reference Mallarmé makes to Descartes. Stevens, too, was concerned with Descartes in this respect:

> Descartes is used as a symbol of the reason. But we live in a place that is not our own; we do not live in a land of Descartes; we have imposed the reason; Adam imposed it even in Eden (L 433).

(Stevens is answering questions about "Notes" here.)

6 The full imaginative implication of which I was prompted into seeing by John Hollander--for which I am very grateful.

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[7] Quoted in The New York Times Book Review as part of an interview with Stevens in the early fifties.

[8] Diane Wood Middlebrook also makes this point in her Introduction to Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens, pp. 15-19.

[9] In this way the personality of the poet is completely absorbed by the words he uses and the way he uses them; this is parallel to Stevens' definition of "style" as a way of "objectifying one's subject." Mallarmé put it in this way, defining in a very important way what he meant by the "pure poet:"

> L'oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poëte, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personelle enthousiaste de la phrase. (Oeuvres Complètes, p. 366).

In this passage we can see faint hints of Stevens' lines from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle:" "'There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,/ Like the clashed edges of two words that kill.'"

[10] Quoted by E.R. Dodds as epigraph to his first chapter of The Greeks and The Irrational, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p. 1.

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5. John Crowe Ransom: Reflections on "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"

Reading the collection of Ransom's essays in The World's Body[1] leads us to expect that Ransom will prove to be Stevens' ideal critic because he takes exception to the direction taken by "modernism," following as it has more and more specialized areas of study. He asks of criticism that it broaden itself and attempt to integrate the various elements that go into the making of a work of art instead of examining each element in its particularity.[2]

Arriving at one of the central essays, "Poets Without Laurels," we find instead a judgment of Stevens based on "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" which identifies the poet with that Puritanical fault in modern America which was responsible for the contemporary version of "pure poetry." This is a sin which Ransom cannot forgive Stevens because it seems to deny the importance of the "traditional" role of the poet in society.

> I shall try a preliminary definition of the poet's traditional function on behalf of society: he proposed to make virtue delicious. He compounded a moral effect with an aesthetic effect. The total effect was not a pure one, but it was rich, and relished highly. The name of the moral effect was goodness; the name of the aesthetic effect was beauty. Perhaps these did not have to coexist, but the planners of society saw to it that they should; they called upon the artists to reinforce morality with charm. The artists obliged.
>
> When they had done so, the public did not think of attempting to distinguish in its experience as reader the glow which was

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> aesthetic from the glow that was moral. . . . There is yet no general recognition of the possibility that an aesthetic effect may exist by itself, independent of morality or any other useful set of ideas. But the modern poet is intensely concerned with the possibility, and has disclaimed social responsibility in order to secure this pure aesthetic effect. He cares nothing, professionally, about morals, or God, or native land. He has performed a work of dissociation and purified his art.[3]

Here we see Ransom attempting to explain his implicit judgement of the "modern poet" as being less serious than the traditional poet because he does not deal with the "res publica." The "traditional" role of the poet to which he compares that of the modern is overtly didactic and exists more vividly in the minds of critics and philosophers than in reality. Plato, for example, wished that there might be an ideal poet who would mirror the requirements of his society but knew that this poet could not exist, so banished all poets instead. This is not to say that there has not been a great body of poetry throughout history which has been public, but the poetry which Plato feared and which the modern poet has been forced by circumstances of history to write is not public, but extremely personal; it is both lyric and irrational.

The problem here is that Ransom and the New Critics, in looking back to Aristotle for a model, inherited an ethical bias which made it extremely difficult for them to admit what appeared to be "pure poetry" into the canon. Ransom's crucial omission when he wrote of Stevens illustrates this problem.

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Ransom stated that it was the modern poet who was "intensely concerned" only with the "aesthetic effect" of his poetry; but in speaking of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," it is Ransom himself, the critic, who isolates for consideration only the "aesthetic effect" of the poem; and so he is able to dismiss the poem as the work of a man who cared "nothing, professionally, about morals, or God, or native land."

In some remarks on New Criticism, Mark Schorer expressed the necessity of considering a work in its wholeness:

> Modern criticism, through its exacting scrutiny of literary texts, has demonstrated with finality that in art, beauty and truth are indivisible and one. . . . The Keatsian overtones of these terms are mitigated and an old dilemma solved if for beauty we substitute form, and for truth, content. We may, without risk of loss, narrow them even more, and speak of technique and subject matter. Modern criticism has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of achieved content, the form, the work of art as work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique.
>
> When we speak of technique, then, we speak of nearly everything. For technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it.[4]

In this contemporary rephrasing of Croce, Schorer abstractly bridged the critical gap between form and content and gave an adequate justification for examining the work as monad. As a matter of theory, this works well, but in actual practice we

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find that it is not always possible to understand content from the analysis of technique. The failure of Ransom in looking at "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" illustrates this. Of this poem Ransom wrote:

> The poem has a calculated complexity, and its technical competence is so high that to study it, if you do that sort of thing, is to be happy. That it has not been studied by a multitude of persons is due to a simple consideration which strikes us at once: the poem has no moral, political, religious, or sociological values. It is not about "res publica," the public thing. The subject matter is trifling.[5]

Instead of seeing the poem's "technical competence," its "style," as being one with its "subject matter," following what Stevens indicated when he wrote, "One's style . . . is a way of objectifying one's subject," (L 838), Ransom fell victim to his own critical vocabulary which makes the distinction between form and content and saw them as distinct in the poem. Why did a fine theoretical critic like Ransom fall into this trap?

Stevens was very careful to make clear that for him this distinction between form-content did not exist in poetry. In the "Adagia," he wrote, "A change in style is a change in subject" (OP 171); this reveals his ties to the Symbolist aesthetic beginning with Baudelaire who expressed the same thing when he wrote that form and content must be considered as "deux êtres en un."[6] This indissolubility of form and content exists in the achieved work of art; it has not existed in contemporary criticism largely because the language

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of New Criticism is logical and taxonomic and so speaks of form and content separately. Criticism cannot afford, however, to consider form and content separately while looking at the work, to say of a poem, as Ransom did of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," that "its technical competence is so high," but that "The subject matter is trifling."[7]

The problem here revolves around a misunderstanding and misreading resulting from Ransom's reaction against impressionism in all its forms and from his having taken Stevens at his word when he defined himself as a "pure poet:"

> To give a sense of the vividness of life is a valid purpose for poetry. A didactic purpose justifies itself in the mind of the teacher; a philosophical purpose justifies itself in the mind of the philosopher. It is not that one purpose is as justifiable as another but that some purposes are pure, others impure. Seek those purposes that are purely the purpose of the pure poet. (OP 157)

Stevens seems to follow Pater and Valéry in this passage by asking poetry to provide "a sense of the vividness of life," which he states to be a "pure purpose." Indeed, when we compare the passages from Pater and Valéry which foreshadow it to this one of Stevens', we are struck by their similarity. First, we have this passage from the conclusion of "The Renaissance:"

> Some spend this interval [of life] in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among "the children of this world," in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of

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> love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested and otherwise, which comes naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion--that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.[8]

And from Valéry's essay, "Contemporary Poetry" we have the following:

> This is the great problem of our art: in some measure to prolong the happiness of a moment.[9]

Stevens separated himself from Pater and Valéry, however, in adding morality to their aesthetics; this is implicit even in his calling this attribute of giving "a sense of vividness to life" a "purpose." This simple naming amounts to a marked difference between his interpretation of "pure poetry" and that of Valery--who, in giving it a name, formalized a concept of poetry that had begun with Poe. However, this difference is not apparent to Ransom just as it is not apparent to us when we look, for example, at the above quoted excerpts. In order to see this very important difference, it is necessary to look at those aspects on which Stevens concentrated when he considered Valéry and the other "pure poets." Before doing this, however, it is necessary first to determine why it is so difficult to perceive this difference and then to examine briefly the ideas of pure poetry from Poe to Valéry--compare them to Stevens' idea. After this, we will return to Ransom

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and his idea of the "pure poetry" of Stevens.

The difficulty in perceiving the difference between Stevens' interpretation of "pure poetry" and that of Valery and his school results from Stevens' apparent ambivalence on the subject. As a young man at Harvard involved with the ideas of his time, Stevens wrote in his Journal:

> 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. This argument is apparent to the reason but it does not convince the fancy--which in artistic matters is often the real thing to be dealt with. Take therefore a few specific examples, such as the sun which is certainly beautiful and mighty enough to withstand the trivial adjective artistic. But its beauty is incidental and assists in making agreeable a monotonous machine. To say that stars were made to guide navigators etc. seems like stretching a point; but the real use of their beauty (which is not their excuse) is that it is a service, a food. Beauty is strength. But art--art all alone, detached, sensuous for the sake of sensuousness, not to perpetuate inspiration or thought, art that is mere art--seems to me to be the most arrant as it is the most inexcuseable rubbish.
>
> Art must fit with other things; it must be part of the system of the world. And if it finds a place in that system it will likewise find a ministry and relation that are its proper adjuncts. . . . What does not have a kinship, a sympathy, a relation, an inspiration and an indissolubility with our lives ought not, and under healthy conditions could not have a place in them (L 24-25).

This passage reflects three things about Stevens: first that in 1899, long before the critical reaction against Romanticism and the aestheticism of the nineties, Stevens felt the

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inadequacies of "art for art's sake;" second, that he had internalized certain attitudes about utility--which he connects in the quotation to the difference between "Beauty" and merely "art"--applied to poetry in which we hear the echoes of his father's voice; third, that this attitude reflects the closeness of Stevens' poetic spirit to what we later see in Ransom. Seven years later, another Journal entry reinforces these perceptions concerning the nature of poetry:

> Been reading poetry. What strikes me is the capable, the marvellous, poetic language; and the absence of poetic thought. Modern people have never failed to crown the poet that gave them poetic thought--and modern people have had to crown Hafiz and Omar--just as the ancients crowned Shelley, Browning, Tennyson. We get plenty of moods (and like them, wherever we get them, whether in novels, in poems, or talk, or paintings); and so we get figures of speech, and impressions, and superb lines, and fantastic music. But it's the mind we want to fill--with Life. We admit now that Truth is the warrior and Beauty only his tender hide, as one might say. (L 92)

Although both of these quotations reveal Stevens to be concerned with the "Truth" which lies with or beyond "Beauty," the greater number of poems in Harmonium do not seem to be concerned with Truth, but appear simply as impressions of a vivid imagination. This is the source of the ambivalence about "pure poetry." Stevens wrote many poems which pursue Truth in the terms in which he defined it--that is, tied to the world of facts, to the reality of the world outside of which he was a part. But he wrote many more poems which pursued unattached

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ideas or images--unattached, that is, to his real rubbing against the world outside of himself--which he either mistook and followed expecting them perhaps to lead to Truth or recognized as products of Fancy, abstractions clothed not blooded, but followed anyway, almost as exercise, until the next real contact with Truth was possible.

In order to see this difference between the two kinds of poetry, we have only to compare "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" to the poem which immediatley precedes it in Harmonium, "The Load of Sugar Cane." The difference between them is in the nature of the content. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," Stevens dealt with his passing into middle age as an aging Romantic--the poem is the account of the journey taken to ease the emotional pain of the experience (prompted by a particular incident) by searching for something transcendent--Truth, Poetic Beauty. "The Load of Sugar Cane" is impressionistic, following an image (of memory perhaps) in the imagination of the poet, but this image is not attached to emotion or real experience. It is attached only to mental experience; this is reflected in the quality of the poem. This is the kind of poem which earned Stevens the reputation of "pure poet" and which understandably prevented many of his critics from perceiving the difference between this kind of poetry and his "real" poetry. It is the other kind of poetry, however--the kind to which "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" belongs--, which Stevens defined as "pure poetry." We could call the difference between the two the difference

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between the "poetry of Fancy" and the "poetry of Imagination."

Stevens' "poetry of Fancy" begins from an abstract conception of a certain idea rather than from a true perception of "a relation between a man and the world." In a letter written with the self-knowledge that came with time, Stevens wrote in 1935 of this kind of poetry and its affinity to the work of Valéry:

> . . . If there is any relation in my things to Valéry's, it must come about in some such way as this:
>
> It is difficult for me to think and not to think abstractly. Consequently, in order to avoid abstraction in writing, I search out instinctively things that express the abstract and yet are not in themselves abstractions . . . my object in all this is simply to write poetry, keeping it as true as possible to myself and as near as possible to the idea that I had in mind. (L 290-91)

We must examine whether there is a true similarity between the concepts of "pure poetry" as understood by Valéry and Stevens, however, before passing judgement on the identity of Stevens' purpose and that of Valéry, which was to achieve in poetry "an essentially analytical idea."[10]

It is easy to understand Stevens' closeness to Valéry and the aesthetic models of the nineties because all of his experience, both real and literary, prepared him to follow those models. We see that it was extremely difficult for him to accept this link, however, as evidenced by his pronouncements in the above-quoted passages and also by his repeated avoidance of a direct answer when asked about his relationship to Valéry and the Symbolists. Until late in his life when he

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acknowledged reading and knowing Valéry very well (in his last year and a half he wrote two prefaces for works of Valéry's which exhibit an excellent understanding), his only answer concerning the Symbolist influence was that any affinity between his work and theirs was the result of an "unconscious" assimilation of their ideas or poetry.[11]

It was difficult for him to accept this link for two reasons--one personal and one historical. Stevens had inherited the Puritan spirit which perceived the value of poetry when it pursued Truth or the Idea of God.[12] This made him inclined to favor Arnold's perception of joy in art rather than Pater's. Stevens copied into his Journal a quotation from Senancour found in Arnold's "Notebooks;" the young poet followed it with a clear indication of his approval:

> "la destination de l'homme est d'accroître le sentiment de la joie, de féconder l'énergie expansive, et de combattre, dans tout ce qui sent, le principe de l'avilissement et les [des] douleurs."
>
> As far as one thing by itself can be true, that is true, I think; but for the word "destination" I should substitute "virtue." Yet is is only one phase of "infinite" wisdom, like the fear of the Lord etc. (L 87-88)

The second reason Stevens found it difficult to acknowledge his following in the steps of those who wrote poetry for the sake of writing poetry came later with the reality of World War I--a fact which informed the work of many of his contemporaries but which did not touch him.[13] This is not a

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fault of his but only a result of his remaining in America while Eliot, Pound and others were in Europe and England. In The Twenties, Edmund Wilson describes this difference in experience in this way:

> In Europe the war was like a part of the history of the human race; in America it was Plattsburg plus a big advertising campaign to sell a new breakfast food or a new kind of uplift.[14]

Because of the combination of these reasons, Stevens viewed "pure poetry," Valéry, the Symbolists, and the Romantics as well, with a certain eye which tended to "misread" their purposes. Because he was the poetic heir of the Nineteenth Century, he had to modify what that century offered him in order to make it palatable to himself as an inheritor of Calvin's in the New World during a period of catastrophe. In misreading what "pure poetry" was, Stevens accomodated it to a world which again had need of moral purpose; but in translating his new conception of "purity" into poetry abstraction often preceded reality. The result was his "poetry of Fancy" which at its worst was "mental impressionism" and at its best became poetry about the act of writing poetry which did reveal its tie to Valéry in its self consciousness.[15]

The main difference between Harmonium and Stevens' later volumes is that it is tied to the Nineteenth Century and to "pure poetry" in a way unlike the later volumes. When Harmonium was published, Stevens believed in the conception of the "whole" work after the models of Baudelaire and Mallarmé.[16]

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The most successful poems of Harmonium (among which I include "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "The Emperor of Ice Cream," "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," though critics like Bloom, insistent on Stevens as a poet of the American Sublime, name "The Snow Man," "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," "A Jar in Tennessee," and "Domination of Black" as marking Stevens' canon, while others, for various reasons, focus on "The Comedian as the Letter C," really an apprentice piece in every sense, though it provides an intended outline of the poet's career, as the most successful poem of the volume) reflect a playing with language and form, a joyousness in the sounds of words and the effects of them on the real ear of the reader or listener that is absent from later volumes. This indulgence in the sensual aspect of language, in its "gaiety," was close to that aspect of pure poetry which Baudealire and Mallarmé inherited from Poe. This allowed Mallarmé to create rhyming words without meaning to fit the rhythm and effect of the poem,[17] just as Stevens later created "rattapallax" to name the sound of thunder (though we must note that Stevens' word does have meaning within the context of the poem--a point which has a great deal to do with Stevens' adaptation of pure poetry to his own needs). Another example presents itself with "The Emperor of Ice Cream." The first impression of this poem--

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the impression which stays with us and haunts us--is the product of what was learned from Poe about the impact of strong rhythms, sounds and brevity in a poem. Its apparently nonsensical title first appears there only to give pleasure, as ice-cream does. If in some part of us we recognize a poem by what Poe stated, "a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul,"[18] then "The Emperor of Ice Cream" strikes us as the prime poem. Yet we know that there is more to it than its exciting effect.

In the same letter in which he describes his relationship to Valéry, Stevens recognizes Harmonium as more successful than Ideas of Order and acknowledges the perspicacity of one of his critics. Apropos of these things, he makes some very revealing comments:

> There is in the last number of Southern Review or Quarterly, an extremely intelligent analysis of my work by Howard Baker. No one before has ever come as close to me as Mr. Baker does in that article. He is perfectly right, as you and I know, in thinking that Harmonium was a better book that Ideas of Order, notwithstanding the fact that Ideas of Order probably contains a small group of poems better than anything in Harmonium. But however striking Mr. Baker's analysis may be, what he does not see is the sort of world in which I am living. If I could create an actuality, it would be quite a different world in a good many ways from the world about us. It is difficult to make much of this in personal terms, because there is nothing that kills an idea like expressing it in personal terms. Whether or not all men are enemies, all egotisms are voluntarily antipathetic. In that world the poet would be the Metropolitan Rabbi, so to speak. We are not beginning to get out of the world what it will ultimately yield through poets. (L 292)

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The one fault Stevens picks out is that the critic "does not see the sort of world in which [he is] I am living." Since Stevens wanted his poetry to be "the expression of a relation between a man and the world," not having that world perceived by one he saw as an astute critic points to a serious flaw in either the poetry or in the criticism. Since the actual world in which he lived has not been perceived through his poetry by critics since then, we must put at least part of the blame for this with Stevens himself. The world which critics have perceived through the poetry is a totally intellectual one.[19] Since that world is contained in the poet--is identifiable with him--, it does not satisfy us to say that this is the world Stevens meant to reveal when he made the distinction between "a man and the world." The only way that actual world can be perceived--and this actual world provides a very important and necessary context for the poetry--is through careful attention to those poems which are "poems of Imagination" and by recourse to his letters, which we are now fortunate to have. If this actual world is not perceived, the impression of Stevens and his poetry that is left is that he was an intellectual hedonist who wrote poems about writing poetry and who was therefore a direct descendant of Mallarmé and Valéry.

Because Stevens was so unwilling to express his ideas and desires in personal terms (as he expresses in the above-quoted passage as well as in numerous other passages from letters, Journal entries and essays) as a result of his Calvinism and

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his Victorian attitudes about self-revelation, he found the concentration on the act of writing poetry of the propounders of "pure poetry" extremely attractive. In being able to focus on himself as maker of poems rather than on himself as thinking and feeling experiencer in his circumscribed world, he was able at once to combine what was in his mind and an utilitarian purpose--to discover how and why poems are written--with the self-indulgence he enjoyed but was unable to accept without guilt and chastisement of some kind.

However, at those moments in his life when actual circumstances impinged so much on his consciousness that they could not be dispelled, those circumstances became attached to his imagination, and his imagination then made poetry out of them; at these moments Stevens wrote his "poems of Imagination." Learning how to read these poems which cry out their occasions, we learn how to read those lesser "poems of Fancy" as well and to distinguish their occasions as being mentally whispered rather than actually cried.

The "poems of Fancy" and the "poems of Imagination" reflect Stevens' relationship to the idea of "pure poetry" in different ways. In the "poems of Fancy" Stevens knowingly became one of the "fops of fancy" who "in their poems leave/ Memorabilia of the mystic spouts;" that is, he recorded his relationship to an internal mental world--"mystic"--rather than to the real world in which we all live. Like Mallarmé and Valéry (and Yeats in his later poetry), this poet is not a man of the

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world but is separated from it. Yet even in this, Stevens attempted something which these "pure poets" did not--he attempted to express the moral purpose of exploring the metaphysical in terms that were accessible to all who had been able to understand his language. This is quite distinct from the "pure purposes" of Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, or Valéry. Or, perhaps it is not that this is a distinctly different purpose, but that Stevens made explicit what was implicit but not worked out in the poetry of the other pure poets.

In "The Poetic Principle," Poe stated that the end of art is pleasure, not truth."[20] In his concluding sentences, however, he wrote:

> It by no means follows, however, that the incitement of Passion, or the precepts of Duty, or even the lesson of Truth, may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve, incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work:--but the true artist will always continue to tone them down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem.[21]

Baudelaire, too, saw the pursuit of Truth, of knowledge, as antithetical to poetry.[22] Following Poe, he defined the object of poetry as the aspiration toward Beauty (in a quotation which will be echoed by Pater, Valéry and Stevens):

> Ainsi le principe de la poésie est, strictement et simplement, l'aspiration humaine vers une Beauté supérieure, et la manifestation de ce principe est dans un enthousiasme, un enlèvement de l'âme; enthousiasme tout à fait indépendent de la passion, qui est l'ivresse du coeur, et de la vérité, qui est la pâture de la raison.[23]

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But in another piece on Victor Hugo, Baudelaire suggested that there are certain aspects of the pursuit of Truth which are the proper subjects for the poet. In this passage, he hinted at a moral purpose in searching to express the "possible" which Stevens later elucidated in his work:

> . . . mais s'abandonner à toutes les rêveries suggérés par le spectacle infini de la vie sur la terre et dans les cieux, est le droit légitime du premier venu, conséquemment du poëte, à qui il est accordé alors de traduire, dans un langage magnifique, autre que la prose et la musique les conjectures éternelles de la curieuse humanité.
>
> En decrivant ce qui est, le poëte se dégrade et descend au rang de professeur. En racontant le possible, il reste fidèle à sa fonction; il est une âme collective qui interroge, qui pleure, qui espère, et qui devine quelquefois.[24]

And in "L'Art Philosophique," when Baudelaire wrote, "Qu'est-ce que l'art pur suivant la conception moderne? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur a l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même,"[25] he provided a definition of "pure" art which prefigured Stevens' definition of poetry as "the expression of a relation between a man and the world."

Mallarmé, who in his poetry pursued most purely "pure" purposes in aspiring toward the effect of music, also provided a seed which grew with Stevens. In one line from "Sur Le Beau et L'Utile," we have, "Le Beau et L'Utile, ayez ce terme moyen le Vrai."[26]

Finally, from Valéry's "Pure Poetry," which first defines the role of the poet scientifically as "an exploration of that

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whole domain of sensibility which is governed by language," there is a brief passage which likens the poet's task to that of the theologian:

> What is more theological than to discuss, for example, inspiration, work, or the value of intuition compared with that of the artifices of art? Are not these problems quite comparable to the celebrated theological problems of Grace and Works? Similarly, there are problems in poetry which, by setting in opposition the rules laid down and fixed by tradition and the immediate date of personal experience or intuition, are absolutely analogous to the problems one finds in the domain of theology between private judgement, the direct knowledge of divine things on the one hand, and on the other the teachings of various religions. The texts of scripture, and the forms of dogma. . . .[27]

In each of these propounders of "pure poetry," there are these elements which reflect at least a passing concern with the moral or didactic purpose of poetry. That none of these poets succeeded or desired to succeed in actually combining a moral with an aesthetic purpose is a fact of the historical and personal particulars (not easily separable without extensive analysis) of each poet. Stevens seemed to sense in himself this covert need for moral purpose and so made explicit those "impure" concerns with Truth and the relationship of Utility to it and Beauty found in the "pure poets."

In what I have called Stevens' "poems of Fancy," there is this attempt (which he described explicitly in the above-quoted letter) to find concrete expression for abstract ideas. Stevens related this attempt to the aesthetic purposes of Poe,

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Pater, Valéry in his desire to achieve a "freshening of life," but he wanted to do this by teaching an order; he thus attempted to combine the two opposing strains--what J.E. Spingarn called "the sexes"[28] --of art. In the following passage which continues and closes the letter from which I have quoted (on pages 121 and 124), Stevens expresses this directly:

> If poetry introduces order, and every competent poem introduces order, and if order means peace, even though that particular peace is an illusion, is it any less an illusion than a good many other things that everyone high and low now-a-days concedes to be no longer of any account? Isn't a freshening of life a thing of consequence? It would be a great thing to change the status of the poet. It may be that the conventional attitude toward poets is deserved by the existing race of poets. But then, it would be a left-handed job in the course of creating a new world to create a new race of poets. (L 293)

In contrast to the "poems of Fancy" in which all the terms refer to a wholly mental or imagined reality (even if those terms are concrete), in the "poems of Imagination" the terms refer to a world outside the mind of the poet, to a world which depends on "that first, foremost law," where there is death and pain, to a world in which the poet actually lived as we all do. The difference between Harmonium and the later volumes is that in Harmonium there are a number of these "poems of Imagination" while in the later volumes the "poems of Fancy" predominate.

During the period of Harmonium, the poet, like his hero Crispin, was still capable of conceiving his life to be "an up

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and down between two elements," between a life of the mind and a life which combined mind with feeling, but after Harmonium and middle-age his wish to become "a thinking stone" became more and more of a self-fulfilling prophecy. This was probably due to a combination of circumstances, not the least of which might have been the critical reaction to his first volume. If during the writing of Harmonium Stevens joyfully projected "a masque/ Beyond the planets," and more than occasionally indulged his delight in the sounds and shapes of his words and images, after the critical naming of him as a hedonist, as a Twentieth Century aesthete, Stevens changed his mind about the projected "Whole of Harmonium" and followed the more austere road indicated by the title of "Ideas of Order."

In the "poems of Imagination," Stevens did what Eliot in his essay, "From Poe to Valéry," stated could not be done: he carried "the art poétique of which we find the germ in Poe, and which bore fruit in the work of Valéry"[29] well into the Twentieth Century. However, Stevens' application of the methods of "pure poetry" in the "poems of Imagination" represent a misreading of Valéry and the French Symbolists which, curiously enough, corrects their own misreading of Poe.

Eliot pointed out that the adoption of Poe by Baudelaire and his compatriots indicated that they had perceived something essential about Poe which English language speakers tended to overlook; this element is Poe's "exceptional feeling for the incantatory element in poetry," in the "immediate and

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undeveloping magic of verse" which "stirs primitive feelings."[30] The French were able to gloss over what Eliot indicated as Poe's shortcoming--that Poe stressed the necessity for the intensity of mood created by the incantatory element because he was incapable of writing a modulated poem which would have reflected a variety of moods--because they did not know English well enough to perceive the limited meaning through the primitive form. They did not perceive that Poe's poetry evoked a primitive response because Poe was primitive, that he conceived his forms and rhythms in his madness and then later attempted to give a lucid and rational explanation for what was irrational. The result of this was that they attempted to achieve by intellectual application of formal theories that incantatory effect which they believed Poe had consciously constructed, but which Poe produced naively from the brutality of his emotions. In attempting to understand how to create this effect, the French poets, especially Mallarmé and Valéry explored the isolated phenomenon of musicality as idea and became lost in the metaphysical aspects of creation which came to be associated with "pure poetry."

As was mentioned earlier, one part of Stevens found this feature of "pure poetry" extremely congenial because it allowed him to explore and write poetry without becoming the self-indulgent Romantic he feared he would become if he gave into his impulses to become a poet. When he wrote in this spirit, the products were "poems of Fancy." There was another part

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of him, however,--the part which perceived what made "man-poets"[31]--which knew that if poetry were to fulfill some vital need, it must be bawdy and passionate and "make windows wince." It was this part which heard beyond the voices of the pure poets stressing in theoretical phrases the importance of musicality in poetry the rhythms of Poe remembered from his childhood.[32] What Stevens recognized in Poe was the "irrational element" which he allowed to overtake him in his writing of poetry. A few comments casually made in letters dating from different periods in his life show that Stevens knew Poe quite well.[33] One passage in particular reflects that he understood Poe's irrationality to be a good:

> Nowadays, when so many people no longer believe in supernatural things, they find a substitute in the stranger and more freakish phenomena of the mind--hallucinations, mysteries and the like. Hence, the revival of Poe.--. . .--Poe illustrates, too, the effect of stimulus. When I complain of the "bareness"--I have in mind, very often, the effect of order and regularity, the effect of moving in a groove. We all cry for life. It is not to be found in railroading to an office and then railroading back.--I do not say the life we cry for is, as a question of merit, good or bad.--But it is obviously more exciting to be Poe than to be a lesser "esquire." You see the effect of the railroading in my letters: the reflection of so many walls, the effect of moving in a groove.--But books make up. They shatter the groove, as far as the mind is concerned. They are like so many fantastic lights filling plain darkness with strange colors. . . . Do you remember--. . . --I like to write most when the young Ariel sits, as you know how, at the head of my pen and whispers to me--many things: for I like his fancies, and his occasional music. (L 122-23)

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Here in one of those early letters to Elsie before their marriage, Stevens reveals a very important part of his poetic self--that he desired to be romantically carried away by passion, by inspiration, by Ariel with his fancies and music, in the way he imagined Poe had been. It is in this spirit that an older Stevens wrote that, "In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and the images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all." (OP 161).

What Stevens learned from Poe is revealed paradigmatically in "The Emperor of Ice Cream." We remember that poem with its unrelenting rhythm in its entirety, not as a poem which says something about writing poetry but only as a poem--even if it does say something about writing poetry (Baudelaire stated that with Poe, "A poem does not say something--it <u>is</u> something");[34] we remember the poem because of the impact it makes as a poem not because of what it is about. "The Emperor of Ice Cream" also reveals that Stevens--unlike the French admirers of Poe's incantatory quality, who wrote of it but never actually achieved it in their poetry--could achieve that incantatory effect <u>and</u>, in addition, could substantiate that effect with real meaning.[35] In perceiving the reality of Poe through his poetry, Stevens understood the real importance of musicality in poetry was not really to attain the pure abstraction and mathematical beauty of music, but to reveal "the irrational element," a primitive emotion or a complex, sophisiticated emotion--but an emotion, the irrational, nonetheless.

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This is what Stevens meant when he likened poetry to music and wrote that, "The poet seems to confer his identity on the reader. It is easiest to recognize this when listening to music--I mean this sort of thing: the transference." (OP 158).

In taking his lesson from Poe, Stevens also realized the failure of Poe to be that he was unconcerned with subject matter or meaning as long as he achieved his desired emotional effect. What Stevens attempted in his most successful "poems of Imagination" was to attach the effect to some proper meaning which he found in his actual experience.

Poe mastered the evocation of emotion in his listeners, but did not particularly concern himself in his poetry with the "thought and action, which emotion brings about, and out of emotion arises."[36] In contrast, Stevens, like Eliot, realized that "the function of poetry can never be simply to arouse these same emotions [which prompted the writing of the poem] in the audience of the poet."[37] Stevens' proper meaning in those poems which do begin from "emotions experienced by human beings in their relations to themselves, to each other, to divine beings, and to the world about them"[38] always concerns the "thought and action" prompted by the emotion. The clearest example of this is "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" where the emotional pain of realizing the full meaning of his middle-age (because of his wife's sexual rejection of him) provides the impetus for the series of poetic mediations which follow and, more importantly, provides the impetus for the action of writing

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the poem. (For a full analysis of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," see Chapter 10 of Section II). This attention to "thought and action" in his poetry separates him from Valéry and the other "pure poets" who followed Poe.

Even though he is extremely self-conscious, like Valéry, Stevens is a very different kind of "pure poet" because, unlike Valéry, his concern is still with subject matter. Valéry's concentration on the poem as pure effect is derived from his descendency from Baudelaire and Mallarmé who either misread Poe or failed to read him fully. Stevens, on the other hand, was quite capable of reading Poe fully, seeing both the attractiveness of the possibilities that could grow out of following him as Valéry had done, as well as understanding the irony that there would eventually be a "failure of feeling" resulting from following in the steps of the poet who was concerned only with feeling and effect. So, the model we find Stevens followed instead of Poe was Poe's master, Coleridge--who, like Poe, wrote that a poem defines itself "by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth,"[39] but who very intelligently inserted the qualifier "immediate" before his object.

What Coleridge--and after him the Abbé Brémond and Eliot[40]--perceived about the purpose of poetry was that it could not be wholly "pure" even though it needed elements of la poésie pure to evoke that "immediate object pleasure" which would, in turn, open the way for "that willing suspension of disbelief which

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constitutes poetic faith."[41] Poetic faith is necessary so that the reader can open himself to the "fluent mundo" of the poet and believe in it as though it is reality, just as one with Christian faith believes in the reality of heaven, hell, the angels and God. This faith enables the reader to partake of the Imagination of the poet and to re-create a fictional world where the poet lives in his own imagination. This fictional world is the "matter" of the poem which the "manner" of form has prepared us, the readers, to perceive. This "matter," like all matter, like nature, is "impure"--it is not wholly Beautiful; only the "manner" can be wholly beautiful and provide the "peace" which reality cannot. Stevens, following Coleridge, understood this; in the following passage from the Biographia Literaria, we can see the seeds of Stevens' definition of the poet, and of his theory of imagination, as well as a description before-the-fact of the reasons why Stevens found in the harmonium such an appropriate metaphor for his actualization of the theory in his poems:

> The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. This power, first put into action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control, laxis effertur habenis, reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete;

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> the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment over awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.[42]

Two elements from Coleridge's description of the activity of the poet strike us as particularly relevant to our present study: first, his denoting the will and understanding as the subtle governors of imagination means that the placing of matter before manner, of nature before art, of the poem before the poet, reflects an essentially ethical choice; second, his perception that it is the imagination, "put into action by the will and understanding," which reconciles opposites--imposes order where there is most chaos--reveals both his ties to the Eighteenth Century with its belief in balance and measure as well as his identity with the spirit of Romanticism which recognized the necessary power of Imagination.

Both of these elements, in turn, suggest the reason why Stevens would have found Coleridge's early approach to "pure poetry" (Coleridge, like Poe, Mallarmé and Valéry later, not only states that the object of poetry is Beauty not Truth, but also places the importance of the poem before that of the poet)[43] much closer to his spirit than Poe's, even though he may have borrowed more "technique" in the musicality of poetry from Poe than from Coleridge. In particular reference to Stevens'

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poems, these elements are important because understanding them enables us to read Stevens' "pure poetry" impurely adding the "matter" of meaning. When, for example, we remember that the Imagination reconciles "a more than usual state of emotion with a more than usual order," we will not dismiss "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" as simpy an impressionistic piece "remarkable for its technical competence" but without meaning ("its subject matter is trifling"); we will, instead, see the "more than usual order" of its form, its "technical competence," as indicating a "more than usual state of emotion," and we will go on to discover what that emotion is by re-creating the world of the poet.

Following in the tradition of Coleridge, Robert Penn Warren in his essay, "Pure and Impure Poetry,"[44] noted that "poetry arises from a recalcitrant and contradictory context; and finally involves the context."[45] In dramatic poetry, as he illustrated, the context is always provided by the poet. In lyric poetry, however, it is difficult to perceive the context unless we allow ourselves to become "enlightened" impressionistic critics--enlightened with the knowledge that our impressions merely allow us to temporarily re-create in ourselves the emotions and thoughts of the poet at the moment when he wrote the poem. Studying the formal tensions in the poet objectively, like scientists, might let us know that the poet experienced a certain intensity of emotion apropos of his subject, but it will not enable us to participate in the poem as a complete

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act which began sometime in the past and continues to be completed in the eternal presents of its readers. After describing how there cannot be one definition of "pure poetry" because all poetry aspires to be pure in different ways, and in closing his essay, Warren cited Coleridge on this important aspect of poetry:

> a good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must, as Coleridge puts it, make the reader into 'an active creative being,'. . . And all of this adds up to the fact that the structure is a dramatic structure, a movement through action toward rest, through complication toward simplicity of effect.[46]

Warren also noted that anything that the poet has in his experience can enter into the poem.[47] This bit of information does not facilitate the critic's task of supplying the work with its proper context since it states that "anything" in the poet's life can provide context for the poem. Warren here generalized a perception of Santayana's concerning the place of philosophy in poetry (a concern which occupied Stevens):

> philosophy, when a poet is not mindless, enters into his poetry, since it has entered into his life; or, rather, the detail of things and the detail of ideas pass equally into his verse, when both alike lie in the path that has led him to the ideal. To object to theory in poetry would be like objecting to words there; for words, too, are symbols without the sensuous character of the things they stand for; and yet it is only by the net of new connections which words throw over things, in recalling them, that poetry arises at all. Poetry is an attenuation, a rehandling, an echo of crude experience; it is itself a theoretic vision of things at arm's length.[48]

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We know that Stevens shared Santayana's and Warren's feelings about the place of philosophy in poetry and that he often tried in his poetry to give concrete expression to what he thought of as philosophical ideas--"insights of a special kind into reality" (OP 238). However, he did not think that philosophy alone could provide the context from which meaning could be derived. In his short essay, "On Poetic Truth," Stevens expressed this in the following manner:

> There is in reality, whether we think of it as animate or inanimate, human or subhuman, an aspect of individuality at which many forms of rational explanation stop short. . . .
> . . . poetry has to do with reality in that concrete and individual aspect of it which the mind can never tackle altogether on its own terms, with matter that is foreign and alien in a way in which abstract systems, ideas in which we detect an inherent pattern, a structure that belongs to the ideas themselves, can never be. (OP 236-37).

In this passage, Stevens directs the attention of his reader-critic to one very specific element of reality which he defines as the matter of poetry--it is that "concrete and individual aspect." What Stevens described here in abstract terms is nothing more than what he defined more concretely elsewhere as the "relation between a man and the world." The key to understanding Stevens' poetry is knowing what Stevens understood as that "relation." In order to understand that, it is necessary to know as much as possible about the two elements of the "relation"--the man and the world in which he lived as they are disclosed in the poetry.

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In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens provided an important clue as to how this "relation" could be perceived by his reader-critics. In this essay he made explicit what was implicit in both the titling of his first volume "Harmonium," and in his desire to have all of his work titled "The Whole of Harmonium: The Grand Poem." These titles reveal his ties to the Symbolists, to the "pure poets" of the Nineteenth Century, whose aesthetic demanded that a reader of their work see all of their poems as parts of one larger poem or book and that this larger work was to be understood musically.[49] The entire work was to be understood as a "fiction"[50] and the language in which it was written was an "instrument" designed for realizing that "fiction." The "fiction" represented an abstraction from actual experience in attempting to express the aspiration toward the ideal felt by the poet throughout his life. The symbolic "fiction" shared with music the statement of a theme which together with its variations would appear at intervals within the whole work. The theme can be perceived clearly at various points within the whole work and appears as variation of one kind or another continually throughout the work. However, only by careful attention to the whole work can the theme in its full development be grasped. Stevens followed through in this aspect of writing "pure poetry," even though he appeared to move away from this aesthetic when he abandoned the project for "The Whole of Harmonium" and instead issued separate volumes beginning with "Ideas of Order."

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However, as we shall see, Stevens never actually gave up his original intention; he only modified it.

In the aesthetic models of both the Romantics and the Symbolists, Stevens recognized an awareness of the importance of the irrational--an aspect of life and poetry which had not received proper attention since the time of the Greeks.[51] In his essay on this subject, written and delivered as a preface to the reading of some of his poems sometime in the 1930's, Stevens called for a kind of criticism (yet to be written) which would take this important element of poetry and life into account:

> It will be time enough to adopt a more systematic usage (of the term "irrational"), when the critique of the irrational comes to be written, by whomever it may be that this potent subject ultimately engages. We must expect in the future incessant activity by the irrational and in the field of the irrational. (OP 229).

Stevens' expression of the irrational was close to that of the Greeks and involved the creation of a "fiction," a mythology, which acknowledged and illustrated its existence. "The greatest piece of fiction [is] Greek mythology. Classical but Greek above Latin." (OP 178). In addition to providing an explanation for external natural phenomena, what the Greeks did in creating their gods and heroes was to give concrete expression to individual irrational impulses: instinctual desires, wishes, dreams, hopes and fears. The Greeks continued to recognize the irrational in different forms throughout their

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history; this most rational of all states, where our ideas of philosophy originated, fully accepted the existence and power of the irrational[52]--unlike America which imitated the ideal of rationality, but failed, until this century, to acknowledge the power and present of the irrational.

In wanting to create the "supreme fiction," Stevens followed the impulse of the Greeks in understanding the full meaning of what he expressed when he wrote that "Poetry must be irrational." (OP 162). The essay on the irrational gives directions as to how the irrational can be perceived and dealt with by the critic. In making the distinction between the "true subject of the poem" and the "poetry of the subject," he asked his reader-critic to see the irrational creation beneath the process of creation--as the Greeks saw Zeus' reality and believed in it rather than how and why they created him. In this essay, Stevens asked the reader-critic to focus his attention not on "the Hegelian process" of "the rational mind which we recognize as irrational in the sense that it takes place unaccountably," but on "what comes of it."

Stevens here directed his reader to pay attention to "the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs:" this is his definition of the irrational element. Stevens specifically discouraged the kind of reading of his poetry which focusses on the process of writing poetry and which results in a portrait of the poet as a man who wrote poems about writing poetry, like Valéry. In

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elucidating what this "transaction" is and how it could be recognized, Stevens named the object of criticism to be the "subjective reality" of the poet (which in becoming poetry has been mythologized like the reality which the gods of the Greeks symbolized):

> All of us understand what is meant by the transposition of an objective reality to a subjective reality. The transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet is precisely that. (OP 217).

In this essay Stevens made his sole reference in prose to Freud, almost in an offhand manner, as being "one of the great figures of the world," and in so doing pointed out in another way how his reader-critics could see the "subjective reality" through the symbolic surface of the poems. Since the poet has already given form to his irrational element in having created his "supreme fiction," he is like both the patient and analyst in having created a new personality, which like the "supreme fiction," is mythological--it takes all of the irrational elements and uses reason to explain them. This doesn't mean that the end product--i.e., the "supreme fiction" or the analyzed personality--will be completely rational. On the contrary, the finished product represents what comes of the reason straining against the irrational. The parallel to this can be understood in the characters of the Greek gods. They are not fully rational but are subject to as many irrationalities as their earthy inventors. This analytic process is the same one which Coleridge described as the work of the Imagination

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and which requires the subjective participation of the reader in order to be understood.

Stevens' reader-critic must read all of Stevens' work as one piece of fiction; he cannot isolate only one poem for consideration without reference to the whole work. Stevens' work demands this in order to be properly understood. What we discover when we do this is the total form which the poet's irrationality has taken when subjected to all the faculties of his mind. When we immerse ourselves in that "fluent mundo," which is the total form all the poems together finally take, we yield to a mythological identity created by that form ("The poet seems to confer his identity on the reader. It is easiest to recognize this when listening to music--I mean this sort of thing: the transference.") which is, at the same time, the body of that mythological figure, the poet. ("The body is the great poem.")

It is only by allowing ourselves to be controlled by the effects that each of the poems create that we can perceive the whole form. In order to participate as Coleridge would have us do--and so we can feel the reality of the poet--, we must supply the human emotional context in which the poems represent moments of lucid crystallization of the poet's experience. In Stevens' case, his experience becomes more and more mental as his life goes on. The more coldly philosophical he becomes in his poems, the more human we become in reading. We find ourselves inventing, creating, a fictional life for the poet

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because of the sweetness which first attracted us in Harmonium and which occasionally reappears in the same "bawdy" manner in his later poetry. When we have finished reading the whole work, we realize that what we have done is mythologized our poet--we have given him body in our imaginations so that we can understand the natural phenomena of his mind, which are represented by his poems. In this way we create our poet-hero, what Stevens called "major man." This is the "supreme fiction" which we have created. But we can only perceive this by yielding wholly to the work.

Because he demanded this kind of reading in order to be perceived, Stevens produced many ironies issuing from the tension between his early and continued expressed intention not to indulge his personality in poetry, and the result of carefully reading his work which forces the reader to create the poet's personality again and again in order to read his poems as poems. Ironically, Stevens emerges as one of the poets most concerned with his self and the place of poetry in completing and expressing that self and its desires rather than as a poet concerned with some other purpose having to do with philosophy, religion, or politics. However, again ironically, the expression of his self is profoundly involved with those other purposes because it reflects his time and circumstances without directed interference. The difficulty in reading Stevens' poetry derives from the fact that unless we have read all the poems as one book and looked at the whole

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work as one form, we cannot determine how we are to read the individual poems.

Because Stevens was so outwardly reticent to reveal his personality, the ways he had of communicating his "pure purpose"--which, on the deepest level, was to create himself as a mythological being--were very devious. As was mentioned earlier, in Harmonium we see the poet, as he saw himself, fluctuating between two elements--between two ways of writing poetry, between two ways of being. One way, which he externally rejected, was to be "the poet"--flamboyant, playful, sensual. The other way was to be "the poet-teacher" which he externally chose to become, thus fulfilling his need for a didactic purpose, exploring and communicating the function of poetry for himself and others. In one way he was like Poe; in the other, like Valéry. In one way, he wrote "poems of Imagination;" in the other, "poems of Fancy." However, even though the "pure poet" seemed to be rejected when the idea for "The Whole of Harmonium" was given up and Ideas of Order indicated his then expressed purpose, the "pure poet" simply went underground. The poetry of the "pure poet" became more and more hermetic with levels which revealed him buried under the many levels of the teacher.

When the "pure poet" went underground, he took with him what he had learned from the pure poets who had preceded him. He had learned from them the beauty of using symbols on many different levels and had learned, as well, that in order for

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the proper meaning of the symbols used by the poet to be understood, the reader had to learn that language of symbols and discover to what each of the symbols corresponded. This clearly followed Baudelaire with his "correspondences," and Mallarmé with his insistence that the language of poetry was like a code[53] which was only accessible to the "initiates;" it was also related to other Symbolist poets like Rimbaud. Stevens was familiar with this Symbolist concept of poetic language as a code made from the interaction of the irrational with the rational, as evidenced by his remarks in one section of "The Irrational Element in Poetry" where he follows Charles Mauron who, in writing of Baudelaire's use of symbol, stressed that in order to discover the key to the symbolic language of a poet, one had to follow the poet's obsessions--in the same way that in attempting to break a code, it is necessary to discover which letter or sign appears most frequently and so corresponds to our "e."

Following the Symbolists, Stevens' work is written in a code. The code is not arbitrary, nor is it nonsensical. Indeed, the language of the code has its own external meaning or meanings which serve as insurance that the deeper meaning will remain well hidden from those who are not properly initiated. There are many hints which lead to the discovery of the key, however, and they begin with the original intended title of "The Whole of Harmonium," and continue with specific references to Chinese poetry within the poems, to the most

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open statement of it in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The key to Stevens poetry provides a clear and direct statement of the "pure purpose" of which he speaks but which he never openly names or defines in either his poetry or his prose, thus leaving critics to equate his "pure purpose" with the aesthetically "pure purpose" of the other pure poets.

In tracing the history of the harmonium (Chapter 4), it was pointed out that this instrument descended from the sheng, a Chinese instrument made from a gourd. In many poems there are evidences of direct and indirect influence from Chinese and Japanese poetry.[54] As examples, there is Stanza III of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" ("Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese/ Sat tittivating by their mountain pools. . . ." etc.); there are many titles which with their images reflect the titles and images of Chinese poetry, like "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores," "Jasmine's Beautiful Thoughts underneath the Willow," "Landscape With Boat," and "Late Hymn from the Myrrh Mountain;" there are those poems which in their form reflect the Westerner's interpretation and adaptation of Sino-Japanese forms, like "Six Significant Landscapes," or "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (clearly influenced by Hiroshige, Hokusai, and Utamaro).[55] The play, "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise," also reveals Stevens' tie to some idea of China and the Chinese, as well as Crispin's "cloak of China" in "The Comedian as the Letter C." There are also many letters which express Stevens' curiosity about

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Chinese poetry. The earliest, written to Elsie Moll in 1909, is perhaps the most revealing:

> (. . .)--You wonder what I have been doing tonight. Well, I continued my superficial study of Mr. Okakura's book, and read a great deal besides. Then I went to an exhibition chiefly of tapestry. But there were some antiquated musical instruments that were amusing. One had sixteen strings. . . .
>
> I do not know if you feel as I do about a place so remote and unknown as China--the irreality of it. So much so, that the little realities of it seem wonderful and beyond belief.--I have just been reading about the Chinese feeling about landscape. Just as we have certain traditional subjects that our artists delight to portray (like "Washington Crossing the Delaware" or "Mother and Child" etc. etc.) so the Chinese have certain aspects of nature, of landscape, that have become traditional. A list of those aspects would be as fascinating as those lists of "Pleasant Things" I used to send. Here is the list (upon my soul!)--
>
> > The Evening Bell from a Distant Temple
> > Sunset Glow over a Fishing Village
> > Fine Weather after Storm at a Lonely Mountain Town
> > Homeward-Bound Boats off a Distant Shore
> > The Autumn Moon over Lake Tung-t'ing
> > Wild Geese on a Sandy Plain
> > Night Rain in Hsiao-Hsiang.
>
> This is one of the most curious things I ever saw, because it is so comprehensive. Any twilight picture is included under the first title, for example. "It is just that silent hour when travellers say to themselves, 'The day is done,' and to their ears from the distance the expected sound of the evening bell."--And last of all is my package of strange things from the East, a little poem written centuries ago by Wang-an-shih:

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> "It is midnight; all is silent in the house: the water-clock has stopped. But I am unable to sleep because of the beauty of the trembling shapes of the spring-flowers, thrown by the moon upon the blind."

> I don't know of anything more beautiful than that anywhere, or more Chinese. . .--I am going to poke around more or less in the dust of Asia for a week or two and have no idea what I shall disturb and bring to light.-- Curious thing, how little we know about Asia, and all that. It makes me wild to learn it all in a night. . . . (L 137-38)[56]

In this letter there are a number of things which are of interest: the association of the poet's interest in China and things Chinese with a fascination with musical instruments (it is possible that a sheng was exhibited as one of the "antiquated musical instruments") is important because of his later use of an instrument derived from the Chinese sheng as his original controlling metaphor; the poet's attraction to the "irreality" of China makes its "realities," like its poems, intrigue him; the relation he intuits between the Chinese poet and his landscape is a relation he will adopt and cultivate to an extreme degree; the kinds of titles the poet notes and his understanding of their "comprehensive" quality prefigure his use and application of "the abstract" in poetry; finally, the poem of Wang-an-shih which he copied and called so "beautiful" manages its images in an impressionistic way which Stevens will follow most closely and expand in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."

There are other references to Chinese poetry as well, but none is as descriptive of his interest as this one. Yet, each

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is interesting because of the light it sheds on the place of this major influence on Stevens' poetry and poetics. The references subsequent to that quoted above are brief, but cover the entire range of Stevens' career which indicates an abiding and meaningful interest.[57] Early, in 1922, there is this remark, "For a poet to have even a second-hand contact with China is a great matter" (L 229). About a month later, we have this in a letter to Harriet Monroe, "Is it the case, as it seems to be, that there is no vanity in China?" (L 231). The second question helps us to perceive one of the aspects of China and Chinese poetry that most fascinated Stevens--that there could be "comprehensive" and yet extremely concrete and personal poems written without apparent "vanity." This must have greatly intrigued the poet who wanted both to indulge his romanticism and yet not indulge personality. Later, in 1935, in a rare direct answer to a question concerning influence on him, Stevens admitted, "Yes. I think that I have been influenced by Chinese and Japanese lyrics. But you ask whether I have ever 'tried deliberately to attain certain qualities.' That is quite possible" (L 291). The qualities of which Stevens spoke here are best expressed many years later, in 1952, in this brief description of the effect made on him by a scroll sent to him by a young Korean poet, "The scroll made the same impression on me when I first looked at it that a collection of Chinese poems makes: an impression of something venerable, true and quiet. (L 742).

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The most fruitful aspect of Chinese poetry for Stevens--the one which informs the whole of his work--grew out of his early friendship with Witter Bynner while they were both at Harvard and very interested in the Orient.[58] During their years there, both Stevens and Bynner wrote poems with a marked Oriental influence;[59] the poems of "Carnet de Voyage" reflect this early fascination of Stevens. Stevens' friendship with Bynner lasted throughout his life (as evidenced by Journal entries and letters from various periods[60]); from what can be determined in Stevens' last letter to Bynner, it seems that he valued this friendship in a special way. In 1929 Bynner published a volume of translations of Chinese poems of the T'ang Dynasty entitled The Jade Mountain; the publisher was Alfred A. Knopf, Stevens' publisher. It would be more than unlikely that Stevens' was not familiar with this volume.

In his introduction to the translations, Bynner describes in general terms the Chinese aesthetic; in that description there are several points which will echo in the aesthetic statements of Stevens. Bynner states that what is important to the Chinese is "The sense of poetry as a natural and solacing part of life." This is almost identical to Stevens' feelings as expressed in various ways--for example, "The purpose of poetry is to make life complete in itself." (OP 162) or "The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness." (OP 168). In revealing what the Chinese feel to be responsible for the

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survival of their ancient culture into modern times--and what is also responsible for the universality of Chinese poetry--as being the attempt on the part of the poet "to maintain within himself the head of a man and the heart of a child," Bynner again exhibits the closeness of this to Stevens' dictum that in order to perceive reality, it is necessary to have an ignorant eye, the sense of child-like wonder that in western poetry has become associated with the Romantic poets. It is this aspect which Stevens defined as romantic (rather than the crying out of raw emotion): "The romantic, however, has a way of renewing itself. It can be said of the romantic, just as it can be said of the imagination, that it can never effectively touch the same thing twice in the same way." (OP 215). What is most important about this is that Bynner defines "pure poetry" in terms of this union of man and child: "The head of a man and the heart of a child working together as in the Chinese have made possible with one race and may make possible with any race, even in the thick of the most intricate culture, the continuance of the purest poetry."[61] (emphasis mine). This is what is at the core of Stevens' conception of pure poetry. This is obvious when we recall his definition:

> To give a sense of the freshness or vividness of life is a valid purpose for poetry. A didactic purpose justifies itself in the mind of the teacher; a philosophical purpose justifies itself in the mind of the philosopher. It is not that one purpose is as justifiable as another but that some purposes are pure, others impure. Seek those purposes that are purely the purpose of the pure poet. (OP 157)

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Bynner also notes the importance of organic unity in Chinese poetry: "In the poetry of the west we are accustomed to let our appreciative minds accept with joy this or that passage in a poem--to prefer the occasional glitter of a jewel to the straight light of the sun. The Chinese poet seldom lets any portion of what he is saying unbalance the entirety."[62] This is something of which Stevens was acutely aware in his poetry. He extended this idea to apply to his whole work so that once the form of the whole has been perceived, all its parts--its poems--are understood to be integral to the full understanding of the whole. In addition, Bynner stressed that,

> Chinese poetry rarely trespasses beyond the bounds of actuality. . . . Even in phraseology they seldom talk about one thing in terms of another, but are able enough and sure enough as artists to make the ultimately exact terms become the beautiful terms. If a metaphor is used, it is a metaphor directly relating to the theme, not something borrowed from the ends of the earth. The metaphor must be concurrent with the action or flow of the poem; not merely superinduced, but an integral part of both the scene and the emotion.[63]

Reading this we remember Stevens' repeated insistance on the integration of the imagination with reality if poetry is to be meaningful. We remember Stevens' relationship to "The exquisite environment of fact" and that, "The final poem will be the poem of fact in the language of fact. But it will be the poem of fact not realized before" (OP 164). Even if Stevens was not entirely successful in reaching this goal, his attempt at its realization prepared the way for future poets--something

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he made clear in "Notes Toward Supreme Fiction." In addition, in the last line of the above-quoted passage where Bynner describes the Chinese use of metaphor, we hear Stevens' definition of the poem as "the cry of its occasion."

The similarities between the Chinese perception of poetry and Stevens' view of it culminate in the closeness of the Chinese identification of poems as "momentous details in the immense patience of beauty . . . that passionate patience which is at the core of life"[64] to Stevens' identification of the poetic act as "an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock" (OP 241). Where Stevens differs from the Chinese is in his focussing on the necessity of the "self" in the perception of Beauty. This is obviously at the center of his task as a poet, as he understood it, since he was a product of Western civilization which since the Renaissance has recorded the emergence of the autonomous individual.

The similarities indicated here do not mean that Stevens borrowed directly from Bynner's work on Chinese poetry (although he might have), but that Stevens' fascination with Chinese poetry did not end when he left Harvard. However, in Bynner's anthology, there is one line in the second introduction, written by the Chinese compiler of the anthology, Kiang-Kang-Hu, in the eighteenth century, which is of great interest to us. According to Kiang-Kang-Hu, there is a "common saying" which provided him with the ordering principle for his selection of poems for his anthology: "By reading

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thoroughly three hundred T'ang poems, one will write verse without learning."[65]

After reading this, when we go back and count the number of poems in Stevens' Collected Poems and find there are three hundred, we cannot ascribe it to pure coincidence. We cannot for a number of reasons: Stevens' attraction to Chinese poetry in many of its aspects as indicated above; his lifelong friendship with Bynner which suggests that Stevens knew Bynner's work; the closeness of Stevens' view on poetry to those of the Chinese; his initial stated desired to have all of his work seen as one whole. And perhaps the clearest clue to this discovery is Stevens' admiration for and aspiration toward the effect of Chinese poetry which he described in the letter to Lee: "an impression of something venerable, true and quiet."

If we accept that "common saying" as the key to unlock the door of understanding Stevens' "pure purpose," many ambivalences and ambiguities concerning Stevens' poetry are dispelled. Since Stevens said that poetry should not be didactic in its purpose, he could not openly state that his poetry, after Harmonium, was written not only for himself--poetry "to make life complete in itself"--but also to indicate to future poets from where his failure to become the "virile poet" who could write the ultimate "poetry of fact" stemmed--this was poetry as "a means of redemption." This latter purpose is didactic but still "pure" following the Chinese definitions of both "purpose" and "purity;" and since the reader

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will "write without learning," its purpose cannot be described as didactic. What is most interesting about this key is how hidden and yet how obvious it is; we discover it by chance in following hints dropped by Stevens, yet that there are three hundred poems in his Collected Poems is a fact whose meaning and importance go unperceived unless the clues leading to the discovery of this key are followed. By doing this Stevens ensured that only those who read his poems in the way he demanded that they be read could ever discover the key to his purpose which, after the "failure" of Harmonium, was to instruct poets how to write poetry that would endure. At the same time, writing in the way that he did ensured that his work, too, would endure, not as the poetry of one of those "man-poets," like Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, or Milton but as poetry which would make that kind of poetry again possible.

This does not mean that all the poetry after Harmonium is poetry written about the act of writing poetry. Of course, on one level many poems fulfill this definition. However, the way in which Stevens instructs through his poetry is by setting himself as man as an example which should not be followed except in theory by those who want to become "man-poets." Throughout his career, the poems (as was mentioned above) fall into two categories, "poems of Fancy" and "poems of Imagination"--poems which are constructed to express an abstraction, a concept, and poems which are true "cries of their occasions,"

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in which reality is perceived by an "ignorant eye." In addition, there are many poems which combine both these aspects. It is not by following only poems of Imagination or any other one of the poems that the "ephebe" (or others interested enough) will learn what is fundamental; only by immersing himself wholly in the world created by the poems will he discover what is essential.

Because we are rational, because "the mind is never satisfied," existing in the "fluent mundo" created by the poems, which are the products of "the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet," which, in turn, is identical to what Stevens defined as the "irrational element," makes us want to break down that element, to analyze it back to its two constituent parts--"reality and the sensibility of the poet." Stevens counts on his true readers' use of the common element of reason, of the mind and its activity, to discover him in his world. He provided a clue in the "Adagia" when he wrote, "It is necessary to pose an enigma to the mind. The mind always proposes a solution." (OP 168).

The surface of all the poems seen as a whole presents us with the poet seen as mythological being, as "planet," as "rock," as institution, but beneath the surface lurks the "monster," his nature in the greater nature of reality. This represents a reversal of expectations. We would think that the surface of the poems, which is the "irrational element," would reflect the "monster," the underside of reason, but it is not so. This "monster" still has to be discovered behind and

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through the poems because what was irrational in Stevens was primarily his desire to project an image of himself as "good Puritan," as institution, rather than accept his monster-nature, the flesh and its wants, as part of his legitimate being. In a late letter (already cited above in a note), Stevens put it in this way:

> Monster
>
> = nature, which I desire to reduce: master, subjugate, acquire complete control over and use freely for my own purpose, as poet. I want, as poet, to be that in nature, which constitutes nature's very self. . . . I want, as a man of imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. . . . (L 790).

The important thing to notice here is that Stevens wanted "to reduce," "master," "subjugate," and "acquire complete control over" nature. That this "Monster-nature" is identical with his own flesh is not made clear here, but when we look back to an early letter, we find confirmation that it is: "Certainly my feelings do not wither--whatever may be said of that monster, the body. [emphasis mine] To-night the monster is full of capon and fresh peach pie" (L 176). Because the needs of his "monster, the body" were never fully satisfied, he always longed for satisfaction and attempted to find it through imagination. Because of the strength of his need, what he wanted was to give to the imagination that power which belonged to the flesh, to nature; this desire, this need, was irrational.

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When we begin to analyze the "irrational element," we do two things: we perceive the "sensibility of the poet" from the texture of the poems themselves--for this, we must follow Stevens when he wrote that, "One reads poetry with one's nerves" (OP 162); and, we attempt to discover all we can about the objective "reality" of the poet. In those poems which are "poems of Imagination," we can perceive the reality to which the Imagination attached itself in the poems themselves. However, in the "poems of Fancy," the Imagination is not attached to reality--it is, in fact, temporarily absent--, and what is perceived under the dress of Fancy is only an idea, a bloodless thing. Since no poet leaves us only "poems of Imagination," if we want to learn about the "reality" surrounding him, we must provide it through historical reconstruction. This must, of necessity, include biography, not, however, biography presented separately from the work, but emergent from it as one of the surfaces illuminated by the metaphors of the poems--one of Cleanth Brooks' "larger symbolizations" derived from the careful examination of the poet's words.

The New Critics and their descendants could not provide this because of their committment to Aristotelian method with its focus on the work considered as process, with each poem seen as complete and self-contained. To include biographical information, to point to <u>personal</u> meaning in the poem, for them meant unscientific, unobjective heresy. What critics have seized on in Stevens' work is precisely what Stevens said

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should not be what received attention, that is, what is rational, that "Hegelian process" of "the rational mind which we recognize as irrational because it takes place unaccountably." This is what has been the focus of all that criticism which has as its subject Stevens' "phenomenology of mind," or the poetry seen as "meta-poetry," poems written about writing poems. In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens calls this the "poetry of the subject" as opposed to the "true subject." The "true subject" will be the focus of the analyses of Stevens' poems presented in Section II of this study; that "true subject" being the irrational element, "the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet."

When Stevens wrote in the "Adagia" that "Aristotle is a skeleton," he pointed to the error made by the New Critics in adopting Aristotelian method for the study of poetry. An objective, scientific criticism provides, as Stevens knew, only the framework; it is what has been called earlier "Synechdochal Criticism," and is valuable because it furnishes names and categories for otherwise elusive and somewhat magical poetic phenomena. This is what Aristotle did in his Poetics in the hope that future poets following the prescriptions set forth therein would produce works equal or greater in power to the work of Homer and the Greek tragedians.

Stevens, too, wanted to make the way ready for future poets. Following the above-quoted aphorism in the "Adagia" is this one, "The body is the great poem." Seen together, they provide

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a most concise definition of the nature of poetry and how it is to be made. Stevens here revealed another clue as to how his poems were to be read and used by his descendants and made clear that, as he said, there was no difference between poetry and the theory of poetry. The "body"--the life of the "skeleton," the mythological recreation of the poet in the mind of his readers--is the "great poem" In order to perceive this life we must yield to the power of the "great poem." This again evokes Mallarmé's idea of the work as a great poem or Whitman's similar idea expressed by "Leaves of Green." These evocations remind us of what that power is. Yielding to the "great poem" means allowing ourselves to be overcome by the total effect of the whole work--that effect is Beauty (if the poet has been successful). This, in turn, makes us desire to understand, to know, the source of that Beauty--to know its spirit--so we feel compelled to complete the poetic act begun by the poet when he wrote his poems; we complete this act by using our reason to create the image of the maker of that form of Beauty. In this sense, the poetic act is a religious act. We recall Stevens' desire to serve in the "ministry" of art. (L 25). Like the Greeks who imaged their gods on Olympus, or like the participants in the Judeo-Christian religions who created an image of God--mythological beings responsible for making reality, the world, which despite its human imperfections, (like the imperfect poems in any poet's whole work which reveal him to be "human," something Stevens was aware of when he wanted to

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add a section to "Notes," entitled "It Must Be Human"), is, in its total conception, Beautiful and Harmonious and provides the model for all our attempts to achieve Beauty and Harmony--those who read "The Whole of Harmonium: The Grand Poem" create an image of the poet as maker of the reality created by the poems, a reality which in its total effect is Beautiful and Harmonious because it is "true" to its intention--to have poetry written by others who can write without having learned but from having re-created a total impression of something "true, venerable and quiet."

Because the full understanding and completion of the poetic act depends on the perception of Beauty, the New Critics were in some way correct when they saw in Stevens the spirit of a hedonist recording his moments of perception in the poems like an Impressionist or Pointilliste painter applying dabs of color to his canvas. Stevens was conscious of his debt to the Impressionists who forced the active participation of the viewers of their paintings for the completion of those paintings. Without the organizing visual integration which the viewer provides to Impressionist and Pointilliste canvasses, there is no completion of the paintings. Stevens subtly followed the Impressionists and Mallarmé (who used this principle of actual <u>visual</u> integration in his "Un Coup de Dés"); he demanded <u>imaginative</u> integration of "reality and sensibility." His poems are like the points of color in an Impressionist canvas. What the reader-critic must provide is

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his own subjective "eye-I" which sees all the poems as one at the same time as it focusses for a moment on one particular poem. This "eye-I" sees the poem as "The Whole of Harmonium" integrated by the power of his own imagination which furnishes the ellipses between the poems, as well as the "poems of Fancy," with the "reality" necessary to understand the "transaction" between that "objective reality" and what is presented in the poem.

Like the Impressionists, too, Stevens recorded the fleeting changes made by the passage of time on a fixed reality; for him, his home, the city of Hartford, his experience, are all transmuted by time as Monet's Cathedral is transmuted by light.[66] The time that is part of Stevens' experience is not limited to that covered by his own life span, however; it is as broad as his historical knowledge and imagination. When he wrote in the "Adagia," that "A journey in space equals a journey in time" (OP 162), he did two things. He rationalized or justified to himself his not having adventured as he had wanted to do as a young man, having chosen instead to establish himself and his reputation as a most admirable New England Puritan.[67] In addition, he gave a clue as to how his experience was to be perceived by indicating that his "objective reality" is not only the reality of his own historical moment (which could be covered by simple biography), but includes all the historical realities in which his imagination travelled. In his imagination he lived in the world of the Old Testament

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as well as in the world of Homer's epics and in Classical Greece (where his view was perhaps colored by Poussin's vision); he also travelled in more recent pasts, making imaginary visits to the time of the Troubadours, to Seventeenth Century France, or to Nineteenth Century England, to China in the Eighteenth Century--all these visits are recorded in his poetry. In each place he, like a good Crispin-Comedian with a wide repertoire, donned the appropriate mask. "Authors are actors, books are theaters" (OP 157). Each of the places were places in which he lived, and he made them as real as an actual visit to France or China. For Stevens, a place was as real as his imagination made it--his imagination had to do this so that he could survive.

However, Stevens went beyond the Impressionists in exploring the philosophical implications of the desire to understand perception; rather than devote himself only to recording the aspiration and movement towards Beauty, his "poems of Imagination" also indicate why it is that we desire it. In one way, he is like Santayana's poet, one who deals with ideas, but in his most successful poems, the ideas are attached to the facts from which they spring--this gives them real meaning. For example, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is an ambiguous poem because it explores the cold idea of the relation between a poet and what he makes, but at the same time it does not let us forget (by titillating our sensibilities in describing Susannah and the Elders) that the poem sprang from the fact

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that the poet felt physical, sexual desire--a desire for Beauty, for momentary peace, in actual reality--and this desire went unsatisfied; "And thus it is that what I feel,/ Here in this room, desiring you" (CP 90). (For a full analysis of this poem, see Chapter 12 of Section II.)

What we learn from Stevens is that the desire for Beauty is univ-rsal, but that the ways of attaining it, and so its definition, like that of Truth and Goodness, depend on the individual in his relationship to the world around him. With Stevens the tradition of Emerson, who in America with the Puritan spirit established Beauty as "an ultimate end," is continued. Stevens, like Emerson, like Aristotle, perceived that there could be no apprehension of Truth without the concomitant feeling of Beauty. He understood that Truth (when it is not scientific, objective truth) is not arrived at through logic alone, as believed by "Rationalists wearing square hats," but that it is felt as well; "the Good, the True, and the Beautiful are One."

By carefully following the "thought and action" prompted by his own emotions, Stevens saw that Emerson in the nineteenth century gave the only possible definition of Beauty as being "an ultimate end"--that it is not a constant and fixed ideal toward which we aspire, but that it is a state of being towards which we move either in reality or in

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imagination, or, in the best cases, in both. In Freudian terms, this could be understood as the movement towards that stage of stillness, of peace, towards Nirvana, which, unfortunately, Freud expressed as the "death wish." This movement, "the fluctuation of the self within the rock," is different for each individual, although it has common characteristics for all. The state to which we all aspire is peace. We attempt to achieve it by balancing opposing forces. All of the factors of our past experience make each of our sensibilities what it is. What goes into the formation of our sensibilities comes mainly from outside sources, first our parents, then later, schools and religion; but there is that "individual aspect" for which we cannot account rationally and which (unless there is severe repression) is an open conflict with the order imposed from the outside which we learn to internalize. This "individual aspect" is the "irrational element," the id, our instinctual natures. The desire for Beauty expresses the ego's attempt to make peace between these two aspects, the id and the super-ego. Following this, we could interpret "the palm at the end of the mind" as a symbol of peace offered by the ego, the mediating force, to both warring sides.

We begin to realize that when Stevens wrote, "Poetry makes life complete in itself," and "Poetry is a means of redemption," or "a health," he meant that where his ego could not in actuality make peace between his most legitimate

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instinctual desires (for which even the institutions of the super-ego provide)--primarily, in his case, the need for sexual gratification made possible through marriage--, his imagination attempted to gratify his desire and so took up the slack for his ego by providing the peace which comes from the contemplation of Beauty and Harmony. At the same time, in this way, the established order of his being and of society was maintained. Seen in this light, we can understand the essentially "practical" aspect of Stevens' poetry.

The pursuit of Beauty through painting or sculpture, through poetry, or through music points to an inability to achieve that Beauty, that Harmony between what is needed instinctually and what is offered by reality, in the actual world. It is not that the poet-maker is less able than anyone else to achieve this in reality, but that he, because of his rarified sensibility, has perceived that it is impossible to achieve that perfection except in the constant repeated attempt in the Imagination. None of us is able to accept our "fallen" state without some kind of myth, but the poet invents his own and we, in turn, invent him because we have somehow shared with him some of the same dissatisfactions because of the discrepancy between what we need and what we are taught to believe we need.

Stevens perceived in himself what in the American Calvinist adaptation of the Judaeo-Christian myth was particularly repressive and unnecessarily contradictory to primary needs.

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It was in insinuating itself into every aspect of life, making what was "practical" of supreme importance, that the success and failure of Puritanism in America lay. In his own being, he could never escape the need to be "practical." It made him become a lawyer when he wanted, or thought he wanted, to become a poet. It made him unable to continue making "windows wince" in the poetry after Harmonium because that would not secure what he needed to make his poetry a viable alternative for the religious faith that was lost with Darwin.

As mentioned earlier, Ransom openly attributed to Puritanism the reasons for the failure of much modern poetry and criticism, though for different reasons than are contained in Stevens' implicit poetical attack. J.E. Spingarn argued in the same vein,[68] but was much closer to Stevens in realizing that Americans, because of Puritanism, had not developed an aesthetics or a sense of the functional and historical importance of art or the pursuit of Beauty for its own sake. He stated that because of a peculiar bias toward what is "practical," there is no acceptance of aesthetic "taste" or sensibility as a basis for real judgment; that, instead, the bases for judgment are borrowed from morality, philosophy, history, economics, or the like. This is an obvious effect of living in a place which was founded on the ground of what is useful and productive following Reason; anything which had the faint hint of giving pleasure directly through feeling without the mediation of the mind was deemed sinful, or,

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at best, something not to be considered in and by itself. Spingarn wrote that when Emerson is remembered and Beauty is seen as "an ultimate end," "the narrow moralist or the man of practical mind assumes that we are giving advice to the dilettante triffler in verse (who is not an artist at all) instead of attempting to define the essential secret of the art of Aeschylus and Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe, Milton and Racine, and all the high compeers, classic and romantic, in the ancient and modern world."[69] Spingarn here seems to be speaking directly of Ransom when he approached the work of Stevens through "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Instead of judging that poem by what he saw as its extremely high aesthetic standard and so going on to understand what "peace" this Beauty attempted to make between "the man and the world," Ransom succumbed to the Puritanical fault he noticed in others because he shared it himself. So, he substituted other standards for the aesthetic one and found the poem and poet lacking. Had he followed the aesthetic basis of judgment, he would have discovered the morality of the poem to be in the implicit judgment it makes on the society which made the hermeticism of the poem and the poet necessary because of the extreme discrepancy between feeling and instinct and what expression of that feeling and instinct was allowed. And the Puritan in him would have discovered morality as well in the possibility of survival offered by the imagination which Stevens illustrated with his life and art.

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In "Forms and Citizens,"[70] Ransom states that "The object of a proper society is to instruct its members how to transform instinctual experience into aesthetic experience." On the surface, this seems close to Stevens and close to Freud, who described the value of civilization as the possibility it offered of sublimating instinctual impulses into art and work.[71] However, Ransom meant something quite different. Unlike Stevens who followed Pater in recognizing that what was aesthetic had to have its basis in real feeling (as indicated even by its etymology), Ransom understood "aesthetic" to mean a form which had been purified of all feeling, something benign to be enjoyed dispassionately in intellectual contemplation. This becomes clearer when we look further into the same essay.

In attempting to point out the similarity between the aims of the artist and those of the scientist, after making some extremely insightful comments on the "occasions of art" (which at first seem to echo Stevens), he gives away the particular bias of New Criticism:

> What is the occasion which will do for the artist and the scientist indifferently? It is the occasion when we propose to 'study' our object; that is, when we are more than usually undesirous and free, and find the time to become curious about the object as, actually, something 'objective' and independent.[72]

Ransom cites Schopenhauer's definition of art as "knowledge without desire" as one of the sources for his own definition.

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However, Schopenhauer was defining art from the point of view of the observer or reader, not from the point of view of the maker. It is in this aspect of Ransom's definition, "when we are more than usually undesirous and free," where the fault lies.

On the surface, this does not seem far from Wordsworth's definition of poetry, or the process of making poetry: poetry has its "origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." What Ransom seems to have forgotten, however, is that Wordsworth continued by saying that, "the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind."[73] What Stevens learned from Wordsworth was that feeling was of prime importance in poetry, that "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling."[74] Ransom, in eliminating desire as a necessary element in the writing of poetry, reveals himself to be the most puritanical of critics because in doing this he implicitly denies the existence of the Nineteenth Century and returns modern poetry and criticism in America to its Eighteenth Century roots.

The Romantic spirit includes emotional values such as desire in its definition of art; it is this spirit modified by what he learned from the "pure poets" and tempered by his own Puritanism which Stevens carried with him into the Twentieth

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Century. Stevens presented the opposite of the attitude expressed by Ransom when he wrote in the "Adagia" that "A poet looks at the world as a man looks at a woman" (OP 165). He looked with desire at the world and found satisfaction in his imagination. To desire is to want perfection, wholeness, completion; this desire informs the work of Stevens and shapes the irrational: those imaginings, the "fiction" which when added to the reality of life make it bearable.

To get under the skin of the poet and discover what it is that he desires means seeing him in his subjectivity, having the personality of the poet "transferred" to the personality of the reader-critic. Stevens clearly wanted his readers to feel the "irrational element" in his poems and to know him, to share his identity. His protestations about the indulgence of the personality must be understood as coming both from a Calvinist background (which viewed this desire as being self-indulgent and unmanly), and from his own real dissatisfaction with the label of "personal" because of its identification with the kind of poetry written by the Romantic poets which reveals not true personality, but "sentimentality," something that Stevens defined as "a failure of feeling." Samuel French Morse helps to clarify this:

> He [Stevens] believed that poetry itself was 'not personal'--not, that is, a means of public self-aggrandizement. But it had everything to do with the self, as even a casual acquaintance with the poems makes evident. What he means is partly summed up in two characteristic statements. The first is from a notebook in which he wrote down passages

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> he had come across in his reading; in this instance, part of an article by Graham Bell on an exhibition of Cézannes. The article was noteworthy, Stevens said, "both for itself and because it adds to subject and manner the thing that is incessantly overlooked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matters much." The other is from a letter to Barbara Church, in which he described his pleasure in an exhibition of Dufys: "When I was able to sit in a room full of paintings . . . my chief pleasure was the companionship of Dufy himself, without any factitious chic."[75]

Returning to what was said at the beginning of this chapter, we see now that in order to read Stevens properly it is necessary to remember the identity of form and content as Schorer stated. In perceiving Stevens' style as reflective of his meaning, seeing the formally tight impressionism of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" as an indication of the importance of its meaning, we feel the identity of the poet and so can begin to understand one of his prime "motives for metaphor." Reading the poem fully, supplying to it its proper context as it is pointed to in the poem, will allow us to see that Ransom was wrong in dismissing it as mere aestheticism. Careful examination of this poem (as of any other of Stevens' "poems of Imagination"), with an eye that keeps the whole of Stevens' experience in view, will reveal the maker of the poem to be intensely concerned with precisely those things to which Ransom wrote he was indifferent: "morality, native land, God." The next chapter will attempt to give this full reading.

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Notes to Chapter 5

[1] Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968 (First edition, New York: Scribners', 1938).

[2] In this, Ransom is very close to what J.E. Spingarn had expressed earlier in his essay, "The American Critic," first delivered as a lecture sometime between 1910 and 1913 (later collected in his volume Creative Criticism and Other Essays, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1931). In that essay, Spingarn specifies the sources of the problem of "puritanism" in criticism:

> For virtually all of us every critical problem is a separate problem, a problem in a philosophic vacuum, and so open for discussion to any astute mind with a taste for letters. Realism, classicism, romanticism, imagism, impressionism, expressionism, and other terms or movements as they spring up, seem ultimate realities instead of matters of very subordinate concern to any philosophy of art,--merely practical programmes which bear somewhat the same relation to aesthetic truth that the platform of the Republican Party bears to Aristotle's Politics or Marx's Capital.
>
> As a result, critics are constantly carrying on a guerrilla warfare of their own in favour of some vague literary shibboleth or sociological abstraction, and discovering anew the virtues or vices of individuality, modernity, Puritanism, the romantic spirit or the spirit of the Middle West, the traditions of the pioneer, and so on ad infinitum. This is true of every school of American criticism, "conservative" or "radical"; for nearly all of them a disconnected body of literary theories takes the place of a real philosophy of art (pp. 126-127);

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> The first need of American criticism today is education in aesthetic thinking. It needs above all the cleansing and stimulating power of an intellectual bath. Only the drenching discipline that comes from mastery of the problem of aesthetic thought can train us for the duty of interpreting the American literature of the future. The anarchy of impressionism is a natural reaction against the mechanical theories and jejune textbooks of the professors, but it is a temporary haven and not a home. The haphazard empiricism of English criticism and faded moralism of some of our own will serve us no more. We must desert these muddy waters, and seek purer and deeper streams. For the conception of the critic as censor or as eulogist we must substitute the conception of the critic as aesthetic thinker (pp. 143-44).

[3] The World's Body, pp. 57-58.

[4] In The Hudson Review, (Spring, 1948), p. 67; also quoted by Cleanth Brooks in his Foreword to Essays and Critiques in Criticism, p. xv.

[5] In "Poets Without Laurels," collected in The World's Body, p. 59.

[6] Oeuvres Complètes de Baudelaire, Paris: Gallimard, 1961, p. 1095.

[7] Even though Eliot in his essay, "From Poe to Valéry," described accurately that the enjoyment of a poem alternates between appreciation of its subject matter and its style, its manner, when the actual criticism is written, it must consider the two elements as one. See note 40, pp. 188-189.

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8 Collected in The Great Critics, ed. by James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, New York: Norton, 1967, p. 897.

9 The Art of Poetry, translated by Denise Folliot, New York: Vintage, 1961, p. 193.

10 Ibid., p. 185.

11 This is stated clearly in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, dated November 5, 1935:

> I have read very little of Paul Valéry, although I have a number of his books and, for that matter, several books about him. If there are any literary relations between my things and those of other writers, they are unconscious. Such a thing as adopting the method or the manner of another writer is inconceivable. Granted the strong effect of literature, it is an effect derived from the mass of things that I have read in the past. Of course, a man like Valéry emerges from his books without a close reading. Some months ago I received from Mr. Vidal a copy of Valéry's Etat de la Vertu beautifully printed by Leon Pichon, and I have had it in my room under my eye ever since, but I have not read a line of it. If there is any relation in my things to Valéry's, it must come about in some such way as this:
>
> It is difficult for me to think and not to think abstractly. Consequently, in order to avoid abstractness, in writing, I search out instinctively things that express the abstract and yet are not in themselves abstractions. . . . I repeat what I said recently that my object in all this is simply to write poetry, keeping it as true as possible to myself and as near as possible to the idea that I have in mind. (L 290-291).

12 This is a point explored by Perry Miller. In his chapter, "Literary Theory," (in The Puritans: A Sourcebook

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of Their Writings, Volume Two, edited by Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, New York: Harper, 1963, p. 667), he says the following:

> Indeed, the belief that truth was integral with well-written history was so firmly established by the second quarter of the seventeenth century that Hobbes assumed its acceptance in his preface to Homer's Odysses (1675): "For both the Poet and the Historian writeth only (or should do) matter of Fact." (Quoted from J.E. Spingarn, Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, II, 70).
>
> . . . the Puritan held to a belief in the poet's high calling, but thought that the danger of poetry lay in its magic spell,--that it tempted men away from truth to fable; Sprat and other members of the Royal Society expressed the view that too much fictional nonsense achieved the dignity of poetic treatment. Yet the fact that danger lurked within the form in no way meant that men should shun it, providing they exhibited skill and high seriousness in handling their theme . . . exploring poetry the better to honor God, while at the same time modestly deprecating their ability to write verse,--assuming God's gracious acceptance of their poor offering. Edward Taylor throughout his life chose verse to express his ardent love of Christ; Wigglesworth told the story of judgment day in monotonous fourteeners, though he "attended Conscience rather than Elegance, fidelity rather than poetry," thus sensibly acknowledging his inadequacy as a poet, for "every good minister hath not a gift of spiritual poetry"; and Jonathan Mitchell stated the case very clearly by saying: "Great Truths to dress in Meeter; Becomes a Preacher," adding,
>
> No Cost too great, no Care too curious is
> To set forth Truth, and win mens Souls to bliss.

13

There is one notable exception to Stevens' apparent immunity to the fact of the war. While he was in Tennessee in 1918, he wrote the following to his wife:

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> There are still a good many soldiers here. The streets are, in fact, crowded with them. There isn't a thing for them to do, except to walk up and down the few blocks on Market Street that amount to anything. They crowd into the hotel for meals--the officers; and a good many of them put up here for the night, on Saturdays, in order to sleep in good beds for a change. It is common gossip that they are being sent abroad by thousands and people begin to wonder whether our first million are not already in France. I hope so. Those that are here are splendid fellows. We cannot help doing well when we really start. . . . (L 206-07).

And, a few days later:

> Nothing has happened since my letter to you from Elizabethton except that last evening a train of negroes that had been drafted passed through Johnson City on the way to camp. The station was crowded with negroes. When the train pulled in there was a burst of yelps and yells. The negroes on the platform ran up and down shaking hands with those in the cars. The few white people who happened to be near took an indulgent attitude. They regard negroes as absurdities. They have no sympathy with them. I tried to take that point of view: to laugh at those absurd animals, in order to understand how it was convenable that one should feel. But the truth is that I feel thrilling emotion at these draft movements. I want to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air; and so far as I have been able to observe, it makes no difference whether the men are black or white. The noise when the train pulled out was intoxicating. (L 209).

The language used to describe his impressions of the soldiers, as "splendid fellows" for example, indicates that Stevens' relationship to the war was sentimental, like that of the English described by Fussell who read about it in the press but who had not experienced it directly. It is exactly the

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opposite of the experience recorded by Eliot and Pound. However, the fact that the poem, "Anecdote of the Jar," was written less than a year after his writing of this experience in Tennessee adds a dimension to the poem which will be explored later.

14 The Twenties, edited, with an Introduction by Leon Edel, New York: Bantam, 1975, p. 96.

15 In his introduction to Valéry's Art of Poetry, T.S. Eliot makes the point that Valéry changed the focus of attention from Poetry per se to the Poet, and that this is somewhat of a failing:

> --Valéry's Idea of the Poet. It is from the conception of the poet that he proceeds to the conception of poetry, and not the other way about. . . . Valéry in fact invented, and was to impose upon his age, not so much a new conception of poetry as a new conception of the poet. (p. xix).
>
> He reminds us of Narcissus gazing into the pool, and partakes of the attraction and the mystery of Narcissus, the aloofness and frigidity of that spiritual celibate.
>
> The one complaint which I am tempted to lodge against Valéry's poetics, is that it provides us with no criterion of seriousness. He is deeply concerned with the problem of process, of how the poem is made, but not with the question of how it is related to the rest of life in such a way as to give the reader the shock of feeling that the poem has been to him, not merely an experience, but a serious experience, And by "experience" I mean here, not an isolable event, having its value solely in itself and not in relation to anything else, but something that has entered into and been fused with a multitude of other experiences in the formation of the person that the reader is developing into. (p. xxiii).

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In the same way, when Stevens wrote his "poems of Fancy" focussing on the process of writing poetry rather than on some aspect of his experience that was in itself meaningful, the result was not as successful.

16 See note 1 to Chapter 4, p. 107.

17 This is clearest in the sonnet titled, "Ses purs ongles très haut dediant leur onyx. . . .:"

> Ses purs ongles très hauts dédiant leur onyx,
> L'Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
> Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
> Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore
>
> Sur les crédences, au salon vide: nul ptyx,
> Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore,
> (Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
> Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s'honore).
>
> Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
> Agonise selon peut-être le décor
> Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe,
>
> Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
> Que, dans l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
> De scintillations sitôt le septuor.
>
> (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, pp. 68-69).

Concerning the creation of this poem, Mallarmé wrote to two of his friends:

> . . . je fisse un sonnet, et que je n'ai que trois rimes en ix, concertez-vous pour m'envoyer le sens réel du mot ptyx, on' m'assure qu'il n'existe dans aucune langue, ce que je préférerais de beaucoup afin de me donner le charme de le créer par la magie de la rime. . . (Correspondance 1862-1871, p. 274).

and,

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> J'extrais ce sonnet, auquel j'avais une fois songé cet été, d'une étude projetée sur la Parole: il est inverse, je veux dire que le sens, s'il en a un (mais je me consolerais du contraire grâce à la dose de poésie qu'il renferme, ce me semble) est évoqué par un mirage interne des mots mêmes. En se laissant aller à le murmurer plusiers fois, on éprouve une sensation assez cabalistique. (Correspondance, 1862-1871, p. 278).

18 "The Poetic Principle," collected in The Great Critics, edited by Smith and Parks, p. 586.

19 A good example of this is the mapping of Stevens' development provided by Michel Benamou in his book, L'Oeuvre--Monde de Wallace Stevens, Paris: Atelier Réproduction des Thèses, 1975, where the symbols of Stevens' imaginary "mundo" are analyzed on an archetypal level rather than as relating to the real experience of the poet. In the note to his page 40, Benamou provides a reproduction of a schema used by Jung to express the psychological significance of certain recurring imaginative images. Benamou states: "Harmonium est décidément un livre lunaire, alors que le reste de l'oeuvre est solaire." (p. 122). While this kind of information is necessary to classify the kinds of symbols used by a poet, and to classify the poet himself, it does not necessarily help us to discover any of what Eliot called "seriousness" in the poetry, that is meaning attached to a life lived and capable of being shared in the imagination of the reader.

20 In The Great Critics, p. 591.

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21 Ibid., p. 591.

22 In a short piece on Victor Hugo, Baudelaire wrote the following:

> . . . La forme didactique . . . est la plus grande ennemie de la véritable poésie. Raconter en vers les lois connues, selon lesquelles se meut un monde moral ou sidéral, c'est décrire ce qui est découvert et ce qui tombe tout entier sous le télescope ou le compas de la science, c'est se réduire aux devoirs de la science et empiéter sur ses fonctions, et c'est embarrasser son langage traditionnel de l'ornement superflu, et dangereux ici, de la rime. . . . (Oeuvres Complètes de Baudelaire, p. 711).

23 Oeuvres Complètes de Baudelaire, p. 686.

24 Ibid., p. 711; it is worth noting that Stevens shared with Baudelaire the desire to explore the "possible" in poetry. The idea of Stevens' poetry as hypothesis is explored by Northrop Frye in his essay, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens." Frye writes:

> The unreal in imaginative perception is most simply described as the sense that if something is not there it at least ought to be there . . . this feeling in art is anything but wistful: it has created the tone of all the civilizations of history (p. 164);

and,

> It was Whitman who urged American writers to lay less emphasis on tradition, thereby starting another tradition of his own, and it is significant that Whitman is one of the very few traditional poets Stevens refers to, though he has little in common with him technically. It is partly this sense of a

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> poem as belonging to experiment [emphasis mine] rather than tradition, separated from the stream of time with its conventional echoes, that gives Stevens' poetry its marked affinity with pictures, an affinity shown also in the curiously formalized symmetry of the longer poems (p. 175).

(in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

25 Oeuvres Complètes de Baudelaire, p. 1099.

26 Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 880.

27 "Pure Poetry," in The Art of Poetry, p. 186.

28 J.E. Spingarn coins these terms when describing the two opposing strains of criticism:

> In every age impressionism (or enjoyment) and dogmatism (or judgment) have grappled with one another. They are the two sexes of Criticism; and to say that they flourish in every age is to say that every age has its masculine as well as its feminine criticism--the masculine criticism may or may not force its own standards on literature, but that never at all events is dominated by the object of its studies; and the feminine criticism that responds to the lure of art with a kind of passive ecstasy . . . they continue to exist side by side, ever falling short of their highest powers, unless mystically mated ["There was a mystic marriage in Catawba. . ." CP 401]--judgment erecting its edicts into arbitrary standards and conventions, enjoyment lost in the mazes of its sensuous indecision.

in "The New Criticism," Creative Criticism and Other Essays, pp. 10-11.

29 To Criticize the Critic: Eight Essays on Literature and

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Education, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965, p. 41. Eliot also said that, "it is a phase which ended with Valery." (p. 28).

30 Ibid., p. 31.

31 As a young man of twenty, Stevens wrote:

> Poetry and Manhood: Those who say that poetry is now the peculiar province of women say so because ideas about poetry are effeminate. Home, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Browning, much of Tennysone--they are your man-poets. Silly verse is always the work of silly men. Poetry itself is unchanged. (L 26).

32 In a letter to Elsie Moll written in 1909, Stevens referred to his adolescence and said,

> --Those were the days when I read Poe and Hawthorne and all the things one ought to read. . . (L 125).

33 From a letter to José Rodriguez Feo written in 1947:

> In the long run, as Poe said in one of his essays which nobody reads [but which Stevens had], the generous man comes to be regarded as the stingy man; the beautiful woman comes to be regarded as an old witch; the scholar becomes the ignoramus. (L 558).

And, in a letter to Barbara Church written in 1952, Stevens reveals that he also knew of Poe's habits and intimate life:

> Poe liked to analyze his feelings in crowds. What I have in mind is not the old idea that the world without other people would not be unbearable, but almost that: the pull between people.(. . .) (L 759).

34 Eliot notes this in his essay, "From Poe to Valéry,"

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collected in To Criticize the Critic, p. 37. This prefigures Stevens' observation that "The poem is part of the res, not about it."

35 See analysis of this poem in Chapter 13 of Section II.

36 "From Poe to Valéry," To Criticize the Critic, p. 38.

37 Ibid.

38 In "From Poe to Valéry," Eliot stated that, "All poetry may be said to start from the emotions experienced by human beings in their relations to themselves, to each other, to divine beings, and to the world about them; it is therefore concerned also with thought and action, which emotion brings about, and out of emotion arises." (p. 38, in To Criticize the Critic). However, there is a great deal of poetry which does not begin with an emotion, but with thought. This is especially true in the case of Stevens as he grew older; he became more and more anaesthetized to feeling (except in rare cases), but not to thinking.

39 "Biographia Literaria," Chapter XIV, in The Great Critics, p. 530.

40 In "From Poe to Valéry," Eliot stated that, "The Abbé Brémond . . . maintains that while the element of la poésie pure is necessary to make a poem a poem, no poem can consist of la poésie pure solely" (p. 39, To Criticize the Critic).

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Eliot also pointed out how "pure poetry" is perceived alternately with "impure" elements by the audience; "pure poetry" can never exist only as such for the audience:

> In the earliest poetry, or in the most rudimentary enjoyment of poetry, the attention of the listener is directed upon the subject matter; the effect of the poetic art is felt, without the listener being wholly conscious of this art. With the development of the consciousness of language, there is another stage at which the auditor, who may by that time have become the reader, is aware of a double interest in a story for its own sake and in the way in which it is told: that is to say, he becomes aware of style. . . .
>
> At a third stage of development, the subject may recede into the background: instead of being the purpose of the poem, it becomes simply a necessary means for the realization of the poem. At this stage the reader or listener may become as nearly indifferent to the subject matter as the primitive listener was to the style. A complete unconsciousness or indifference to the style at the beginning, or to the subject matter at the end, would however take us outside of poetry altogether: for a complete unconsciousness of anything but subject matter would mean that for the listener poetry had not yet appeared; a complete unconsciousness of anything but style would mean that poetry had vanished (pp. 38-39, To Criticize the Critic).

41 "Biographia Literaria," The Great Critics, p. 527.

42 Ibid., pp. 531-32.

43 In "From Poe to Valéry," (To Criticize the Critic, p. 41) Eliot also notes Coleridge's precedence in time over Poe as well as his relation to Valéry. Eliot concentrates on

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the similarity between Coleridge and Valéry in their both asking, "What am I doing when I write a poem?" Valéry's concern was wholly technical, however, focussing on the act of writing, not at all on the emotions which Eliot earlier noted are the starting points of all poems. Coleridge, on the other hand, dealt with the process of writing--the transformation of raw emotions into finished forms.

44 In Critiques and Essays in Criticism, edited by R.W. Stallman, pp. 85-104.

45 Ibid., p. 88.

46 Ibid., p. 102.

47 Ibid., p. 101.

48 Quoted by Warren, Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 101.

49 This is especially true of Mallarmé and Valéry. Mallarmé was preoccupied with the relation between music and poetry throughout his life. In "Crise de Vers" he wrote the following:

> Susceptibilité en raison que le cri possède un écho--des motifs de même jeu s'équilibreront, balancés, à distance, ni le sublime incohérent de la mise en page romantique ni cette unité artificielle, jadis, mesurée en bloc au livre. Tout devient suspens, disposition fragmentaire avec alternance et vis-à-vis, concourant au rythme total, lequel serait le poëme tu,

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> aux blancs; seulement traduit, en une manière, par chaque pendentif. [Here we are reminded of Stevens' "pendentives" in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"]. Instinct, je veux, entrevu à des publications et, si le type supposé, ne reste pas exclusif de complémentaires, la jeunesse, pour cette fois, en poésie ou s'impose une foudrayante et harmonieuse plénitude, bégaya le magique concept de l'Oeuvre. Quelque symétrie, parallèlement, qui, de la situation des vers en la pièce se lie à l'authenticité de la pièce dans le volume, vole, outre le volume, à plusiers inscrivant, eux, sur l'espace spirituel, le paraphe amplifié du génie, anonyme et parfait comme une existence d'art. (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, pp. 366-67).

And later in "La Musique et les Lettres,"

> Je sais que la Musique ou ce qu'on est convenu de nommer ainsi, dans l'acception ordinaire, la limitant aux exécutions concertantes avec le secours des cordes, des cuivres et des bois et cette licence, en outre, qu'elle s'adjoigne la parole, cache une ambition, la même: sauf à n'en rien dire, parce qu'elle ne se confie pas volontiers. Par contre, à ce tracé, il y a une minute, des sinueuses et mobiles variations de l'Idée, que l'écrit revendique de fixer, y eut'il, peut'être chez quelques-uns de vous, lieu de confronter à telles phrases une réminiscence de l'orchestre; où succède à des rentrées en l'ombre, après un remous soucieux, tout à coup l'éruptif multiple sursautement de la clarté, comme les proches irradiations d'un lever de jour: vain si le langage, par le retrempe et l'essor purifiants du chant, n'y confère un sens. (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 648).
>
> . . . la Musique et les Lettres sont la face alternative ici élargie vers l'obscur; scintillante là, avec certitude, d'un phénomène, le seul, je l'appelai, l'Idée. (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 649).

Valéry followed Mallarmé in this preoccupation which foreshadowed Stevens' perceptions concerning the "transference"

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of the personality of the artist so clear in music. In his "Remarks on Poetry," (in The Art of Poetry, p. 198 and p. 211) we find the following:

> . . . I meant that the poetic state or emotion seems to me to consist in a dawning perception, a tendency toward perceiving a world, or complete system of relations, in which beings, things, events and acts, although they may resemble, each to each, those which fill and form the tangible world--the immediate world from which they are borrowed--stand, however, in an indefinable, but wonderfully accurate, relationship to the modes and laws of our general sensibility. So, the value of these well-known objects and beings is in some way altered. They respond to each other and combine quite otherwise than in ordinary conditions. They become--if you will allow the expression--musicalized, somehow commensurable, echoing each other.

And,

> Poetry must extend over the whole being; it stimulates the muscular organization by its rhythms, it frees or unleashes the verbal faculties, ennobling their whole action, it regulates our depths, for poetry aims to arouse or reproduce the unity and harmony of the living person, an extraordinary unity that shows itself when a man is possessed by an intense feeling that leaves none of his powers disengaged.

50 "Toute méthode est une fiction, et bonne pour la démonstration. Le langage lui est apparu l'instrument de la fiction: il suivra la méthode du langage (la déterminer). Le langage se réfléchissant. Enfin la fiction lui semble être le procédé même de l'esprit humain. . . ." (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 851).

51 E.R. Dodds in The Greeks and the Irrational deals with this at length.

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52 This is the thesis of The Greeks and the Irrational.

53 Mallarmé makes this clear, especially in some of his earlier prose; in "L'Art Pour Tous," he writes,

> Toute chose sacrée et qui veut demeurer sacrée s'enveloppe de mystère. Les religions se retranchent à l'abri d'arcanes dévoilés au seul prédestiné: l'art a les siens. . . .
>
> Ainsi les premiers venus entrent de plain-pied dans un chef-d'oeuvre, et depuis qu'il y a des poëtes, il n'a pas été inventé, pour l'écartement de ces importuns, une langue immaculée,--des formules hiératiques dont l'étude aride aveugle le profane et aiguillonne le patient fatal;--et ces intrus tiennent en façon de carte d'entrée une page de l'alphabet où ils ont appris à lire!
>
> O fermoirs d'or des vieux missels! O hiéroglyphes inviolés des rouleaux de papyrus!
>
> Qu'advient-il de cette absence de mystère?
>
> Comme tout ce qui est absolument beau, la poésie force l'admiration; mais cette admiration sera lointaine, vague,--bête, elle sort de la foule (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 257).

Later in his career, he expresses it in this way:

> . . . s'il a, recréé par lui-même, pris soin de conserver de son débarras strictement une piété aux vingt-quatre lettres comme elles se sont, par le miracle de l'infinité, fixées en quelque langue la sienne, puis un sens pour leurs symétries, action, reflet, jusqu'à une transfiguration en le terme surnaturel, qu'est le vers; il possède, ce civilisé édennique, au-dessus d'autre bien, l'élément de félicités, une doctrine en même temps qu'une contrée. Quand son initiative, ou la force virtuelle des caractères divins lui enseigne de les mettre en oeuvre. (Oeuvres complètes de Mallarmé, p. 646).

54 James Baird in The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

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University Press, 1968, pp. 55-56; Robert Buttel in The Making of Harmonium, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, pp. 64-68 and pp. 70-74, 84-85, 125, 129; and A. Walton Litz in Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens, New York: Oxford, 1972, pp. 14-18 all discuss the influence of orientalism on Stevens. All note the closeness of some poems, like "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," to the poetry of the East. Buttel sees the main influence on Stevens as being color use, and he and Baird agree that "he [Stevens] discarded the 'oriental pose' so conspicuous in "Carnet de Voyage" as unsuitable for the full aesthetic of Harmonium." All also link Wallace Stevens' enthusiasm for the Orient with the general feeling of the moment which had begun in nineteenth century France and was continued through the work of the Impressionists and reinforced by the publicity given to China during the Boxer Rebellion.

55 As indicated by Earl Miner in The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958, pp. 194-96. Miner insists that Stevens was influenced not only by pictorial Oriental art but by Haiku poets like Basho as well.

56 Litz also quotes from this letter.

57 None of Stevens' critics perceives any deep and lasting connection between the poet and Chinese and Japanese poetry and art.

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58
Arthur Davison Ficke, who collected Japanese prints and wrote verses describing them, was, like Bynner, a friend of Stevens' Harvard years; Baird, Buttel and Litz all note this as well.

59
According to Holly Stevens as quoted by Buttel, p. 65.

60
The one note that has been found from Stevens' years at Harvard was addressed to Witter Bynner. In addition there are the following from his Journal and Letters:

Journal--Dated April 9, 1904:
> Strange phantasmagoria! Bynner, the old Advocate poet, dropped in on me last night + I went with him to the Cafe Francis in West 35th Street where we sat and smoked and talked and drank S. Estephe until after midnight. An inexplicable fellow--the manners of a girl, the divination, flattery + sympathy of a woman, the morbidness + reverie of a poet, the fire and enthusiasm + ingenuousness of a young man. He has gathered his own impressions + odd ones they are. Has he passed safely through the sentimental, sketchy stage?

Letter--Dated May, 1904:
> Dear Hal,
>
> Last week my insides were in great disorder--I was indeed, sick with a sickness. But by dint of going to bed at eight, + of much Sitzbathing, + dieting+lithia-ing+ porous plastering, I am knocking about again. . . . My bar exams are on June 7 + until then I intend to apply himself most conscientiously to grinding. Therefore our congeniality must ex necessitate be a thing apart from "drink" (as you call it--hideously). In fact, I detest rum + never intended that, if we were to see much of one another, there should be much liquor spilled. It is a tiresome thing. My idea of life is a fine evening, an orchestra + a crowd at a distance, a medium dinner, a

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glass of something cool + at the sime time a wholesome, + a soft, full Panatela. If that is congenial to you, we can surely arrange it after June 7--unless I flunk. In the meantime we must be without much ceremony, although eager enough.

W. Stevens

Letter--Dated April 6, 1934:

Dear Bynner,

To hell with Leippert:

The only thing that I can find from him is enclosed. The only reason that I am sending this to you is that, if he offered to bind your manuscript in orange crushed levant, it was wonderfully far-seeing of him, considering that you are now in Florida.

I don't see why you should pay any attention to the thing. Ordinarily when one has been played for a sucker one forgets it. Of course, I don't know that Leippert is all that you say he is; I don't know anything at all about him and don't care.

But I do care about you. Come to see me sometime when you are in Hartford. I went through Sarasota the other afternoon, so to speak, on the way from Tampa to Miami, or, rather, on the way from Tampa to Key West. You ought to foresake Santa Fe and put Key West on the map.

And, the last letter--Dated December 20, 1954:

Dear Bynner,

Alfred Knopf gave quite a party to celebrate my birthday. The only thing that went wrong was that his wife insisted that I get up and talk. There were a lot of people there whom you would have enjoyed quite as much as I did, including young James Merrill, who is about the age which you and I were when we were in New York.

I am horrified to hear about your eye. Five or ten years ago I had trouble with my right eye. Since it was dangerous, I devoted myself to taking care of it and now it is as if nothing had ever happened except that I still use four kinds of medicine every day. I should have to give up everything if anything went wrong with my eyes. Only this last weekend: yesterday

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> and the day before, I felt a bit of strain and read nothing except the newspapers, although my table at home is piling up with things.
>
> I think it is a wonderful idea for you to come down off your perch at Christmas time. Pitts Sanborn, whom you may remember, knew everyone in New York just as you used to but he had a special place for people he knew at college and who were part of the world at Cambridge. The relationship is not quite the same as the relationship between oneself and someone in the high school at home. That is the relationship between myself and Ed Bechtel. . . .
>
> Your note made me happy. Merry Christmas to you and, of course, a Happy New Year, and many of them, although since you must be about my own age, perhaps I ought to eliminate the many of them and just substitute plain good luck.

61 The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology: Being Three Hundred Poems of the T'ang Dynasty 618-906, translated by Witter Bynner from the texts of Kiang Kang-Hu, New York: Vintage, 1957, p. xviii

62 Ibid., p. xvi.

63 Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.

64 Ibid., p. xviii.

65 Ibid., p. xxvi.

66 Michel Benamou and other critics have also noted this similarity to Monet, but have pointed it out in a particular poem, like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," rather than as a general quality of Stevens' work.

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67 This was not altogether freely chosen, however. It was indicated earlier that Stevens' father provided the "voice of Reason" temporarily lost by the young poet when he wanted to travel in Europe rather than go on to Law School. And, later as a young lawyer married to Elsie Moll, he had wanted to pursue a more or less literary life in New York, but Elsie seemed to have found life in New York disagreeable. (This is seen clearly when we compare Stevens' letters and journal entries concerning New York during the periods preceding and following his marriage.)

68 In "The American Critic," Creative Criticism and Other Essays, pp. 123-147.

69 Ibid., pp. 136-137.

70 In The World's Body, p. 42.

71 Civilization and Its Discontents, London: Hogarth Press, 1949, pp. 13-21 et passim.

72 The World's Body, p. 44.

73 "Observations Prefixedto the 'Lyrical Ballads,' (1800), collected in The Great Critics, p. 514.

74 Ibid., p. 502.

75 Wallace Stevens: Life as Poetry, New York: Pegasus, 1970, pp. 22-23.

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6. "The poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man."

To be "ignorant" when approaching a poem means to have no preconceptions about it, to forget what we know about "isms" and the history of poetry, and to see it and participate in it freshly and spontaneously allowing its words to move us and point, without our interference, to its "larger symbolizations." When we yield wholly to "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" in this way, we find many surprising things just below the surface, hidden by the "clouds" of words.

Form reflects the emotional content of the experience recorded in the poem. This idea of form has been part of English literary history since the Middle Ages when the Pearl-Poet, for example, wrote a poem where the complexity and stringency of the form is directly proportional to the intensity of the emotion he felt upon the death of his daughter. In the same way, the complexity of the impressions recorded in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" reflects the complex of emotions that, I shall argue, Stevens felt about the conception and birth of his daughter. Ransom would consider this fact extraneous to the examination of the poem seen as monad; nonetheless, it does play a prevalent part when the poem is seen in its proper context as a moment within the whole experience recorded by all the poems. All the poems, "The Whole of Harmonium," is really the one poem, the monad, which must be examined if Stevens is to be understood. In analyzing the

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poem, Ransom did not pay attention to the resonances of each of its words as Brooks recommended, and as Eliot indicated should be done in "The Three Voices of Poetry."[1] When each of the words is taken in its full signification, what emerges is a poem embedded in the morality which Ransom thought was absent from it and the poet.

When Stevens wrote "In that November off Tehuantepec," he used "that" for a particular and important purpose. Stevens did not write "In November off Tehuantepec," or "In a November off Tehuantepec," but "In that November off Tehuantepec" (emphasis mine) because he meant to designate a precise time which he is pointing out to his reader-critic for a special reason. The "that" points to a specific moment or "occasion" in the life of the poet. When we follow its direction, we find that "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" was written in 1924, or sometime between October 28, 1923, when Stevens and his wife saw Tehuantepec, and August, 1924 when his daughter was born.[2] (The Stevenses actually passed Tehuantepec in October, but the remembrance of November is important because it was during that month that Holly was conceived--being born on August 10, 1924.)

There is a synaesthetic conjunction of memories recorded in the poem, informed by the line, "C'était mon enfant, mon bijou mon âme." In light of the fact just uncovered by following the pointing of "that," this line appears full of meaning rather than as something borrowed for aesthetic effect

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from Baudelairean French. This line is made to appear stylized and dandified precisely because in it (as in the other French lines) Stevens provides the only concrete expression of the actual "occasion" of the poem.

In order to perceive this "reality," hidden by the "sensibility" of the poet, it is necessary to remember the importance of the poet's relationship to his wife, particularly to his early life and poetry. This is especially evident in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (see Chapter 10 of Section II for a full analysis of this), in the letters, and in some of the poems, like "Red Loves Kit" (which we will later examine in relationship to this poem), which Stevens omitted from his Collected Poems. In this context, we should remember that "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" had its "occasion" in the first extended journey the couple made together since their marriage in 1909, fourteen years earlier. Stevens had urged Elsie to travel with him many times before (to Florida and to the South on business, for example), but, as evidenced in the letters, it appears that Elsie had always preferred instead to remain at home or to visit her family either in Reading or in the mountains where they vacationed; more than occasionally she pleaded vague illness as an excuse not to accompany her husband. This vacation must have had special significance for both Stevens and Elsie because it was the first time since their marriage when they would be together in a context removed from the pressures of "the everyday world." In addition, this

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period corresponded to the period immediately following the publication of the first edition of Harmonium--another reason the poet would feel especially "free" and, at the same time, "bound" since he had formally defined himself as a poet.

At first, the poem reflects a kind of peace that is unusual in Stevens' poetry; there is a marked absence of any attempt at logical ordering imposed by the voice of the poet; there is apparently no thought, there are only impressions. These impressions appear to be imaginative recordings of the play of light on the sea at different times of the day and night; on the most accessible level of the poem, this is what they are. This is the poem to which Ransom's criticism, as well as that of other critics examining the poem, is addressed. What is most striking about these surface impressions is the resemblance they have, as Michel Benamou and others have indicated,[3] to the canvasses of the Impressionists, most notably, Monet.[4] On this level, the poem is purely aesthetic--extremely beautiful and satisfying in its comparisons.

However, the poem operates on deeper levels that the surface indicates; these levels reflect the complexity of the emotions Stevens was then experiencing. The fact that the meaning is so hidden beneath the embroidered surface indicates the depth of the feelings of the poet, unwilling as he was ever to reveal himself impudically. After lifting the tapestry of sea-blooms, we notice certain uses of words which are peculiar in their resonances when the poem is considered only as

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an impressionistic piece. There are three distinct groups of words which form re-emerging patterns. One group, consisting of "stratagem," "cajoled," "sham," and "trumped," suggests the presence of trickery in the poem; another, consisting of "malevolent," "macabre," "shrouds," (in one of its meanings), "shrouding shadows," "sinister," and "malice," suggests the presence of evil and mortality; the last group, consisting of "Paradisal green," and "ambrosial latitude," clearly points to ideas of immortality and gives important hints to a connection with Genesis. In addition, of the names of the flowers that appear in the poem, two--"iris" and "hyacinth"--have obvious significations in Greek mythology.

Following the clues provided by these patterns, we begin to see more than a description of how the light playing through the clouds "tricks" the observer into seeing or imagining flowers, chocolate and umbrellas. We begin to question why the poet imagines these particular things. These questions will be asked in the course of following the poem as it develops.

The constant factor for each of the sections of the poem is that the sea has been stilled. This points to what was mentioned earlier about this period being an interlude for the poet, a time suspended, a time without the exigencies of daily life there to distract him or interrupt his observing what passed through his consciousness. The poem is not a description of the present since the poet points back to an

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earlier time with his "that" in the opening of each section. The poem is written of a memory, but with a later knowledge which informs it: that "In that November off Tehuantepec" his daughter was conceived. Also "In that November off Tehuantepec," the poet, like his hero, Crispin, was on a ship voyaging between the two elements of imagination and reality. He was also like Columbus, discovering the waist of America in the "ambrosial latitude" where night and day are equal and time loses its importance. Paradise is suggested and experienced as nearly as it can ever be.

The poem is broken into five equal sections; the first and last two sections frame the central third in which the poet describes night--a very particular night. What we have are not random impressions with only internal ordering, but an extremely complex form reinforced by the tightness of the repetitions with variations. The first two sections, which describe different times of the morning, come before the description of the night, but they do not describe the day before that night, but the morning just after--just like the last two sections. The repeated "one night" in the second line of both the first and second sections points ahead to the "one night" which is the core of the poem; the repetition forecasts its importance. After the first two sections, the third section yields its meaning and eases our expectations so that in the last two sections "one night" is not repeated because the expectant tension has been relieved

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by our knowledge of that night.

Using what has been indicated above as a set of keys to unlock meaning, we shall follow the poem. Before beginning, we should note that the impulse for the poem did not belong to Stevens alone. Elsie entered the following in her Journal, apropos of the time when they were passing Tehuantepec: "The sea lay flat and still as a pan-cake, before breakfast."[5] In another application of synaesthesia, the poet records not only his impressions, but those of his wife as well by transforming her banal, trite comparison, "like a pan-cake," into "rosy chocolate" and all the other variations of chocolate which appear.

The pattern of the poem is set by the first section; each subsequent section presents variations of light and spirit, just as a series of canvasses by Monet records the changing aspects of one scene. In the first section, we have a portrait of the poet as a satisfied and happy, potent Hoon; this is the first, and possibly the only, vision we have of the poet as potent and fulfilled (in the later poetry, in "Planet on the Table," for example, we see the poet fulfilled, but by age and wisdom rather than by the vigor of manhood).

We ask ourselves, first, why the poet imagines "chocolate" and "umbrellas." The juxtaposition of the two is perplexing. Stevens seems to have anticipated this reaction; in the third line of the second stanza, he uses "perplexed" to describe the "machine/ Of ocean." Because of this, we feel that we share

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something in common with the ocean, which in this way becomes personified. The ocean is "perplexed" because of the stillness brought by the calm; "which like limpid water lay" (emphasis mine) indicates that this is only an appearance, not reality. However, this still state gives reality to the poet's imaginings. The perplexed quality belongs not only to us and the ocean, but to the poet as well, though he does not admit it directly. He is at sea in November, and it is summer; the label he is so well-accustomed to as signifying chill, grey weather now signifies "Paradisal green." Away from all thoughts of business, without the necessity of thought, he is only a sense receptor of impressions; the only activity comes from his imagination which cannot help but associate. He looks at the deck of the boat and "thinks," or thinks he thinks, of "rosy chocolate" and "gilt umbrellas." His mind is flowing with associations from Homer's "rosy fingered dawn" to ideas of muddy chocolate rivers emptying into the sea in which he sails, and of the ancestral Indians of Tehuantepec from whom the Spaniards learned of chocolate and so brought it to Europe. Associated as it is with a lush tropical atmosphere, chocolate, bitter in its natural state, is a beautifully sweet cipher for the experience of coming to the New World.

The juxtaposed image of "gilt umbrellas" is more problematic, although when the actual feeling of being on a ship in tropical waters during a dead calm is imagined, it is easier to understand why the poet would think of "umbrellas;" he

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wishes for some shelter from the intensity of the tropical sun. The association goes further, however; it suggests the unsuitability of the European to the climate of the American tropics, to the America that was first discovered. The European and his descendants must protect themselves from the weather of their new land; they cannot be in direct contact with this "Paradisal" nature, much as they might like to be.

Seeing shadows projected in front of him on the deck of the ship (since they are headed west, the morning sun would be behind them, and so projecting shadows ahead), the poet observes his imagination. Then looking at the sea, he feels his power over nature and revels in it. He aggrandizes himself by asking rhetorical questions: "Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude/ Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,/ Who, then, evolved the sea blooms from the clouds/ Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?" (We must remember that he uses the past tense because he is recording this experience at a later time.) This is the poet of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," feeling himself majestic, godlike, immortal, belonging in "that ambrosial latitude," creating "sea-blooms" from the clouds as they move across the sky shadowing the sea. It also evokes, very significantly, the beginning of Genesis; God's spirit, like the imagination of the poet, moves over the face of the waters and creates form. When he answers his questions, he cannot openly speak the power he feels so he

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switches to French: "C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme." He gives us the only concrete clues in the poem in the most abstract form. After the creation of form there is Paradise: we realize that the perplexed poet is soothed by hints of immortality: "Paradisal green/ Gave suavity to the perplexed machine." The open-endedness of this line, which is not completed until the next stanza with "Of ocean," lends the necessary ambiguity allowing "machine" to point more strongly to the poet himself than to the ocean to which it belongs grammatically.

What is responsible for this peace, this temporary grasping of immortality by the poet? He gives the answer: "C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme."--the actuality of his continuity in the flesh of his child, conceived "one night" "In that November off Tehuantepec." This is deeply embedded in complex imagery and borrowed French because it is so personal. It is also ambiguous; it is possible to interpret it as being his imagination alone which gives him the power he feels, but there are no other poems in which the imagination is equally extolled where there is the same quality of peace as we find here.

As his imagined blooms move beneath the sea, "in the swimming green," he sees them as "those flotillas," his little fleet, his navy defending him against any greater power of heaven or of nature that might rob him of those imaginings which are the representations he makes to himself of his

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potency and joy. In the next line, the association of "iris" to Iris of Greek mythology lends an additional level of meaning and connects, as well, to the hint of Homer we hear in "rosy chocolate." "And sometimes the sea/ Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue," suggests the presence of this goddess whose duty is was to feed the gods ambrosia (connecting this to "ambrosial latitude"). Iris was the granddaughter of Oceanus and served as messenger for the other gods; her union with Zephyrus was believed by some to have produced Eros. She was also able to dive into the sea between the dark waves, as Homer records, to perform whatever task the gods had given her; her representation was the rainbow. The interweaving of these symbolic meanings cannot be done logically; they are presented as associations in the imagination, without reason; they are the associations of the poet--"perplexed machine"--at an important moment in his life. The images with their myriad associations from Genesis, from Homeric epic to New World colonization are in flux in this poem; there is no attempt at ordering their meaning except within the rigid repetitions of the poem. The poet is presenting who he is by recording what is in his consciousness since it is this aggregation of experience which he is and which he will pass on to his child.

In the second section of the poem, the mood, as well as the surface apprehension of time, shifts. It is now well beyond the dawn of Section I, and the poet's associations begin with

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those to breakfast or the time of breakfast. The two opening lines are still the same, making us return with the poet to that "true subject" which he cannot evade--that "one night"--even though the poem seems to be about another subject altogether, the "sea surface full of clouds"--this is the "poetry of the subject." Here in Section II, with the rising of the sun higher in the sky, that is, with less evasion possible because the light is clearer (the most evasion is possible during the night, in the moonlight), an element of doubt and the first suggestion of some kind of falsity become apparent together with hints of evil and mortality.

Whereas in the first section all the associations are possitive, linking the poet's feelings to thoughts of his immortality (the only ambiguous touches are provided there by the adjective "perplexed" and by the blooms described as "flotillas"), the tone is now controlled by primarily negative, or at least ambivalent, feelings. The poet is now more in touch with his own internal reality, apart from the actual voyage he is making. His mood reflects his preoccupation (even if this preoccupation is subconscious, as we are led to believe) with the more problematic aspects of the experience which he is undergoing.

He thinks now not of "rosy chocolate and gilt umbrellas," but of "chop-house chocolate and sham umbrellas." The association to chop-house carries out the association to breakfast since a chop-house is an eating place. But the fact that it

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is the kind of eating place most often frequented by those who must eat away from home in a place where the food has been pre-prepared suggests that the poet is subliminally conscious of the time previous to his marriage, or to the times when he had travelled previously, away from home without Elsie. The introduction of the adjective "sham" communicates that something is indeed awry, that the poet is conscious of some kind of covering or trickery either on his own part, on the part of his wife, or on the part of his imagination as it devises substantial images of shadow from the play of light (most likely, the trickery derives from a combination of all of these). This is continued with the shift from "Paradisal green" to "sham-like green," and the fact that he no longer perceives "summer" but "summer-seeming," suggesting that he is now more conscious of his imagination's providing effects which are not at all real.

With this realization, he becomes "tense;" he realizes his tension and projects it on to the "machine/ Of ocean" which now "in sinister flatness lay." He again beholds the movement of the clouds, but does not now immediately see them as "blooms" but as what they are, clouds "that strode submerged in the malevolent sheen." The presence of evil is clearly indicated here with two of the five words suggesting it already presented. The ocean now threatens him; his "flotillas" of blooms, the products of his imagination, can no longer defend and protect him against the feelings he has.

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These feelings are connected with thoughts of his mortality which he projects onto the imaginary blooms: "Who saw the mortal [emphasis mine] massives of the blooms/ Of water moving on the water-floor?/ C'était mon frère du ciel, ma vie, mon or." His own life paralleled to a personified sun--his gold, his treasure--is perceived in its transience, just as the blooms on the surface of the sea are transient. His imagination alone no longer has the power to sustain him; he, too, is dependent on the power of nature. The sun is his "frère du ciel" because it, too, depends on something else, here the clouds, for the possibility of creating images and illusions.

The next stanza introduces the first auditory element in the poem: "The gongs rang loudly as the windy blooms/ Hoo-hooed it in the darkened ocean-blooms./ The gongs grew still. . ." Here the clear intrusion of an exterior reality mirrors the poet's consciousness as it turns to things more real. The gongs belong to the ship or to a buoy rocking in the swell; perhaps they are the gongs that are the call to an actual breakfast--breaking the fast which induces a spiritualized, illusory state. Together with the gongs comes the rising of the wind, suggesting that the gongs did belong to a buoy which sounded more with the rising of the wind, then as the ship moved away, the sound "grew still." This signals the end of the illusions that were part of the still, the "malevolent sheen" and reminds us of Iris' mate, Zephyrus,

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and hints at Eros, the product of their union. The wind is most probably that northwesterly which Jamaican and West Indian seamen call the "Chocolate North;"[6] this lends another association to the chocolate imagery which is part of the poet's consciousness. The wind clears the sky of the clouds: "And the blue heaven spread/ Its crystalline pendentives on the sea/ And the macabre of the water-glooms/ In an enormous undulation fled." The umbrella imagery is now projected onto the sky with its raying sunshine which suggests the pendentives supporting arches. Here all of Stevens' imagery connected with palms and their archings, signifying in a quasi-religious sense the peace found by the mind, is brought to bear. His rational mind is in operation, and it sees what the imagination saw as "sea-blooms" as "water-glooms." The crystalline force of the mind, helped by the forces of the sun and wind, which allows him to see things clearly, has banished illusion.

The suggestion of palms at this point evokes two more concrete associations which give the poem deven deeper resonances. The first is to the actual figure of a palm depicted on a Pennsylvania Dutch charm which hung on the front of the Stevens' grandfather's house and which he referred to as remaining fixed in his memory whenever he contemplated his ancestors and his relationship to them.[7] This symbolization, then, communicates the poet's musings on the tie to his personal past and the continuity of this tie through the life of his daughter. The second is to Valéry's "Palme"[8] ("Ce belle

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arbitre mobile/ Entre l'ombre et le soleil, Simule d'une sibylle/ La sagesse et le sommeil"), which is also connected to Stevens' personal association by the thread of "continuity" ("la divine durée"):

> Sa douceur est mesurée
> Par la divine durée
> Qui ne compte pas les jours,
> Mais bien qui les dissimule
> Dans un suc où s'accumule
> Tout l'arome des amours.

Once this connection has been established by the poet, it is a small step to make another and link "Le Cimitière Marin"[9] to "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Both poems have to do with the nature of the poet's immortality, though for Valéry it is wholly aesthetic, while for Stevens it is tied inexorably by his poem to its concrete expression in the flesh of his child. Valéry's poem is certainly more intellectual than Stevens' "impressionistic" one, and does not transcend the level of being a poem about the writing and purpose of poetry cast in a literary setting, whereas Stevens' goes beyond this level and connects to a non-literary, unsentimentalized occasion. The association to Valéry is also reinforced by Stevens' borrowing from the French in his poem, which now acquires another level of meaning.

Both poets are prompted to make their poems by a somewhat disturbing calm on the sea; both poets reflect on "Creation"--though Valéry's meditation, in spite of its evocation of paradisal fruit in the fifth strophe, is more openly pagan and

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philosophical than Stevens'. Abstractly, Valéry recalls in one line that seed of memory out of which the poem grew ("Une étincelle y pense à mes absents") while Stevens develops his whole poem out of the memory concretely described though imaginatively experienced: he seems to answer with the fact of his poem the essential question Valéry rhetorically poses,

> Et vous, grand âme, espérez-vous un songe
> Qui n'aura plus ces couleurs de mensonge
> Qu'aux yeux de chair l'onde et l'or font ici?

Stevens uses Valéry's poem as an additional key; if the association to it is discovered, it illustrates the meaning of his poem, corroborates our perceptions as to its intention and purpose, and, in addition, points out Stevens' difference from Valéry, with whom he has often been compared. Near the end of his poem, Valéry writes, "O puissance salée!/ Courons à l'onde en rejaillir vivant!" Besides the obvious reference that Stevens plays on of being reborn through the fulfillment of the sexual act during which his daughter was conceived, there is implicit in these lines a yearned for identification between the poet and the sea which Stevens also uses in "Sea Surface" through the ambiguous reference of "machine" to "ocean" and to him. (There are also other figurative associations between the two poems which may or may not represent conscious borrowing on Stevens' part: for example, the images of the pigeons, and the metaphor of the diamond for the crystalline force of the mind.)

In naming himself and the ocean "machine," Stevens also

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makes another very covert connection to Valéry's poem, this time through the epigraph which is from Pindar's Pythic Odes III (Μή, φίλα ψυχά, βίον ἀθάνατον σπεῦδε, τὰν δ' ἔμπρακτον ἄντλει μαχᾶνάν) advising lovers of the spirit not to pursue eternal life as an abstraction, but as that which is drawn from battle, the battle of real life; the word "μαχᾶνάν " for "battle" is rooted in the word "sword"--an important point, as we shall see. Valéry and Stevens, makers, poets, battle, struggle with life, with their words, which are, as Stevens pointed out, real facts once the poet has given them life. "Μαχᾶνάν" is etymologically connected to the same root from which we get "machine" in English. The poet, then, represents the battle; his words are his swords (here, we cannot ignore those lines from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,/ Like the clashed edges of two words that kill," where the metaphorical connection between "words" and "swords" is strongly evoked) which he uses, like heroes of ancient times, to ensure his fame, the continuity of his name. The ocean, too, is also a "machine" because it produces life, always changes, yet always remains the same; the poet in this same way will become a hero.

As in Stevens' poem, so to in Valéry's, it is the rising of the wind that signals the return from meditation to a more concrete reality in which the poet expresses his actual wishes ("Le vent se lève! . . . il faut tenter de vivre!"). Both

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poets have seen something clearly; they have clearly projected both their mortality (as we shall see, for Stevens, in the next paragraph) and their immortality, and they choose to act on the basis of what it is that they have seen.

What it is that Stevens has now seen clearly is what is important about this section of the poem. In the penultimate line, "And the macabre of the water-glooms," the meaning of this section is concealed. "Macabre" derives etymologically from its application to the "Danse Macabre," that medieval series of depictions of the soul and its being on the way to death which, in turn, derived from a fourteenth century morality play; its most popular representation is that of Holbein the Younger. There were originally twenty-four in the series of the danse macabre. If one section of Stevens' poem is omitted, there are twenty-four stanzas; which section should be deleted so that the remainder of the poem can stand as a new danse will become clear as the analysis progresses. We must now ask why the associations to mortality, to evil and trickery are in this section, immediately following the peace found in the first.

The danse macabre was a religiously inspired answer and foil to man's vanity. In the first section of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," the poet reveled in his potency, in his male power to conceive a child and in the power of his imagination not to let nature rest simply as nature, but to embellish it with illusions which gave pleasure. As an inheritor of the

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Calvinist spirit (a fact of which we have been reminded by the associations "chocolate" and "umbrellas" indicated earlier see pp. 203-205), Stevens could not longer maintain this feeling of peace and power without before long feeling a pang of guilt. He would feel that an act which did give him unmitigated pleasure was evil, "sinister" and "malevolent" because it led him away from what is considered "good" by Calvinism. In addition, and more significantly, in keeping with his early wish to be like St. Augustine, the poet here seems to develop poetically Augustine's piquant observation that "Post coitum, homo triste est." After the initial peace which comes with full sexual satisfaction, there is, on the part of those sensitive enough to perceive it, an intense awareness of mortality which causes the tension Stevens so well describes in this section. To the possible objection that this is not what the poem is really about, the next section should be carefully examined.

Section III is the central section of the poet; here its secret lies hidden. Here there is no day, only night--a night of the intensest blue, complete with a moon which is not named but whose presence is known by the shadowed images its light makes: "And a pale silver patterned on the deck/ And made one think of porcelain chocolate and pied umbrellas." The adjectives here suggest both the delicacy and the playfullness of the experience contained in this section. Here is the last time that "one night" will be mentioned since it is for this

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section that the indications in the preceding two sections exist.

The "green" is now "uncertain" instead of "Paradisal" or "sham-like" because not only is the meaning of this section made to appear uncertain, but the poet, too, feels uncertain. The symbolization of the poet with imagination is "green;" "green" functions synechdochally at this point, elliptically suggesting that "green and fluent mundo," and the "fat girl, green and terrestial" of "Notes." It is "an uncertain green" because the poet is unsure whether he is now partaking more of reality or of imagination. It is "Piano-polished" not only because it appears glimmering and shining, but because of the poet's associations to pianos--his mother having played and Elsie, too, when he met her and she worked playing the piano in a Reading department store. For him, the piano and other keyboard instruments are always attached to something magical connected with the idea of Beauty and the allure of the female, as in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (see analysis in Chapter 12 of Section II). Accordingly, the machine of ocean, his projection, is now "tranced," carried away by the rapture of the "Uncertain green . . . as a prelude holds and holds."

"Prelude" here continues the metaphor begun with "Piano-polished," and also describes most hermetically the period preceding sexual climax. In his imagination, he synaesthetically perceives both his sensations and those of Elsie--the female is

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felt by him as "silver petals of white blooms/ Unfolding in the water," and he, the male, is "feeling sure/ Of the milk within the saltiest spurge." He continues to express the feelings of both of them in this section and in part of the next. The climax itself is recorded as, "The sea unfolding in the sunken clouds/ Oh! [marking the surprise of the moment of climax] C'était mon extase et mon amour." Unlike the previous two sections, he does not now see the sea-blooms since his attention is no longer focussed on what is external; he only hears the sea: "heard, then,/ The sea unfolding in the sunken clouds."

The section continues following the pattern already established, and the poet describes, "So deeply sunken were they that the shrouds,/ The shrouded shadows, made the petals black/ Until the rolling heaven made them blue,/ A blue beyond the rainy hyacinth,/ And smiting the crevasses of the leaves/ Deluged the ocean with a sapphire blue." The moment of climax still making its power felt makes them feel "deeply sunken" like the sea-blooms themselves. The petals are now black, the absence of all color, the color of "la petite mort." When they again become slightly conscious of the external reality, they perceive a blue that is associated with immortality, as suggested by the mythological association to Hyacinth. They also become aware of their temporary union with the "rolling heaven" with which they "Deluged the ocean with a sapphire blue."

The only suggestions of mortality here are the symbols

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of the "shrouds" and "shrouding shadows" which are ambiguous because they refer both to the winding cloth of death (an association which exists because of the French name for sexual climax hinted at because Stevens has chosen to use the French language cryptically in the poem) and to the actual shrouds, lines, on the ship which throw their shadows in the moonlight. The ambiguous "they" in the first line of the penultimate stanza refers both to the sea-blooms and to themselves (the sea-blooms are not referred to as "they" before this in the poem) as they move with the rhythms of the ship on the sea.

This section differs from all the other sections because it records a present without reflection. Here the present participles, "seeing," "feeling," "unfolding," are substituted for the past tenses of "evolved," "beheld," "moved," "strode," and "secluded." This is because the poet is simultaneously acting and perceiving, caught in the passion of his act as he describes what informs the whole poem. It is this section which is to be deleted from the whole poem when it is considered as a danse macabre since in this section there is no separation between feeling and action, no dialogue between body and soul, between mind and imagination; all here is one, and is the reason for the other imaginary meditations and observations of change. Following the Genesis imagery, the poet is now like Adam with Eve before the Fall; he has made the transition from creator to created.

The last two sections of the poem reflect a marked change

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in mood from the first two, even though they describe the same morning as the first two. The account of that "one night" has caused the change. There is no longer any need to mention that "one night" since the knowledge of the experience has been internalized by both the poet and the reader. This knowledge was not known, only hinted at, before the third central section.

In the first stanza of Section IV the change is immediately reflected by the abruptness caused by the alteration of the second line from, "The slopping of the sea grew still one night" to, "The night-long slopping of the sea grew still." This leaves us with a feeling of hesitation and impatience parallel to the poet's whose earlier state of peace has been interrupted; he cannot now be the same because he has revealed himself to us and to himself and is somewhat ashamed. He has fallen. Instead of alluding to Homer's dawn, the poet now speaks entirely in his own voice without echoes from the past. He describes the morning, the dawn, as, "A mallow morning dozed upon the deck/ And made one think of musky chocolate/ And frail umbrellas." "Mallow," besides suggesting the color of the flower it names, hints at another adjective, "mellow;" we are expected to make this association because of the mood the poet has already set up. Things appear unclear to him now, and the adjectives he chooses to describe his chocolate and umbrellas communicate this--the suggestion of "mellow" by "mallow," and "musky" and "frail" as well. The poet now

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feels vulnerable and afraid and wants to hide--like Adam and Even after the Fall.

"A too-fluent green/ Suggested malice in the dry machine/ Of ocean, pondering dank stratagem." These lines point out the reason for the fear he now experiences. The green is no longer "Paradisal," "sham-like," or even "uncertain," but "too-fluent;" it has over-expended itself. It overpowers his fertility, his imagination, because it has brought the union of imagination with reality, of body and spirit, of himself and Elsie, that he records in the previous section. There is no need for his imagination to complete life which is at this moment complete in itself. This suggests "malice in the dry machine" that he is now, having spent his "saltiest spurge," because he, good Puritan, cannot justify to himself the satisfactions of the flesh without the concomitant awareness that it is evil. In addition, since he must have played at seducing his wife, must have "cajoled" her, planned like a general his "stratagem" to win her, he now feels guilty. In addition to the characters of God and Adam, he has taken on that of Satan as well. He characterizes himself as "pondering dank stratagem;" his thought processes are working to alleviate the pangs he feels. He looks at the "figures of the clouds" and sees them, like Elsie and himself, reenacting the primal shame of Adam and Eve, "secluded in the thick marine," (emphasis mine), hiding themselves from the voice which will punish them.

The suggestion of the presence of the God who punished

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Adam and Even after their "sin" in the same words which describe the poet and his experience indicates that the poet is torn between his animal nature and what he has internalized of the punishing nature of God. Following this, the God in him could be understood to be "pondering dank stratagem" as punishment at the same time as the serpent in him was "pondering dank stratagem" to cause his fall into consciousness. This presence grows out of the shame the poet, like Adam and Even, feels. He (God internalized by the poet) sees them, identified with the "blooms" ("they" referred both to the sea-blooms and to the poet and Elsie in the previous section, and it is now carried over here), hiding, "secluded in the thick marine." The divine presence is also suggested by "ma foi, la nonchalance divine." Since the poet has a vestige of faith because he was raised with it, he believes in the nonchalant (because uncaring of the human pain) divinity whose image of "salt masks of beard" grows out of the poet's shameful "nakedness" of which he is aware now for the first time, as was Adam after the Fall. Because of the ambivalence of the images in this section, we understand the strain the poet felt between his animal and spiritual natures--a tension that can never be completely eased. The strength of our controlling myth of Genesis is reiterated.

The associations suddenly shift in the middle of this imagery, however, and the "blooms" become "damasks that were shaken off/ From the loosed girdles in the spangling must."

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The poet imagines Elsie as a goddess undressing, like Iris shaking loose the colors of the rainbow from her girdle, and he remembers both of them caught by the "spangling must" of animal desire ("must" here carries its full weight and makes the meaning very clear). The tension between his animal and spiritual natures is stretched even more. What in one sense is the punishing agent, "ma foi, la nonchalance divine," is also what allows him to have this remembrance. This represents a temporary lack of concern with how Elsie might now feel and a momentary forgetting of his own guilt. It reminds us, too, of the reason Stevens preferred pagan Greek mythology to any other. In addition, this is coupled with a renewed desire for the faith in imagination which can sustain him; this provides the possibility for continuation, even into the next stanza which is wholly imaginary; we know this because it is characterized and stressed as such by the repetition of "would:"

> The nakedness would rise and suddenly turn
> Salt masks of beard and mouths of bellowing,
> Would--But more suddenly the heaven rolled

The use of imagination here is different from that which characterizes the images of the sea-blooms. Here there is the introduction of an entirely new image to the poem, an image unconnected with anything that has come before in the first three sections: nakedness; it is derived from the immediately preceding image of "the loosed girdles in the spangling must." From the first mention of "damasks" through "The nakedness

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would rise and suddenly turn/ Salt masks of beard and mouths of bellowing,/ Would," the use of imagination is connected with thought, that is, with the active intrusion of an ordering faculty which attempts to impose meaning on the experience. With this continued image, we are totally within the mind of the poet, not even half connected to the memory of the external reality from which he has previously drawn the impressions which mirror his feelings. This lasts for only a very brief moment, however, until, "--But more suddenly the heaven rolled// Its bluest sea-clouds in the thinking green,/ And the nakedness became the broadest blooms,/ Mile-mallows that a mallow sun cajoled."

In this brief passage before the intrusion of the last lines beginning with "But more suddenly," we have the singular instance in the poem of the poet's not using his images as defenses, as his "flotilla" protecting him against invasion by his spontaneous feelings. On the contrary, what is contained in this image is not a defense against feeling but a spontaneous and genuine expression of it, using trope as a "manner" of revelation. What he reveals is how he feels in his nakedness, in his vulnerability after having surrendered his body and spirit. If he could, he "would" see in the sea the mirror of his own being, "Salt masks of beard and [completed by] mouths of bellowing," but then he would have had to have written a poem about that joyful suffering, having it (the joyful suffering) as its stated subject instead of the impressions of the

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sea surface. As it is, there is only this very brief glimpse of the poet's real feelings; this is understandable and in keeping with Stevens' extreme reluctance to indulge any of the Romantic's need for direct self-expression.

That what has occurred--this slight lapse into the direct examination of himself and his condition--results from his having turned his imagination inward together with his thought is confirmed by the final modification of "green" in this section by "thinking:" "--But more suddenly the heaven rolled// Its bluest sea-clouds in the thinking green." His attention has again been caught by the play of light on the sea which makes the sea-blooms, his defenses against himself; instead of contemplating his "nakedness" any longer, he imagines again "the broadest blooms,/ Mile-mallows that a mallow sun cajoled." The description of the blooms now is not as variously imaginative as it was earlier; the repetition of "mallow" as plural noun and as adjective in the same line (echoing the first stanza of the section) suggests that the poet is really not able to use his imagination as freely any longer. He is now using energy to repress what would be his "true subject," and the repetitions reflect this resulting staleness. He can no longer be the passive observer of his imagination as he was in the first section when he did not have to defend himself against expressing the genuine feelings which are tied to his intimate life. He "cajoles" his imagination to focus itself again on the sea, but it is too late; both the reader and

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he know that it is cajolery, that the sea surface is not and has not at all been his "true subject."

The last section of the poem sums up what has happened. The poet gives, as directly as possible, an explanation for the kind of impressionism found in the poem. The form still follows the established pattern. The variation from the previous section here in the second line of the first stanza counterpoises night and day on either side of the line. This symbolically informs us that it was that "one night" which stilled the sea and was responsible for the poet's imaginings. The enjambed intrusion of "the day" at the end of the line prepares us for more lucidity now, more of what is rational and less of what is imaginative. It is as though the poet has suddenly realized that up until now his imaginings of the day and of the light on the sea have been conditioned by that "one night"--that is, on the deck of the ship during that "morning after," he had acted in the way he usually acted only at night when he was alone in his room, allowing his imagination full rein. But now thought has intruded, and his awareness and knowledge cannot be hidden so he looks at things in the clear light of day.

He describes how, "The day/ Came bowing and voluble, upon the deck;" the description is no longer concrete and imaginative, but abstract and rational, based on an intellectually constructed comparison of the day to a clown--this is a product of Fancy. He describes and addresses the day as "Good Clown"

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because the day brings the return of reason and allows him to feel more familiar with himself again, to see himself like the day and like the sea, as well, as a clown who out of an enormous amount of control and effort can make it appear that he is only playing--just as he has done in the poem.

After the ellipsis following "Good clown," which makes us supply the reason for naming the day "clown," all the associative imagery belongs to the clown. We recognize the poet of the early poems of Harmonium, of "The Comedian as the Letter C," of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," because of the ironic tone which has been markedly absent from the rest of the poem, but which now makes itself heard. The poet is again playing the dandy, the aesthete, one separated from real feeling who thinksof "Chinese chocolate and large umbrellas;" he is not really paying attention to what he sees in his memory, but letting his fancy associate wittily. The green is now "motley" like the imaginary clothing he wears as clown. "And a motley green/ Followed the drift of the obese machine// Of ocean, perfected in indolence." Like the ocean onto which he projects his characteristics, he now is "obese:" he feels the weight of his body because he is now fully in reality. What was beautifully peaceful in the first section is now "perfected in indolence."

His Calvinism has won out; it has prevented the poet from extending the moment of his satisfaction beyond the one section which opened the poem (when he was still un-self-conscious about

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what had transpired during the night). Moreover, it has forced him to create that persona, that "pistache one, ingenious and droll," who sees the world colored by his attitude of green (here connected imaginatively to "pistache") irony, who protects himself from true self-knowledge and consequent revelation by observing--instead of his soul--"the sovereign clouds as jugglery// And the sea as turquoise-turbaned Sambo, neat/ At tossing saucers," like himself distracting attention from where it should be focussed. He names this "mon espirit bâtard, l'ignominie," quite rightfully because he knows that it is out of his shame--out of his inability to sustain perceived pleasure in his flesh and describe it openly--that the images of sea-blooms and chocolate and umbrellas, which the poem apparently has as its subject, grow. It is a bastard spirit because it does not allow him to know who he really is, to name and accept himself as sexual, guiltless, and as having legitimate appetites.

The two final stanzas of the poem reinforce the theme suggested at the beginning of this section: the absence of true imaginative power on the part of the poet. There is a more or less general description of how the clouds finally come together: "The sovereign clouds came clustering." Then we have the rather cryptic line, "The conch of loyal conjuration trumped." This does not seem to refer to anything in this section, but it does, explaining the context of the whole poem. His ability to conjure (as poet-clown-trickster, "the sleight

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of hand man") has "trumped" us into mistaking the "poetry of the subject" for the "true subject;" it has even tricked the poet himself, making him the real victim of the artifice. Ultimately the wind clears away the clouds and there is an ambiguously successful ending to the poem: "Then the sea/ And heaven rolled as one and from the two/ Came fresh transfigurings of the freshest blue." What makes these lines ambiguous is the "Then" opening because it apparently refers to the time after the clearing away of the clouds; that is, to the moment the poem closes when reality and the clear light of the sun have made "fresh transfigurings" possible. But the "Then" refers just as easily back to the second half of the third section when the clouds and heavens rolled as one with the poet and his wife and produced "A blue beyond the rainy hyacinth," "fresh transfigurings of the freshest blue." Because of these two references, the lines assume a mimicking quality since what we do when we read both the hidden "true subject" of the poem and the external "poetry of the subject" is to make "fresh transfigurings." And what the poet and his wife produced from this momentary union resulted from their being like the sea and heaven described in the poem, "rolled as one."

The impressionism of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is trickery which hides the true subject. Like a siren's song, the "poetry of the subject" with its controlled repetitions enchants us and leads us away from finding the "true subject,"

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that personal meaning which lies beneath the "surface." By suggesting the presence of clouds reflected beneath the surface of the sea, the title of the poem suggests this deceptive quality; it also suggests the possibility of a storm or menace of some sort. After careful examination, we find that this "storm" is the welter of emotions, the expression of the poet's "irrational element" which has been aroused by the bittersweetness of his union with his wife--a union which brought his child into the world and at the same time evoked all his memories of their usual inaccessibility to each other.

Without knowing the corpus of Stevens' work and the material contained in the Letters, it would be almost impossible to determine all the significations of the words which give the poem meaning. It is probably Stevens' most hermetic poem, and is so precisely because of its "true subject." As mentioned above, the care with which the poet hides his "true subject" reflects his sensibility which was largely the product of the Puritanical background he inherited which was intolerant of excessive attention given to personal, intimate matters and of the self-indulgence required to write poetry dealing with these issues.[10] Having an awareness of this aspect of Stevens' personality enables us to perceive the conflict he experienced, even in having chosen to write poetry at all. This conflict expresses itself in his attributing to his writing of peoms the adjectives "ladylike" and "self-indulgent." Because of this, he compromised by hiding himself

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and his feelings when he did write poetry; this is what happened with "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."

There is a ratio which we can posit for examining Stevens' poetry; the more moving the experience, the "occasion" of the poem, the more hermetic and apparently more impressionistic--the more purely "aesthetic"--it will appear. This is something which Stevens' critics (with the possible exception of Blackmur) have not recognized; they have not penetrated beneath the "poetry of the subject" to find the "true subject." Once this true subject" has been perceived, we understand the profound moral impact of the poem. The poem is not about the morality of the poet, it is a reflection of that morality--the mixing of personal desire together with an attachment to a set of beliefs that may have evolved into nothing more than a code of behaviour. In the end, these two elements cancel each other out and paralyze the individual, except in imagination (for which he feels guilty). Affective action is made impossible without enormous pain, a pain which Stevens preferred not to feel and avoided when he could.

Any doubt that may still exist as to whether the "true subject" of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is what has been indicated in this analysis is quickly dispelled when another poem, "Red Loves Kit," is considered together with it. "Red Loves Kit" was written at roughly the same time as "Sea Surface" and appeared together with it in Measure.[11] Stevens later chose not to include it in his three hundred collected

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poems probably because it is too open and reveals much too blatantly, and somewhat prosaically as well, the situation which prompted the writing of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." One hesitates to examine a poem which the poem did not want collected, but since it did appear at one time, and since it sheds more light on "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," there is justification.

"Red Loves Kit" is not a successful poem; in fact, with the exception of the last stanza, the poem is more prose than poetry. Because of this, we will not analyze it as a poem with attention to rhyme, repetition, meter, and image, but we will look at the words which inform the meaning of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."

The poem opens with four lines describing an untenable situation between the poet and "her," who is almost unmistakeably Elsie: "Your yes her no, your no, her yes. The words/ Make little difference for being wrong/ And wronging her, if only as she thinks,/ You can never be right." These lines evoke the first stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" where the poet also described a situation where he is being denied by his wife (see analysis in Chapter 10 of Section II.) The fourth line continues with, "You are the man:" here we hear an echo from the first section of "Sea Surface" where the poet exalts in his manhood. The following line, "You brought the incredible calm in ecstasy," seems to refer directly to the calm described in the other poem, and here the "calm" is

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openly attached to "ecstasy" in an overt (for Stevens) reference to a sexual encounter between him and his wife. The stanza continues and describes Elsie's callousness toward her husband, her ignorance of him, of his imaginative power, of his love, of his sense of loss and his perplexity, of his lack of satisfaction in their marriage. The stanza closes with two lines suggesting that now that she was his wife, Elsie did not even understand her husband's involvement with poetry (a fact which is touched on by Samuel French Morse[12]) since she accuses him of "metaphysical" adulteries "that sack the sun."

The second stanza opens with five lines which provide another important key to understanding the form Stevens used when he wrote "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." At first, they appear to be nothing more than an elaboration of what is beautiful: "A beautiful thing, milord, is beautiful/ Not only in itself but in the things/ Around it. Thus it has a large expanse,/ As the moon has in its moonlight, worlds away,/ As the sea has in its coastal clamorings." These lines refer to the way in which "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is constructed; they indicate that what must be considered about something "beautiful," as for each of the surface impressions of the sea, is not only what is immediately seen, but also what is "around it"--the "irrational element" which informs the words, the "aureoles" of meaning which illuminate each line.[13] This perception is then extended to apply to

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Elsie and his relationship with her:

> So she, when in her mystic aureole
> She walks, triumphing humbly, should express
> Her beauty in your love. She should reflect
> Her glory in your passion and be proud.
> Her music should repeat itself in you,
> Impelled by a convulsive harmony.
> Milord, I ask you, though you will to sing,
> Does she will to be proud? True, you may love
> And she have a beauty of a kind, but such
> Unhappy love reveals vast blemishes.

Here is the other side of the experience recorded in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds;" this is the negative aspect which prompts the confusion the poet experiences in that poem after the initial section. Here we have a most literal presentation of the situation which existed between them. The poet feels that she has not and cannot "take on his knowledge with his power," that she cannot accept the implications of her sexuality and be proud as he would have her be so that he, too, could accept his sexuality without guilt and pain. In the previous stanza, he describes her as "mystic," as "virgin visionary spent/ In this spent world," indicating that she has protected herself from facing the reality of their sexual relationship by retreating into a mystical, quasi-religious state, unattached to the beauty of external reality which he still enjoys, an enjoyment which she resents, having accused him of "metaphysical adulteries." In addition, the modifier, "virgin," suggests that she has remained untouched by the experience recorded in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" even though she is carrying the child who concretely symbolizes their union.

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As a result, the poet is unable to accept himself not only as a man, fulfiller of both his own and his wife's real needs, but also unable to accept himself as a poet, one who sings his joy and the beauty of the world he sees after having satisfied his primary libidinal needs. The most informing word of this stanza is "convulsive" modifying "harmony," because it suggests the involuntary movements of the sexual act; Elsie is unable to "repeat" his music, "Her glory in his passion," because she has not been "Impelled by a compulsive harmony." She denies not only his words but his attempts at penetrating her as well. Even though she has participated in the act, she cannot accept that participation, nor enjoy it. The end for the poet is his facing his inability to reach her; he closes with, "but such/ Unhappy love reveals vast blemishes." He has been reduced to impotence.

The last stanza of the poem reinforces this feeling of impotence by projecting an imaginative impotence as well; the poet imagines crows covering the moon, the source of poetic inspiration, representation of Apollo. Paradoxically, however, this is the only stanza which comes close to being poetry, suggesting that the poet has sublimated his instincts into the writing of poetry. As in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," the images here make the "poetry of the subject" and deflect his attention and ours away from the actual situation, his "true subject:"

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Rest, crows, upon the edges of the moon,
Cover the golden altar deepest black,
Fly upward thick in numbers, fly across
The blueness of the half-night, fill the air
And darken it, make an unbroken mat
Out of the whirl and denseness of your wings,
Spread over heaven shutting out the light.
Then turn your heads and let your spiral eyes
Look backward. Let your swiftly-flying flocks
Look suddenly downward with their shining eyes
And move the night by their intelligent motes.
Made a sidereal splendor as you fly.
And you, good galliard, to enchant black thoughts
Beseech them for an overpowering gloom.
It will be fecund in rapt curios.

The association to Apollo emerges in the second line where the poet asks the crows to "Cover the golden altar deepest black;" we understand that the altar belongs to Apollo. He asks the crows to cover the "light"--the same moonlight which in "Sea Surface" is associated with the "one night" during which the poet and his wife joined. The poet does not want to be reminded any longer; he does not want the moonlight which is responsible for the evasion of metaphors.

Stevens chooses the crows as his cipher for a number of reasons. The blackness of the crow is symbolically associated with the blackness of maternal night, primal darkness; The symbol of the crow is also connected to the fertility of the earth--this Stevens uses in the last line, "It will be fecund with rapt curios." This association also suggests his and his wife's fertility which is evidenced by the conception of their daughter, but it has not been satisfying to the poet, so it is transferred, projected onto his imagination, now again his only

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refuge. He instructs the crows to "Spread over heaven"--that same heaven with which the sea blended to make "fresh transfigurings"--because he does not want to remember again the pain attached to the experience. In addition, reversing the belief in the power of these birds to predict the future, the poet asks them to look backward and downward, just as he looks back to his past and down into his "irrational element" in an attempt to explain to himself what has happened.

There is also a play on the sense of the word "crow" which means to exult and cry out in joy; this is exactly the opposite of what the poet feels and expresses. At the same time, the association of "crow" with colloquial expressions meaning to be forced to accept something extremely distasteful about what one has done (such as "to eat crow," or "to have a crow to pluck," which means to grapple about something which admits of fault on the subject's part) points to the situation described in the beginning of the poem, "Your yes her no, your no her yes;" this association also indicates the difficulty he has accepting his situation (already suggested and stressed in the beginning of the second stanza when he addresses himself mockingly as "milord").

Finally, there are the last two associations. In the mythology of the American Indians, the crow symbolizes the great civilizer and creator of the visible world. And according to Jung, for the alchemists the crow stood for nigredo, or the initial state which is both the inherent characteristic

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of prime matter and the condition produced by separating out the elements.[14] Using these imagined crows, who in both these associations symbolize some elemental ordering principle, the poet rationalizes (suggested by "intelligent motes") his experience until he emerges seeing the unhappiness of his real life as the spur goading his imagination to provide him with the only possible satisfaction. This is openly reinforced by the last three lines of the poem where the poet overtly indicates that their purpose is to "enchant black thought" which "will be fecund in rapt curios," i.e., his poems. The marked tone of condescension here, indicated by his referring to himself as "galliard" and his work as "rapt curios," is the obvious result of his not having been understood by the one closest to him. When taken into consideration with Stevens' own problems about accepting himself as a poet, we can understand how this made it increasingly difficult for him to take himself seriously at this point in his life.

Coming to the end of the analyses of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," and the informing "Red Loves Kit," directs our attention back to the previous chapter where the inadequacies of New Criticism's approach to Stevens' work were discussed apropos of what Ransom saw in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." We have found that contrary to what Ransom thought, this is not only a virtuoso's rendition of pure poetry, but a poem which reflects all the levels of the poet's experience, from

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what is most personal to what is most universal, of being "American." When reading Stevens' poetry, we must always keep in mind what he wrote in the "Adagia," that, "It is life that we are trying to get to in poetry." (OP 158).

The quasi-scientific, objective approach of the New Critics prevents them from accepting this most primary level of meaning in poetry. They interpret it, instead, as being not about life, but about poetry--and so three times abstracted from actual experience. The scientific, objective approach to analyzing a poem yields scientific and objective results: the solutions of problems of rhyme and meter, the studies of stress and rhythms, the historical and topical significance. However, what is acutely needed for understanding a poet like Stevens is attention to what he asked of his future critics: an involvement with the "irrational element," the source of poetry. The New Critics were trapped, finding in poems only what was prescribed by their method, not what actually exists "around" the beauty of the poems.

The New Critics' adoption of scientific method for dealing with literary texts grew out of the same seed as Stevens' attachment to what was "practical," to searching always for Truth. This seed was planted by the Pragmatists in Nineteenth Century American soil (see section on Charles Peirce, pp. 8-11) from the flower of Eighteenth Century Rationalism. Both Stevens and the New Critics reacted against the excesses of Nineteenth Century Romanticism, but Stevens--the poet--saw

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that there was something there that needed salvaging.

A more meaningful explication of "Puritanism" in relation to Stevens might begin, then, by seeing his "pure poetry" as a reaction against the excesses of emotion, of the sentimentality of the Romantics, which at the same time acknowledged the emotional basis of meaning in poetry defined by Wordsworth (unlike Pound and Eliot who reacted by rejecting emotion entirely and using "foreign" models like Gautier and Laforgue). Having the emotion condition the form represents what Stevens learned from Poe, the American Romantic, purest of pure poets. Stevens integrated the American, English, and European traditions because he was tied to all of them and did not suffer the rupture recorded by Pound and Eliot which was brought with the First World War.

The New Critics could not see this since they, too, came from the same Puritanical background as Stevens; this made it difficult for them to isolate feeling and emotion in a poem. The New Critics, like Ransom and Blackmur,[15] deal with emotion or the "occasion" of a poem as if it were another literary convention, another formal aspect. Besides the Puritanical and Rational background of New Criticism, there is also the fact that in looking at the poetry of the Romantics, the New Critics perceived that the emotions recorded by them could not be genuine expressions, that those poets were dramatizing, "sentimentalizing," their experience; as a result, in order to understand the actual intention and "occasion"

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of their poetry, the emotional base had to be understood as a convention. Consequently, the New Critics had a great deal of trouble perceiving how far and to what depth the "modern" poet is involved with his material not only as a poet, a maker-craftsman, but as a living and feeling human being with a particular psychological make-up who is in a particular situation and who lives in history.

The problem between Stevens and the New Critics reflects a distinction between "romanticism" and "classicism" made by T.E. Hulme as expressed in an essay of the same name written in 1913 and published in 1924.[16] For Hulme, and then for T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards, fathers of the New Critics, "modernism" had to be characterized by a return to the classical ideal[17] in an attempt to re-order experience which had been exploded, together with all myths during the romanticism of the Nineteenth Century. Some of Stevens' critics have linked the work of T.E. Hulme to Stevens' early work,[18] but they have concentrated mainly on the aspects of Imagism found in his early poetry which he later modified and expanded for his own use.

Analyzing Stevens' relationship to modernism, or to T.E. Hulme and the Imagists, is difficult because his experience was, at the same time, very much like that of the other "modern" poets in his being aware of a certain "spirit of the age" (a spirit perhaps best symbolized for the early part of the century by the Armory Show of 1913 where Americans

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became "enlightened" by the work of the Impressionists) and also very different because he never went to Europe and experienced the War and its effects; and so, after Harmonium, he very soon gave up the idea of "progressing" toward a revolutionary aesthetic but returned, instead, to the models of the Nineteenth Century. Because of this there was a marked ambivalence in his attitudes towards and expression of both the classic and the romantic ideals[19]--"a moving up and down between two elements." He neither fully accepted nor rejected Hulme and the Imagists, never fully accepted or rejected Romanticism (as evidenced by his contradictory statements concerning it), never fully accepted or rejected anything for that matter, but used what he could from wherever he could find it; he refused classification.

Stevens shared much in common with Hulme; he also differed from him in his perception of what was essential in poetry--at least for himself. If we look at the essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," we are immediately struck by the similarities to Stevens, even to finding identical phrases. First we notice the distinction Hulme made between Imagination and Fancy and see that it is based on the same difference we have noted herein between Stevens' "poems of Imagination" and his "poems of Fancy" (a fact which is not surprising); Hulme noted that with the Imagination engaged, the poet is able to express his emotions as they are attached to reality, but that with Fancy, he is able to describe (without

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desire, as Ransom would have the poet do) any object aesthetically, separated from feeling--"The object of aesthetic contemplation is something framed apart by itself and regarded without memory or expectation, simply as being itself, as end not means, as individual not universal."[20] Like Stevens, Hulme stated that the artist must "see things as they really are."[21] Stevens played with the same ideas as Hulme presented; he wrote both "poems of Fancy" and "poems of Imagination," but he did not, as did Hulme, find that it was the use of Fancy that represented the return to the classical idea, and so he did not see Fancy as the proper vehicle for modernism; this was so even though he agreed with Hulme in his dislike of the "sentimentalism" of the Romantics. According to Hulme,

> . . . after a hundred years of romanticism, we are in for a classical revival, and the particular weapon of this new classical spirit, when it works in verse, will be fancy. And in this, I imply the superiority of fancy --not superior generally or absolutely, for that would be obvious nonsense, but superior in the sense that we use the word good in empirical ethics--good for something, superior for something.[22]

In this passage, we see that Hulme's basis for judging Fancy superior for the modern period is that it was, at a certain moment, "good for something." Here we see the same basis that Ransom used when he found "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" inadequate. Using Fancy was "good for" "purifying" poetry of the excess emotions, the "sentimentalism" which was

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insincere and inessential. Stevens learned from this and realized that this was actually an exercise to train the poet to look cooly at objects so that he could learn from that to look cooly at himself. The result for Stevens was that he was able to perceive the difference between "occasions" of Fancy and "occasions" of Imagination when there was real, primary emotion which had to find expression. When Stevens dealt with real emotions, or "occasions" of real emotion--such as death in "The Emperor of Ice Cream," conception and birth in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," passing into middle-age in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"--, there is a classical formal tightness which reflects to what extent he was grappling with a real problem--these are the "poems of Imagination." The other poems, however, the "poems of Fancy," employ rather pedestrian rhythms, an ambling pentameter line in meditative three line strophes or improvised stanzaic forms, which do not reflect felt emotion, but simply a mind playing with itself and reality. In these cases, the form is undistinguished because the subject matter is. When he abstained from using strong rhythms, he did so because he did not want to "transfer his identity" in poems which do not deal with important, universal meanings. Stevens knew for which poems he wanted to be remembered--those which reflect his involvement with poetry as the activity of a "man-poet," those which demand that we yield ourselves to them in order to understand. In this way, Stevens combined the ideals of classicism in perfecting his

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craft and skill in perception and the ideals of romanticism in searching for adequate expression of real emotion ("Bravura adequate to that great hymn") and searching for a replacement for lost religious faith.[23]

The essential difference between Hulme's perception of poetry and Stevens' stems from this, that Hulme rejected the idea of continuity and organicity in poetry[24] as it was expressed by Coleridge, but Stevens understood its necessity if poetry was to be what he wanted it to be, "a health," a "completion of life." As Frank Lentricchia notes,

> With his notion of discontinuity and with his notions (derived from Kant and Bergson) of the uniqueness of aesthetic intuition and language within the poetic context, Hulme opens a new line of aesthetic inquiry. The idea that the poem, by definition, is itself a self-enclosed, self-sufficient, and organic entity throws out its transparency function. Historically, Hulme stands about midway between Poe and Baudelaire, who were anticipators of the symbolist aesthetic, and those modern contextualist critics who derive some of their leading ideas not from romantic but from symbolist theory.[25]

Because Stevens used techniques learned from Poe, Baudelaire, and the Symbolists, because he understood and shared Hulme's reaction against the excesses of Romanticism, because he used language and imagery in a way which made it appear that he was a "pure poet," writing self-sufficient poems, his poetry was read by the New Critics and others as what it "appeared" to be. But this was just the surface of his poetry, its dress of motley, the work of the clown-comedian. For

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Stevens' poetry, there is above all a "transparency function"--the crystal, the rock, he imagines is "pure" language in a classical mode, but at the center, through the transparent rock, we see the poet--"fluctuations of the self within the rock"--a re-invented romantic.

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Notes to Chapter 6

1 New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954, pp. 38-39:

> If you complain that a poet is obscure, and apparently ignoring you, the reader, or that he is speaking only to a limited circle of initiates from which you are excluded--remember that what he may have been trying to do, was to put something into words which could not be said in any other way, and therefore in a language which may be worth the trouble of learning.

2 The poem appeared in Measure, 42 (August, 1924) together with "Red Loves Kit," a poem which should be considered together it since it, like "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," sheds a great deal of light on this poem.

3 Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, p. xvii, p. 5, p. 36.

4 It is interesting to remember in this context that much later in his life, Stevens named an Impressionist canvas which he had acquired, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." See Letters, p. 841.

5 Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 241.

6 Oxford English Dictionary entry under combinative forms of "chocolate."

7 Noted in a quotation from Stevens by Frank Kermode,

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Wallace Stevens, London & Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1967, p. 2, "Life, not the artist, creates or reveals reality: time and experience in the poet, in the painter. During last September, I visited the old Zeller house in the Tulpehocken, in Pennsylvania. This family of religious refugees came to this country in 1709, lived for some fifteen or twenty years in the Schoharie region in New York and then went down the Susquehanna to the valley in which the house was built. Over the door there is an architectural cartouche of the cross with palm-branches below, placed there, no doubt, to indicate that the house and those that lived in it were consecrated to the glory of God."

[8] I am grateful to Mary Ann Caws for reminding me of this important connection.

[9] John Hollander pointed out this significant parallel to me.

[10] Perry Miller points out in The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings (ed., Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, vol. 2, p. 546) that:

> . . . Though the Bible was for him
>
> > the Sacred Grammar, where
> > The Rules of speaking well, contained are,
> > the Puritan expected that the example set by the classical poets might guide him to achieve a higher virtue in life. . . . In one respect only can we detect in his attitude a view of poetry different from that held by other Englishmen. The Puritan centered his mind on God with a keener intensity, and thus more consciously withdrew his attention from "fleshly schools."

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> The Anglican poets juxtaposed flesh and spirit. . . . But for the Puritans, and especially for those who came to New England, God, not the world, inspired their "noble numbers," and they many times chose verse the better to honor Him. They were still Elizabethan enough to live intensely, though their ardor took a new direction. It is clear therefore that since the Puritan did not cut himself off from the realities which a poetic art can summon, he made such use of them as seemed to him most fitting. Fundamentally Spenser, Sidney, and Milton, the real precursors of lesser Puritan bards, are ethical poets, and it is the moral import of their art which appealed to the Puritan mind; broadly speaking, those great writers conceived poetry as a philosophy--the highest philosophy, in fact; one which taught men virtue by example, not through mere didacticism, but by the embodiment of every knowledge.

It is easy to see that this is the spirit which Stevens inherited and that it was very easy for him to translate the aim of setting an example from the Puritan ethic to the "aesthetic" of Chinese poetry made available by Bynner (see pp. 149-158).

11 One other critic, Samuel French Morse, considers this poem together with "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," though he writes that "Sea Surface" appeared in Dial and "Red Loves Kit" in Measure; however, he does not analyze either poem satisfactorily. See Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life, p. 104.

12 In Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life, p. 39:

> . . . How much his literary ambitions contributed to the "blow-ups of the nerves" between him and his wife, to which he confessed, it is impossible to say. There is

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> little in the Letters to indicate much more than vast differences in taste and interests and Stevens' determination to master the dissensions they may have caused even as he pursued his own course.

And on p. 89:

> He had also begun to feel that his extended business trips upset "life at home abominably," and there is little doubt that his preoccupation with poetry, which made him more than willing to stay in Hartford during what might have been vacations, contributed to his growing uneasiness about attempting to make the most of two different ambitions. After 1916, Elsie did not return to Pennsylvania during the summer; and if he brought his poetry home with him as a businessman might bring his work, she could not share in it. The "affectation" she had disliked in his earlier poems had by no means disappeared. . . .

13

This is something which Stevens had learned, consciously or unconsciously from the Symbolists, especially Mallarmé.

In "Crise de Vers," Mallarmé wrote:

> A quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant; si ce n'est pour qu'en émane, sans la gêne d'un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure.
>
> Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets.
>
> Au contraire d'une fonction de numéraire facile et représentatif, comme le traite d'abord la foule, le dire, avant tout, rêve et chant, retrouve chez le Poëte, par nécessité constitutive d'un art consacré aux fictions, sa virtualité.
>
> Le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire, achève cet isolement de la parole: niant, d'un trait souverain, le

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> hasard demeure aux termes malgré l'artifice de leur retrempe alternée en le sens et la sonorité, et vous cause cette surprise de n'avoir ouï jamais tel fragment ordinaire d'élocution, en même temps que la réminiscence de l'objet nommé baigne dans une neuve atmosphère. (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 368).

14 Jung, C.G., Psychology and Alchemy (Collected Works, 12), London, 1953, p. 185.

15 This is very clear in Blackmur's essay on Pound in Form and Value in Modern Poetry, pp. 79-112.

16 Collected in Critiques and Essays in Criticism, edited by R.W. Stallman, pp. 3-16.

17 Frank Lentricchia in The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p. 2. also notes this.

18 Robert Buttel in Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium, pp. 130-132, writes that in 1916 Stevens was following Hulme and the Imagists in wanting to achieve "sculptural hardness" in poetry for the same reason Pound (and Eliot, whom he does not mention) followed Gautier's aesthetic as expressed in Emaux et Camees.

A. Walton Litz in Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens notes the affinity between what was contained in T.E. Hulme's "Lecture on Modern Poetry" (delivered

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in 1908-09 and again in 1914; Litz states that Stevens could not have seen it, however, since it was not published until 1938) and Stevens' work during the period from 1914-1916, especially "Phases." Litz quotes from Hulme's "Lecture," saying Hulme observes that since modern poetry no longer expresses epic subjects, "no longer deals with heroic action, it has become definitely and finally introspective and deals with expression and communication of momentary phases in the poet's mind." Litz writes that these are the "phases" which Stevens chose as the title of his war poems. He goes on to make a good point that the Imagists, including Stevens, attempted to treat the theme of their generation without violating their aesthetic and that this fact reveals a great deal about the virtues and limitations of the form. He then makes an excellent comparison between "Phases" and the war sections of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" and states that what Pound's poem possesses that Stevens' lacks is "the authority of direct experience." Litz also discusses Hulme's perceptions about the discoveries made by the Impressionist painters on Imagist poetry and, accordingly, on Stevens' because he, "Like a dandy" could "not resist trying the latest fashion;" Hulme said that musical form and vers libre were the proper vehicles to express the "vague mood" of the poem. In order to communicate this "mood," Hulme wrote that the poet constructs a "harmony" of images which creates its own musical verse-form (this is, of course, very close to Mallarmé and Valéry).

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James Baird in The Dome and the Rock, unlike the other critics, writes that Stevens represented the opposite of what Hulme called for. Unlike Eliot who followed the classical sculptural ideal of Hulme, Stevens remained loyal to Romanticism and its necessity.

19 This is also quoted by Lentricchia, p. 169.

20 In Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 14.

21 Ibid., p. 12.

22 Ibid., p. 3.

23 In this context, it is interesting to note this passage from Hulme:

> It would be a mistake to identify the classical view with that of materialism. On the contrary, it is absolutely identical with the normal religious attitude. I should put it in this way: That part of the fixed nature of man is the belief in the Diety. This should be as fixed and true for every man as belief in the existence of matter and in the objective world. It is parallel to appetite, the instinct of sex, and all the other fixed qualities. Now at certain times, by the use of either force or rhetoric, these instincts have been suppressed--in Florence under Savonarola, in Geneva under Calvin, and here under the Roundheads. The inevitable result of such a process is that the repressed instinct bursts out in some abnormal direction. So with religion. By the perverted rhetoric of Rationalism, your natural instincts are suppressed and you are converted into an agnostic. Just as in the case of the other instincts, Nature has her revenge. The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't

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> believe in a God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism. The concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table. Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give it, is spilt religion. (Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 5).

24 T.E. Hulme, Speculations, ed. Herbert Read, New York, 1924, pp. 3-5.

25 The Gaiety of Language, pp. 26-27.

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7. Yvor Winters: The Case of the Wincing Widow

What is most surprising about Yvor Winters' criticism is that he so often reaches conclusions with which we agree from premises with which we disagree. As Stanley Edgar Hyman has pointed out in his essay, "Yvor Winters and Evaluation in Criticism," apropos of Winters' judgment of Melville:

> Winters is actually evaluating the man accurately for the wrong reasons, for a "morality" that seems to be his chief interest in all of the works of Melville he praises.[1]

This also happens when Winters looks at Stevens. Curiously, like Ransom who finds in Stevens the purest example of a pure poet, Winters finds in Stevens "hedonism" in its "purest" form.[2] Both critics single Stevens out as the paradigmatic enemy of morality who at the same time figures as a master of form.

However, whereas Ransom chooses one of Stevens' purest poems to help illustrate his point, Winters chooses "Sunday Morning," where the paraphraseable content does have moral implications, to illustrate Stevens' apparent hedonism and total lack of morality. In the same breath, he also states that,

> "Sunday Morning" is in some ways Stevens' greatest poem . . . the greatest poem of the twentieth century and is certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English: in a blank verse which differs, in its firmness of structure and incalculable sensitivity of

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> detail, from all other blank verse of our time . . . it renders the acute uncertainty of what we are inclined to consider the modern mind.[3]

Using other poems like "Anecdote of the Jar," and fragments of other poems like "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Winters goes on to make his point about Stevens' hedonism, stating it to be his only true subject and responsible for the decay of his style. In doing this, however, Winters substantially misreads the poems he is discussing, including "Sunday Morning," even though he has some very accurate perceptions.

Because Winters professes what he believes, being subjective and idiosyncratic, because his personality enters wholly into his criticism, we know why it is he writes what he writes and sees what he sees. Unlike the work of critics whose material is presented objectively and clinically, preparing us to accept the results of their arguments as we would scientific truth, Winters' material is presented as the product of the man he is, and so we feel free to accept or reject his criticism as exactly what it is. Reason can pick out certain elements for consideration and dismiss others; emotive and non-emotive elements are already separated. We do not need to pierce the fabric of apparently objective language to find the body who read the poem and who felt it was good and so criticized it. Winters writes only about those poems of Stevens' he likes, poems he has determined to be, in some way, good. Contrary to the method he sets out, Winters' basis for judgment

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is impressionistic--it depends on whether or not the poem agrees or disagrees with his taste and sensibility.[4] In his five steps necessary for evaluating a particular work, Winters provides an excellent theoretical outline for literary criticism:

> It will consist (1) of the statement of such historical or biographical knowledge as may be necessary in order to understand the mind and method of the writer; (2) of such analysis of his literary theories as we may need to understand and evaluate what he is doing; (3) of a rational critique of the paraphraseable content (roughly, the motive) of the poem; (4) of a rational critique of the feeling motivated--that is, of the details of style, as seen in language and technique; and (5) of the final act of judgment, a unique act, the general nature of which can be indicated, but which cannot be communicated precisely, since it consists in receiving from the poet his own final and unique judgment of his matter and in judging that judgment. It should be noted that the purpose of the first four processes is to limit as narrowly as possible the region in which the final unique act is to occur.[5]

With the exception that steps three and four should not be separate, that is, that the discussion of content and style should not be separated, the method appears to be a good one, but Winters does not follow it; in the case of Stevens, he completely ignores the first step and deals with the second by stating that the poem, "Sunday Morning," is Stevens' clearest statement of his theories of life and literature.[6] It seems that Winters makes his "final act of judgment" first, then later tries to fill in what he can of his other four steps. This is not unusual in itself, but it

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is in light of the fact that Winters, too, is reticent to admit that his judgment of works is not primarily rational but grows out of an initial "impression" of the work.

We are not surprised that Winters chooses from among the poems of Harmonium to focus on what he considers to be Stevens' best poems. We are not surprised for two reasons: first, we may agree that Harmonium represents Stevens' best volume; second, because Winters' personality is so flagrantly present in his work, it is easy to understand why he would favor the volume where Stevens' personality as a man is most apparent, rather than the later volumes where the personality is largely that of "the poet." But if we accept as true Winters' moral predisposition, there seems to be an inconsistency in this judgment, just as there is an inconsistency in Winters' providing a very adequate method which he ignores.

The inconsistency resides in Winters' inability to accept the reason for his judgment of the poems of Harmonium as superior to those of the later volumes. Rather than admit Stevens' involvement with sensuality, with the "gaiety of language," with the vitality of experience reflected in Harmonium as being at least partially responsible for its success, he singles out those aspects as examples of the "hedonism" which he condemns. We seem to have a case of a critic who is dogmatic because he is trying not so much to persuade us of the necessity for a committment to morality, but trying to persuade

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himself. So we find him liking the right poems but being unable to judge them as being wholly successful because if he did, he would have to accept himself as one who is pleased by the self-indulgence Stevens enjoyed in his first volume. If Winters accepted this, he would have had to admit that the work in question was "moral" following his interpretation of the time; according to Hyman:

> . . . originally, "moral" meant one clear thing to Winters, perhaps some personal, artistic discipline equivalent to the neo-humanists "inner check," and then gradually extended in usage until it applied to the results of this control and finally to any work or attitude where the control could be presumed, that is, to any work Winters likes or any attitude he respects.[7]

In fact, for Winters "moral" has meant so many different things at different times (as Hyman has pointed out[8]), that we cannot, in any case, take it seriously as a basis of judgment even though he calls again and again for morality in literature. This "morality" is, in the simplest terms, the clearest possible reflection of the poet's beliefs. If those beliefs match his own, then the work is good; if they do not, it is a failed work. Winters' beliefs center around controlling emotions; in art, around the complete absorption of controlled emotions into conventionalized forms so that there can be no question of what the emotion is and that it has been controlled. His justification for this dogmatism is ultimately his belief in God, though he denies that this is the case.[9] Winters would have us believe that absolute

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truths exist because God exists when, in reality, for him, God exists because his "absolute truths" exist. Winters holds on to a formalized code of morality that was once the external expression of a real belief in the existence of God, but that is no longer. Because he is attached to this code which he thinks expresses his belief, he wants poets to be attached to their forms, their conventions, as though they, too, expressed the ultimate reality. In a strange way, this is not very far from what Stevens wanted, that is, a world in which fact finally corresponds to form; the difference is that Stevens accepted relativity and the power of emotion and intuition which Winters, in rejecting the Romantics outright, could not (with these two positions, we see the argument between Neo-Platonists holding that essence precedes existence and modern Existentialists, holding the opposite).

Winters cannot tolerate equivocation of any sort. He can read The Scarlet Letter and see it as successful because it does operate as allegory, but he cannot see that in moving away from allegory and approaching more ambiguous uses of symbolism, Hawthorne moved toward becoming a greater artist.[10] Winters is consistently intolerant of any ambivalence in reading a particular symbol; he ignores the necessity and actuality of polyvalence of meaning in twentieth century writing. With this handicap it is startling that he perceives at all the greatness of those poems of Stevens' which he names. Winters confuses poetic ambiguity with loss of control.

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As a consequence of this confusion, whenever Winters comes upon a poem or work that he likes, he must assume that he likes it because the poet is in some way in control of his emotions, and his material is under the control of the form he has chosen. Once this is accepted, according to his moralistic and allegorical predisposition, there can be only one meaning, completely paraphraseable, to be derived from the work and each of its constituent parts. This explains why Winters works so assiduously at finding the individual norms for the forms of free verse used by particular poets. Winters cannot accept free verse as a vehicle which allows the modern poet to express a full range of emotions while at the same time allowing him the freedom to explore the entire history of metric forms in order to find cadences which will express "Bravura adequate to that great hymn." Instead he sees free verse, to the extent that it is undetermined by some standard set by the individual poet, as a restriction on the freedom of the poet because it does not provide him with a set form from which any departure will be immediately seen:

> The nearer a norm a writer hovers, the more able is he to vary his feelings in opposite or even in many directions, and the more significant will be his variations. I have observed elsewhere that variations of any kind are more important in proportion as they are habitually less pronounced: a man who speaks habitually at the top of his voice cannot raise his voice, but a man who speaks quietly commands attention by means of a minute inflection.[11]

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While this may be true, it does not mean that free verse does not allow an even greater complexity of form which forces both the active participation of the reader and the involvement of history in finding echoes of the cadences used by the poet; at the same time it announces the importance of the individual soul or spirit of the maker. In fact, contrary to what he writes above, Winters does recognize this when he speaks of Stevens:

> The Experimental poets who mastered the medium [of free verse], it is worth observing, were those who for some years were more or less fanatical on the subject and gave themselves over to it wholly or almost wholly: Wallace Stevens is perhaps the only poet living who has practiced the new and the old meters simultaneously and at a high level of excellence.[12]

Comparing two segments from the two above citations will give us a clue about the confusion found in Winters which, as we will discover, is the result of either conscious self-deception or ignorance concerning the nature of poetic creation. In the first passage he writes, "the nearer a norm a writer hovers, the more able is he to vary his feelings in opposite or even in many directions." What this indicates is that he believes that the poet varies his feelings consciously, at will, when incited by the already formalized expression of another feeling. From this we can infer that Winters thinks that what the poet does is search among infinite possibilities of feelings for a new one which he can then express by varying an established form. One problem with this

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is that there is not an infinite range of human feelings (unless, as he says Stevens believes, we live in an entirely nominalistic universe)[13] so to search for an opposite feeling to one that is expressed is rather silly. Another problem is that feelings are not generated by bouncing Fancy off Form, but are the expressions of our sensibilities--our complete sensibilities which include both our instinctual and our intellectual natures. Winters does not deal with these problems.

In the next passage we find him saying that those poets, among whom he names only Stevens, who mastered free verse, "gave themselves over to it wholly or almost wholly." If Winters were not playing with words as counters, he would follow the implications of what he writes here and discover that to give oneself wholly to free verse means to allow oneself to be moved entirely by the feeling which inspires the cadence. In other words, he would have to admit the legitimacy of feeling, and, consequently, the contribution made by the Romantics to the concept of "morality."

On the one hand, he recognizes the success of free verse and on the other defines it as an inferior form. We must ask what it is that Winters perceives in Stevens' use of free verse that allows him to both acknowledge its power and also understand what the poet must do in order to use this "non-form" effectively. In the opening of his essay, "The Influence of Meter on Poetic Convention," Winter writes:

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> . . . the morality of poetry is inextricably involved in its form . . . it is closely related to the convention, or norm of feeling, of any particular poem, and to certain general types of convention. As the norm of a poem will set certain limits upon the range and procedure and quality of feeling possible within the poem, we may say that a convention, whether we take the term in the particular or in the generic sense, has a life of its own to which the poet is subjected once he has adopted it.[14]

First we must ask in what way morality is involved with form. In Genesis when God proceeded to order with more and more specificity what had previously been "without form and void," he saw, at particular stages of his creation that "it was good." Here in the beginning of our mythology is the original association between form and goodness; so, if for no other reason that this, we must accept the truth of Winters' statement. The problem begins in the next clause where he slips into equating "form" with "convention." Only if we ignore the impact of Romanticism, as we know Winters tries very hard to do, can we accept this parity of terms. He goes on to describe the effect of adopting a convention, and again we must agree. But what we must return to is what Winters does not deal with, namely, form--"organic form" as we understand it after Coleridge. It is important to return to this because it is on the basis of Stevens' creation of form, not his working within a fixed convention, that Winters judges his success, though he says just the opposite.

Stevens intrigues Winters because he used free verse forms

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to explore the "thoughts and actions" prompted by emotions rather than to express the emotions themselves; in Winters' terms, Stevens does not abuse his freedom. He is formally acceptable. In addition, Stevens was involved with "moral" questions: the loss of faith, the value of myth, reason in its relationship to nature and instinct. Winters recognizes in Stevens a kindred spirit "gone awry" because he no longer believed in absolute truths, but "kindred" because he dealt with the effects of losing the truth of what remain as forms. The images of Paradise remain even though the Necessary Angel of reality keeps us from ever returning there, except in Imagination--and there is the rub for Winters. Even though Imagination cannot permanently sustain the image of Paradise, as long as one continues to complete reality in Imagination, Imagination can stretch the moment of perception by becoming involved in the act of writing (and to a lesser degree, reading) poetry. But because Winters believes in God, or says he does (as Stevens points out, in the end it is the belief and not the fiction that matters), it is against his personal morality to accept that Paradise exists only in the individual imagination rather than as the reward given by God for a life well-lived. What he describes as Stevens' "hedonism" is not, as Winters says it is, "the cultivation of the emotions as an end it itself,"[15] but Stevens' rational acceptance of the absence of God and his imaginative compensation of that loss. Stevens certainly was not a man given

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to excesses of emotion, but he was a man with both a keen intelligence tied to reality and an extremely powerful and fertile imagination--facts which Winters (himself an aspiring poet) is reluctant to admit. He prefers to see Stevens as completely "decadent," worse than the Romantics whom he abhors.

In spite of all this, Winters does recognize the excellence of Stevens' work in Harmonium (which, if Winters were consistent, he would like the least because it is the most "hedonistic" of Stevens' volumes). This says something both about the poet and about the critic.

When Stevens wrote in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,"

> Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
> Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
> Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
> Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
> May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
> A jovial hullaballoo among the spheres.
> This will make widows wince. But fictive things
> Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

he seems to have included Winters in his category of "winking widows." Stevens understood the moralist's position since he, too, had shared the same set of Christian beliefs which Winters states the poet was "released from"[16] (for a full analysis of this poem, see Section II, Chapter 12). This set of beliefs doesn't allow the believer to indulge his Imagination. Harmonium is eminently successful because it is sure of itself; even with its ironies, it has an integrity which is rare in an age of doubt and disillusion. Harmonium is the bait which attracts

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readers and which keeps serious readers reading and re-reading the later volumes in an effort to discover why the promise offered by the physical sensuality (as opposed to an imagined sensuality which characterizes the later volumes) of that first volume was never kept. The bait caught even Winters, but he did not go on to enter Stevens' "fluent mundo" because he could not read the poems in the way they must be read and at the same time remain a Christian. When we consider this, Stevens immediately becomes a revolutionary poet. He was aware of this and so kept it well hidden in ambiguity. But when he commands his "fictive thing," his poem: "Wink most when widows wince," he is clearly announcing his desire to at least cause the discomfort we notice as Winters wriggles on the hook.

Winters has inklings of his closeness to Stevens though he won't admit it in any other way than by recognizing the success of certain poems in Harmonium. In writing of "Sunday Morning," Winters indicates his understanding and acceptance of both content and form, here seen in their identity:

> Sunday Morning is probably the greatest American poem of the twentieth century and is certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English: in blank verse which differs, in its firmness of structure and incalculable sensitivity of detail, from all other blank verse of our time . . . it renders the acute uncertainty of what we are inclined to consider the modern mind, but it does so with no uncertainty of method or of statement; it renders an acute consciousness of the imminence of death, of the sensory and emotional richness of life

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> on this bewildering planet, and of the heroic magnificence of the religious myths which are lost to the poet and to the very many of the rest of us, except as memories of things long past.[17]

What allows Winters to understand Stevens at this point in his poetic career and to see this poem as "the greatest American poem of the twentieth century"--what he outwardly describes as the elegant marriage of traditional form and modern sensibility--actually derives from Winters' keen perceptions about the mind of the American Puritan expressed clearly in "Maule's Curse." However, he does not bring these perceptions to bear when he criticizes Stevens. Ironically, the absence of this understanding (which he had applied to Hawthorne) concerning Stevens' and his own Puritan inheritance is what prevents Winters from reading this poem correctly (though he acknowledges its greatness) and from adequately reading the other poems he discusses in order to make his analysis of "Sunday Morning" clearer; this results in his blindness to the elements most necessary to the meaning of those poems. When, for example, he reads "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," he equates irony with ridicule because he does not see that the high-toned old Christian woman is not separate from the poet but that she represents at least half of his nature, the half controlled by the "moral law;" his other half is represented as one of those "smacking their muzzy bellies in parade." The poem is not about the opposition between the "moral law" and the "oppsing law" as

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abstractions, as Winters states and so calls it a "didactic" poem, but the poem describes the real conflict Stevens felt about writing poetry because he was human and so half-god and half-animal; this the poet expressed through the irony in the poem resulting from the rubbing against each other of these two opposing laws in his being.

Had Winters followed the method he sets out for literary criticism more closely and taken biographical information into consideration, perhaps he would have seen things more clearly. On the other hand, that information which we now have available was not then available to Winters, though he could have intuited certain facts from the historical moment as well as from understanding, as he did for Hawthorne, the experience of being American. In addition, arguing for Winters, Stevens wrote the poem intending the ambiguity which allows Winters and other critics to see it, as well as "Sunday Morning" and many other poems, as theoretical or philosophical explorations put to verse rather than as "thoughts and actions" prompted by <u>emotion</u>. Perhaps Stevens put too much faith in his readers, assuming they would remember what Wordsworth had made explicit and what Eliot reiterated about the impetus given the poet by emotion; remembering this puts the burden on the critic to explore the poem until he finds that generating emotion. Stevens himself wanted to keep his raw emotions well hidden. However, the task of the critic is to be a trustworthy reader and to attempt at each point to understand

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the poet's intention to the fullest extent. Winters seems to have a fixed idea of the poet as super-human, capable of controlling emotions, able to rise above the pangs of human experience by an act of will "to make." This is the position of themoralist, his own position, which he projects onto Stevens (because it is the only way he can accept his approving response), the poet who wrote poems, like "Sunday Morning," that made Winters feel. This vision of the poet as superhuman accounts for Winters' thinking that Stevens is "ridiculing" in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" when, in fact, he is expressing his felt experience.

Winters had the possibility of understanding Stevens fully, both as a man and as a poet, but he did not make the connections necessary in his own experience as critic. In "Maule's Curse" Winters describes very accurately what Hyman names "the Puritan paradox"[18] which, stated concisely, results from the Puritans' necessary reliance on the will in order to survive in the hostile environment of the New World; at the same time, they had to deny its value because salvation was predestined. What they willed did not matter spiritually, while physically it meant the difference between survival and death.[19] Ultimately, as Winters points out, the pressure of reality on the belief in predestination was too great and it collapsed[20] (Winters does not make explicit, however, the importance of the physical environment in destroying that belief--the power of the will <u>had</u> to be accepted as fact in

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the real world regardless of its possible absurdity in spiritual terms; this power of the physical environment in shaping the sensibility is particularly emphasized by the American experience and is something of which Stevens was especially aware and which he constantly included and stressed in his poetry); the belief could not survive without the power of orators like Edwards who convinced congregations of the necessity of believing in predestination at the same time as he persuaded them to perform the contradictory act, in light of this, of repentance.[21] The eventual result of this situation, as Winters vividly describes it in the case of Hawthorne is:

> . . . that the Puritans cannot be discussed, nor can they discuss each other, without the language employed exceeding the limit's proper to predestination and invoking the traditional morality of the older churches; yet [there was] the attempt to ignore this traditional morality as far as might be, and in the manner of formal doctrine, to repudiate it . . . in the name of God, they had violently cut themselves off from human nature; in the end, that is in Hawthorne's generation and in the generation following, more than one of them drank his own heart's blood, as Hawthorne himself must have done in his ultimate and frustrated solitude, and more than one of them shed it.[22]

Translated through the generations Winters mentions into and applied to the modern period, this situation becomes what we notice particularly in Stevens' poetry--that same aspect Winters names "hedonism"--the language used by the poet exceeds the proper limits of his actual experience and invokes

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the morality of an earlier period, the nineties with its aestheticism, which approved "art for art's sake" and crowding moments with as many pleasurable sensations as possible. The richness of Stevens' language does not reflect the richness of his lived experience but the richness of his imagination, educated by the aesthetics of the nineties. At the same time, as we know, there was also for Stevens "the attempt to ignore" in himself his attachment to this set of manners "as far as might be, and, in the manner of formal doctrine, to repudiate it."[23] In other words, Stevens, too, was a victim of "Maule's curse," though the form of the curse had become progressively less severe (in consequence, however, it was possibly more insidious) over the years which separated Stevens from Hawthorne. The rejection of the forms of, what in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is called, the "moral law" was extremely painful and difficult for Stevens, and he never quite succeeded. In Harmonium we have the record of his attempt to make poetry out of the "opposing law" while he continued to live his life still within the forms of the "moral law" which had been handed down to him through his own Calvinist generations: "Thus he conceived his voyaging to be/ An up and down between two elements" (CP 35). "In the name of God" and his laws, then, Stevens "violently cut [himself] off from [his own] human nature; in the end [he, too,] drank his own heart's blood" and lived more and more in and through his imagination, as is evidenced by the decreasing incidence

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of actual (as opposed to remembered or imagined) emotions prompting the "thoughts and actions" expressed in the later volumes.

Stevens is a twentieth century victim of "Maule's curse;" this describes a major aspect of modern American literature insofar as it is still involved with its Puritan heritage. Perhaps taking it into account helps us to understand why, for example, Pound and Eliot felt so strong a need to leave America, and it provides us as well with an additional reason for their having chosen foreign, benign fathers to slay. (Of course, ironically, Eliot, too, succumbed to "Maule's curse" not simply by "invoking the traditional morality of the older churches," but by embracing that morality by his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism; and Pound spent his last years mute, so great the disparity between this internal reality and what spoken language could express.) In any case, Winters focusses sharply on a significant problem in the American experience; what he writes of Hawthorne at the end of his essay can be extended to include Stevens and other American poets and novelists who have inherited the forms of the Puritan past:

> History . . . had cut him off from the ideas which might have enabled him to deal with his own period, in part making up for the injustice by facilitating his entrance . . . into an age more congenial to his nature. . . . His dilemma, the choice between abstraction inadequate or irrelevant to experience on the one hand, and experience on the other . . . is tragically characteristic of the

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> history of this country and of its literature; only a few scattered individuals, at the cost of inordinate labor, and often impermanently, have achieved the permeation of human experience by a consistent moral understanding which results in wisdom and great art.[24]

The question of why Winters could not perceive Stevens as one of the victims of "Maule's curse" remains, however. Winters is sensitive to the problem in Hawthorne because he has no difficulty seeing either the single meaning pointed to by that author's successful use of allegory or the meaning hinted at by the unsuccessful attempts. But in the case of Stevens, Winters is at an extreme disadvantage because of his inability to accept the multiple layers of suggested meaning in the poems. This is an example both of Winters' personal dogmatism as well as his critical reaction against the aspect of "suggestion" which Stevens had inherited from the Symbolists[25] and which can be perceived only "by reading with one's nerves."[26] Because of this Winters himself falls victim to "Maule's curse," but in a most perverse fashion. He obviates the problem of employing language which exceeds the proper limits of his experience--which would extend his understanding of experience--by choosing to use the language of traditional morality complete with its necessary conventions; this limits his understanding to the limits his reason can achieve (which are often, as we see in his work, extremely complex) within the bounds of that traditional morality with its acceptance of absolute truths.

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We could say of Winters' use of reason, as Henry James said of "most English talk," that is is "like a quadrille in a sentry box." When his reason examines objects of fact or history, like the "Puritan paradox," it discovers inherent patterns which he then describes accurately and incisively; but when his reason tries to describe his emotional reaction to a poem--a reaction which he will, of course, not admit because it seems for him to belong to "impressionistic" rather than to "evaluative" criticism--we find him contradicting himself, unable to follow the method he prescribes; in short, we find him in a very confused critical state.

Looking closely at what Winters writes in his essay on Stevens will illustrate this willed blindness and confusion. Of course, the first error Winters makes is in the opening paragraphs where he describes Stevens, the poet, as a literary theorist and pronounces "Sunday Morning" to be a formalized statement of the poet's philosophy. Ironically, the fact that Winters and other critics can read this and other poems as philosophy and derive an abstraction of the meaning Stevens experienced and expressed in particulars in his poems represents a real success for the poet who held that it is the belief and not the fiction that counts. This ability to make a poem which can be read in the way the reader wants to read it means that Stevens achieved the ultimate relativity in poetry--certainly a complete fulfillment of his intent to write poetry that would reflect its time and place, as well

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as the Plotinal eye of its reader. If one reads with the rational eye of a philosopher, one will see the poems as philosophical statements of abstract ideas; however, if one reads the poems allowing one's imagination to become engaged and yielding to the rhythms, the "musicality," of the work, one will re-create the experience felt by the poet both in reality and in his imagination when he composed the poem. Through that understanding, that inner vision, together with accepting the validity of whatever feelings are prompted by the sound, rhythm and meter of the particular poem, one can know the emotion (or in poems where there is none, know there is none but imagined feeling) which prompted the abstract "thoughts and actions" which the rationalist mistakes as the only subject.

This understanding is one of the levels of meaning expressed in these lines from "The Snow Man" (CP 9):

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees covered with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruce rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves.

Stevens here gives the explanation discussed above: the reason "any misery," emotion, is not perceived is because one does not have a mind which would perceive it; if one has a mind of winter, "cold a long time," rational and without feeling, he

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will not feel that "misery" which occasions the cry of the poem.

The fact of this situation explains why it is that Winters can come to conclusions with which we agree from premises we must reject. His mind can grasp the abstraction of meaning, but he cannot experience the poem as poem in its particularity because he does not complete the poetic act begun in the past by the poet and brought to fulfillment only when the reader engages his whole sensibility--his intelligence, his imagination, and his feelings. For example, we agree that in "Sunday Morning" the poet,

> denies the possibility of Paradise, at the same time that he communicates through the feeling of his language a deep nostalgic longing to accept the ideas which he is rejecting . . . the poet [gives] an explanation of the function of death: it is our awareness of the imminence of death which heightens our emotions and sharpens our perceptions; our knowledge of life's transience stimulates our perception of life's beauty.[27]

However, we cannot agree that contemplating the idea of Paradise (in the sixth stanza of the poem) inspires the poet with what Winters names "ennui." According to Winters:

> In the sixth stanza the poet considers an hypothetical paradise, and, since he can imagine it only in terms of a projection of the good life as the hedonist understands the good life, he deduces that paradise would become tedious and insipid: we have in this stanza the first sharp vision of the ennui which is to obsess the later work of the poet and which is ultimately to wreck his talent, an ennui arising from the fact that emotion is not a good in itself, but

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> that if cultivated for itself alone is merely a pleasant diversion as long as the novelty of a given experience endures, at most as long as new experiences can give us the illusion of novel excitement, and then becomes a disease of the spirit, a state of indifferency in which there is neither novelty nor significance.[28]

The fact is that this stanza describes in language which reflects it perfectly the poet's "inarticulate pang" at the thought of death which is the prime motive for metaphor precisely because the experience of it cannot be articulated; it can only be expressed in "innuendo," never in "inflection." Like God who cannot be named (in Judaic law), like Paradise which can never be found, like the self which <u>is</u> named but whose essense is always sought after and never wholly defined except in memory and after death, the fruit of Paradise in this stanza never falls--the act is not completed except in death. A full analysis of this stanza appears in the chapter of Section Two dealing with "Sunday Morning (see pp. 535-562); however, this brief excursion into the complex meanings suggested by what Winters describes as "ennui" should serve here to point out that Winters was less that inadequate in dealing with this poem. In fact, what he derives to be "ennui" is the most profound <u>angst</u> of human experience prompted at this point in Stevens' life by the death of his mother whom he devised in the poem "waiting, sleeplessly."

Perhaps the most glaring evidence of Winters' projection onto Stevens of the inadequacy of his "rational" method is

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in his analysis of "Anecdote of the Jar," of which he says it is "a poem which has been at least twice misinterpreted by commentators who have not taken the trouble to understand Stevens as a whole." The discussion of this poem and Winters' misunderstanding of it, which he proposes as a definitive reading taking the "whole" of Stevens into account, will serve as paradigm of the curious inversions and perversions of misunderstanding resulting from engaging the reason without imagination and feeling when reading a poem. It is, of course, an extreme example (because Winters is a man of extremes), but a good one nonetheless, of the shortcomings of the New Critical approach.

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild.
> The jar was round upon the ground
> And tall and of a port in air.
>
> It took dominion everywhere.
> The jar was gray and bare.
> It did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee.

After briefly citing the criticism of Stanley Chase and Howard Baker who both understand the jar to give order to the wilderness by providing a point of reference, and that this is a good, Winters goes on:

> If the poem ended with the fourth line, there might be an imperfect justification of the interpretation offered by these writers, for in the first four lines the wilderness is not only dominated by the jar--as, in fact,

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> it is dominated throughout the poem,--but it is called slovenly. If we examine the next three lines, however, we see that the phrase, "the slovenly wilderness" is in fact a slovenly ellipsis. The wilderness is slovenly after it has been dominated and not before: it "sprawled around, no longer wild." The jar is the product of the human mind, as the critics remark, and it dominates the wilderness; but it does not give order to the wilderness--it is vulgar and sterile, and it transforms the wilderness into the semblance of a deserted picnic ground. Its sterility is indicated in the last three lines. . . . The poem would appear to be primarily an expression of the corrupting effect of the intellect upon natural beauty, and hence a purely romantic performance. To read any message of neo-humanism into Stevens is as foolish as to endeavor, in the manner of certain young critics a few years ago, to read into him a kind of incipient and trembling consciousness of the beauty of Marxism.[29]

Again we have an instance of Winters' reaching a conclusion with which there is agreement--that, to some extent, the jar represents the human mind--but Winters has misread along the way so that he can judge the poem as a "purely romantic performance" and so another example of Stevens' progressive decay. The misreading begins when he says the "wilderness is slovenly after it has been dominated and not before" and does not follow the implications of his statement nor see that it was slovenly both before and after the appearance of the jar. However, long before this, Winters fails to pay close enough attention to the words and structure of the poem. We will examine both the words and structure carefully as well as the implications he does not draw. Winters, like many other critics, reads this poem without engaging his imagination; this

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failure is certain because with the imagination engaged and with an awareness that this is one of the poems in Harmonium, very strong and necessary associations emerge which give the poem a richness that has not been at all perceived by Winters and those others who read the jar only as an intellectually conceived symbol without the life imagination provides.

We begin with the title and notice from it that the poem is the last of five "anecdotes" found in the Collected Poems, and all these belong to Harmonium; the others are "Earthy Anecdote," (the first poem), "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand," "Anecdote of Canna," and "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks." With the exceptions of "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" (which is equivocal because of the evocation of "moonlight") and "Anecdote of the Jar," the anecdotes have something to do with sleep. After he has made the bucks swerve to the right and left, "the firecat closed his bright eyes/ And slept;" this last line of the first poem prepares the way for the suggestions of moonlight, dreams and imagination in the rest of the volume. In "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand," which as its title indicates generalizes about the human condition, the last lines--"The dress of a woman of Lhassa, / In its place/ Is an invisible element of that place/ Made visible"--speak of that identity between a man and his place that is a major theme in Stevens' poetry. In "Anecdote of Canna," in addition to being witness to the "dreams of X, the mighty thought, the mighty man," we learn that "His thought sleeps

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not. Yet thought that wakes/ In sleep may never meet another thought or thing. . . ." This observation ambiguously reflects both the poet's mistrust of thought and his fear of the unconscious freed in sleep--the latter being made even more explicit in "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" where Berserk threatens the sanity of the poet-speaker ("I") by setting "traps in the midst of dreams."

Lastly, the "canna" in "Anecdote of Canna" is not only the plant with ornamental foliage "native to warm climates but cultivated in Britain" and also native as ornament to Eastern capitols of which the dreamer dreams, but it is a form of "cannot" as well. In 1721 Allan Ramsay, a Scottish poet and wig-maker who wrote partly pathetic and partly humorous elegies, published a collection of them.[30] In addition to the tangential hints that Stevens might have found something attractive about the Ramsay he imagined--that his poetry was elegiac and partly humorous, partly pathetic, like Stevens' own, that he was a wig-maker and that Stevens very often played with the idea of wearing a wig in his letters, his Journal entries and his poetry--there is this line of Ramsay's which provides a very important clue for both "Anecdote of Canna" and "Anecdote of the Jar:" "He disna live that canna link the glass about."[31] This use of "canna" provides Stevens with a beautiful cipher in his "Anecdote;" with it the poem takes on an additional meaning which closely points to the poet's preoccupation with his inability to live wholly either

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in the world of practical reality or in the world of imagination. Read with this meaning of "canna"--

> Huge are the canna in the dreams of
> X, the mighty thought, the mighty man.
> They fill the terrace of his capitol.
>
> His thought sleeps not. Yet thought that wakes
> In sleep may never meet another thought
> Or thing. . . . Now the day-break comes. . . .
>
> X promenades the dewy stones,
> Observes the canna with a clinging eye,
> Observes and then continues to observe.--

we see behind the decorative foliage the pain of the man who had wanted to "become something," not the "dilettante" he thought he was, "half-dream, half-deed." In his dreams, "canna" (cannot) "fills the terrace of his capitol" (his head) and does not let his thought rest.

The more surprising and illuminating clue is offered by the whole line from Ramsay in the context of "Anecdote of the Jar:" "He disna live that canna link the glass about." This line easily serves as a key to unlock the door to understanding that poem. The "glass" becomes the "jar" which will eventually evolve in its purity as the poet grows older to become the "crystal" in which he revolves and through which we see him. Here at the beginning of his poetic career the glass is crude, but as he cuts parts of his experience to examine them and polishes his craft, it becomes the perfected, shining, many-faceted crystal (like Bergson's "prism") of his later poetry without which "he disna live."

Another important aspect of the title is in the meaning

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of "anecdote." Because anecdotes were originally unpublished narratives or details, sometimes concerning a detached incident or single event, concerning the private life of some important person or king (it was first applied by Procopius to his unpublished memoirs of the Emperor Justinian, which consisted chiefly of tales of the intimate life of the court),[32] and because it accordingly came to mean "an item of gossip"--this was the only meaning Samuel Johnson attached to it--, we understand that in the five poems which Stevens named "anecdotes," he is both revealing an item or incident of his personal life and that in each poem the subject is to be considered, in some way, as an "important person or king." In "Earthy Anecdote" this subject appears to be the firecat; in "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" it is the "he" who describes the variations on the statement that "The soul is composed of the external world;" in "Anecdote of Canna" it is "X, the mighty thought, the mighty man" whose dreams form the substance of the anecdote (in a letter Stevens wrote that it was while visiting Washington and thinking of the President and the Capitol that he conceived this poem); in "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" it is "I," the Prince with a thousand eyes (the symbolization of the peacock) whose dreams we are again to witness in the poem; and lastly, in "Anecdote of the Jar," it is the "jar" which is inseparable from the "I" (following what has been pointed out in the previous paragraph). In these poems Stevens gives us important details of his internal

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life through which we can understand both that he sees himself in his imagination as "Hoon," an "important person or king," as thought, "the mighty man," who shares his throne with the "firecat," imagination--and that his relationship to these visions is ambivalent. Moreover, we learn from these anecdotes, as we learn from gossip, the idiosyncrasies of the subject, facts he would not himself, in the direct light of the sun, make or allow to be made public, but facts which are all the more revealing because of this. In reading the anecdotes, then, we must be conscious that we are being given access to privileged information, and that in receiving it we are in a special relationship to the poet who is giving it to us in spite of himself. Knowing this and looking back at the sequence of the anecdotes, we understand why it is that each one gives a clue which helps us to understand the next and that all of the first four prepare the way for the last, "Anecdote of the Jar."

Besides the aspects of the "jar" having to do with its transparency, as indicated above, there are the equally important associations to "jar" deriving from its use as a verb which initially grew out of "an echo or onomatopoeic process since certain birds make a harsh, vibratory sound"[33] described by that word. In this context, there are connected meanings and applications of them[34] which, when considered in reading Stevens' poem, add greatly to our understanding of it and its place and function in the volume. The first meaning of "jar" is "a harsh or unharmonious sound or combination of sounds;"

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in 1553, T. Wilson in his Rhetoric used the word in this way: "Composition . . . is an opte joyning together of words in suche order, that neither the ear shall espie any gerre [jar], not yet [etc.];" and in 1840, following this, Isaac D'Israeli wrote in Amenities of Literature that "The critic's fastidious ear listens to nothing but the jar of rude rhyme." With this meaning in mind, we can look at "Anecdote of the Jar" and understand it to present something discordant and unharmonious in both sound and substance in the body of Harmonium, thus adding another level to the discordance of the jar itself placed in Tennessee, "Like nothing else in Tennessee." What is most striking about this poem within the "whole of Harmonium" is its "grayness and bareness," its marked lack of the "gaiety of language" so characteristic of the volume; it is apparently purely abstract and intellectual in substance, cold and hard like the other kind of jar--all of this presents a "jar" to the reader.

In addition there is the sound of the poem: its readers do, in fact, hear "the jar of rude rhyme" with the repetition of "hill" ending the first and third lines; the repetition and inversion of the "ess" sound in "Tennessee" and "wilderness" (the "see" of "Tennessee" inverts to become "ess" of "wilderness," but the "ess" of "wilderness" is already present in the penultimate syllable of "Tennessee"); the internal rhymes playing on "round"--"ground," "Around," "surround;" the three line end rhymes of "air," "everywhere," and "bare" which are

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especially "rude" since they finally disappoint any expectation we might still have of there being a rhyme pattern established in the poem, and, at the same time, they engage our ear because the rhyme bridges the second two stanzas (a point which we will discuss further on); finally, the identical rhyming of the first and last lines with "Tennessee" provides in that identity a most ironic rudeness since the rest of the poem has been so irregular. Playing against this "jar of rude rhyme" are the meter and rhythm of the poem. The standard here is a four beat iambic line which is jarringly broken by two lines--"It made the slovenly wilderness" and "And tall and of a port in air"--which don't scan (the importance of these lines will be dealt with further on); two lines which vary the rhythm by providing only two and three beats respectively--"Surround that hill" and "The jar was gray and bare;" and, one line which is metrically equivocal since it can be read as a regular line or as a line with a spondee substituted for an iamb in the third measure (which would mirror the meaning of "rose up")--"The wilderness rose up to it." Because the standard metric pattern is so simple and direct, the deviations from it are all the more glaring, providing meaningful jars which we will explore to their fullest extent as we continue to analyze the poem.

In considering "jar" in its relation to the title, that is, before moving on to its relation within the poem to "Tennessee" and the "wilderness," there are two closely related

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meanings which serve as a bridge from its use in the title to those in the poem. A "jar" is "a quivering or grating sound; a tremulous or harsh vibration of sound" as produced when we form the letter "J": "the impulse . . . shakes and agitates the whole tongue, whereby the sound is affected with a trembling jar." Jar is also "a vibration or tremulous movement of the kind running through the body or nerves; a thrill of the nerves, mind, or feelings caused by, or resembling the effect of a physical shock." With this awareness of the physical, sensual aspects of "jar," that is, that its "j" together with the sound of a soft "g" (with which it is identical) and the sound of "z" are the sounds in the alphabet which require the vibration of the tongue, we recall the importance of Stevens' use of the harmonium as his controlling metaphor--the harmonium is an instrument which produces sound when air forced through it vibrates metal "tongues." When we read this poem aloud, then, we are experiencing as nearly as possible the reality of the poet's chosen metaphor at the same time as the poem appears on the page to be the coldest of intellectual exercises. This is the full impact of the "jar:" it is not only a jar in the poet's experience of which the poem is an anecdote, but of ours as well. When we remember all Stevens wrote apropos of the "gaiety of language," however, and specifically what he wrote concerning the sounds of "c" in the "Comedian as the Letter C,"--who makes his appearance in this poem as the last syllable of "Tennesee"--

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we are not surprised to find ourselves entertained and educated in such a perversely playful manner. Again, it is an instance of Stevens' simultaneously hiding and revealing himself, but revealing himself only to those who have been careful enough to consider the work as a whole.

Carrying the meaning of "jar" into the poem and looking at the first line--"I placed a jar in Tennessee"--, we understand it to mean that the poet-speaker felt that what he added to Tennessee was "discordant and unharmonious." If we look at those Journal entries and letters of Stevens' which have to do with his feelings about Tennessee, and if we keep in mind the historical background of the letters (which are from a later period than the Journal entries), we will at once deepen our understanding of the poem and fulfill the first of the requirements for proper evaluation of a poem as laid out by Winters (i.e., that literary criticism should "consist (1) of the statement of such historical or biographical knowledge as may be necessary in order to understand the mind and method of the writer").

On an early business trip in 1905, shortly after being admitted to practice as a lawyer, Stevens saw Tennessee for the first time as he approached aboard a train, and he wrote in his Journal:

> We are approaching Tennessee--green, hilly, sunny-cloudy place. (L 83).

and the next day:

> Got through red Tennessee. . . . (L 84).

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Thirteen years later in April of 1918, Stevens was again on a business trip in Tennessee and wrote from there to his wife on three of the four days he spent there; excerpts from these letters follow:

> . . . I have always been of two minds about Tennessee. Sometimes I like it and sometimes I loathe it. . . . I scarcely know what to think. I know well that I love the far South, along the Gulf, but this midway South is an uncertainty. . . . I should really be glad to stay at home for a long time when I get back or, if I must go away, go, at least, to some new place. There are a good many soldiers here. The streets are, in fact, crowded with them. There isn't a thing for them to do, except to walk up and down the few blocks on Market Street that amount to anything. They crowd into the hotel for meals--the officers; and a good many of them put up here for the night, on Saturdays, in order to sleep in good beds for a change. It is common gossip that they are being sent abroad by the thousands and people begin to wonder whether our first million are not already in France. I hope so. Those that are here are splendid fellows. We cannot help doing well when we really start. . . .

and the next day, a Sunday,

> . . . I walked all afternoon and feel infinitely better for it, although I am tired. From Knoxville, to the South East, one can see the Appalachian Mountains. Out near the golf club, at the Western end of the city, there is a really swank view. The Tennessee River makes a great bend through the woods and cliffs and hills and on the horizon run the blue ranges of the mountains. I saw no end of irises in people's gardens. There were peonies, tulip-trees, locust trees and an unknown tree, very large and spreading, covered with purple blossoms. You remember, no doubt, the pungent, lightly acrid, odor of locust blossoms. . . . And, of course, I saw many boys and girls,

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> both black and white, loafing in pleasant places. . . . The place is unfortunate in not having a decent hotel. . . . People in hotels of this sort are an amusing study on Sundays. They cannot make themselves comfortable either upstairs or down. Consequently, they loll about looking unspeakably bored. The town is now what Reading was twenty years ago.

Two days later,

> . . . A man came into his office while I was there and described a friend's casket as "the finest casket my flashin' eyes ever laid on, the finest my flashin' eyes every laid on." Here they spell Arthur, Arter, and so on. All this will give you some idea of the grandeurs of traveling in Tennessee. I noticed the other day that O. Henry, in one of his letters, asked, "Is it possible for anything to happen in Nashville?" Certainly not without outside help. This applies to the state as a whole. I have never been so concerned about a place. I begin to think of it as Pope thought of London: as a "dear, damned, distracting place.". . .

and the last, the next day,

> . . . Nothing has happened since my letter to you from Elizabethton except that last evening a train of negroes that had been drafted passed through Johnson City on the way to camp. The station was crowded with negroes. When the train pulled in there was a burst of yelps and yells. The negroes on the platform ran up and down shaking hands with those in the cars. The few white people who happened to be near took an indulgent attitude. They regard negroes as absurdities. They have no sympathy for them. I tried to take that point of view: to laugh at those absurd animals, in order to understand how it was <u>convenable</u> that one should feel. But the truth is that I feel thrilling emotion at these draft movements. I want to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air; and so far as I have been able to observe, it makes no difference whether the men are black or white. The noise when the train pulled out was intoxicating.

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The first thing we notice after the expected physical impressions made on the poet is his initial "uncertainty" which changes over the four day period to a strong but inexplicable attraction: "I have never been so concerned about a place." At the same time we have the only recordings in his letters or Journal of an active interest in both the war and "negroes," joined as they were by circumstance; this is a very important aspect of Stevens' relationship to Tennessee, and it helps provide an equally important meaning within the structure of the poem. What we must ask now, taking the above into consideration, is why the poet-speaker felt that he "placed a jar in Tennessee." What was discordant and unharmonious in Tennessee?

The poet is uncertain about Tennessee because it is "midway South," a "green, hilly sunny-cloudy place:" it is not the lush and fertile "venereal soil" of Florida, nor the harsh rocky soil of the North, but a place where ways of being cannot be clarified because the landscape and weather are so "in-between." So then, in one sense it is Tennessee itself that represents a "jar" to the experience of North and South for the poet; Tennessee is jarring because it will not define itself. The poet in Tennessee is also "a jar" because while there he is like Tennessee, in-between; he is the clear glass jar through which we see the place limned by the outline of his presence. This interpretation is reinforced by what Stevens wrote in his first letter to Elsie: "I have always

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been of two minds about Tennessee." And when we look closely at the poem, we see that each of these two minds is explored distinctly in the second and third stanzas after the general situation has been established by the first.

Before looking at the internal evidence of the poem, from the external evidence offered in his letters we can infer the specific reason for the poet's being of two minds--the fact that makes him feel "a jar" (jarring to the natural integrity of the place and "ajar" since his mind is undefined, open-ended, without the conclusion offered by reason). Not only are the landscape and weather responsible for his insecurity, but so is the presence of soldiers--who march into his letter brusquely without even the grace of a transitional phrase. After their presence is first announced, it becomes part of the background repeatedly evoked as the poet continues in his descriptions of the various towns in Tennessee in which he stopped. His remarks about the war and the soldiers, especially his naming them "splendid fellows," reveal how distant the actuality of the First World War was for Stevens who (like the English whom Fussell describes who could see the glow of gunfire across the Channel, but who could not begin to imagine the stinking decay of blood and flesh in the trenches from where the gunfire issued) was using the inflated language of an heroic past to describe those who were being sent to what was, at that point, practically wholesale sacrifice. Together with the suggestion that

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in the presence of these real reminders of the war Stevens felt particularly "discordant" because of his sentimentalized literary experience of it, there is also another meaning suggested by "jar" in connection with war which, curiously enough, comes from Spenser; in The Faerie Queene (II,ii,26) we find these lines: "He maketh warre, he maketh peace againe,/ And yett his peace is but continual iarre" (jar). In contrast to the real "jar" of the war which he could not feel, Stevens felt the "jar" of his internal metaphorical war as he tried to make peace between the two aspects of his being--his thought and his passion, his mind and his body, reason and imagination, his real life and his imagined one.

The next step in our analysis is to understand the anecdote in the context of the preceding anecdotes and the rest of the volume. The other anecdotes have an animate being who is openly given importance and power in the poems; this is in keeping with the etymology of "anecdote" as discussed earlier; this predisposes us to consider the subject of this poem in the same way. The subject is "the Jar," however, but it is identical with the "I;" placing himself in Tennessee meant being and feeling "discordant and unharmonious," a "jar" there. At the same time, the other meaning of jar as a cylindrical glass container operates as well so that we know that we see Tennessee in a certain way through the ordering principle of the jar-poet, "the important person" about whom the anecdote has been written.

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After the opening statement of fact, the first stanza continues to predicate the attributes of the jar: "And round it was, upon a hill" describes it physically, its suggestive shape and its superior place; "It made the slovenly wilderness/ Surround that hill" describes its abstract power and introduces the new element, the "slovenly wilderness." Winters connects this directly to an abstract landscape in which a glass jar sits on top of an imaginary hill and serves as focal point; Winters then goes on to argue for Stevens' neo-Romanticism based on the fact that this jar represents the mind and, as such, though it may provide order, disturbs the organic order of nature and makes it "slovenly." Winters fails to read the full meaning of "jar," however, and so cannot see the complexity of the poem and the dilemma presented by it. The third and fourth lines posit abstract power for the jar while the second line simply describes it as a physical, sensuous object--these are two opposing ways of seeing (like the difference between "inflection" and "innuendo" in "Thirteen Ways") which account for the real "jar" of the poem.

The abstract power <u>adds</u> its physical property of roundness to the hill--it has control over this physical aspect--and causes the "slovenly wilderness" to take on its nature and "<u>Sur</u>round that hill." The wilderness was "slovenly" long before the jar, however, as evidenced by this quotation from Emerson: "There, in that great untrained sloven continent, in high Alleghany pastures, . . still sleeps and murmurs . . .

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the great Mother [Nature]."[35] But the abstract power which "made" ("It made" when we read Stevens as identical with the "jar" = "I made" as he made the poem; this evokes the etymology of "poetry"), conceptualized, the "slovenly wilderness" surrounding the hill cannot be one with the physical reality of its roundness and its place, its temporality,--it cannot see itself, only what is around it. "The life seen and temporal and the life eternal are at a jar."[36]

The second stanza develops the physical nature of the jar. The "slovenly wilderness," the wilderness of America uncultivated by civilization or religion ("The sloven imagination of people who received no religious instruction."[37]) acts sexually; it tempts the jar-poet by its submission to his power. The wilderness becomes active only after the initial order of the jar which made it surround him on the hill. This is a romantic humanizing of nature, but in a twentieth century style that focusses on the specifically sexual character of nature rather than on some other vague, mysterious attribute. When we engage our imaginations and see how the wilderness suggestively "rose up" (the ambivalence of the scansion with its equivocal spondee mirrors the poet's ambivalence on the subject of sexuality, nature and the body, "that monster.") and "sprawled around, no longer wild," we cannot help but see its sexuality.

This continues with the next two lines which switch the focus back to the jar, and we hear the grating "jar" of the

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"g" before "round" as the poet is momentarily lost in the recalled sense of the experience. He is carried by the physical sound and rhythm of his verse: "The jar was round upon the ground;" it added itself to nature, the "ground," as naturally as the "g" to "round." This union is organic and whole and it is echoed by the primary, animal sound of "round" and especially "ground." The last line, "And tall and of a port in air," stops the flow of the previous line because it doesn't scan, particularly coming after the preceding line; it also adds rather peculiar elements of description that are entirely unexpected. These lines are also ambivalent because they at once add to the physical meaning of the poem by suggesting nothing as clearly as the actual figure of the poet--Stevens was "tall and of a port in air,"--but they also serve as a transition into the last stanza which develops the abstract nature of the jar, just as this one developed its physical nature. Because this line is so rhythmically poor in the context of the poem, it makes us take particular notice and recall the evocations of "jar" and connect them here. This line is most jarring because it expresses the extreme tension between physical nature--sexual appetite tied to the "ground" which reflects our animal selves--and consciousness--the power of the mind which is not judged to be good or evil but is presented simply as a reflection of our godlike selves which aspires towards order and the ideal. The poem actually describes our human state as it was first described in the third chapter of Genesis; however, it does this using the poet's felt, not his intellectual, experience as a basis.

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We know the poet was very much affected by his stay in Tennessee because of what he noticed. The excitement he described feeling about the war and the soldiers was not actively generated by those facts but by his special attention to the effects the war had on those who were to participate in it. Feelings and actions become immediately more spontaneous and passionate because of the pressure of death and uncertainty. We notice that he actively tried to see the "negroes" as "animals," as he said others did, but he found that if they were, they were no different from anyone else--even himself if he allowed it--who was carried by the event. In dealing with this poem, we cannot afford to forget this background, particularly in view of what Stevens himself wrote apropos of Howard Baker's criticism of the poem.[38] Stevens acknowledged the astuteness of the analysis, but also faulted it, saying Baker "did not see the sort of world in which I am living." (L 292); he also wrote at the same time that "there is nothing that kills an idea like expressing it in personal terms."

So, with Baker we can agree that the jar "is a fitting symbol for man's dominion over nature," but we must remember at the same time "the world in which" Stevens lived; we can accept this only as one level of meaning, the abstract expression of an idea which the poet experienced in "personal terms." When Winters criticizes Baker and Chase for misunderstanding, he agrees that the jar "dominates," the wilderness, but he says that the jar "does not give order to the wilderness--it is vulgar and sterile." Unfortunately, here

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again Winters is perceptive in seeing how "sterile" the jar is in the last stanza, but he does not see the contrast between stanzas two and three, nor the fact that in spite of its sterility, the jar does, in fact, "provide order." The error made by Winters, as well as by other critics, is in reading the "jar" as a symbol of the intellect alone rather than as a symbol for the whole of Stevens' self, the "I" with which it is identified in the first line. The "jar" is a transparent yet concrete symbol for the poet in his media of imagination and intellect; through it, as through the poem, we see him in his ambivalence, feeling the tension between his sexual imagination tied to reality and to nature, as described in stanza two, and his sterile intellect described in stanza three.

The last stanza provides a somewhat tragic closing to the poem because it describes the intellectual ordering facet of the "jar-self-poet" as the most powerful part which takes dominion over his own physical nature not only over the physical nature which "surrounds it." We are helped to understand this by the shortening of the metrical pattern in the line, "The jar was gray and bare;" this line destroys any possibility of hope that we may have had earlier in the poem that the two forces could be equally integrated by the poet. Its "bare" finishes the sequence of "air," and "everywhere" which expressed an ephemeral wish for the positive synthesis of mind with nature through the elements ("Air," "everywhere").

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The physical description is conditioned now by the intellect so that the jar's roundness no longer matters; all that is in this light is "gray and bare;" it no longer has spatial, temporal attributes ("round," "tall and of a port in air") because it is seen only in its ideal state like the form of the triangle never actually seen in nature. "The mind is the most terrible force in the world," (OP 173); this line now assumes a deeper meaning because we see the poet has lost. The last two lines with their negatives:

> It did not give of bird or bush
> Like nothing else in Tennessee.

reinforce the sense of tragedy since they offer no possibility of continuation for the poet who has yielded his physical nature to his intellect. The poem is a twentieth century version of "The Songs of Innocence and Experience," compressed into twelve lines; however, it is a poem which speaks of the poet's own experience rather than of necessity.

It is not the general corrupting influence of the intellect on nature that is being described here, as Winters writes, but the state of the poet who sees himself as sterile because he does not participate sufficiently in the physical world around him or in him. His experience of being in Tennessee was negative but enlightening. He felt his difference from those he called "splendid fellows" who, no matter who they were, were actively engaged in an historical reality which allowed them to participate spontaneously, innocently, while the poet felt "thrilling emotion at the[se] draft movements"

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and wanted "to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air," but didn't; he just observed and heard "the noise." ("Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble." (OP 158). At the same time he was unable to sympathize with the general "indulgent attitude" of the whites toward the black soldiers who yelped and yelled on the train; he could neither be part of the animal excitement nor be separate from it. All he felt was the "jar" of the experience.

What makes the poem most tragic in the end is that we have been given in the anecdote a glimpse of the poet as he saw himself, impotent and dominated by his Reason, unable because of who he was--a product of history and circumstances--to indulge in the freedom he would have liked. The poem is a little drama, an account of a situation. When the poem opens there seems to be a possibility that Reason and Passion will merge into an organic whole; by the second stanza, we believe it will be Passion that will win, and our spirits (like Stevens' on the train platform wanting to yield to the animal pleasures of screaming and jumping) hope for this because it is human to yield to Passion--as Burton wrote in the Anatomy of Melancholy,[39] (with which Stevens was most probably familiar if the clue provided by this line is any indication), "They often jar, Reason is overborne by Passion"; in the last stanza our hope dies with all other sensual excitement, and we feel the death cold Reason brings.

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Obviously, in the context of the whole of Harmonium this poem is a major jar because it is so unlike those poems in which the poet delights in, at least, the sensual aspects of language and imagination. It is also unlike the other poems because of what it reveals about its maker. It is a poem in which there is no persona, unless we want to call the "jar" a persona, and a poem which has as its subject a concrete action of the poet. We have been given an important piece of "gossip" which, when taken into account when looking at the rest of the work, will give us a much deeper understanding of the poet's motivation. When we finish the poem, we understand something about the poet's relationship to his intellect, to Reason, which we have not understood before, and that is that his intellect no less than his imagination provides him with consolation. This integration of the intellect, "gray and bare" though it is, into poetry is the "jar" of this poem in the context of Harmonium, a volume which represents, rather, the important place of aesthetic imagination in poetry and life. As such, the "jar" prepares the way for Stevens' later work which will depend more and more on the consolation offered by Reason when added to Imagination in the absence of Passion.

Winters, apparently such a staunch defender of Reason, fails to see that Stevens depends so greatly on it; he, in fact, sees precisely the opposite--that Stevens condemns cold Reason as the corrupter of Nature. The first error Winters

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makes--a common one for New Critics--is trying to read objectively, without feelings; this was discussed earlier. The other great insufficiency in reading comes from his inability to understand the nature of poetic language; this may be partially the result of his personal dogmatism, but probably has to do with a failure of critical method as well. Because of this, Winters reads poetry as prose that has a single paraphraseable meaning and constantly attributes to Stevens judgments he didn't make--though they <u>are</u> judgments which Winters makes and projects onto Stevens so that he can then disagree or find fault with them. For example, in trying to make his point about Stevens' condemnation of Reason and his concomitant exaltation of the emotions, Winters cites "Stars at Tallapoosa" as another poem which "postulates the absolute severance of the intellectual and the emotional."[40] He writes that Stevens judges "that the intellectual experience, since it has no relationship to the rest of our life and hence is in no way useful, is valuable simply for the independent emotional excitement which one may derive from it."[41] This is wrong; in order to see that it is, we should look first at the poem:

> The lines are straight and swift between the stars.
> The night is not the cradle that they cry,
> The criers, undulating the deep-oceaned phrase.
> The lines are much too dark and much too sharp.
>
> The mind herein attains simplicity,
> There is no moon, on single, silvered leaf.
> The body is no body to be seen
> But is an eye that studies its black lid.

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Let these be your delight, secretive hunter,
Wading the sea-lines, moist and ever-mingling,
Mounting the earth-lines, long and lax, lethargic.
These lines are swift and fall without diverging.

The melon-flower nor dew nor web of either
Is like to these. But in yourself is like:
A sheaf of brilliant arrows flying straight,
Flying and falling straightway for their pleasure.

Their pleasure that is all bright-edged and cold;
Or, if not arrows, then the nimblest motions,
Making recoveries of young nakedness
And the lost vehemence the midnights hold.

In the poem, as in "Anecdote of the Jar," Stevens deals with the place and function of the intellect in life, but he does not find its only good to be an "independent emotional excitement one may derive from it." On the contrary, the poem establishes an important parallel between memory ("Making recoveries of young nakedness/ And the lost vehemence the midnights hold") and reason ("lines are straight and swift between the stars") based on the fact that they are both imagined. Memory provides order to the present by defining a past self as the perceiver of the order of past events; in the same way, reason projects order on the external present by defining connections for the facts which are the world. Both reason and memory, however, all functions of imagination, in fact, produce innuendo which is not the primary but the secondary experience of ourselves in the world. The primary experience, inflection, though beautiful and desirable in its uncertainty, the Passion without which (whether real or remembered) we cannot live, is threatening because it is

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changing, unordered, chaotic,with a rhythm and logic which we cannot conceive: "Wading the sea-lines, moist and ever-mingling,/ Mounting the earth lines, long and lax, lethargic." "The night is not the cradle that they cry" because it is, like the sea, a continual reminder of that original chaos against which we invent ourselves through memory and the external world through reason. Looking at the stars, we impose our learned order just as we impose order on our pasts, though we can just as easily continue to imagine with the Greeks the stars as the falling tips of millions of arrows shot by that "secretive hunter." It is not the poem which postulates the severance of intellect and emotions; it is the experience of life as it was first recorded in Genesis that makes that postulate. What the poem postulates is a partial solution: simply seeing Reason, the intellect, as a natural imagining like memory and mythology, as another imagined order, like memory, which assuages the pain of change and uncertainty; expressed in poetry, this solution attempts to become "inflection" itself.

Stevens realized his place in the universe, in the center, the "eye" that studies its black lid" littered with stars. Rather than a being created separate and distinct by God, he wanted to be part of nature in the same way as the Greeks who felt themselves to be its children, descendants of Uranus and Gaea. This underlying desire for paganism in its most profound sense is what Winters is really opposed to

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in Stevens and what he never addresses honestly because it would mean that he would have to bring into the open his own "rational" belief in the idea of a God who created us in his image. Instead of putting Stevens' "hedonism" in its proper context of paganism, Winters regards it simply as evidence of Stevens' superficial aestheticism.

In the poem, Stevens marks the difference between the imagined order of Reason which explains the lines of stars and the real order of Nature which is organic and uncertain (even theories explaining these orders take in "uncertainty" as a parameter), and he offers that it is the understanding, acceptance and indulgence of both which is the only possibility we have of "delight and pleasure," since it becomes increasingly apparent that Reason is simply an order which we use on the way to discovering the larger organic order of nature. This is very different from simply indulging whatever is necessary for the sake of "emotional excitement." Winters rejects all order but that offered by Reason because, like the idea of a single God which it inevitably invents, Reason can only be defended by Reason. A pagan mythology is pagan and considered superior by Stevens not because it substitutes the idea of many gods for one, but because it acknowledges and fosters the inclusion of the "irrational," of Nature, in its order and so allows the imagining of whatever is necessary to ensure peace and comfort in the fact of what was, previously, an "impersonal" universe. The Greeks

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were able to use Reason, to apply it wherever necessary to explain and understand, from mythology to philosophy, because they saw it as a tool; inheritors of the Judeo-Christian mythology have a great deal of difficulty disentangling Reason from the complex of belief because the belief in one God is dependent on the supremacy of Reason and vice versa.

Stevens was a man extremely sensitive to the problems posed not only by the force of history but sensitive to the realities of his period as well. Though an inheritor of the Judeo-Christian tradition and part of the "soil" of America, daughter of Reason, Stevens was able through his Imagination to understand limits and facts about the reality surrounding him and about the reality of the past--that, for example, the Greek idea offered the possibility of living with Reason as a handmaiden whereas the possibility offered by the idea of America, which Winters voices loudly still, is the reverse, condemning us to a life completely at the service of Reason. Stevens' desire to create a new mythology for America stems from his perception of this situation. Stevens wanted the belief in the power of Reason and a single God carried over by the Puritans in search of a New Jerusalem to be replaced by a mythology which would begin from the fact that "his soil is man's intelligence," that here man is no longer a wanderer whose only order is provided by Reason but, like one of the Greeks, identical with the order of Nature, soil and weather.

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Notes to Chapter 7

1 The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism, New York: Vintage Books, 1955, p. 37.

2 Ibid., p. 44.

3 "Wallace Stevens or The Hedonist's Progress," In Defense of Reason, Chicago: Swallow Press, 1947, p. 433.

4 In this, he follows, without admitting or being aware of it, the program for criticism set out by J.E. Spingarn in Creative Criticism and Other Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1925) in "The New Criticism," (pp. 3-38) rather than that set out by Eliot, the acknowledged father of New Criticism.

5 Hyman notes these five steps in his essay and also points out that Winters failed to follow them. Hyman then proceeds to follow them to great advantage in his evaluation of Winters.

6 In Defense of Reason, p. 431.

7 The Armed Vision, p. 43; we should also note Winters' latest interpretation as stated by Hyman:

> In Winters' recent work "moral" seems to have become almost entirely a matter of the attitudes expressed in the paraphraseable prose content of the poem. Thus

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> Robinson's "choice of matter," "subjects," and "themes" frequently constitute his morality, and a poem like "Hillcrest" appears to be moral and "counter-romantic" largely because "it tells us that life is a very trying experience, to be endured only with pain and to be understood only with difficulty." In other words, a stoic poem dealing with "the endurance of suffering" and taking an approved attitude toward it is a "moral" poem. (pp. 43-44n.).

8 Ibid., p. 43.

9 In Defense of Reason, p. 14.

10 "If we reverse the formula, however, so as to make the physical representation perfectly clear but the meaning uncertain, we have a very serious situation; and this is precisely what occurs, in some measure toward the close of The Blithedale Romance, and without mitigation throughout the four unfinished romances." (From "Maule's Curse or Hawthorne and The problem of Allegory," in In Defense of Reason, p. 172.)

11 "The Influence of Meter on Poetic Convention," In Defense of Reason, p. 130.

12 Ibid., p. 105.

13 "Wallace Stevens or The Hedonist's Progress," In Defense of Reason, p. 459.

14 In Defense of Reason, p. 103.

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[15] "Wallace Stevens or The Hedonist's Progress," In Defense of Reason, p. 431; of the attitude in "Sunday Morning": ". . . divinity . . . consists wholly in . . . emotions--not in . . . understanding of the emotions, but in the emotions as a good in themselves."

[16] In Defense of Reason, p. 459.

[17] Ibid., p. 433.

[18] The Armed Vision, p. 35.

[19] As Winters quotes from Frank Hugh Foster, A Genetic History of the New England Theology, University of Chicago Press, 1907, p. 29: "The first Puritans, sure in their own hearts that they were the elect of God, found the doctrine necessary to sustain them in the tremendous struggle through which they passed. . . . Hence the doctrine nerved to greater activity; and it produced a similar effect during the first period of the promulgation of Calvinism, among every nation which accepted the system." (In Defense of Reason, p. 162) And as Winters himself writes, "The English Puritans who settled in Massachusetts were socially the product of centuries of the type of ethical discipline fostered by the Catholic and Anglo-Catholic Churches. They may have denied the freedom of the will and the efficaciousness of good works by lip, but by habit, and without really grasping the fact, they believed in them and acted upon them" p. 161.

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[20] "Over a longer period, however, the doctrine of predestination would naturally lead to religious apathy, for it offered no explicit motive to action; and this is precisely that to which it led, for after the Great Awakening of the middle of the eighteenth century, itself a reaction to previous decay in the Church, the Church lost power rapidly, and by the opening of the nineteenth century was succumbing on every hand to Unitarianism, a mildly moralistic creed, in which the element of supernaturalism was minimized, and which, in turn, yielded rapidly among the relatively intellectual classes to Romantic ethical theory, especially as propounded by the Transcendentalists." In Defense of Reason, p. 163.

[21] Ibid., p. 164.

[22] Ibid., pp. 167-168.

[23] We have only to consider Stevens' feelings on the subject of "art for art's sake," as expressed early in his career to see that he was concerned with something more, namely morality, in poetry:

> 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. . . . Beauty is strength. But art--art all alone, detached, sensuous for the sake of sensuousness, not to perpetuate inspiration

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> or thought, art that is mere art--seems to me to be the most arrant as it is the most inexcuseable rubbish.
>
> Art must fit with other things; it must be part of the system of the world. And if it finds a place in that system it will likewise find a ministry [emphasis mine] and relation that are its proper adjuncts. (L 24-25).

This is echoed later in the "Adagia" (OP 159): "Art involves vastly more than the sense of beauty."

24 In Defense of Reason, pp. 174-175.

25 This aspect of "suggestion" comes from Mallarmé and indicates that what is absent will be most evoked by the proper use of words in a poem: "Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets." (Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 368). In the same way, Stevens suggests "morality" by never naming it.

26 In the "Adagia" (OP 162), Stevens writes, "One reads poetry with one's nerves," thus connecting himself to Pater and to Housman who said that he could tell a good poem because it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

27 In Defense of Reason, p. 432.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 436.

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30 The Oxford Companion to English Literature, ed. Sir Paul Harvey, Oxford, 1942, p. 650.

31 Oxford English Dictionary entry under "canna."

32 Ibid., entry for "anecdote."

33 Ibid., entry for "jar."

34 All definitions and applications are taken from the OED listings under "jar."

35 English Traits, Stonehenge, New York, 1856, p. 39.

36 I. Taylor, Logic in Theology, London, 1859, p. 139.

37 According to the OED, from Schaff's Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, London, 1882-83.

38 "Wallace Stevens and Other Poets," The Southern Review, Vol. I, No. 2, Autumn, 1935, p. 376.

39 As cited in OED, edition of 1621, I,i,II, 1165-30.

40 In Defense of Reason, p. 434.

41 Ibid.

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8. R.P. Blackmur, Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode:
"Like a tree in which there are three blackbirds."

Blackmur, Frye and Kermode are astute critics who have each examined Stevens from a particular point of view that has deepened our understanding of the poet and his work. However, if we look at the work of any one of these critics in isolation, we find it insufficient; we find that the point of view, though apparently unhindered by adherence to "morality" or defensive reasoning, is either that of one too close or that of one too far away so he sees the poet moving bloodlessly along the "flat historic scale." The combined criticism of all three (plus the biographical material collected by Morse in his book and by Holly Stevens in the Letters and in the more recent Souvenirs and Prophecies) provides what has been, up until now, the most adequate approach to understanding Stevens, though each of them, because of the shortcomings of the "new method," has not provided what has been most lacking in the criticism of the poet--that aspect which Stevens himself mistakenly thought too obvious to have to name--specifically, that "it must be human." Curiously, it seems as if each of the three critics took his cue from only one of the named sections of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" instead of from a combination of the three: Blackmur, in his close attention to Stevens' "gaiety of language" has explored what the poet meant when he wrote that "It must give pleasure;"

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Frye, in studying assiduously the philosophical consciousness of the poet and its relationship to external reality and to our controlling myths, has given us the most intelligent descriptive definition of the meaning of "It must be abstract;" and Kermode, in his careful tracing of the development of the poet's preoccupations and themes, has provided an historical map so that we can begin to follow, in the life of the poet, how poetry "must change."

In his essays on Wallace Stevens,[1] Blackmur teaches us how to read Stevens, and, in doing so, he broadens the contours of New Criticism by integrating form and content, reminding us of the importance of meaning and feeling in poetry. From Blackmur's meticulous regard to the precise richness of Stevens' vocabulary and syntax and to Stevens' use of rhetoric, we learn to distinguish what it is about a poet's use of language that makes him great. For example, early in his first essay Blackmur notes the difference between E.E. Cummings and Stevens:

> In some notes on the language of E.E. Cummings I tried to show how that poet, by relying on his private feelings and using words as if their meanings were spontaneous with use, succeeded mainly in turning his words into empty shells. With very likely no better inspiration in the life around him, Mr. Stevens, by combining the insides of those words he found to fit his feelings, has turned his words into knowledge. Both Mr. Stevens and Cummings issue in ambiguity--as any good poet does; but the ambiguity of Cummings is that of the absence of known content, the ambiguity of a phantom which no words could

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> give being; while Mr. Stevens' ambiguity is that of a substance so dense with being that it restricts paraphrase and can be truly perceived only in the form of words in which it was given. It is the difference between poetry which depends on the poet and poetry which depends on itself.[2]

We are grateful to Blackmur as a critic for his clarity of language which allows us to see how accurately the distinction he draws describes our own reactions to the works in question.

His vision is equally direct when he compares Stevens to Eliot and Pound because he goes immediately to what is most essential to the poet and to the reader of poetry, that is, the use of language as bearer of meaning. Blackmur provides the basis for reading Stevens as he meant himself to be read; he does not try to read him as another "modern" like Eliot and Pound, whose methods and images--as expressed in their poetic language--take us out of the poem to find meaning. The basis Blackmur gives us is that of understanding that the words used by Stevens have a direct relationship to the poet's <u>felt</u> experience and that the meaning of those words is tied to that personal experience, but not limited by it--meaning is, in fact, informed by the poet's felt experience. For this reason, according to Blackmur, all we need to do in order to find meaning in Stevens is to understand the words in all their ambiguity (with the help of a dictionary) and to limit that ambiguity by familiarity with the words as they have been used in the particular poem. This

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is very different, he points out, from the cases of Eliot or Pound, for whose work we need not only a dictionary, but fully annotated ancient and modern histories, as well as a full knowledge of all past literary history, and a working-reading knowledge of two or three ancient languages. It is from Blackmur that we get our first glimpse of how human Stevens' poetry is, how of all of the "modern" poets, Stevens is the only one in whom we can find the peace and wholeness that fulfills our most primary need for solace in the face of the indifferent universe. In the end, although he does not make an explicit judgment, Blackmur implies that Eliot and Pound become a part of that large indifference because they look for that solace outside of themselves in religion and history. This is an implicit judgment with which we must agree not because their poetry is objectively any less achieved in form that Stevens', but because the "feeling" contained in and generated by the poems does not satisfy that important human need.

Blackmur is not afraid to admit "feeling" as one of his bases for critical evaluation; this separates him from many, or most, of the New Critics and their followers. However, his "feeling" is limited because, like his fellow critics, what remains primary for him is "Criticism" and not "Poetry;" he continues to maintain his identity as critic rather than lose it to that of the poet in what would be a completion of the poetic act begun by the poet when he wrote his poems

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("The poet seems to confer his identity on the reader. It is easiest to recognize this when listening to music--I mean this sort of thing: the transference" [OP 158]). Blackmur does not become "an ignorant man" when reading. What he writes, though obviously derived from what he understood and felt when reading, is still limited in its point of view. Blackmur comes very close to Stevens when he reads, but he never forgets that he is a critic and that Stevens is a poet when he should have read instead as a man listening empathetically to the intimacies of another. This is obvious in his failing to read "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" as more than a poem "where tone and atmosphere are very nearly equivalent to substance and meaning themselves."[3] Like Ransom, he admires the "technical intricacy," though he goes beyond Ransom in feeling that the poet when he wrote the poem "found himself in ecstasy." However, he finds sufficient explanation for that very strong feeling in the poet's having been entirely responsive to "the spectacle of endlessly varied appearances of California seas off Tehuantepec."[4] It is strange that Blackmur, who examines the meanings of the words used by the poet when they appear "precious," does not equally examine the "preciousness" of the variations in the images of "November" and the sea to discover the important use of "that" and the shifts in verb tenses that particularize the occasion of the poem.

This is indicative of the way Blackmur looks at the poems.

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Because he comes very close to them, he examines the words in all their importance and discusses them in their context of the rhetorical mechanism of the poem. He sees each poem as a carefully constructed device operating like clockwork, designed by a master of precision. However, Blackmur does not step back from the single poem he is reading (even though he recommends doing this as a part of good criticism) to place it in the larger context of the poet's work; as a result, he misses the range of connotation which informs the ambiguity with personal meaning (in addition to the more general poetic meaning and the particular feeling prompted by the specific poem which he does give). As an illustration of this, we can look at Blackmur's reading of "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock."

After making an excellent point about Stevens' kind of ambiguity, that it "consists in the double importance of both sound and sense where neither has direct connection with the other but where neither can stand alone . . . as if Mr. Stevens wrote two poems at once with the real poem somewhere between, unwritten but vivid," Blackmur goes on,

> A poem which exemplifies not the approach merely but actual entrance into nonsense is "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock." . . . The language is simple and declarative. There is no doubt about the words or the separate statements. Every part of the poem makes literal sense. Yet the combination makes a nonsense, and a nonsense much more convincing than the separate sensible statements. The statement about catching tigers in red weather coming after the

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> white nightgowns and baboons and periwinkles, has a persuasive force out of all relation to the sense of the words. Literally, there is nothing alarming about the statement, and nothing ambiguous, but by so putting the statement that it appears as nonsense, infinite possibilities are made terrifying and plain. The shock and virtue of nonsense is this: it compels us to scrutinize the words in such a way that we see the enormous ambiguity in the substance of every phrase, every image, every word. The simpler the words are the more impressive and certain is the ambiguity. Half our sleeping knowledge is in nonsense; and when put in a poem it wakes.[5]

Even without knowing the bit of concrete information that Stevens, as a young man in New York, could see from his window the movements of certain ladies in "white nightgowns" flitting about their rooms,[6] we can see that the "real poem" which Blackmur says is "unwritten but vivid" is about the experience of the poet and so is more than nonsense, even though it seems to be nonsense--an aspect which is responsible for its rhetorical charm. In this "real poem" the poet sharply separates himself from "people." The first declarative sentence is made to appear nonsensical by its verb, "haunted," which jars the directness of the statement; we account for it by attributing this child-like figure of perception to the imagination of the poet. It reveals that the poet feels a part of himself to be in some way like a child. He then goes on to describe how none of the nightgowns are--but we understand that they are that way for him because he has made us see them with him as "green,/ Or purple with green rings,/

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Or green with yellow rings,/ Or yellow with blue rings." For the others, "people" who "are not going/ To dream of baboons and periwinkles" ("periwinkles" because, like the imagined nightgowns, they are ringed with iridescent spirals), it is enough of an imaginative act that they see "The houses are haunted/ By white nightgowns." But he is different, "strange" because he imagines them ringed and "With socks of lace/ And beaded ceintures." Unlike "people," he does dream of "baboons and periwinkles," and makes us see them in his poem. They are the images of "an old sailor" who has travelled to far tropical places in times when lacey socks and ceintures were worn. The poet is the "old sailor" both "here," in the poem, and "there," in his imagination, "Drunk and asleep in his boots," who "Catches tigers/ In red weather." This is a vision of an older Crispin who has abandoned the security of his colony; he is now dissolute ("Drunk") because he he has been disillusioned. The colony could not provide him with what he needed so he left again to travel, but now totally in dream and imagination. This is why the poem is titled "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock:" he is unlike other "people"--this is one aspect of the disillusionment; the other is presented by the first sentence--in spite of all his dreaming and imagining, there are, in reality, only "white nightgowns" which haunt him because they are the ghosts of his dreams and desires. This first sentence is made like an announcement of his "disillusionment" so

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that we know that no matter what he makes us imagine, reality is there, "white," simple and declarative, and that reality haunts him in its plainness. He is strange because he is not satisfied by it.

If this poem is not seen in the larger context of "The Whole of Harmonium" so that the image of the "old sailor," for example, can be understood as a later shade of Crispin, or so that the "old sailor" can also be connected to the poet as the one who imagines the "firecat" of his first poem (the "firecat now transformed in later dreams and imaginings to one of the "tigers/ In red weather"), then the most meaningful level of the poem disappears. The importance of this transformation of the "firecat" into the dream tigers caught by the drunken, dreaming sailor reveals how the state of mind of the poet has evolved as the volume progresses. At the opening, sure of his poetic powers, the poet uses the cipher of the "firecat" to signify his potent imagination that can describe arcs of movement in reality. By the time we get to this poem, however, the poet has already been prepared for the final disillusionment by the experiences described in the preceding poems: "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" describes his loss of physical potency and its compensation in meditative imagination; "The Comedian as The Letter C" outlines the voyage of this imagination in time and personal history; "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" reveals how his imagination's voyage forces him to

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doubt the basis of his ethical being; "The Emperor of Ice Cream" describes his facing death as "an everyday affair" (as described by Blackmur) in light of this awareness--"Let the lamp affix its beam. . . ." At this point, then, after the knowledge he has gained, there is total disillusionment: he becomes an old, drunk sailor no longer in control of his reality as his morality had prepared him to be, but free at least in his imagination to catch "tigers/ In red weather." Because he knows now that his imagination cannot change or control that external reality as he had thought in the first poem, the poet recognizes his isolation. Coming immediately after "Tea At the Palaz of Hoon"--where after the successful facing of death without religion or morality in "The Emperor of Ice Cream," the poet is able to experience his personal majesty in his own imagination--, and immediately preceding "Sunday Morning"--where the effects of the disillusionment and his new awareness of the limitations of the imagination force him to attempt to integrate what he imagines with an older pagan myth that is one with nature so that he can replace the lost morality--, "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" describes simultaneously the freedom of the poet and the anxieties that attend that freedom which comes with disillusionment; this freedom/anxiety is symbolized in the poem by the drunkedness of the sailor and the return of the fears of childhood, that "The houses are haunted. . . ."

In the end we understand both the advantages and the

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limitations offered by Blackmur's approach. From Blackmur, more than for any other of Stevens' critics, we come away with a full appreciation of the importance of the poet's use of language; Blackmur makes us see how Stevens makes reality out of language.

> . . . The ability to handle rhetoric so as to reach the same sort of intense condensation that is secured in bare, non-rhetorical language is very rare, and since what rhetoric can condense is very valuable it ought to receive the same degree of attention as any other use of language. . . . Simple language, dealing obviously with surds, draws emotion out of feelings; rhetorical language, dealing rather, or apparently, with inflections, employed with the same seriousness, creates a surface equivalent to an emotion by its approximately complete escape from the purely communicative function of language.
> . . . I have tried to imply that his (Stevens') success is due largely to his double adherence to words and experience as existing apart from his private sensibility. His great labor has been to allow the reality of what he felt personally to pass into the superior impersonal reality of words. Such a transformation amounts to an access knowledge, as it raises to a condition where it may be rehearsed and understood in permanent form that body of emotional and sensational experience which in its natural condition makes life a torment and confusion.[7]

Based on Blackmur's understanding of how Stevens used rhetoric, that is, not as the dress but as the body of meaning, given life by a transumptive act in which the poet discovered his feelings in the process of writing ("Poetry is a health," OP 176), we can infer very significant facts about the historic nature of Stevens' involvement with poetry. If we step a bit

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farther away than Blackmur did from the poet in the act of writing those words, we begin to perceive, following Blackmur, that the particular function of Stevens' poetry to exist in itself as "inflection" is the result of the poet's living in the world of words, having isolated himself to the point where experience and thinking are identical because he no longer experiences any reality but that of words. This represents both a poetic success and a profound personal failure. Finally, all his instincts, as well as his reason, --both his animal and his spiritual natures--existed only in and for language; this is his personal failure. But with this we also realize that since language has replaced nature as the world in which the poet lives, he, in being one with and expressing that world directly, becomes an epic poet with a lyric voice.

Blackmur touches on this but does not develop it to full advantage nor relate it to the reality of the poems. In a later essay (1948), Blackmur notices that Stevens' poetry,

> . . . is a poetry unusually high with the odor of "poets" and "poetry." Poems about poetry and poets, except when they are invocations or testaments of failure, hide or obliterate what the poet ought to see. . . . [but] This is a poetry nonetheless. The Dove in the Belly; II,vi and III,iii of Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction; Dutch Graves in Bucks County; and part VII of Esthétique du Mal. . .--all these, and no doubt others missed, go into that canon against which other poems merely beat; the canon of poems, no matter what their idiosyncrasy, which

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> create sensibility in desperation.
>
> What is this desperation? Ask a haunted man what is a haunt.--Holding in mind as much of Mr. Stevens' poetry--all thirty-five years of it--as possible, does it not seem that he has always been trying to put down those statements heard in dreams? His esthetic, so to speak, was unaware of those statements, and was in fact rather against making statements, and so got in the way. . . . Thus the statements come out as lyric cries, all the more moving because we feel in them a craving for a fuller being than they can ever reach. Of such privations, in our place and time, is our actual drama made: "an ancient aspect touching a new mind." However inappropriate to its purpose, it was Mr. Stevens' own esthetic which gave his poems achievement. There is the desperation.[8]

While we agree with all that Blackmur states, we feel cheated because he seems to beg the question at, at least, two points. Blackmur does not elaborate on the failure, in Stevens' terms, of poetry which is essentially "about poets and poetry." And he does not satisfactorily define that "desperation" which he quite astutely discerns, nor connect it to the fact that Stevens' poetry finally does become poetry written for and about poetry. Again, had Blackmur taken more distance from his subject, he would have seen the man behind the poems.

In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens identified poetry with the "supreme fiction" and revealed that it could be recognized by its capacity to "make widows wince." At that point in his life, as reflected in Harmonium, Stevens was still able to "whip from [himself]/ A jovial hullaballoo among the spheres" because he still experienced the real world around him and was able to make us see and feel that

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world, whether it was the "venereal soil" of Florida, his experience of death ("The Emperor of Ice Cream"), or the pain of his failing relationship with his wife ("Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"). By the time he wrote "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," he had long ceased to experience that real world and had wisely abdicated any claims he may have had to writing what he considered real poetry that could "make widows wince." This is most obviously indicated by the title of that poem--we could read it as "Notes Toward Poetry"--what he knows he can offer is instruction to the "virile poet" about writing poetry. This is his "desperation." By the age of forty he had mastered the craft and the language, what Blackmur calls his "esthetic;" he had developed his talent to its fullest capacity, but he also realized, for personal reasons, that he could not emotionally afford to remain open to the world in which he lived, specifically to the world in which he lived with his wife. As a result, his affective life was satisfied not in reality but in imagination--with the exception that in that isolation he found solace outside of himself in nature and in art--, but all affective action became increasingly verbal and imagined. It was under these conditions that Stevens was forced to make language what it became for him. Under no circumstances did he desire that this involvement with language be a goal to which future "virile poets" should aspire. For him it was "salvation," a "means of redemption," his only way of survival; "I have no life

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except in poetry. No doubt that would be true if my whole life was free for poetry" (OP 175). But to use him as paradigm would mean to destroy any possibility he offered to make poetry what he had once hoped he could. If for him "poetry [was] an effort of a dissatisfied man to find satisfaction through words," (OP 165), he hoped that future poets could make poetry that really could give, as he was able to occasionally, "a sense of freshness or vividness of life" (OP 157).

The "esthetic" of which Blackmur speaks was complete in Harmonium, and what it promised is proposed openly in "The Comedian as The Letter C." Stevens wanted to create the modern American epic. Its hero would have been a comedian like Crispin and like Odysseus, changing their identities like the poet who dons so many guises throughout Harmonium (but who later becomes a disembodied voice symbolized by the absolute spirituality of "Ariel"). His voyaging would have been, parallel to the example Odysseus offered the Greeks, the archetype for the experience of being American. Also like the adventures of Odysseus, the adventures of the poet would have had to involve his whole being in all aspects of the world in which the hero lived; hence, Stevens' willingness to participate in the practical life of an American businessman, successfully clever, and in his adventures into his American past (evidenced clearly by his interest in geneaology). However, after Harmonium, there was an abrupt shift; the poet could no longer adventure as he had desired. He proposed to

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find order instead, and he did. In the process he lost his heroic self and became one with the seasons and nature, like another element, but not the "sun."

We learn about criticism from the failure of Blackmur's criticism just as we learn about poetry from the failure of Stevens' poetry. Blackmur's concentration on understanding the poet's technique, which he sees as the "essential problem of the poet who wants to name, arrange and transfix life through art in language," limits his perceptions. It also indicates that just as the subject of Stevens' poetry is dual, having both his life (as "true subject") and poetry (the "poetry of the subject"), the subject of Blackmur's criticism is also dual: he has Stevens' poetry as his stated subject, but we learn just as much, if not more, about criticism as we do about how Stevens used language. His focus on the "how" marks him as a New Critic; what he points to for future critics is including the "who," "where" and "why" in criticism as well. While Stevens specified his two subjects, Blackmur does not; this is the source of the failure. He prepares us for a full reading of the poems, but he cannot provide it because his vision is simply not broad enough. We come away feeling the vacuum left by the "Puritanical," over-specialized approach named by Spingarn and Ransom.

Perhaps the best criticism of Blackmur is what Stevens himself wrote. After commenting that he only read the criticism of those men "about whose judgment no question exists,"

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and that he certainly could not say this of Yvor Winters, the poet goes on,

> Blackmur is immeasurably superior to him (Winters). I don't mean to say that he is any more intelligent, or any more sensitive, but he is more sensible, less eccentric. There is, however, a serious defect in Blackmur, or so it seems to me, and that is that it takes him twenty-five pages to say what would be much better if said in one. The result is that, after you have finished twenty-five pages of Blackmur, you haven't the faintest idea what he has been talking about. Either he has too many ideas or too few; it is hard to say which. How many ideas are there in currency that can be said to be purely Blackmurean ideas? Most critics very soon become identified with a group of principles or, say, a group of ideas; I cannot say that Blackmur is identified with anything. And the truth is that I don't know of any good solid book on modern poetry. (L 484).

A few months later, he adds,

> As an expositor of ideas Blackmur fails, not for lack of ideas, but for not knowing what his ideas are. Nothing shows this more clearly than ten or twelve pages of his work from which one usually comes away--longing for sex and politics. (L 509).

This seems a very strange criticism, indeed, from a poet who had as little to do with "sex and politics" as he seemingly did. What it hints at, however, is that Stevens hoped that his critic would include those aspects in the criticism, completing the reality of the poem and the life lived.

It would be interesting to see what Stevens would have said of the criticism of Northrop Frye, a critic who excels in expressing and elaborating his ideas as well as those of

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his subjects. From Frye we begin to learn something about "why" Stevens wrote the way he did. Where Blackmur teaches us how to appreciate the poet's "gaiety of language," and, thus, to feel how poetry "must give pleasure," Frye fills out what it means for poetry to "be abstract" by providing the body of philosophical ideas behind Stevens' dictum. Unfortunately, although Frye enriches our conception of what the idea of poetry meant for Stevens, he totally ignores and ultimately obfuscates our perception of the poem as act. If Blackmur fails because he does not connect his concrete discoveries about the poet's words to any larger context of ideas, Frye fails because he sees only the ideas unattached to the life of the words and the poet.

Certainly all poetry that is great poetry operates on an archetypal level; however, in greaty poetry this level grows out of the particulars of the poet's experience in "reality." Frye completely ignores this latter aspect. Primarily a theoretician, Frye, like his New Critical compeers, fails to engage his imagination when reading poetry; this represents a failure to complete the poetic act begun by the poet, who expects his true reader to focus on those particulars in the poem and allow them to grow organically into the whole poem. Stevens showed, picking up where Coleridge left off, that it is exclusively the imagination that allows us to look closely at an object, seemingly fixed and complete in its rationally named form, and to perceive the actual

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ever-changing life of that object. A clear example of this is "Poem Written At Morning" (when the senses are fresh). In "As You Leave the Room" (OP 116), Stevens names this as one of the poems that is "not what skeletons think about."[9]

> A sunny day's complete Poussiniana
> Divide it from itself. It is this or that
> And it is not.
> By metaphor you paint
> A thing. Thus, the pineapple was a leather fruit,
> A fruit for pewter, thorned and palmed and blue,
> To be served by men of ice.
> The senses paint
> By metaphor. The juice was fragranter
> Than wettest cinnamon. It was cribled pears
> Dripping a morning sap.
> The truth must be
> That you do not see, you experience, you feel,
> That the buxom eye brings merely its element
> To the total thing, a shapeless giant forced
> Upward.
> Green were the curls upon that head.

Here Stevens sets out his most revealing definition of metaphor and imagination. Unless we participate in what the poet perceived with his senses as he describes the pineapple in different ways through metaphor, we cannot understand what the last line has to do with the rest of the poem--it seems to evoke the image of Crispin's "Daughters with Curls." If we have engaged our imagination and remembered for ourselves the taste, smell, and the resembled appearances of a pine-apple, then the last line openly describes the palming leaves topping the fruit. In this way the poet makes us recall that his Muse is daughter of memory and the greatest power of nature, of Mnemosyne and Zeus. To engage in the act of the poem, to feel the presence of the Muse, we, as well as the

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poet, must call on memory with power. If we have never used our senses to perceive the object which the poet describes, the poem will not yield its full meaning; it will remain a flat form only seen. The poet reminds us that the "buxom eye," which provides the final order, is only one of the senses on which we depend. To have seen is not to have known. The imagination, then, is the eye that has tasted, smelled, felt and heard. "The tongue is an eye" (OP 167). "The eye sees less than the tongue says. The tongue says less than the mind thinks" (OP 170). The imagination is the primal synthesizing function born when the shadowed veil dissolves and the infant begins to associate the property he has felt with the objects he sees for the first time. Only the poet can restore this bursting of ignorance into knowledge; "The poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man" (OP 160).

Frye sees none of this. He sees useful taxonomic patterns, but he does not know the poems. Because of this, his definitions of Stevens' basic terms, on which his vision of the poetry depends, are inadequate and partial. Quite the opposite of Blackmur, Frye's point of view is too far away from the poet who emerges from his criticism as an "abstraction bled to death."

If we look, for example, at the opening of Frye's earlier article on Stevens, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens,"[10] we see that the basis of his criticism is that Stevens' poetry is identical with a theory of poetry, whereas,

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in fact, the theory of poetry is only one aspect of what we identify as Stevens' poetry.

> Wallace Stevens was a poet for whom the theory and the practice of poetry were inseparable. His poetic vision is informed by a metaphysic; his metaphysic is informed by a theory of knowledge; his theory of knowledge is informed by a poetic vision. . . . Stevens is of particular interest and value to the critical theorist because he sees so clearly that the only ideas the poet can deal with are those directly involved with, and implied by, his own writing: that, in short, 'Poetry is the subject of the poem' (176).[11]

After beginning with a bit of circular reasoning, Frye takes an important line of Stevens' out of context: "Poetry is the subject of the poem." If we return this line to its proper place, we find that it is not as static and definitive a statement as the critic makes it appear.

> Poetry is the subject of the poem
> From this the poem issues and
>
> To this returns. Between the two,
> Between issue and return, there is
>
> An absence in reality,
> Things as they are. Or so we say.
>
> But are these separate? Is it
> An absence for the poem, which acquires
>
> Its true appearances there, sun's green,
> Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?
>
> From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
> In the universal intercourse.

By taking only the first line from this section of "The Man With The Blue Guitar," Frye entirely misreads Stevens' intention. That "Poetry is the subject" is only the beginning

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and the end point of the poem; in between is the substantial reality of it. From the balance of the section, we see that the subject is poetry not as an idea, an abstraction, but as a part of reality because it "acquires/ Its true appearances there." If we look ahead in the poem, we find the twenty-fifth section (coming immediately after the description of the poem "like a missal found/ In the mud, a missal for that young man," in which the poet tells us, "I play"):

> He held the world upon his nose
> And this-away he gave a fling.
>
> His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi--
> And that-a-way he twirled the thing.
>
> Sombre as fir-trees, liquid cats
> Moved in the grass without a sound.
>
> They did not know the grass went round.
> The cats had cats and the grass turned gray
>
> And the world had worlds, ai, this-a-way:
> The grass turned green and the grass turned gray.
>
> And the nose is eternal, that-a-way.
> Things as they were, things as they are.
>
> Things as they will be by and by. . . .
> A fat thumb beats out ai-yi-yi.

Examining this section will illustrate the shortcomings of Frye's approach. He understands only one function of "fictive things;" that they "imitate ideas as well as events;" "that any poem with an idea in it is a secondary imitation of thought; and hence deals with representative or typical thought: that is, with forms of thought rather than propositions."[12] This deduced definition is partial; it deals only with philosophical categories and not at all with what really makes

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poetry, the words and the poet. Frye might like his poet to be a philosopher-king, but Stevens sees himself rather as a Merlin-like clown in "His robes and symbols." Frye, too, has forgotten that most important predicate of "fictive things," of which the stanza quoted above is a perfect example, that they "wink as they will." If successful, "fictive things" enjoy a life of their own; their maker plays and creates them, but after that, like musical pieces, they continue to play in the minds of those who seek them out to enjoy them. It is possible to rationally paraphrase the above-quoted section and say that its subject is poetry, that the poet has the power to transform reality because he perceives its essential movements, and he uses them to create eternity or immortality. But to do that reduces, in fact, it destroys poetry by ignoring the irrational element of the poet[13] who wanted to express this idea, not as idea, but as part of his reality--"not the idea, but the thing itself." In this section, Stevens' "fictive thing" has the power to "make widows wince" because it is extremely joyful and playful and insists that the only way to achieve "salvation" is by playing as he does--"and the nose is eternal." When Stevens writes that "Poetry is the subject of the poem," he is pointing both to the ideas that inform the poem (which Frye discusses to the exclusion of that other aspect of poetry) and to the "gaiety of language" which the poet uses as the suit of motley in which he clothes himself and the world. The "absence in reality," which is

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the poem, eternalizes the elements of reality it contains; it removes them from our human invention of time and makes them part of what returns again and again--"And the world had worlds"--like the grass turning from green to gray to green. More, the poem is singular because unlike the cat which has cats and so ensures the continuation of the genus, "cat," the poem remains specific; it does not remain only as the idea of itself or as the idea which it may illustrate. "The poem is the cry of its occasion/ Part of the res itself and not about it. /The poet speaks the poem as it is" (CP 473).

Frye never deals with what delights us in Stevens' poems; in this he is most puritanical. He attempts to satisfy the mind by conceiving definitive epistemological conclusions, but he seems incapable of perceiving anything but abstract structures in his imagination. If Frye had really heard the cry and had imaginatively conjured the occasion of "The Man With The Blue Guitar," and perceived the poet as juggler-jongleur, balancing the world like a ball on the tip of his nose in Section XXV, he would have been delighted and would have written about how we hear the poet's voice as he invents stanzas for his song, and that this element, in the fashion of Odysseus when he begins to tell his own story, anchors the work firmly in the concrete reality of the poet's playing and singing; and this, in turn, allows the poet to create fantastic and enchanting beings

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and situations about which we listen enraptured. The power of the poem comes from our enjoying the privilege of entering into the world recreated for us in the imagination of the poet which we perceive immediately, not from our understanding of the ideas behind his imaginings, of which we conceive later. Thus, we finish the poem wanting to learn to play as he does, to be like him, juggling the world on our noses because it is all we have. He is different from the "liquid cats" who "did not know the grass went round;" he has consciousness. The only way to assuage the pain of the split from being that consciousness brings is to play in it as in our native element, as the cats in the grass.

The power that comes from playing, as the child who makes-believe knows, makes consciousness concrete and specific, makes it "For a moment final, the way/ The thinking of art seems final when/ The thinking of a god is smoky dew" (CP 168). Our pleasure is in perceiving how the poet makes-believe like a child, imagining himself an alchemical clown, Crispin wiser; it is from this that we learn "how to live, what to do," not from rationally exchanging ideas from place to place.[14] Philosophy comes after perception; "The poet speaks the poem as it is,/ Not as it was" (CP 473). He gives us the raw elements out of which conceptions are made. In view of this--and, strangely, Frye does state this, "Poetry is concerned with the ambiguities, the unconscious diagrams, the metaphors out of which actual ideas grow"[15]--it seems

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rather perverse for him to deal with the conceptions, which require engaging the imagination attached to thoughts and ideas, rather than dealing with those elements which require engaging the imagination attached to reality. It would seem that we should address Frye with what Stevens pointed out concerning the differences between poetry and philosophy:

> First of all, since a similarity has been established between poets and philosophers and since it can no longer be necessary to argue that a measure of identity exists between them, what is the fundamental principle that separates them? The habit of forming concepts unites them. The use to which they put their ideas separates them. . . . The habit of forming concepts is a habit of the mind by which it probes for an integration. . . . The habit of probing for an integration seems to be part of the general will to order. We must, therefore, go a step further and look for the respect that separates the poet and the philosopher in the kind of integrations for which they search. The philosopher searches for an integration for its own sake, as, for example, Plato's idea that knowledge is recollection or that the soul is a harmony; the poet searches for an integration that shall be not so much sufficient in itself as sufficient for some quality that it possesses, such as its insight or its appearance in the eye of the imagination. The philosopher intends his integration to be fateful; the poet intends his to be effective.
> . . . it is possible to generalize and to say that the philosopher's world is intended to be a world, which yet remains to be discovered and which, at bottom, the philosophers probably hope will always remain to be discovered and that the poet's world is intended to be a world, which yet remains to be celebrated and which, at bottom, the poets probably hope will always remains to be celebrated. If the philosopher's world is this present world plus thought, then the poet's world is this present world plus imagination.

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> The most significant deduction possible relates to the question of supremacy as between philosophy and poetry. If we say that philosophy is supreme, this means that the reason is supreme over the imagination. But is it? Does not philosophy carry us to a point at which there is nothing left except the imagination? If we rely on the imagination (or, say, intuition), to carry us beyond that point, and if the imagination succeeds in carrying us beyond that point (as in respect to the idea of God, if we can conceive of the idea of God as this world's capital idea), then the imagination is supreme, because its powers have shown themselves to be greater than the powers of reason. Philosophers, however, are not limited to the reason and, as the concepts, to which I have referred, show, their ideas are often triumphs of the imagination. To call attention to ideas in which the reason and the imagination have been acting in concert is a way of saying that when they act in concert they are supreme and is not the same thing as to say that one is supreme over the other.
>
> It is as if in a study of modern man we predicated the greatness of poetry as the final measure of his stature, as if his willingness to believe beyond belief was what had made him modern and was always certain to keep him so. (OP 196-202).

Frye looks at Stevens with a philosopher's eye, in his own words, with the eye of a "critical theorist." He speaks in general terms, outlining principles, talking about how "the imagination keeps form concrete and particular, whereas emotion and reason are more apt to seek the vague and the general respectively,"[16] but he does not himself use his imagination to elucidate the concretion and particularity in Stevens' poems; instead, he picks a line here, a line there, to suit his theory. As a consequence, even though he

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concludes that Stevens' vision is "of major scope and intensity,"[17] and sees how Stevens distinguishes himself in the twentieth century by being "anti-poetic," making perception "new" as is necessary for an American poet ("to achieve in each poem a unique expression and force his reader to make a correspondingly unique act of apprehension")[18], he does not show us how the perception is unique and modern; he does not apply his conceptual insights to the individual poems which are the proper subject for critical study. As a result, he does not show what makes the poet "modern" in a way that is different from those other "moderns" whose work prompted the response of the New Critics with their "objective" theories. Frye categorizes Stevens as if he belonged to an age past, showing us how he belongs to the tradition of great poetry because he fits easily into a neat archetypal pattern which accords with our external experience of nature and reality. But he does not deal with the poet as an individual index of "modern" reality because he does not use his imagination to synthesize his general apprehension with the particulars of the poet's experience as he presents them in his poetry.

As an illustration of this, we can look at a paragraph from Frye's analysis where he accurately presents certain insights but fails to relate them to the unique historical climate in which the poet lived. Following his imaginary journey through the seasons, Frye describes the poet's passage from autumn to winter:

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> At the end of autumn comes the terrors of winter, the sense of a world disintegrating into chaos which we feel socially when we see the annihilating wars of our time, and individually when we face that fact of death in others or for ourselves. We have spoken of Stevens' dislike of projecting the religious imagination into a world remote in space and time. The woman in "Sunday Morning" (66) stays home from church and meditates on religion surrounded by the brilliant oranges and greens of the summer vision, and in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (59) it is suggested that the poet, seeking an increase rather than a diminishing of life, gets closer to a genuinely religious sense than morality with its taboos and denials. For Stevens all real religion is concerned with a renewal of earth rather than with a surrender to heaven. He even says, "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of earth remains to be written" (NA 142). It is part of his own ambition to compose hymns "Happy rather than holy but happy-high" (185) which will take the place of empty heavens" (167), and he looks forward to a world in which "all men are priests" (254). As this last phrase shows, he has no interest in turning to some cellophane-wrapped version of neo-paganism. He sees, like Yeats, that the poet is a "Connoisseur of Chaos" (215) aware that "Poetry is a Destructive Force (192), and Stevens' imagery, for all its luxuriance and good humor, is full of menace. From the "firecat" of the opening page of the Collected Poems through the screaming peacocks of "Domination of Black" (8), the buzzard of "The Jack-Rabbit" (50; cf. 318), the butcher of "A Weak Mind in the Mountains" (212), the bodiless serpent of "The Auroras of Autumn" (411) and the bloody lion of "Puella Parvula" (456), we are aware that a simple song of carpe diem is not enough.[19]

We agree with what Frye has to say concerning Stevens' feelings about religion as they are reflected in "Sunday Morning" and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman:" his point that

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these feelings are given birth when the poet seriously confronts the idea of death is also well taken and agrees with our perceptions of the work. Then, after quoting a series of lines taken from different poems and ending with the one he finds closest to the purpose of his next remark--"and he looks forward to a world in which 'all men are priests' (254)"--Frye states that Stevens has no interest in "neo-paganism." As evidence for this, he points out the implicit menace in Stevens' imagery and follows this by closing with the statement that for Stevens carpe diem is not enough.

The last line Frye quotes comes from "Extracts From Addresses To The Academy of Fine Ideas;" at best, its meaning is equivocal since "all men" become identified with "they" in the following stanza. "They" all evangelize their separate "theses" without a "queen" or "an intercessor by innate report" who could "collect their thoughts together into one,/ Into a single thought." The poet is clearly separate from the group known as "they;" rather, he is identified with "the assassin that remains and sings/ In the high imagination, triumphantly" whose song is "consolation," "the music of the mass of meaning." The poet will not be a priest, but, specifically, an "assassin" because he with his song--like the original Moslem assassins who, temporarily freed from the restraints of rationality by the use of hashish, murdered Christians--wants, when in his own "irrational element" to destroy the hold of Christianity on himself, at least. The

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assassin becomes identified with the musician, "The Man With The Blue Guitar," who plays the enchanting music for the High Mass of Meaning. He is not the priest--all men are; he provides the "vital music" which "formulates the words," hoping thereby to change old meanings by the insinuation of his harmonies. We cannot read this poem without recognizing how Stevens separated himself from other men, "all men" who "are priests"--and, he does so with good reason. He is both different and superior. However, because of all his stated reticence about indulging his personality, we find it difficult to acknowledge the ease with which Stevens seems to recognize and accept his own elitism here. It becomes easier to see this when we recall what the poet wrote to Elsie Moll early in their relationship concerning his feelings about religion, for him and for others:

> --I was more interested than you may believe in what you said about religion. A.T.'s opinions are quite elementary. I have never told you about what I believe. There are so many things to think of. I don't care whether the churches are all alike or whether they're right or wrong. It is not important. The very fact that they take care of A.T.'s "stupid" people is an exquisite device. It is undoubtedly true that they do not influence any but the "stupid." But they are beautiful and full of comfort and moral help. One can get a thousand benefits from churches that one cannot get outside them. They purify man, they soften life. Please don't listen to A.T., or, at least, don't argue with her. Don't care about the Truth. There are other things in life besides the Truth upon which anybody of any experience agrees, while no two people agree about the Truth. I'd rather

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> see you going to church than to know you were as wise as Plato and Haeckel rolled into one; and I'd rather sing some old chestnut out of a hymn-book with you surrounded by "stupid" people, than listen to all the wisemen in the world. It has always been a particular desire of mind to have you join church; and I am very, very glad to know that you are now on the road.--I am not in the least religious. The sun clears my spirit, if I may say that and an occasional sight of the sea, and thinking of blue valleys, and the odor of the earth, and many things/ Such things make a god of a man; but a chapel makes a man of him. Churches are human.--I say prayers every night--not that I need them now, or that they are anything more than a habit, half-unconscious. But, in Spain, in Salamanca, there is a pillar in a church (Santayana told me) worn by the kisses of generations of the devout. One of their kisses are worth all my prayers. Yet the church is another for them--and for us. (L 96).

After seeing this, we must accept that Stevens saw himself as "a god," able to enjoy "the sun," "the occasional sight of the sea," "the odor of the earth," who existed on a much higher plane than "all men." Obviously, being a god is far more desirable than being one of the priests who perform his required offices. The man who sees himself in this way is "an assassin" because "Poetry is a Destructive Force" to religion, specifically (we are reminded of the identification between "The Man With The Blue Guitar" and "a horde of destructions"). Stevens implicitly wants to prove Plato was right in wanting to ban the poet from the rationally ideal Republic. Contrary to what Frye says, Stevens does advocate carpe diem, not for "all men" but for himself or future, "virile youths,"

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if he cannot seize what he would. More, for Stevens, this concept was not what Frye leads us to see, following its already corrupt form in Roman times, but what it originally meant for the Greeks. Stevens wanted to be pagan. He thought that if he only could have become this way, he would have been completely happy. (Had he achieved it, he would not have written the kind of poetry he did; however, this is a moot point since it is apparent to us, as it was apparent to the poet, that no one religiously trained as a child in the Judaeo-Christian tradition can ever fulfill the wish to be totally pagan in the way of the Greeks, both because of the partiality of our conception of ancient Greece and because of the residual power on the psyche exerted by the Western religions' idea of evil.) Nonetheless, what was possible for Stevens was to approach his ideal in imagination through poetry. This is clearly described in "Poetry as a Destructive Force" where the potent poet is one with his animal self, represented by the ox, the bear and the lion--, that animal nature which all Western religion has sought to suppress.

This last point brings us to look at Frye's most glaring misuse of poetry. After properly noting the "menace" hidden behind the poet's symbols, he finds it sufficient to attribute it to the insufficiency of "carpe diem." This ellision of cause and effect comes from a logical gap between the two last sentences of Frye's paragraph. And again, he roughly

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picks titles and symbols out of the garden of poems for his bouquet of theory. Frye does not attempt to answer the questions he poses: why are Stevens' symbols of nature menacing? what has this quality to do with the poet's involvement with religion and paganism, which is described in the same paragraph?

The menace grows out of the poet's fear as he describes it in "Domination of Black." After his successful attempt to partake in perceiving the order of nature and the universe in a pagan way, reflected by the order of the poem, the poet explains the envisioned menace of the hemlocks and the peacocks by closing the poem with,

> I felt afraid.
> And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

His fear is of punishment because he has exceeded the limits of experience assigned to him by the morality inherited from his fathers and forefathers; he has not used poetry to praise God (as Perry Miller points out is the most common distinguishing feature of American Puritan poetry), but to express his own assumption of divinity. Because of this, he feels afraid; the symbolization carries this out. The cry of the peacocks is associated both with the actual sound, like children piercingly screeching of torment, and with monastery gardens where peacocks were and are most often found. In addition, the cry of the peacocks is associated with the presence of hemlocks which, besides offering a perfect rhyme with the choking "ocks" sound, reminds us of the suicide of Socrates. This suggests

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that something is threatening the poet-philosopher, making him both fear and desire his own death because of his guilt,--that something is religion, even if only "half-unconscious," as the poet tells us. Religion holds imagination and intellect in tight check, lest they discover the god in the man.

All of the other symbols cited by Frye also relate to this fear attending the abandonment of our controlling myth; however, in order to see them in this way, it is necessary to restore them to their places within the poems. The poet makes the embroidered buzzard of "The Jack-Rabbit" a constant reminder, like art and like his poems, of the power of death over life, over the animal nature of the jack-rabbit who cannot be allowed to sing spontaneously. This menacing power of death was not always part of human life; Socrates did not fear death but chose it. The fear came with the myth of a punishing God who constantly threatens enjoyment. The butcher in "A Weak Mind in The Mountains" deals directly with nature, unlike the poet who completes the sacrifice of "the body" by sacrificing his "blood"--his own animal nature which would have allowed him to make of this, too, a joyful song. His mind is "weak" and goes off to imagine winds "of Iceland" and "of Ceylon" because he cannot face the brutality of nature without distracting mediation. This is very much unlike those in ancient times who, with Odysseus, named butchering for hunger sacrifice to the gods and felt no twinge.

The "bodiless serpent" in "The Auroras of Autumn" is

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sexuality,

> This is form gulping after formlessness,
> Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances
> And the serpent body flashing without the skin
>
> This is the height emerging and its base.

This sexuality could not be accepted, however; with complete gratification of animal desires, death is not feared; the yielding to it is giving into the greater forces of nature that take us in the end. Repressing this sexuality engenders the fear of death necessary for the nascent Christian religion to rule hordes of Northern Barbarians; however, it is no longer necessary, but dangerous to the modern sensibility, as Freud's work clearly shows. In this poem, more clearly than in any other, Stevens brings together all the strains sensed in his being, whether hereditary, instinctual or learned. He wants to reinvent the serpent as having mythological being only in the stars, as a constellation, part of Nature and so part of man rather than as the most hated tempter, foreign and to be feared. But can he succeed? In Section II we see Crispin's cabin on the beach, deserted; the poet, walking the beach, observes it from afar; he approaches and finds that like the Mediterranean civilizations that accepted sexuality and death as part of life, his cabin has been invaded by the "frigid brilliances" of the North. Because of his own "Northernness," he cannot live as one with the world outside; it is a world "of ice and fire and solitude." Section III places the poet concretely remembering, and we discover that it is "the

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mother's face,/ The purpose of the poem" that occasions this meditation. Again, many years after the fact, we are witness to the poet's facing of his mother's and his father's (Section IV) deaths. His parents are the cause both of his life and his suffering; we see the poet in these two sections revealing the feelings of the boy and the youth in him as he both yearns for and rejects what they represented. All of this is as in a dream. The poet sees his childhood houses, as the wiser Crispin sees his cabin, from the outside. "The windows will be lighted, not the rooms;" he is like Odysseus visiting Hades, seeing his shades. What he sees is like "a masque projected beyond the planets." In this "theatre" appear all the images of his past dreams come to haunt him: "flying birds" (like peacocks), "A capitol . . . collapsed" from "Anecdote of Canna"--all these visions are caused by one thing:

> . . . The scholar of one candle sees
> An arctic effulgence flowing on the frame
> Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.

After his stay in the underworld, there are four more sections which offer a sort of commentary on what he has experienced. The poet goes from asking himself whether there is "an imagination that sits enthroned . . . which in the midst of summer stops/ To imagine winter?" He leaves it unanswered, but after questioning, too, what "innocence" is, he concludes that it does exist if we allow it to. If we see the serpent in the stars and not as a "false sign/ Or symbol of malice," we partake of nature as her children

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instead of as miscreants haunted by "the guilty dream" invented by "an unhappy people [the wandering Hebrews who could not, like the Greeks, invent a myth where they were seen as products of the earth, because they had no land, and, thus, had to invent a myth that explained their wandering by stating that they were created by God in his image] in a happy world." He addresses the Rabbi, symbol for the source, who "In these unhappy he meditates a whole, . . as if he lived all lives, that he might know."

If the cultural and personal levels of experience are taken into account, as well as the archetypal and philosophical levels, when discussing Stevens' poetry and these poems particularly, we become aware of much more than that, "a simple song of carpe diem is not enough." If carpe diem is not enough, it is partly because, like Christianity in the twentieth century, it is a decadent concept. For the Romans, removed from but imitating the Greek world to which the imagined gods were as native as their light and sea, a true paganism, uniting body and spirit in an organic perception of nature, quickly became the empty formula of bodily "seizing the day" while the spirit roamed unattached seeking a place in a new religion which would somewhat explain the new kind of suffering that came with the decaying of the Roman world. For Stevens, raised as a "reformed" Christian living in the land of the "New Jerusalem,"--a concept which from the time of the first colonization by the Puritans was, at least, equivocal and to

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be considered with an ironic eye since, according to Miller, the experience of coming to America quickly revealed to the religious settlers that they were certainly not "God's chosen" though they continued to speak and write as if they were in the interests of both maintaining face for those across the Atlantic and of continuing to preserve the unity that was essential to survive in this "savage place;" this led to a serious split, still expressed today, between what they knew and how they acted and what they said and wrote[20]--the modern American form of Christianity was an empty shell inside which his spirit rattled. This is clearly expressed in an early letter the poet wrote to Elsie Moll:

> . . . I dropped into St. John's chapel an hour before the service began and sat in the last pew and looked around. It happens that last night at the Library I read a life of Jesus and I was interested to see what symbols of that life appeared in the chapel. I think there were none at all excepting the gold cross on the altar. When you compare the poverty with the wealth of symbols, of remembrances that were created and revered in times past, you appreciate the change that has come over the church. The church should be more than a moral institution, if it is to have the influence that it should have. The space, the gloom, the quiet mystify the spirit. But that is not enough--
> And one turns from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus--temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness--tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the noble depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem.--
> I do not wonder that the church is so largely a relic. Its vitality depended on its association with Palestine, so to speak.--
> . . . Reading the life of Jesus, too, makes one distinguish the separate idea of God.

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> Before today I do not think I have ever realized that God was distinct from Jesus. It enlarges the matter almost beyond comprehension. People doubt the existence of Jesus--at least, they doubt incidents of his life, such as, say, the Ascension into Heaven after his death. But I do not understand that they deny God. I think everyone admits that in some form or other.--The thought makes the world sweeter--even if God be no more than the mystery of Life.
> (L 139-140)

In his search for the idea of God as he conceived it, Stevens attempted to find a form of belief which would encompass his spirit without fettering it. To this purpose, Stevens found poetry most conducive because it allowed him to engage his imagination and intellect to their utmost capacity in mythologizing himself and his experience, making of himself a god who saw that what was good was incorporating his own intentions in his own created forms, while his language was ambiguous enough that it permitted him to do so with impunity since the symbols used, products of a sensibility formed by the American Puritan version of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, could be interpreted in ways that were not outwardly threatening to the established norm of the society in which he lived. In this way Stevens at the same time carried out the tradition of the Puritans in using <u>language as rhetoric</u> which does not accurately reflect what he knew, while he used that same <u>language as meaning</u> to destroy the form in which it was expressed ("In the end, the aesthetic is completely crushed and destroyed by the inability of the observer who has himself been crushed to have any feeling

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for it left" [OP 172]). This amounts to an end-point in American literature; Stevens knew this and so, in his later poetry, he spoke to the future, to the "ephebe" who would see what he had done and who, after learning of this, would be able to write the necessary poem for the new modern period of America:

> The final poem will be the poem of fact in the language of fact. But it will be the poem of fact not realized before. (OP 164).

Stevens represents the vestiges of the European imagination growing in American soil. He would have liked to have written the modern American epic, as pointed to by "The Comedian as The Letter C," but he realized early in his poetic career that his sensibility was overly corrupted by his longing for a past in time and place that belonged not to America, but to Europe. The new epic is necessary, he thought, and its author, the "ephebe," would have to be properly trained "to see with an ignorant eye" so that the place he conjured to which he would long to return would be as natively naked America as Ithaca to Odysseus.

> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
> And see it clearly in the idea of it.
>
> Never suppose an inventing mind as source
> Of this idea nor for that mind compose
> A voluminous master folded in his fire.
>
> How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
> Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
> That has expelled us and our images. . .
> (CP 380-381).

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Stevens knew that the new poet would himself invent metaphors to describe the sun because, sooner or later, there would be "an ennui of the first idea," but before he would do this he did not want him to see the sun as others had seen it, as the Greeks saw Phoebus, but as itself so that he, as native with "an ignorant eye," could describe it as himself, a body part of a fixed and real place. In a way, Stevens is asking his ideal poet to become purely "Puritan," to do away with ornament that is improper to the clarity of the idea of "God;" this concept would also not be inimical to neo-paganism in the sense that Arnold wrote of, the "ideal, cheerful, sensuous pagan life."[21]

In this context, we begin to realize the importance of Stevens' constant reminders of "ocean" in his poetry. The "ocean" beating on our shores, not the "wine-dark sea" furrowed by Poseidon's anger, characterizes America, isolated but grand place. The American epic hero may attempt to sail as did Odysseus, but will soon discover, as did Crispin, that he could not long endure this ocean and find resting places along the way of his voyage home because it was too "wild and ruinous," thus making the first landing place a desired haven; Crispin attempts, unsuccessfully, to forget the dreams of returning to the place from where he began because the ocean was too threatening, so he remains and quashes his yearnings. This suggests that the modern epic hero, if he is to succeed, must seek himself not on the sea, but amongst

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"people and things" and in "places" that constitute American Nature.

To sum up, Frye does not set Stevens in his time nor see the poetic task he took on; he sees him wrestling with the great philosophical problems concerning experience and cognition, reality and imagination, but he does not relate this struggle to the actual experience of Stevens as a man and as a poet in the twentieth century. In his most recent essay, "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form,"[22] Frye shows how Stevens dealt with these philosophical problems poetically, using "verbal tricks" to describe the ambiguity of all real experience. He brilliantly traces the abstract outlines of the poet's work and its meaning to us, but he never looks at a poem as a poem, a human utterance. In the end, we feel grateful to this critic, too, for his having elucidated the complex workings of Stevens' natively philosophical mind; Frye's analyses are never reductive but match the imaginative vagaries of Stevens' approach. We know that our understanding of underlying principles beneath the work has been made clearer by having read him; he satisfies our reason. However, his critical method, because it does not focus on specific works, cannot issue in a final act of judgment naming certain poems as successful and achieved and others as less successful or unsuccessful. For example, Frye notes that there are two distinct kinds of poetry that Stevens wrote: those where the imagination is attached to reality--what

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we have called "Poems of Imagination"--and those were the imagination is completely detached from reality, embroidering concepts, creating a totally solipsistic universe for the poet[23]--these we have called "Poems of Fancy." But he does not indicate that the "Poems of Imagination" are, in fact, superior to the others because in them there is the common ground of our American reality, in the perception of which we delight with the poet. This is an essential element if we are to participate in experiencing the poem as a necessary act. The final act of judgment is necessary for literary criticism if it is going to serve its purpose of educating the imagination. After reading Frye, we know that poetry "should be abstract," but not that it also "should give pleasure."

As though guided by an invisible hand to complete the analysis of the whole of Stevens' poetry as indicated by the section titles of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Frank Kermode seems to follow Blackmur who concentrates on how poetry "must give pleasure" and Frye who examines why it "must be abstract," and focusses his attention on that aspect of poetry which "must change." In his book, Wallace Stevens, Kermode provides an outline of the entire career of the poet beginning with a brief biography, going quickly through his views of the separate volumes, including the prose works, and completing his study with a summarizing conclusion following his look at "The Rock."

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Faithful to, even if unaware of, his particular task, Kermode shows us how the poetry evolves and "changes," where certain symbols and topoi originated, and how, through repetition and variation, they become transformed during the poet's lifetime. Indeed, he himself states, "Change is the law of Stevens' world."[24]

However, after all of this, we still do not come away with a sense of the poet as "a man in his world," even though we are led to believe that we will since the critic opens his volume by reminding us of the peculiarity of Stevens' situation as a man who lived "a double life."[25] Although he sets himself in opposition to those critics who think that Stevens took the wrong "fork in the road" by not devoting himself entirely to his literary career, Kermode does not at all illuminate the reasons for what he calls "the divorce between his activities as a man of business, a family man, a citizen of Hartford, Connecticut, and his work as a man of letters."[26] Almost as an implicit defense of this failure, Kermode, before he begins his study, calls on the poet's avowed reticence to reveal himself and states that "the 'reek of the human' is absent from Stevens."[27] He notices, however, that "this lack becomes a critical issue,"[28] but does not elaborate on it as he promises. The real reason for his failure is that Kermode, like the other critics whose work we have examined, also reads Stevens' poems on only one level; he writes that "his poetry was clearly, under one form or another, about

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poetry." He, too, falls victim to that critical fallacy that Stevens had covertly warned against in "Poetry and the Irrational: because the critic does not engage what in himself is "human" in reading the poetry, because he seems to temporarily forget that in him, too, there lurks that unnameable force of the "irrational," he does not hear its "cry" and so projects his own lack of what is human (which, unfortunately, is an integral part of the "objective" personality of the New Critic) onto the poet. In short, if poetry is not "read with one's nerves" as Stevens says it must be read, what emerges is a vision of a poet without nerves.

It could perhaps be argued that Kermode, like the other earlier critics, did not have the collected Letters available, but this will not do since, as evidenced by his notes, he did have them available in uncollected form. And those letters from which he does quote are among the most central which give us a keen insight into the poet's involvement with his world; these, when seen in the context of the poems, deepen our understanding of them as carrying profound emotional significance. We must conclude that even though Kermode's approach appears, on the surface, to offer the greatest promise of reward in the form of elucidating real meaning, since it does take the whole body of Stevens' work, as well as the general historical background of the poet, into consideration, it is ultimately unsatisfactory because of the critical inhibition of personal impressions and felt

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emotions on the part of Kermode as a reader.

It is not that Kermode is insensitive to the "personality" of the poet; in fact, he remarks that,

> . . . the strong tang of a highly individual consciousness penetrates even the earlier work, to the degree that we call tell a Stevens failure as we detect the rottenness of a particular fruit: it is bad in its own peculiar way, a corruption of the good, an evil parody of banana.[29]

It is obvious from this that Kermode does make the final act of judgment necessary for good criticism, but, unfortunately, he does not allow the emotional bases for his judgment which allows him to perceive Stevens' "highly individual consciousness," to enter into the "objective" examination of the work which he presents to his readers. He does not specify which he considers to be the successful and which the unsuccessful poems, together with his judgment and the reasons for it; it seems he must have felt this would be too personal and impressionistic. In the same way, Kermode notices the distinctly American nature of Stevens' work with its echoes of Whitman (also noted by Jarrell, Morse, and, more recently, Middlebrook) and its affinity to the French (which he sees as a result of the forcing of French culture on the American intellectual),[30] but he fails to analyze what it is in the poetry that reflects these moods. Likewise, although Kermode makes a point that "some specific experience might intrude into Stevens' work,"[31] as it obviously does in "To An Old Philosopher in Rome," he does not use chronology to help him

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unlock the meaning of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," for example, which he states is "famous and a little over-rated."[32]

When Kermode looks at Stevens' volumes, he considers each in its entirety but does not take enough time to consider carefully the resonances of the particular symbols in the individual poems in order to make judgments about their effectiveness as "cries of their occasions." Consequently, he gives an accurate description of the impact of the volumes as wholes, in relation to one another and to the proposed The Whole of Harmonium, but of the poems themselves he says that their ultimate purpose is to "invite the reader to 'glide through an abstract process' if only to relate the individual case to the general law."[33] Of Harmonium, Kermode perceptively writes,

> . . . Harmonium is on the whole very much more concerned than the later poetry with establishing the contours, the colours, the fortuity of Stevens' world--with reality "arranging itself into poems" of the "gaudiness" necessary to the fictive presentation of its own texture, its own strangeness. . . . Harmonium, then, is a volume of poems which live or die as physical objects radiating to freshness and pleasure of a transformed reality. They live; as one goes back to them again and again having studied in Stevens' own school the physics of their world, the riches of Harmonium grow continually. It is a book of almost incredible gaiety, variety and power, and it is a reminder that all the literary history in the world cannot predict the nature of a great poet. In one way and another Harmonium is of its age; but we perceive this either by hindsight, or in details which are not of the essence of the book.[34]

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But later, instead of clarifying his perceptions by giving attention to those "details which are not of the essence of the book," he looks only to the general and writes that, "Harmonium has, as Stevens insisted, 'a single theme'--if only because, as is often said, all the poems are 'about poetry.'"[35] Following this, when Kermode does present a poem for consideration, his conclusions have only to do with the poeto-philosophical realm which he seems to propose as the only world in which Stevens lived.

Kermode takes into account the work of Blackmur and Winters as preliminary to his own, and though he makes vague despective remarks about Winters, he does not see any real inadequacy in either of their approaches to Stevens. This reveals a great deal about the dangers of investing criticism with the spiritual force that should originate and continue to dwell in the individual soul. As Kermode curiously notes without taking heed of its importance, Stevens reminds us that this can only be recognized by "sensation"--"It is the mundo of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of reason. The pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation" (NA 58).[36]

In addition to Blackmur and Winters, Kermode also draws on the criticism of Randall Jarrell, whom he acknowledges, and, like Northrop Frye (whom he does not mention), he

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interprets Stevens' use of archetypal symbols, such as the seasons, and, also like Frye, he spends a great deal of time speaking of Stevens' playing with imagination and reality as a constant theme. When Kermode discusses Winters, he does not attack the premises of that critic's judgment, with which he disagrees, as he should have, but concludes that the problem Winters has in reading Stevens comes from the fact that both he and the poet have equally "strong minds." When he looks at Jarrell's judgment, he points out that it is inadequate because it fails to take the later poetry into consideration as successful on its own terms; at the same time, he indicates that Marius Bewley rightly does. In a way, Kermode is right, and in another way, he is wrong.

Jarrell is right in judging the poetry after Harmonium to be inferior as poetry; Winters, as mentioned earlier, also reaches this correct conclusion from altogether different premises, which he offers to hide the fact of his feeling that the earlier poems are better as poetry. Jarrell judges, as a poet, with sensation, and his responses (which shall be examined in more detail in the next chapter) accurately reflect the proper emotional reactions to the poems that other critics have been afraid to acknowledge.

On the other hand, Kermode, following Bewley, sees that Jarrell is wrong in not at all appreciating the poetry after Harmonium where, as Jarrell says, it is "unfortunate" that the poet more and more gets into "the habit of philosophizing in

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poetry--or of seeming to philosophize, of using a philosophical tone, images, constructions, of having quasi-philosophical day-dreams."[37] However, neither Kermode nor Bewley (who believes that all the poetry after Harmonium must be considered as leading up to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which he, together with Roy Harvey Pearce and many other critics, thinks is "Stevens' greatest achievement"[38]) nor Jarrell try to understand why there is this great difference between Harmonium and the later poetry. And as to naming "Notes" Stevens' "greatest achievement,"--this can only be accepted if we add that it was so because it was the acknowledgement of his own failure to become the "virile poet" who would "whip from [himself] a jovial hullaballoo among the spheres;" that it was in his honest recognition of his own limitations and in his passing on to the "ephebe" what he had learned to be necessary for poetry that Stevens' ultimate "greatness" resides. "Notes" is not, in terms of the outline it itself proposes for poetry, Stevens' greatest poem; it does not delight nearly as much as other poems, nor does it fulfill Stevens' primary requirement of focussing the imagination on reality--unless we accept the fact that the poet's reality is represented solely by all the other poems he has written, which are now "part of the res, not about it." If this is so, then the poet is implicitly announcing his failure, anyway, since that created reality is made out of words, and that is precisely the reality he does not want the "ephebe" to inherit.

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Strangely, however, because the true reader of "Notes" imagines the "fluent mundo" of the body of Stevens' poetry as part of reality, as he would imagine the change of seasons in one place over a period of years, it means that Stevens has succeeded in mythologizing himself, making himself another element like the earth and the sea and the wind for which the Greeks had invented gods. Contrary to what we would have expected, and yet an understandable psychological result of the poet's fear of indulging "personality," what emerges is the unmatched, hubristic egotism of Stevens. But this still represents a failure in Stevens' terms; if we understand how limited the audience who perceives this, we understand why it is still a failure. Because the reality into which Stevens gradually retreated was literary, imagined, "made out of words," the ordinary man, who lives in the real world of the twentieth century and hears horns instead of ducks honking, traffic snarling, sees cement spreading and nature retreating, cannot read Stevens' poetry. In terms of what he was raised to believe about his place in the ordinary work-a-day world, where his father had taught him he must strive and live among other men, his apotheosis into the empyrean realm where gods and poets dwell alone must have caused Stevens ambivalent feelings, to say the least. In addition, his personal life had deteriorated to the point where he could not even share in what was most native in our vital animal natures. With all of this, he realized in writing "Notes" that the

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only possibility open to American poets was to become native in their element and indulge all the senses in absorbing it, as he had been unable to do.

This brings us back to reconsidering the difference between Harmonium and the later poetry. It was indicated earlier that this change originated in Stevens' realization that his indulgence in what he had believed to be his "poetic sensibility" was a mistake because of his obvious inheritance of the "aesthetic" models of the nineties and of the predispositions of the Romantics and the French Symbolists. It was also suggested that the financial failure of Harmonium together with the negative critical response to it were possible, if not likely, contributing causes for his temporary withdrawal from writing and his shift in focus when he did begin to write again. This shift is represented most clearly by the opening poem of Ideas of Order, "Farewell to Florida," where the poet openly rejects the sensual and bawdy aspects of his nature which he had indulged in Harmonium. His overprotestations in the poem contradict his felt experience and confirm that he had felt passion ("That I loved her once"): now he consciously rejects it and wills to live in the mind alone and be part of the North where he will wait for his "bride"[39] who will never really come again.

Florida's sensuality, her venereality become ciphers for the poet's involvement with poetry as it is reflected in Harmonium. This involvement is that of the poet as Adam in

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Paradise before the Fall when he was as an animal and yet above the purely animal nature. Like Adam in Eden, the poet in Harmonium "names" and describes the elements of his world thereby giving it true being. On the literary level, Stevens' relationship to poetry was also edenic in that like Adam who lived in a Garden in the world created by God, a place unspoiled by the intrusion of pain or real awareness, the poet in America lived, at the same time, in the imagined paradise of the Europeans while in his own imagination he lived in the artificial paradise created by all the literature he had read; here in America he, like Adam, was still free to tend his created imaginary orchard without the painful awareness of the fallen reality of decaying, war-torn Europe. The sensuality of Harmonium makes us feel the only Paradise we will ever know; reading the poems, seeing, hearing, smelling the fertility of Florida, of a language that is as rich as her soil--and as decadent--compels us to know, with our senses, what America was and what it represented to the European imagination. When we come to Ideas of Order after the experience of Harmonium, we relive, or possibly live for the first time, as completely as can be expected, the Fall from Paradise because Harmonium is Paradise. In this context, it makes absolute sense that there should be the "change" that represents the Fall with Ideas of Order; the snake's skin shed upon the floor in "Farewell to Florida" reminds us that we have been tempted, that we have eaten the fruit and that we are falling

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into more and more consciousness--this is reflected in the progressive abstraction of the later volumes.

Further, it is more than fitting, in terms of our ties to the European imagination, that the poet experiences Florida and then leaves it for the "leafless" North where he will "be free again" from that "first and foremost law" binding him to the earth through "that monster, the body" which ensures the continuation of the species that is the caretaker of this garden. The implicit suggestion is that the garden should no longer be maintained, even in imagination. Florida is youth and innocence. For the Europeans, the first vision of America was of Florida; the legend that Ponce de Leon, more than a century before the first voyage of the Puritans, had found the "Fountain of Youth," a place where the senile, over-civilized European spirit could renew itself and possibly discover the fulfillment of the heavenly promise of Paradise, was long-lived--certainly it had enough mythological power to affect a literary imagination like Stevens'. However, this imagining belonged to a Southern spirit; and the Northern Puritans seeking spiritual salvation, not the Indian-killing Spaniards seeking gold, tamed the continent that is our garden. The reasons for the return to the North, with all it represents for America, are implicit even in our earliest history. Stevens was acutely aware of this. In Florida, it was true, the instincts controlled reality, while in the North they had to be controlled because of reality.

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Because the Romantic notion of a Rousseauian innocence is only illusion for the inheritors of the European spirit, the North, sadly, must be the place to which we return. Unfortunately, for Stevens, who desperately wanted it to be different, Mallarmé's sentimental perception was naively true: "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres."

The Fall from Innocence, from the illusions of Romanticism, had to be re-experienced on American soil; this re-experiencing issued in a curious reversal for the American poet, however. Like the peculiar mirroring offered to the European spirit by the reality of American, where illusion was distorted and turned back on itself, and unlike his French predecessor who flees on sea to seek "une exotique nature," Stevens as Crispin sails and finds that exotic nature offers no salvation. A look at Mallarmé's poem will shed light on the direction taken by Stevens because in it we see a rich source of the resonances heard in the American poet:

Brise Marine

La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres.
Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres
D'être parmi l'écume inconnue et les cieux!
Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux
Ne retiendra ce coeur qui dans la mer se trempe
O nuits! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe
Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend
Et ni la jeune femme allaitant son enfant.
Je partirai! Steamer balançant ta mâture,
Lève l'ancre pour une exotique nature!

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> Un Ennui, désolé par les cruels espoirs,
> Croit encore à l'adieu suprême des mouchoirs!
> Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
> Sont-ils de ceux qu'un vent penche sur les naufrages
> Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots. . .
> Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots![40]

Stevens is left without the cruel hope of ever finding the ancient garden reflected in the eye of his imagination. Because of this he is both experienced and yet innocent enough to reject the European "ennui" (which Yvor Winters accuses him of sharing) in favor of attempting to perfect that Northern spirit of rationalism in his poetry which, he, as American, does have. In Ideas of Order we find the poem, "The Reader" (CP 146); in it Stevens seems to be answering this poem of Mallarmé's directly:

> All night I sat reading a book,
> Sat reading as if in a book
> Of somber 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,
>
> Even the musky muscadines,
> The melons, the vermilion pears
> Of the leafless garden."
>
> The sombre pages bore no print
> Except the trace of buring stars
> In the frosty heaven.

We should note here, as well, that "Sailing After Lunch" (which, as Kermode notes, Louis Martz named "a curiously fatigued poem"), which first opened Ideas of Order, clearly

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indicates the necessity of this Fall away from Romanticism. If it does limp on its "crutch" and is "fatigued," it is because the poet, without the tradition he had thought to be his before realizing his true nature, is at a distinct disadvantage, having to search anew for "what will suffice" in his native element.

The "change," then, from the paradisal richness of Harmonium to the rational awareness of the later volumes beginning with Ideas of Order is a very profound one--yet one which neither Kermode nor any of Stevens' other critics have perceived in its fullness. Harmonium is the Paradise from which we, with the poet, fall, and in so doing, the reality of our controlling cultural myth, vigorously renewed by the Romantics, is particularized. In addition, in combining the symbols and images of this myth with the repeated sailing metaphors, Stevens attempted to integrate it with Homer's story of Odysseus who continues in his many plights with the suggested knowledge (of which the audience is aware from the onset) that he will, unlike Adam cast out of Paradise, reach home. This integration is obviously quite appropriate to the experience of coming to America; and it also stretches the Greek analogue because the "home" America represents could never be like Ithaca where Odysseus was native, but could only be "home" as the imaginative fulfillment of the desires for what it would be. This is both a disturbing and a comforting situation--disturbing because

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America can never offer the security and peace of Odysseus' Ithaca; comforting because America represents a fluid concept, always offering the "possible," a "home" of our own making since we must complete its reality as such in imagination.

In attempting to make a case for the greatness of the poetry after Harmonium, Kermode stresses the closeness of some of the later poetry to the Romantic tradition. In particular, of "The Idea of Order at Key West," which he names "the crown" of Stevens' second volume, he writes:

> Such a poem may stand as a great, perhaps belated, climax to a whole age of poetry that begins with Coleridge and Wordsworth; it celebrates the power of the mind over what they called "a universe of death." It will be a poem that means something so long as we have any kind of belief in the lamp which Coleridge substituted for the mirror of Locke. We receive but what we give. One sees as belonging to a great family certain Romantic emblems, early and late: Wordsworth beside the pool bare to the eye of heaven and Yeats in the schoolroom; Mallarmé's lucky constellation swinging up over a marine chaos, and Stevens hearing his singer by the sea, deriding his angel, or contemplating the rock on which the lilacs grow and bloom like a blindness cleaned. It is those who cannot value the great founders of the tradition--and we should add the name of Blake, for Stevens is a bit like an agnostic Blake, too--who stick at Harmonium and do not see how such ideas of order can make poetry.[41]

Here again Kermode is both right and wrong. This poem announces Stevens' break from the Romantics, not his tie to them; at the same time, it does use what the poet had learned about Imagination and Poetry from Coleridge and Wordsworth--but to

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a distinctly new purpose.

Where the Romantics fell victim to the pathetic fallacy and would have invested the "ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea" with their feelings, the twentieth century American poet does not say, "Where my spirit is I am"--he rejects that pantheism (this is clearly marked in "Sailing After Lunch"). He does not become one with what is around him because he has discovered that if he does that, he cannot see, and seeing is the primary force of Imagination. Of that Romanticism which fuses everything into one, he says it "Is wholly the vapidest fake. . ./ It is the least what one ever sees" (CP 120). That is why in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the voice of the Imagination ("She") never becomes identified with that of the sea. The sea remains "inhuman" like Whitman's in "In the Cradle Endlessly Rocking;" this represents a particularly American experience because the European could never have known the power and separateness of the sea, the ocean, as one who had crossed it to make a home on the virgin shore (a point also developed in "The Doctor of Geneva"). Stevens separates himself from Whitman too, however; Whitman remained like the European Romantics in learning his song from the bird and hearing the sea's word as "death." For Stevens, the sea is simply part of the setting which the poet observes. He gives it attributes of an actor, "ever-hooded, tragic-gestured," in a way which reminds us that "the sea is not a mask" behind which the poet acts out his feelings; the sea

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does not act, gesturing, but merely goes through its "mimic motion." The suggestion is that although the poet realizes how easy it was and would be still to invest the sea with a human cry, his cry, it is a misuse of Imagination to do this. Here he takes his giant step away from Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Stevens moves towards incorporating the "ideas of order" and Imagination; "ideas of order" are external to the subject--he may make them, but once he has they appear as foreign to himself as the song of the "she" in the poem. Unlike the Romantics who remain subjects alone, voices of Imagination, like "her" song, this poet remains an observer, both of nature and of his imagination. He is both mirror and lamp, object and subject at once. The song of Imagination adds its artifice to the reality which precedes it and seems to bring a human order out of the chaos of nature; but the chaos of nature is really simply a greater order--the regular "mimic motion" of the sea is a reminder of this greater order. Stevens has begun to focus his imagination on his mode of perception; what he hears by the sea is not its sound, though it is louder and constant, but the sound of the song he is making "uttered word by word;" the mirror is held not to nature but to the inner workings of his mind as his senses simultaneously perceive. He tries to combine the Eighteenth Century with the Nineteenth, Bishop Berkeley (as he notes in a letter apropos of this poem) and Coleridge. Because these workings are abstract orders, the description of them makes

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a different kind of poetry--perhaps not as successful, perhpas unfamiliar. But it certainly is not Romantic, though it could not have been written had not Stevens carried that tradition, as well as that of the Symbolists, well into the twentieth century with Harmonium.

It should be noted, however, that Stevens wrote the way he did because he had to; it was not a matter of choice. As to what he would have chosen, and what he proposes for future generations at this point, we must look at his favorite poem of Ideas of Order, "How to Live, What to Do." It is most surprising that Kermode does not deal with this short piece because in it there is the first important use of the symbol of "the rock" (this symbol is suggested near the end of Harmonium in "In a Clear Season of Grapes," but not named specifically as "the rock") which he mistakenly states is a "late-starting" symbol for Stevens, not appearing until "Credences of Summer" vi. Of this poem, Stevens wrote, "I like it most, I suppose, because it so definitely represents my way of thinking" (L 293). This "way of thinking" is anti-romantic. A look at the poem will make this clearer,

> Last evening the moon rose above this rock
> Impure upon a world unpurged.
> The man and his companion stopped
> To rest before the heroic height.
>
> Coldly the wind fell upon them
> In many majesties of sound:
> They that had left the flame-freaked sun
> To seek a sun a fuller fire.

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Instead there was this tufted rock
Massively rising high and bare
Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown
Like giant arms among the clouds.

There was neither voice nor crested image,
No chorister, nor priest. There was
Only the great height of the rock
And the two of them standing still to rest.

There was the cold wind and the sound
It made, away from the muck of the land
That they had left, heroic sound
Joyous and jubilant and sure.

The poet describes a situation he has experienced. We see "the man and his companion" (most likely, his imagination), who have, for a while, "stopped/ To rest" from their journey "away from the muck of the land" and "flame-freaked sun/ To seek a sun of fuller fire." We know, then, of a quest and of this momentary interruption described by the poem.

The setting places the speaker in the morning after the "Last evening;" the implication is that something important has been learned from what transpired--important enough that the poet feels compelled to record this occasion, too powerful to record at its moment, afterwards, seeing himself as an object in the past. The moon rising is described as "Impure"--this is in keeping with what we know Stevens felt about the distorting and suggestive qualities of moonlight ("Impure" is slightly equivocal, though, since it could also modify "the rock;" this seems doubtful, however. The ambiguity is understandable because of the moonlight). From the next two lines we know immediately that "the rock" is an "heroic height." We expect an explanation from the rest of the poem.

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The world is "unpurged:" of what, we are not yet sure.

As soon as they "stopped," "the wind fell upon them/ In many majesties of sound;" before stopping and observing, they had not perceived this because of the fervor of their questing. What they left is the "flame-freaked sun;" this use of "freaked" came into the language with Milton[42] and was later used by Swinburne. Their having left the sun described in this way suggests that the poet is seeking what he later directs the "ephebe" to find--a description of the sun in a language "purged" of the "impure" residues of a tradition not native to America. We understand here that the world is "unpurged" because perception of it has been conditioned by the language of a foreign tradition, "the muck of the land/ That they had left." In their search for "a sun of fuller fire" they find "instead" "this tufted rock" which appears more majestic than the sun they sought; unlike the sun, the rock is concrete with its ridges "Like giant arms among the clouds." This is so because the rock represents America much more accurately than the sun which characterizes the Mediterranean world where Western European culture was born. Perceiving this is like perceiving "the ultimate fact" so there is no "voice nor crested image," just the "thing itself." Romantic illusion, yearning for the lost reality of the ancient past is false and leads to inadequacy. There is "no chorister, nor priest" because "the rock" is not an hermetic "symbolist" <u>trouvé</u> holding mystery;

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it is greater than any past poetic language or form can express. Here we find the actualization of the poet's fear as it had been expressed in "The Doctor of Geneva" and in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"--that if he attempted to perceive the nature of America in itself, he would lose language because the poetic tradition he had inherited was not based on the sensual experience of what America is and so would make it impossible for him to articulate what he sees, feels and hears here. This proves true in this poem which is not successful as poetry; its rhythms are unmusical and prosaic; the descriptions of the sound of the "cold wind" are abstract, "Joyous and jubilant and sure;" the only concretion is the fact of their "standing still to rest" before the "rock," which cannot be distorted even by moonlight.

This poem is pivotal in expressing the change in Stevens' poetic sensibility beginning with Ideas of Order. It denies the future possibility of the kind of poetry of Harmonium where the descriptions are in the light of "the flame-freaked sun" and also denies the possibility of the poet's personally finding "a sun of fuller fire." Before this can be achieved, the poet must simply lose his self-consciousness--as he does in this poem without the tears of the "Doctor of Geneva" who mourns the loss of his language and tradition--and experience the heroism of the place naively as Odysseus experienced the heroism of the sea. Only in doing this will the poet be able to find the heroism in himself and "purge" the world in

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which he lives; if he can survive here and dominate this nature with his Reason while continuing to recognize the power and majesty of this noble opponent, then he will again have the possibility of making poetry. However, because the experience is so overwhelming and demands total involvement, the poetry must, for a time at least, be written after the experience--just as Odysseus makes poetry out of his experience in Nature afterwards. At the same time as it rejects what would have been the continuation of the Romantic and Symbolist traditions, this poem looks forward to the creation of the "assassin" in "The Man With the Blue Guitar" who will actively destroy these traditions by singing an insidious song whose rhythms and melody will insinuate themselves beneath the levels of consciousness and so eventually change the language and the meaning it carries. The rhythms and melody belong to the movement of Reason; on American soil Reason is the anarchist because its application makes heroes of men, defines them as human and separates them from the illusions of the past, especially the dangerous ones of Romanticism. Reason must grapple with reality before Imagination can embellish it with words after the fact.

Naming "A Fading of the Sun" (CP 139) as a companion piece to "How to Live, What to Do," Stevens wrote,

> It is an old story that we derive our ideas of nobility, say, from the objects of nature. But then, it is an equally true old story that we derive them from ourselves. For convenience, and in view of the simplicity of the large mass of people, we give our

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> good qualities to God, or to gods, but they come from ourselves. . . . The exaltation of of human nature should take the place of its abasement. Perhaps I ought to say, the sense of its exaltation should take the place of its abasement. . . .
>
> Another point about looking to oneself is this: the fundamental source of joy in life is the instinct of joy. If that is true, and a little difficult to realize in life, it is infinitely more true in poetry and painting, and much more easy to realize there. Van Gogh painted to indulge the instinct of joy. (L 295-296)

"How to Live, What to Do" represents an ethical statement made by one who believed that poetry should "seek those purposes that are purely the purpose of the pure poet: to give a sense of the freshness or vividness of life is a valid purpose" (OP 157). The Romantic poet did not see this purpose; what he sought was a return to the unreal paradise of the past imaged in his mind when he cried out for it. To seek a return to an unreal place, to an abstracted ideal, is not only sentimental, it is a form of the "abasement" about which Stevens spoke. To be so involved in the expression of feeling that whatever is seen is colored by that feeling--the extreme of self-consciousness which Stevens always wanted to avoid--excludes the possibility of seeing "things as they are," the rock bare but majestic. Not to see "things as they are" in turn precludes imagining them differently as "played upon the blue guitar." This is the romantic in its "perjorative" sense. But to "shed the skin upon the floor," to break out of the bounds of the self and past myths and see oneself as "other," like the "rock," like

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the poet in this poem who is both speaker and observed, makes it possible to indulge the "instinct of joy." What makes man heroic has not changed from the time of Homer. It is not the consciousness of self with attention focussed inward that makes the hero, though it is consciousness, but consciousness applied to a self in a real situation in the external world.

With Odysseus, the first Western hero, we are made aware of what it is in human nature that makes us worthy of exltation. Though he is aware of and acknowledges the greater power and the indifference of the natural world, he always weighs all the possibilities of survival in it offered to him by his Reason; on the basis of which possibility best ensures his survival, he makes his choice. In the face of nature, it is always his use of Reason that marks him as a hero. But when he deals with people, he must invent personalities and stories; it is then that he must engage Imagination. Imagination does deceive others (as "The Man With The Blue Guitar" deceives), but assures him of reaching his goal in dealing with mortals just as Reason assures him of surviving in spite of the whims of the gods, embodiments of Nature. It is when Imagination is employed that he becomes conscious of his being as "self;" he considers himself as "other," as something which must sometimes be embellished and sometimes hidden before he can reveal himself openly on his native soil. In the world of Nature, heroism is ensured by

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the rigorous application of Reason and experience, while in the world of man, who already uses Reason to some degree, there must be another step added; that is when Imagination marks the hero (this follows what Stevens wrote in "A Collect of Philosophy" concerning the difference between the "power of reason" and the "power of imagination"). The hero is "many-troped" because he can turn his being in response to his situation. Where others perished because they weakened and followed instinct instead of the painful dictates of Reason when survival in nature was in question, Odysseus held firm. Yet when it was safe to indulge instincts, he felt wholly free to use Reason as handmaiden to rationalize whatever was necessary in order to satisfy those primal needs--and in these cases, too, Imagination joined hands with Reason to satisfy what was necessary. Because all was subservient to his goal of reaching "home" so he could again feel himself peaceful in the arms of his wife--where he <u>knew</u> from his senses what was good, true and beautiful--there was never any concern with intermediate "truths." He was heroic because he had a goal and because he used all of his human powers to reach it; he was able to put all his faculties at his service because his goal was not abstract, neither a product of Imagination nor of intellect, but one experienced and real--being himself in a place which gave him his identity because in it he was native. His search was to get back to that <u>real</u> place, not to find an "idea" of his self.

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Stevens rejected the Romantic conceptions of poetry and of heroism because they were sentimental, immature and incomplete. In rejecting the possibilities of growth offered by the use of Reason, the Romantic poet precluded the experience of surviving in Nature, or in the external world, as a hero, as had Odysseus. As a result, he could not define himself as a man, as separate from and above Nature because he had managed to survive. Byron's death was not an heroic action, nor the result of a series of heroic actions, but a failure to properly engage Reason and calculate his chances in a very real situation instead of in his imagined, over-idealized one--it was simply a yielding of his being (not "self") to Nature as part of Nature. Byron's being taken up as the model for the Romantic hero is indicative of the general "spirit of the age" in which began the constant search for "self" and expression because that which immediately marks the existence of a distinctly different "human" being, separate from but capable of surviving in Nature--namely the Reason--was mistrusted and subjugated to "organicism," "spontanaeity," and "Imagination."

Unfortunately for the poet in him, and for the man as well, Stevens ceased to function affectively in the external world; even though he went through the necessary motions, he could not afford to keep his emotions attached to them. He was forced by the circumstances of his personal life to abandon the search for "a sun of fuller fire" and to focus

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consciousness inward. But rather than fall into the kind of self-consciousness of the Romantics, he chose, at least, to make his subject an "external situation," the process of human consciousness, the bare "rock" of Reason "tufted" with imaginings. His solution reflects both tragedy and triumph. The experience of the poet is tragic because he falls with the realization of what could be done if he had been whole, but triumphant because he refused to relinquish his grasp of the necessary forms; these he left for future poets. The result is that his work does fulfill the outlines of the epic he proposed for America, but does not embody it because he simply did not have the experience necessary. Perhaps it is the perfect modern American epic, however; perhaps this tragic fault reflects most accurately the impossibility of ever finding a "home" on this continent--at least in the twentieth century. The hero is Reason. Reason marks America and her hero; Reason makes us as gods, but forgets that we are men and that we, like Odysseus, live among men. "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (OP 158). But strangely, like Odysseus, Stevens did succeed in his external world of business by using his Reason and succeeded in the world of men (at least the small world of those who read poetry) by applying his Imagination to himself as the embodiment of Reason; but unlike Odysseus, he had not Penelope waiting and, consequently, little or no feeling. We should

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add that as he grew older, what feeling there was belonged on the side of pain; the imagination's function was to soothe that pain and give pleasure instead. In his last years, there was finally resignation and a kind of peace, but never, after Harmonium, do we derive the feeling of joy from the poems; if we do read with feeling, we perceive beneath the pleasure of language (of which there is less and less as time goes on) the pain and emptiness of the poet's life; our understanding of this gives us pleasure, however.

In dealing with Stevens' prose works and later poetry, Kermode continues to trace the philosophical patterns and to point out influences (Santayana, Bergson, Focillon), but fails to meaningfully connect to the poetry what is developed in the prose work, just as he still presents, in his own words, a "somewhat indigestable extract of ideas from the poems"[43] rather than give a close reading of a selected group of poems which would, perhaps, enable him to discover the "occasion" and hear the "cry" instead of compacting the body of poetry into a skeletal philosophical nutshell. As justification for this "doctrinal" reduction of the poems of Transport to Summer and Auroras of Autumn, Kermode offers his desire to see the greatest number of poems of these and earlier volumes as tributary to "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction;" we could accept this, and, in fact, we somewhat do accept it, until we come to his analysis of "Notes" and find that it is just as oversimplified and cursory as all his earlier interpretations

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and that it does not deal at all with that poem, or any others, as a form of human feeling.

In spite of this, we find some brilliant perceptions concerning the implications of Stevens' philosophical posture, though he does not extend his perceptions enough to reveal their importance. For example, in speaking of the necessity Stevens enunciated of becoming "an ignorant man again," which he points out follows Bergson's belief that "categorisations of intellect falsify reality" (Kermode does not indicate, however, that for Stevens becoming "ignorant" again meant cleansing away not only the "categorisations of intellect" but all previous "imaginative tuftings" of reality as well), Kermode perceives that behind this desire is an equally strong desire on the part of the poet to be "anonymous."[44] But he does not see how his perception of this desire of Stevens' reveals the poet's rejection of Romanticism and his yearning for the absence of self-consciousness that characterizes the epic hero, who does not dwell on finding his "self" since it is simply an organic extension of the place he calls his home. Released from the pressure to express "self" in order to realize it, the poet can first begin to understand that if he looks carefully at what is around him and describes it, he will be revealing himself in a much more permanent and meaningful fashion than if he were to continue in the Romantic-Symbolist tradition following Hermes to the personal Hades of closed symbols.

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In pointing out the particulars of Santayana's influence on Stevens, Kermode again perceives something of great significance but appears not to realize it himself since he neither elaborates on it nor gives specific examples from the body of the poet's work in order to firmly establish the importance of what he sees. He, of course, notes the obvious parallels between Santayana and Stevens who both felt that poetry should give pleasure and that it should attempt, at its best, to replace the function of religion. Then, quoting from Santayana's Reason and Art (Kermode revealingly mistakes the title, replacing "In" with "And") that the "rational poet's vision would have the same moral functions that myth was asked to fulfill, and fulfilled so treacherously; it would employ the same ideal faculties which myth used confusedly,"[45] Kermode really strikes on the essence of both the philosopher and the poet without understanding that he has. Kermode is not alone; no critic of Stevens' has ever explored what this means in terms of the poet's place in "modern" twentieth century American letters.

If we examine parts of the essays which constitute Reason In Art, we discover how profoundly what Santayana tried to communicate was, in fact, communicated in Stevens' art. In "The Basis of Art in Instinct and Experience,"[46] we find another important element to add to the definition Stevens intended to give his work in choosing the name "Harmonium." Santayana writes, "Utility, like significance, is

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an eventual harmony in the arts and by no means their ground" (emphasis mine). In describing what he means by "utility," the philosopher continues, showing how art is both useful and necessary:

> Of all reason's embodiments art is therefore the most splendid and complete. Merely to attain categories by which inner experience may be articulated, or to feign analogies by which a universe may be conceived, would be but a visionary triumph if it remained ineffectual and went with no actual remodelling of the outer world, to render man's dwelling more appropriate and his mind better fed and more largely transmissible. Mind grows self-perpetuating only by its expression in matter. What makes progress possible is that rational action may leave its traces in nature, such that nature in consequence furnished a better basis for the Life of Reason; in other words, progress is art bettering the conditions of existence. Until art arises, all achievement is internal to the brain, dies with the individual, and even in him spends itself without recovery, like music heard in a dream. Art, in establishing instruments for human life beyond the human body, and moulding outer things into sympathy with inner values, establishes a ground whence values may continually spring up; the thatch that protects from today's rain will last and keep out tomorrow's rain also; the sign that once expresses an idea will serve to recall it in the future.[47]

Because myth engages only Imagination and not Reason in order to explain and explore reality, it is "treacherous." It imprisons consciousness and does not allow it to progress toward that resolution between external reality and our perception of it which engenders peace instead of fear. It is not accident that in the original five Old Testament books after the initial mythologizing of creation, the Fall from

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Innocence into Knowledge results in the turning away from the myth and towards history, the recording of fact--until, of course, the mythologizing of Christ and his purpose with the New Testament writers which again imprisoned human consciousness with fear. This is why Stevens chose to advocate the creation of a "fiction" rather than a new "myth." History, the recollection of past events through the medium of the recorder's personality, no matter how objective it attempts to be, is a fiction in which we believe more or less willingly, knowing it to be a fiction. Fiction is the child of both Reason and Imagination; myth is the bastard child of Imagination alone.

We notice in the above-quoted passage that the products of Art are referred to as "instruments," like Stevens' "harmonium." An instrument played allows us to perceive through the senses what Santayana calls "the rhythms, echoes or rays which things awaken within the artist."[48] These rhythms are not rational, just as the rhythms of the sea are not, but their scoring, their translation into a reproduceable system of signs, is. According to Santayana, the rational function of art makes it utilitarian, enables it to be "teachable:"

> Not only does the work of art thus perpetuate its own function and produces better experience, but the process of art also perpetuates itself, because it is teachable. Every animal learns something by living; but if his offspring inherit only what he possessed at birth, they have to learn life's lessons over again from the beginning, with at best some vague

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> help given by the parents' example. But when the fruits of experience exist in the common environment, when new instruments, unknown to nature, are offered to each individual for his better equipment, although he must still learn for himself how to live, he may learn in a humaner school, where artificial occasions are constantly open to him for expanding his powers. It is no longer merely hidden inner processes that he must reproduce to attain his predecessors' wisdom; he may acquire much of it more expeditiously by imitating their outward habit--an imitation which, furthermore, they have some means of exacting from him. Wherever there is art there is a possibility of training. . . . So great is the sustained advance in rationality made possible by art which, being embodied in matter, is teachable and transmissable by training; for in art the values secured are recognized the more easily for having been first enjoyed when other people furnished the means to them; while the maintenance of these values is facilitated by an external tradition imposing itself contagiously or by force on each new generation.[49]

In this context we must recall what was mentioned earlier about the influence of Sino-Japanese models on Stevens who chose to collect precisely three hundred poems for his body of work, following the ideal of Chinese Anthologies: that by thoroughly reading three hundred poems the reader would write poetry without learning. In doing this Stevens followed both Eastern tradition in a meaningful way for a Westerner (unlike Pound) and Santayana (who, in his philosophy, combined the best of native American Pragmatism with forms of Eastern thought), who carried the tradition of American philosophy meaningfully into the twentieth century. As a result, Stevens' poetry is more truly American than any

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other, using the language of a place that lies floating between the continents of East and West to express his actual felt experience.

The tragedy of Stevens was that he could not succeed in expressing finally the "Supreme Fiction," but only the "Notes" for it because he wisely realized that too much of his emotional life had been destroyed by the accidents of his personal life. Yet in recognizing this and leaving what he did, he performed the noblest of moral acts. He showed how poetry must "change" from all past conceptions of it and still remain itself. With "Notes" he provided instructions for how poetry should be scored; he abstracted from both the Romantics and Symbolists what was essential about the relation of music to poetry. When we follow the instructions, we abstract from the particulars of the poet's personal experience without forgetting how he used those particulars to give pleasure, and we feel the change both in the poet's experience and in our own. We discover that poetry, like "music is feeling, then, not sound," and that what we do, if we read carefully, studying each of the notes well, is conduct his opus, interpret the work in such a way that we make possible the ideal of criticism, as Santayana would have: "it shows the race assimilating the individual, dividing the immortal from the mortal part of a soul."[50]

Finally, when we examine "Notes" carefully, we find the answers to all the questions we have asked along the way and

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wanted Stevens to answer. Contrary to what Kermode and the other critics have written, this poem does not fulfill the necessary requirements for the "Supreme Fiction" it proposes, but in each section it provides the reasons why it, as representative of (abstract) the whole body of work, falls short, and so points out the way for the "virile poets" of the future. That Kermode and others have felt compelled to consider this Stevens' greatest achievement as poetry, the culmination and justification of all his earlier work, offers a peculiar comment on the rationalizations critics give themselves to justify the attention they have given to a particular poet; it is as though they feel they must see the end product of their subject as most successful and so their subject as fully achieved in order to deem their investment of time and study worthwhile. In other words, critics find it difficult to be the "students," the "ephebes," for whom Stevens came to write. In any case, we should look at those sections of "Notes" which make Stevens' meaning and intention clear. This, however, will be postponed until a future time since its impact cannot be understood without the preliminary grounding in a knowledge of the poet's experience as it is reflected in the early poetry where feeling is still very much alive.

When we come to the last chapter in Kermode's book, dealing with "The Rock," there is no final illumination of the poet's work, no profound insight into the actuality of what Stevens meant when he wrote that "It must change;" he

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offers only what ends up as being equivocal praise for the "change" that evolves from so much repetition and variation of abstract ideas. Still unable to articulate meaningful perceptions about Stevens and his poetry, Kermode summarizes the "greatness" of his subject in this way:

> Considering the grandeur of this structure of Stevens [which he sees as being defined at last by the "elegiac tone" and the repetition of the "great themes of meditation" of the last volume], it is hard to believe that anyone now holds the view that he came to grief a little way from Harmonium.[51]

The fact is that Stevens did "come to grief a little way from Harmonium" and it is not inconsistent with his having achieved "grandeur of structure" in his work; if the principle of exclusion does not hold in poetry (as it does not in dreams and the subconscious), it cannot hold in the criticism of poetry either; criticism must provide an imaginative but rational encompassing that objective, scientific analysis cannot. By failing to feel and see the actual historical and personal "occasions" of Stevens' poems, by failing to consider, as a critic, that "It must" also "be human," Kermode, like the other critics, cannot bridge the contradictions in Stevens' life and poetry which he proposes as his intended goal on the first page of his study. That there is that marked change from Harmonium to the later volumes but that, in spite of it, the poet succeeded in making out of his own "grief," out of the realization of his personal failure, a complete creation which incorporates both of the different intentions--

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the first, the attempt at becoming the "virile poet," the "man-poet," with Harmonium; and then after it, the actualization of his self-assumed role of failed model--gives an enormous amount of pleasure and represents the spirit of the "modern" period in America far better than what remain as the irrational fragments of experience of Eliot and Pound. Ultimately, we must realize that where Eliot and Pound spoke of the necessity of preserving the "classic ideal" in poetry and sought it outside of their actual felt experience because they couldn't see that a pleasing aesthetic whole could be created out of the personal and cultural desperation of the age--if the imagination was allowed to do its work--Stevens never spoke of preserving or seeking the "classic ideal," but provided it knowing that it was only by being true to himself that anything good and beautiful could come, beginning from the Reason which gives value to Imagination. After all this examination, what we see suddenly is that what Stevens implicitly called for was poetry that was more rational and criticism that was imaginative.

Yet in retrospect, when we look at the "changes" in Stevens' volumes as Kermode ingenuously presents them, an implicit order which he never articulates himself but which is responsible for the "grandeur" which he names, emerges. Kermode agrees with the accepted judgment of Harmonium. We see the creator of that sensual world as a man fully involved in his reality whose Imagination was attached to both aspects

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of it: Passion and Reason. With Ideas of Order, Stevens writes, in his own words, "as an exponent of the imagination," and in Kermode's words, "as a student of its relation to reality"[52] (we accept this, of course, with the knowledge thatStevens' conception of Imagination was already distinct from that of the Romantics). We must add to this that Stevens rejects this approach for future volumes because the reality to which Imagination was applied in Ideas of Order was entirely external. Because of his personal situation and in his zealous rejection of the Romantics, Imagination was applied only to Reason and other "orders" and never to that other half of reality, Passion.

Next, Kermode deals with Owl's Clover but does not reveal the reason for Stevens' absolute rejection of this volume. In it the poet experimented with language as rhetoric alone (in an attempt to become what the critics called for)--as political statement of any kind must be. The value in his failure was that it showed Stevens what he could not do in the future. After it comes The Man With the Blue Guitar where there is no rhetoric at all, but, as Kermode puts it, "thirty-three pools of astringent thoughts on imagination and reality"[53] (emphasis mine). In this volume Stevens reversed the process of Ideas of Order where Imagination is applied to Reason and "order;" here "thought," Reason, is applied to Imagination because "there must be no falsification"; "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from

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reality:--the concrete forms of reality with their passions, even if those passions are destructive and violent as they are here. This aspect of the poet as assassin Stevens never revealed before this poem (In connection with this theme of the poet as one who destroys past myths--for Stevens specifically Christianity--, the fact that there are thirty-three sections in this, Stevens' "Horde of Destructions," reminds us of the crufixion of Christ.).

Of Parts of a World, Kermode notes that it was not liked, that its "main topic is the exteriority of things, but it is philosophically considered; the thought is revolved, not transmuted into those images which wake in the poet's blood for "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."[54] What he does not say is that what this points to is the inadequacy of the Imagination engaged alone without Reason in trying to reintegrate experience: "There would still remain the never-resting mind. . . . The imperfect of our paradise." What the volume works toward is the integration of thought with imagination pointed to and hoped for, but impossible, in "Anecdote of the Jar." Parts of a World presents the tentative examination of the poet as a hero who can "put together the parts of the world and make what suffices."[55]

Of Transport to Summer and Auroras of Autumn, which he couples saying that between the tone of the two there is only "a seasonal difference," Kermode writes that in them "Stevens had developed to an extraordinary degree a manner

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of commenting upon the text of reality and also upon the commentary which, he said, was equally a part of the real."[56] Finally, The Rock crystallizes the solution found in the two earlier volumes, and we hear the voice of complete acceptance.

Now, if we take a step farther back and consider all the work as Stevens intended, as The Whole of Harmonium, as one poem, and retrace the process just outlined, we see the following movement. In this larger poem, Harmonium, with its sensuality, is the "occasion" which prompts the series of poetic meditations which follow in the form of the other volumes (excluding Owl's Clover at the author's request). The first meditation, represented by Ideas of Order, contemplates the function of Imagination as the embellisher of Reason and "orders" (as was its function in the Eighteenth Century--time of America's birth). The second meditation, represented by The Man With the Blue Guitar, contemplates the supremacy of Imagination, with Reason used to provide "thoughts" on it and its function. The poet finds through this that if Imagination rather than Reason is the basis for experience, it can only lead to destruction (parallel to the experience of the Nineteenth Century with its evidences of Romantic excess). The third meditation, illustrated by Parts of a World, attempts to put together the fragments of reality that were destroyed by Imagination in the second stage (mirroring the poet's experience and the Twentieth Century). Here the Reason is re-introduced to Imagination as an equal and

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necessary power. In the last meditations, Transport to Summer, Auroras of Autumn, and The Rock, the poet experiences a new kind of joy in transcending his personal and historical reality and in perceiving again both Passion and Reason, but now as spirit alone (There is no external correspondence for this as there has not yet been the experience of it; we leave the Twentieth Century and common experience in the last meditation). The joy expressed comes from the necessary integration, for his own survival, of Reason and Imagination; even in the absence of experiential passion, he found a renewed, even if brief, perception of summer before his final hardening into fact. There is no "return," but there is an imaginative "transport." This "transport" is successful because Reason was not abandoned; his facts were faced, and he rationally understood that if he were not going to destroy himself in true Romantic fashion after The Man With The Blue Guitar, he could not totally replace the reality of his life, but he could complete it in Imagination. This is the essence of how and why Stevens' poetry changed from the "inflection" of Harmonium to the "innuendo" of the later volumes. Kermode was helpful but insufficient.

Having examined the last of the "three blackbirds," we must now begin to look at "the tree" which grows in its soil and provides a place for birds to rest--"a great tree is a symbol of fixity, permanence, completion, the opposite of

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"A moving contour" (L 444). Stevens wrote, "Possibly one never has more than a very few readers who pick up the feelings that one puts into one's poems" (L 436); we must look at those feelings and take them into consideration when reading the poems in order to realize the unuttered intent that "It must be human" so that we no longer have to be condemned to come away from criticism "longing for a little sex and politics" as Stevens did.[57]

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Notes to Chpater 8

1 "Examples of Wallace Stevens," "Wallace Stevens: An Abstraction Blooded," and "On Herbert Read and Wallace Stevens," in Form and Value in Modern Poetry, New York: Anchor Books, 1957, pp. 183-223.

2 Ibid., p. 184.

3 Ibid., p. 192.

4 Ibid., p. 193.

5 Ibid., p. 188.

6 "It is a pleasant enough life that I lead. After the day's work I climb up these stairs into the distant company of strange yet friendly windows burning over the roofs. I read a few hours, catch glimpses of my neighbors in their nightgowns. . . ." (L 67-68).

7 Form and Value in Modern Poetry, pp. 205-206.

8 Ibid., pp. 221-222.

9 Among the others referred to is "The Well Dressed Man With a Beard."

10 In Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism, ed. John Hollander, New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 267-284.

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[11] Ibid., p. 267.

[12] Ibid., p. 268.

[13] In Spiritus Mundi, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, in his latest essay on Stevens, "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form," (pp. 275-294), Frye denies the existence of this element in Stevens' poetry: ". . . Stevens does not accept the mystique of the unconscious and has nothing of Yeats' or Joyce's feeling for the dream world as having a peculiarly close relation to the creative process." (pp. 278-79).

[14] This idea of productivity through clowning or playing is developed thoroughly by Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

[15] Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism, p. 268.

[16] Ibid., p. 269.

[17] Ibid., p. 284.

[18] Ibid., p. 283.

[19] Ibid., p. 274.

[20] As Perry Miller points out in the first chapter of Errand into The Wilderness (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), because the Puritans realized that their "errand" was a failed one but did not want to admit it fully to themselves or to

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fathers across the ocean, a serious split evolved between what they knew and what they said and wrote.

21 In Essays and Criticism, London, 1865, vi., p. 201.

22 In Spiritus Mundi.

23 Ibid., pp. 286-287.

24 Kermode, p. 5.

25 Ibid., p. 1.

26 Ibid., p. 2.

27 Ibid., p. 6.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 10.

30 Ibid., p. 12.

31 Ibid., p. 19.

32 Ibid., p. 14.

33 Ibid., p. 26.

34 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

35 Ibid., p. 26.

36 Ibid., p. 24.

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37 In "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," in Poetry and The Age, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953.

38 In "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," in The Complex Fate, pp. 190-91.

39 See "Ghosts as Cocoons" (CP 119); also interesting to note in this context is the connection between Stevens' use of "bride" and Poe's, which as adopted by Nabokov in Lolita, makes the poet's dream of America the "bride."

40 Oeuvres Complètes de Mallarmé, p. 38.

41 Kermode, p. 58.

42 In Lycidas, l.144: "The pansy freaked with jet."

43 Kermode, p. 102.

44 Ibid., p. 97; we should also remember that Odysseus survived the attack of the Cyclops, symbol of an earlier epoch, by being "anonymous."

45 Ibid., p. 81.

46 In The Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, Vol. I, pp. 253-258.

47 Ibid., p. 255.

48 In "Penitent Art," in The Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, Vol. I, p. 275.

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49 Op cit., pp. 255-256.

50 In "Plastic Representation" from "Reason in Art" collected in The Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, Vol. I, p. 261.

51 Kermode, p. 124.

52 Ibid., p. 52.

53 Ibid., p. 67.

54 Ibid., p. 71.

55 Ibid., p. 74.

56 Ibid., p. 95.

57 In response to having read Blackmur's essays; already quoted above at the end of the first part of this chapter.

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Section Two

The Beam Cast Out: Criticism With a Clear Eye

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9. "Prologues to What is Possible:"
Jarrell, Riddel, Doggett, Baird, Vendler and Bloom

The tree is the poet, "the self . . . once one with the earth, that has its origin in nature," has "its roots in time . . .--the whole figure representing the self rooted in the past."[1] Stevens' choice of this figure as one of the major ciphers for himself reflects his elaboration of the many poetic devices Santayana used which were responsible for the vitality of his philosophy. As Frank Doggett points out, the source of this image for Wallace Stevens is in Santayana's Scepticism:

> Santayana has an interesting image for the reader of Stevens'. . . . He describes the material psyche as a kind of bush or tree growing from a seed, depicted at the same time as an anatomical diagram of the nervous system. "The seed again becomes a subtler body within the body: only that instead of a shadow of the whole man, even as in life he stood, it is a prodigious network of nerves and tissues, growing in each generation out of a seed."[2]

With this symbolization kept in mind, the critic cannot stray too far afield since the suggestions it bears indicate each of the areas where attention should be focussed in reading Stevens and that the process that describes what is learned will be organic. Following its model, the critic knows that the poet, like the tree, is native to a certain soil; that he finds his nourishment there; that the poet reaches to heaven with his arm-branches and provides a resting place and

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sometimes a home for spiritual "birds" of mind while remaining rooted through the earth to the past; and finally, the poet yields his many seeds which are eaten by the "birds" and dropped and nourished in new native soil where they, depending on the weather and the richness of the soil, might grow into trees themselves. The tree cipher also recalls the permutations of the "White Goddess," mysterious queen of nature whom the poet constantly courts and fears, as well as the Biblical source of knowledge, hiding place of the serpent, and the source of immortality guarded from access by the "necessary angel of reality" whom the true poet slays. The poet embodies all of these aspects, but we can only know them by tasting the fruits of the tree--the poems themselves. We have already picked here and there and bitten through the glistening skin, but before delighting fully in the juicy pulp of the first mouthful and trying to determine what kind of fruit this is, we must examine the fruit for certain bird bites and worm holes indicating that we were not the first to find this fruit. As we look around, we also notice growing around us some strange seedlings bearing withered, premature fruit.

In this chapter, the work of those critics who followed but who seemingly escaped the trap of the New Critics will be examined briefly in an attempt to trace tentative but incomplete (for various reasons) approaches to the tree which preceded this one. With the exception of Jarrell's, none of

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these studies reflects a sensual "tasting" of the poems of Stevens, and in this is their failing; however, each in a different way attempts a more comprehensive and unitary reading of the whole work and/or an understanding of Stevens' poetic impulse--which are, at least, steps in the right direction. The order in which these critics will be discussed is chronological, but what is important about the ordering is the counterpoising of Jarrell and Bloom at either end of the scale, so to speak, covering the most important work in reaction to the New Critics and the most recent critical work of the present, respectively. In doing this we are, of course, excluding from primary consideration a great deal of earlier and more recent Stevens' criticism--from William Van O'Connor's[3] somewhat pioneering but flagrantly misleading book; to certain heirs of the New Critics like Fuchs[4] who mimics Winters idiosyncratically, or to heirs like Merle Brown[5] who attempt to go beyond the New Critics but who, in the attempt, lose sight of the "true subject," the poetry of Stevens, and concentrate instead on the criticism of critics, and like Herbert J. Stern[6] who attempts to make the poet come alive by providing more biographical material in connection with the poems but whose quasi-Freudian approach fails both because of his keeping the critical vocabulary of the New Critics and because he is not a sensitive reader of the poems who preserves the integrity of a whole poem for analysis; to those critics who focus on one aspect of

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Stevens or his poetry, again like Daniel Fuchs[7] or Robert Pack[8] on the "comic spirit" or Adalaide Morris[9] on the religious aspect; or to those critics who in order to make a certain predetermined point fail to read Stevens at all completely like Edward Kessler[10] who also follows the New Critics, in this case, Blackmur, in paying attention to language alone and seeing Stevens as a "pure poet" whose work is not at all dependent on a cultural background; or like Lucy Beckett[11] who with extremely abstract analyses of the poems and unnecessary and distracting comparisons of Stevens to Eliot, tries to make Stevens an absolute inheritor of the English Romantics and nothing more because he equates poetry with belief; or like Henry W. Wells'[12] supposed "Introduction" to the reading of the "poet-rhetorician," whom he looks at as having no blood, only intellect and words,--his work, therefore, obscures rather than aids our reading; to the studies of Stevens' early work, like Buttell's[13] or Litz's[14] which, although useful, do not see the poet in his fullness or ripeness; to the comparative studies like Lentricchia's[15] or Middlebrook's[16] which, for obvious reasons, see the work of the poet only in a certain light; to the many informative articles, some collected in critical editions and others still uncollected, which have often helped to give a quick but pungent foretaste of the richness of the whole of Stevens; to the quasi-"structuralist" approaches of critics like Nassar[17] and Benamou[18] (and Baird

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as well, though we will discuss his approach for specific reasons) who take the "whole" of Stevens into consideration but only as an abstract pattern of figures either self-contained or inherited; to the wholly impersonal approach to the poetry as "abstract" by Blessing;[19] and finally, to the biographical approach of Morse which is useful for those who have not read the Letters but which is inadequate when it comes to the reading of a poem in light of the personal material. All these approaches come under what was earlier named "synechdochal criticism" which substitutes for the whole a part. This kind of criticism is perhaps useful in our search for specific details or alternative readings, but it cannot stand in the end as proper criticism which both evaluates, analyzes and completes the whole work, doing what the poet cannot do, "receive his poetry,"

> . . . all poets address themselves to someone and it is of the essence of that instinct, and it seems to amount to an instinct, that it should be to an elite, not to a drab but to a woman with the hair of a pythoness, not to a chamber of commerce but to a gallery of one's own, if there are enough of one's own to fill a gallery. And that elite, if it responds, not out of complaisance, but because he has educed from it that for which it was searching in itself and in the life around it and which it had not yet quite found, will thereafter do for the poet what he cannot do for himself, that is to say, receive his poetry. (NA 58)

The problem with the greater part of this "synechdochal criticism" is that it did not "receive his poetry," taking its cue from the body of work, but took its cue instead from

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other criticism of the poetry. This is a fatal error causing the complete obscuring of the original text and meaning. The germ of this decaying process is in the nature of the criticism which has grown out of New Criticism as it was handed down by Eliot, begetter of many still-born texts. When Eliot in "Tradition and The Individual Talent" conceived of tradition as an accretive solid, a pyramid of spirit where each poet and each critic would stand "upon the shoulders of Giants"[20] who came before him, thus becoming increasingly specialized, he borrowed an objective, mechanical metaphor from Newton for what is, in fact, a subjective and organic process. In adopting the myth of "progress" for poetry and criticism, Eliot implied that artistic inspiration and the proper response to it were cumulative in nature, like scientific knowledge. He was wrong in doing this. Criticism is still suffering the consequences.

On the basis of cumulative knowledge, critics read critics with the faith that should only be invested in the text, <u>if</u> the text has been good enough to be successful in engaging that "willing suspension of disbelief," which allows us to participate fully in a "fiction, knowing it to be a fiction, but one in which we believe willingly." Only by openly rejecting the kind of criticism Eliot wrote and engendered can we begin to recover the real delight in tasting the fruits of knowing. What Eliot wanted was sinister.

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He provided the basis for a criticism which was destined to lose sight of its "true subject" so that instead of giving pleasure, poetry, art, seen through the work of critics who refer to one another instead of to the text, would subserve the "greater good" of the "Republic," society, morality, the religion which he adopted and thought necessary for all if the world was not going to continue to disintegrate, flying away from its center. What he did not see was that he was a part of the disintegration and that the only center was in the self--as Stevens realized.

Perhaps the only critic who has really tasted the fruits of Stevens (until now) is Randall Jarrell (Marius Bewley and Roy Harvey Pearce understand Stevens and his place in a cultural and historical setting, but in their criticism do not reveal that they have experienced the poems in feeling.). In his 1955 essay, "The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens,"[21] in which he corrects his earlier response to Stevens, Jarrell "receives his poetry" and evaluates it, though he does not complete the critical job with a close analysis of the text. (As Stevens wrote, he favored complete "explication de texte.") Jarrell reads well because he is a poet who is not afraid to feel his response to the poetry and is not afraid to acknowledge that feeling as a just basis for criticism (simply being a poet does not ensure proper reading as is clear in the cases of Eliot, Ransom, Winters and many others). More, he is completely free of that critical vocabulary which substitutes

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quasi-scientific language and formulas for genuine utterance. In this, Jarrell sharply distinguishes himself from the New Critics. Unfortunately, as a poet his primary interest was in his own creative work (as is fitting) not in the intricate elaboration of the work of another poet, so he left only a brief though incisive sample of the kind of criticism necessary to inform rather than obfuscate poetry and its makers.

Jarrell approaches Stevens' poetry as it must be approached --with humility and receptivity. In this, he reveals himself to be the first critic to realize the kind of reader Stevens called for (to "receive his poetry"); this is a major achievement in making Stevens accessible. When Jarrell writes, "Setting out on Stevens for the first time would be like setting out to be an explorer of Earth,"[22] we understand that he perceives that Stevens implicitly demanded to be felt "like another element" and that the reader, in response to this, must assume, as he must for all "man-poets," a feminine attitude. This attitude is inimical to critics who instead of being like "explorers" and discovering realities, take on the roles of theoreticians, postulating hypothetical structures which they later fill in with what they think to be appropriate findings; this role is masculine in imposing rather than in uncovering order and meaning. (Here we are, of course, reminded of Spingarn's distinction between the two sexes of criticism.[23])

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As we have seen, many critics find Jarrell's judgment too harsh or too narrow in his praising of Harmonium and his relegation of the succeeding volumes, with the exception of The Rock, as less successful as poetry. In the end, however, we must agree with Jarrell's perceptions if we read the poems as poems and not as philosophical elaborations or as criticism, meta-poems. In Harmonium and The Rock, Jarrell feels, as we feel, Stevens' humanity largely unhindered by pre-occupations of what "should be" or "could be"--which led him to the inordinate use of the "qualified assertions" which Helen Vendler[24] sees as Stevens' essential mode. This quality of directness is present in Harmonium because it was Stevens' first volume, and he had not yet been confronted with the negative response to this mirroring of his spirit which helped cause the major shift in his later work; it exists in The Rock because, as Jarrell points out--though not in this context--by the time of this volume, the poet had passed beyond caring about externalized judgment and so once more felt free to express himself spontaneously, though now that expression takes on the movement appropriate to his aged spirit in contrast to the earlier excited tempo of Harmonium. Without explicitly stating it, but by using the poetry to illustrate his meaning, Jarrell shows us how simple and direct Stevens' last poems are--how much they "changed" from the gaudy "hullaballoo" of his first volume, and yet, how understandable this change is if careful attention

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has been given to the work that has come between which, even if it does not inspire much feeling in itself, is necessary to feel fully the impact of the last volume. In this context of finding "simplicity," Jarrell makes an important distinction between the "indifference" of Stevens' pose in the middle volumes and the "indifference" sensed in The Rock:

> Stevens has always looked steadily at the object, but has looked, often, shortly and with a certain indifference, the indifference of the artist who--as Goethe says--"stands above art and the object; he stands above art because he utilizes it for his purpose; he stands above the object because he deals with it in his own manner." But now that the unwanted, the inescapable indifference of age has taken the place of this conscious indifference, Stevens is willing to be possessed by "the plain sense of things," and his serious undeviating meditation about them seems as much in their manner as in his. His poetry has had "the power to transform itself, or else/ And what meant more, to be transformed." The movement of his poetry has changed; the reader feels in it a different presence, and is touched by all that is no longer there. Stevens' late-nineteenth-century orchestration has been replaced, most of the time, by plain chords from a few instruments--the stir and dazzle of the parts is lost in the sense of the whole.[25]

In first pointing out the "motion of qualification" in the larger part of Stevens' work (preparing the way for Vendler who, in many ways, misses the importance that Jarrell notes), Jarrell again responds with feeling and with the sensuality we know existed, even if it became dormant, in

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Stevens. In describing this movement, Jarrell sums up in two sentences both the reason for the mistake made by the critics in seeing Stevens' poetry as meta-poetry and nothing more, and the actual human situation of the poet who, somewhat like Tantalus, was tempted by reality to touch it tenderly and to drink it in, but who was unable to, so who devised imaginative satisfactions in place of real ones:

> As we read the poems we are so continually aware of Stevens observing, meditating, creating, that we feel like saying that the process of creating the poem is the poem. Surprisingly often the motion of qualification, of concession, of logical conclusion--a dialectical motion in the older sense of dialectical--is the movement that organizes the poem; and in Stevens the unlikely tenderness of this movement--the one, the not-quite-that, the other, the not-exactly-the-other, the real one, the real other--is like the tenderness of the sculptor or draftsman, whose hand makes but looks as if it caressed.[26]

Jarrell is also extremely honest--this is probably the greatest virtue a critic can have. He concludes that Stevens' middle poems, his exercises in rhetoric and philosophy, are finally justified by the last poems--"A tree is justified in its fruits"--but in re-reading those poems with the taste of the fruit still in his mouth and being prepared for "an honest reformation," he still cannot see them as successful. However, in doing this, he understands the value of continuing to write, as Stevens did, even when inspiration is absent--whether for internal or external reasons; he sees, as we have, that there are different kinds of poems, what we have called

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"poems of Imagination" (Jarrell's "inspired" poems) and "poems of Fancy." As Jarrell writes, this devotion to the craft of writing produces a "great deal," but only a small part of that "great deal" is "good poetry;" what it enables is the direct and easy expression of inspiration when it is present.

What Jarrell never asks, however,--and perhaps this is also because he is a poet who feels--is why so much of the poetry is "rhetoric . . . accompanied . . . by little content and less emotion," so that "it seems clear, bright, complicated and inhuman."[27] This is the essential question that must be asked, the one which this study attempts to answer. Jarrell seems to know so many of the "facts of feeling" concerning Stevens and his work: his difference from Pound and Eliot in remaining American and keeping his identity as a "citizen of the world" in his imagination; his vocabulary, his world of words where he named as an Adam who never experienced the reality of Eden; his attachment to a kind of religious experience, the "celestial possible," without religion, without God; his indirect recognition of himself through his poems as one who was afraid to touch himself; his committment to the "good of the world," to a kind of joy in an age "when almost everybody sold man and the world short"[28]--but Jarrell never puts all the facts together. What he presents instead, in closing, is his selection of Stevens' "best" and "better" poems and, in good poet's manner, leaves

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the rest to us.

In contrast to Jarrell who points out but wisely avoids considering "the process of creating the poem as the poem," Riddel, acknowledging, following and elaborating Louis Martz[29] (who, in turn, begins by agreeing with Winters' evaluation, but finds that in the "decadence" of the later style there is maturity and a measure of "metaphysical" success) and wishing that Jarrell "had followed through on his remark" and considered the poems as meta-poems, examines the "poem as process" for its "epistemological and metaphysical significance in our time."[30] Even with the limitations resulting from concentrating on this kind of significance, Riddel sometimes gives us important insights and, on the whole, suggests more by what he does not say than by what he says. Although he attempts to avoid the technical focus and objectivity of the body of New Criticism, and even though his study is on the right track in taking the whole corpus into consideration--telling us, rightly, for example, that Harmonium should not be read only in its own light but must be read in light of the "whole work"--Riddel is (though probably unaware of it) still a victim of the "idea" of New Criticism because he substitutes Reason for Feeling and Imagination in responding to the work, seeing the poems as analyzable "meta-things" rather than as poems, "makings" of a self at a particular moment, products of a human need to express, not only a divine aspiration to

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know.

Of course, considering the poems as "meta," or in Stevens' language, "para"-poems makes them accessible to the only critical tool most critics have been willing to use in our century, namely, Reason. An image in a poem is seen as a symbol, a sign for something else which is logically paraphraseable, instead of as something sensual, either real or recalled in the poet's memory, which, in order to know, the critic must completely lose himself and, for the duration of the poem "become" the poet. In "The Bouquet," a central poem in The Auroras of Autumn, Stevens makes this clear in a style that recalls the richness of Harmonium and reminds us that the poet has not forgotten who he once was.

In this poem Stevens distinguishes himself as perceiver from "meta-men" who see "meta-things," "for whom/ The world has turned to the several speeds of glass,// For whom no blue in the sky prevents them, as/ They understand, and take on potency,/ By growing clear, transparent magistrates,// Bearded with chains of blue-grass glitterings/ And wearing hats of angular flick and fleck,/ Cold with an under impotency that they know,// Now that they know, because they know." (CP 451). In these lines Stevens covertly mocks the roundabouts of Reason that make men think themselves potent magistrates though there is "an under impotency" which they fear. When watching the duck, they do not perceive with their senses, but see the "idea." The poet, however, in

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spite of what the critics write, perceives both the duck and the bouquet with his senses and, in the poem, makes us perceive both as he did earlier in Harmonium when he made us taste, smell, hear and see the "venereal soil" of Florida and in the process of this disclosure made us her lovers as he was. In "The Bouquet," the senses are engaged for the poet and for those who "receive his poetry," and because they are, memory comes alive both to body forth the informing emotional context of the poem--in one line, "One remembers a woman standing in such a dress," as poignant a line in its place as any Stevens wrote; the tablecloth and duck, shapes and colors moved by the wind and touched by the sun are Nature and Memory, Zeus and Mnemosyne, who together conceive his Muse--and to swallow this present, too, which had it not been impressed in sense experience would be totally lost, shattered quickly, as it is by the intrusion of the soldier of external reality who enters the room and causes the vase to fall and break at the close of the poem. For those "meta-men" who see the bouquet not like the poet does, but "quirked/ And queered by lavishings of their will to see. It stands a sovereign of souvenirs/ Neither remembered nor forgotten, nor old./ Nor new, nor in the sense of memory./ It is a symbol, a sovereign of symbols/ In its interpretation voluble" (CP 451). Seeing not the thing itself, but only beyond it precludes its settling in memory; this, in turn, precludes the creation of art, since

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one of the presences necessary for the Muse to appear, Mnemosyne, is absent. The critic who only sees beyond and does not see the thing itself does not perceive art but only provides interpretations. Interpretations, products of Reason, are, of course, not excluded by Stevens, but he reminds us here again, late in his career, that no matter how "finikin" and "flatly there" his own Reason may make things appear, there is still occasionally that basis in feeling which is not willed but which grows spontaneously from a sense impression, as in the case of this poem; this germ of reality must be searched for and recalled since it is the mark of true poetry.

Though Riddel very astutely notes that in Stevens an "image" represents a "subjective attitude" and that the description of that image is revelation not of the thing but of the poet's self,[31] he does not perceive the reality of what he says when he reads the poems. It is a very curious situation that a critic can, using Reason, "theoretically," understand certain facts about a poem or a poet without ever showing evidence of having "felt" a poem. It is like an illustrative translation of Stevens' lines from "Peter Quince at the Clavier:" "Beauty is momentary in the mind--/ The fitful tracing of a portal;/ But in the flesh it is immortal." In our minds we can momentarily agree with these theoretical statements about Stevens' metaphysics and epistemology, but without "feeling" the poems "in the flesh," nothing of what

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the critics write will remain with us, helping to make the poem "immortal."

This is what happens with Riddel. We agree with certain reasoned facts and conclusions he presents: he, also, marks the affinity between Stevens' desire for "The Whole of Harmonium" and Mallarmé's Oeuvre;[32] he indicates, as well, how Stevens developed and adopted Coleridge's Theory of Imagination for the twentieth century, taking Cassirer into consideration (in "Imagination as Value," NA 133);[33] he delineates Stevens' metaphysical ties to the Symbolists in wanting "to discover the duration of the soul, its oneness with the Ideal in a moment of contemplation"[34] as well as his difference from them; he develops the poet's ties to Bergson and Santayana and sees his realization of "Bergson's theory of the duration of the self in time, the continual and continuing self-creation which takes place in the imagination in the intercourse of consciousness and flux;"[35] coupled with the inclusion of Santayana's "animal faith"[36] (which gives the life of forms to wholly human beings instead of to Kantian idealizations) as the prime quality marking Stevens' "modernism;" he properly sees the movement from Stevens' early anti-rationalism to his later desire for its integration as a complement to Imagination;[37] he notices Stevens' progressive excising of self in and after Harmonium, but he does not ask why this is so; he states correctly that "Harmonium performs the ritualistic service of introducing the

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self to time and change, in which it is to discover its instruments"[38] and that in order to perceive this, "Harmonium demanded, at first, a return to innocence, a beginning over"[39] and that it represented a "fall into consciousness;"[40] but Riddel does not develop what he sees by giving us reflective readings of the poems which would support his ideas; he observes that the idiom of Harmonium had its roots in an earlier time and that it was a "public style" full of "mannerism," but, again, he does not explore this to discover the meaning behind it--which he clearly should have since for Stevens, "style was a way of objectifying his subject," himself; in addition, all of this is based on Riddel's very perceptive basic premise that for Stevens "a poem becomes an action rather than a perception, a process rather than a form," but he doesn't realize that the completed form is "The Whole of Harmonium," the one work, and that the perception is ours of an entire life seen organically--he is strangely blind to this even though he has noticed the affinity to Mallarmé's Oeuvre as a model for Stevens.

Because he presents these details, which appear as hints of "what is possible" in criticism, Riddel's work is not easily dismissed. Nonetheless, since his "ideas" are not attached to the sensual reality of the poems and the poet, his understanding is often simplistic. For example, Riddel accounts for Stevens' shift to the later style after Harmonium by one reason alone: "that Stevens wanted to strip

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away the panoply of Style and clarify intrinsic themes"[41]--in fact, this is what Stevens did, but not why he did it. Or, where Riddel understands that Stevens' concern is "with metaphors and not the line" and that "the structure of the poems . . . becomes the action of metaphors,"[42] instead of exploring the metaphors to find the meaning being troped, he retreats into reasoned generalization and says, "His subject is the activity of the mind, the act of creation, to which the reader is witness and in which he is involved." As a consequence, he sees through Stevens' work, "a world without passion in which suffering is academic and tragedy non-existent, a solipsistic poetry."[43]

Because his critical vocabulary is too abstract and too general, and because he pays no attention to the ambiguities of poetic language, where a poet's real truth lies hidden--like the serpent easily hides in the twisting branches and iridescent leaves of the tree--, Riddel sees Stevens' chief aim to be the making of a complete "Ars Poetica."[44] As a result of this misconception, he is able to say, without the least qualification, that Stevens' world was the same as Eliot's and that only their ways of confronting it were different.[45] This represents the critic's blindness to the actual historical and cultural differences in the experience of each of the poet's--that difference which marks Stevens' "modernism" as something completely distinct from Eliot's, whose use of time and "la durée" also reflects the importance

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of Bergson's influence during the early part of the century.

With his concentration on "epistemology and metaphysics," Riddel loses sight of the specific, personal elements in Stevens' world. He makes Stevens an index of the "normal" rather than see him as the highly sensitized, idiosyncratic being he was. The best indication of this is Riddel's analysis of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," a poem which serves as an excellent index for determining the particular predispositions of critics because it is the central poem for understanding Stevens and because, like the birds that come to the tree, all critics "come to it at one time or another." Like the greatest number of critics, Riddel reads the female in the poem as a "faded muse" and sees the situation of the poet only in general terms and his retreat into poetry as simply necessary as some kind of retreat is necessary for all men of that age who no longer have religion.[46] Following this, Riddel says, "There is no tragedy for Stevens as an aging lover."[47] He is able to say this because he has not felt the poem. He also does not realize that Stevens would have written poetry whether or not he believed in religion. The occasion of this poem is specific, and it is painful to the poet; the suffering is certainly not academic, but intense enough for the poet to reveal himself, perhaps more immediately and directly than he does at any other point in his life. In the same context, when Riddel notices Stevens' "passion for yes," he understands it to mean a passion for "his retention

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of the imagination and thus the will to act joyfully in the face of absurdity"[48] instead of perceiving that, while this may be true on a general level, the poet's passion was for a "yes" rather than a "no" from his wife, for once, (see "Red Loves Kit" and the analysis of it in Chapter 6 as well as the analysis of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," in Chapter 10) which would mean sexual gratification--an indulgence in the senses, of his animal nature, which would, in turn, allow him to name reality after having just really experienced it as animal, as Adam in Eden names. Riddel, however, doesn't lead us here; we must arrive ourselves.

Somewhat along the same "metaphysical" line as Riddel, Frank Doggett's basic premise is that in Stevens' view, a concept may provide the "occasion" of a poem just as easily and effectively as a perception or a fact of feeling. He writes that for Stevens,

> . . . a concept could hold inherent aesthetic possibilities, could become an object of contemplation; and could evoke an inner discourse and echoing feeling. He remarks that the distinction between feeling and thought vanishes at the inception of a poetic concept and says that "in the excitement of bringing things about it is not always easy to say whether one is thinking or feeling or doing both at the same time." A poetic concept at work in a poem of Stevens' is a nucleus of possibility, an undeveloped implication, as free of dialectic as an image.[49]

While we know that this is true for, perhaps, the greater part of Stevens' poetry, it does not mean that that poetry is the most successful. The poems which begin from a concept are

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lesser poems, "poems of Fancy." What Doggett quotes from Stevens indicates that the process of making a concept a poem may be the same as the process of making a germ of experience a poem, but the initial impetus for the poet and the complementary reaction in the reader are totally different in each of these two different kinds of poetry. It is, as Stevens says, "in the excitement of bringing things about," of turning them in his mind into changing tropes, when there is the confusion, not before or after.

In addition, and certainly more interesting to consider in connection with the poet's use of a concept as the occasion of a poem, is that a concept serves as well as any image to be the trope behind which the poet can hide. So that, rather than look at the surface of the concept ("do not look at facts, but through them" [L 39]), like Doggett who gives us some very useful information about Stevens' philosophical roots in the same way as other critics look at the surface of the pattern of images and figures, we should try to strip away the concepts one by one, as Stevens advises the ephebe, and we should ask ourselves and the poet why he chose these concepts. In trying to formulate an answer to this question, the real, hidden meaning, what Bloom would call the "repressed" material (though he confines this to only literary reference and not personal), may, merely may display its muzzy belly. After all, the poet who stresses how the imagination must not detach itself from reality would not consider a concept,

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already at least once removed from reality, from the world of facts, as anything more than a figure behind which to hide himself, a fig leaf to cover his nakedness. As such, the concept, like the image, should not be accepted as the base fact of the poem, what it is essentially, as Doggett and other critics would have us believe, but has to be seen as an ambiguous and equivocal screen, also like the image, which must be interpreted and analyzed, not as a philosophical statement, but according to the actual dimensions of the poet's experience, according to the time, place and mood (or "height," in Longinus' figurative sense of the intensity of the sublime at the moment of composition--an important aspect for Stevens who borrows from Longinus' borrowing in On The Sublime from Sophocles, "On pigmy hautboys: mouthpiece have they none," for his "Asides on the Oboe"--this is a connection, which no one has as yet pointed out) of its utterance. In this sense, contrary to what Doggett writes, neither the concept nor the image is "free of dialectic" since in determining the extensions of the equivocations and ambiguities of concepts or images, dialectic does operate, progressively presenting for our consideration first one extreme possibility and then another until the distance between the extremes becomes less and less--poetic meaning includes the whole range of possibilities included in the mind's swing.

Poems which begin from concepts are lesser poems because they dress themselves in Fancy, and Fancy's images are

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embellishments, distracting but pretty extras, adding an additional level of obscurity, and often propriety, to the poem, so it and we are doubly troped. We get through the first layer of images to discover they are only decorative, unattached to the poet's reality, uncolored by Imagination, and then we are met with another layer of obscurity, the concept, which is all too easily accepted as the fact of the poem because it happens to lie beneath the dress of images. In swinging between the possibilities uncovered by Imagination, the mind itself may never be satisfied, but it does come to rest when the fact of feeling is found; there is a return to the true way of experience where it is a sensual perception that informs the mind and quietly commands it to stop. "We never arrive intellectually but emotionally we arrive constantly" (OP 173). In swinging between the possibilities offered by Fancy building on a tenebrous concept, there is never really rest; the mind is truly never satisfied because there is no revealed basis in feeling, no germ of perceived sense experience which will educe the equivalent response in a reader and anchor the poem in reality. We know, from our experience and from the theoretical formulations of Freud, that "pleasure" is equivalent to rest, to stillness, to peace. If the poem cannot provide that resting place, cannot be the tree for the blackbird, "the palm at the end of the mind," then it is not giving pleasure, so it is a lesser poem.

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Using a concept as the occasion of a poem is perhaps the most effective defense available to the poet who is unwilling to reveal himself because it generates the necessary movement of the receiving mind, leading it to expect satisfaction, especially because there are other poems where that satisfaction is provided, but in itself, in the poem, it does not allow that human identification which marks great poetry. The poet who writes this kind of poetry is not writing meta-poems about the process of writing poetry, but is trying to generate some movement in his own mind which, in the absence of real feeling, will hopefully recall at least "echoing feeling" from a remembered past or projected future. Is as though the poet were writing in a mirrored reverse, hoping to find remnants of feeling by using images (now of Fancy) and concepts from the past when they were products of Imagination and concrete expressions or conclusions of real feeling, in his present when he is empty and sterile but still longing for "the wished-for words"--this longing is what has been repressed.

Doggett does not deal with any of this, though he unknowingly but obviously opens the way for the examination of Stevens' use of concepts. However, Doggett is excellent in pointing out the sources of these concepts; what is most striking is the enormity of Stevens' borrowing from Santayana, of everything from his use of images like the tree,[50] the river (connecting through Whitehead back to Heraclitus),[51] or the "hermit" as consciousness,[52] to the philosopher's figure which

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"defines the individuality of any moment as marked by the cry of its occasion."[53] Less startling but equally important are the ties Doggett indicates linking the poet to Whitehead, Hume and Schopenhauer, especially in connection with Stevens' constant play on "eye" and "I," which point directly back to these philosophers.[54]

Reading with the eye of a philosopher, Doggett provides very good, even if partial, philosophical readings of certain poems like "Asides on the Oboe," where he finds and develops the parallel image of a transparent human globe in Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Idea[55] and connects it to William James' idea of the "self of selves"[56] and the possibility of renovation. He also enriches "Frogs Eat Butterflies. . .," in one way, by suggesting that "in this poem time and consciousness are joined in the image of the individual's psychological flux as river"[57] (where he links Stevens to Whitehead and Heraclitus as mentioned above); however, he does not develop the physical and sexual aspects of this poem which must be included for a full understanding; though elsewhere, in relation to the "cock" in "Bantams in Pine Woods" and "The Bird With The Coppery Keen Claws," for example, he briefly notes the "phallic pun" on the desire for what he calls "the procreative urge." He also adds a level, which makes us smile a bit, to "The Reader" where he indicates how Stevens poetized the Second Law of Thermodynamics describing heat dispersion; that this distracts our attention

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from the real "occasion" of the poem--as Stevens specifies it, "All night I sat reading a book. . . . It was autumn and falling stars/ Covered the shrivelled form/ Crouched in the moonlight" (CP 146)--where real meaning lies is incidental at this point. Doggett's approach consistently makes us aware of the breadth of the poet's experience included under his personal description of reality.

Accordingly, Doggett understands some essential aspects of Stevens' perception of self, but he misunderstands some generalized aspects because of his philosophical preoccupation. For example, he writes that Stevens' idea of "his true being" was,

> . . . his own sense of the world, continuing from memory into the movement of present realization . . . and that his personification of the self (this feeling that the I is an inner person) is an image like other images, he accepts a concept of self as nothing more than its own vortex of experience: a recurring idea in the history of thought from Hume to the present, as, for example, in the familiar pages of The Birth of Tragedy in which Nietzsche asserts that ". . . we must view ourselves as the truly nonexistent, that is to say, as a perpetual unfolding in time, space and causality--what we label 'empiric reality.'

But Doggett is careful to add something of major significance for Stevens, that,

> The idea that the self is an unfolding of empiric reality and that, as a personal identity one is "truly non-existent" ignores the personal history of the body and its own individual outlook. Stevens, like Santayana, knows that the human body is an animal and remembers that the unfolding of experience is an animal's interior life.[58]

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Doggett illustrates this by a quick analysis of "A Dish of Peaches in Russia" and a more detailed, longer look at "Jouga." He is, of course, right in pointing out the importance of admitting the purely physical aspect of being into Stevens' definition of self, but he does not begin to grapple with the particular problem resulting from the poet's having been intellectually aware of this necessity, this part of "that first and foremost law," yet his being unable to engage that aspect in his practical physical life. The consequence of this was a large body of poetry which appears in many ways at first to be narcissistic, continuing the way of the Romantics, as Doggett indicates. However, the poetry escapes that categorization, as evidenced by something else Doggett notices but mistakenly interprets as a mark of narcissim, that is, Stevens' "fundamental naturalism," a "sentiment with an allegiance to earth" expressed "in many celebrations of the reality that is the substance and support of his existence."[59] Doggett does not perceive Stevens' split from the Romantics with whom he says Stevens shared both tradition and the same "matrix of thought." Because of this he sees Stevens relationship to Nature as that of poet to mirror, though he says that the poet is a "flame"--thus both mirror and lamp.[60] This is very strange since elsewhere he rightly knocks down Yvor Winters' assertion of Stevens' nominalism, writing that the poet is aware of "some strength exterior to mind and language" in Nature.[61]

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Stevens avoids drowning in Narcissus' pool because, in spite of how much he had to close off to his emotions and feelings in his personal life, he remained intellectually aware that what he was doing was necessary to his survival but that had circumstances been different he would have made himself wholly open, laid himself bare, feeling his animal self. However, he did keep certain senses open even if others were closed; as Doggett notes without questioning himself as to why it was so, "eye and ear stand for all perception in the poetry of Wallace Stevens."[62] Narcissus has no feelings; his body does not respond to his physical senses but only to imagined proddings. Narcissus' experience is totally internal; his only perception of self is as and in projected images--in the pool into which he gazes which is sometimes distorted by currents of wind and water. He is wholly spirit, unable to recognize his animal self and so he can never feel in his body what is good (and accordingly, what is true and beautiful). In the absence of feeling what is good, aesthetic (though already removed from its etymology rooted in feeling), formal constructions or figurings pleasing only to his eye replace felt experience, which is the integration of what the eye sees with what all the other sense feel, as the index of values. Narcissus drowns himself because there is no external correspondence of experience in his life, no possibility of communality.

Stevens knew that his time and his tradition had prepared

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him to become a Narcissus and, in many or most instances, his experience does appear narcissistic in some ways except that he makes us aware that he is aware that there is his physical self which he can sometimes respond to; and when he can't at all, he mourns its death. Contrary to what Doggett writes, however, Stevens does not see Nature as a mirror to himself; what he knows is that he is a mirror of Nature and is tied to her in his physical being, in his being an animal, "that monster, the body." In the absence, then, of a personal affective life, his oneness with the natural world around him replaces sexual oneness with his wife. We know that he keeps at least two senses open to the world around him, his eyes and his ears. It is very significant that we know his "ears" are open because unlike the "eyes" alone which focus, perhaps, only on what they are predisposed to see by the individual's internal life, "ears" are less selective, and having to integrate the data from two senses forces the consciousness to act and thus define itself in response to an external reality rather that as only a projection of imagined feelings. Stevens separated himself from the Romantics and ensured his development into maturity because he was wise enough to understand that if he retreated wholly into his imagination, he would be dead--drowned in his own internal pool.[63]

After reading Doggett, we understand the danger posed by "poetic philosophers and philosophic poets"[64] against whom Stevens warns the "youth as virile poet." Doggett draws

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general conclusions with the authority of reason and past references which are very useful in placing Stevens in a nexus of historical thought, but he forgets that Stevens' work is poetry and not versified philosophy. This is perhaps clearest in Doggett's failure to see the links connecting the various aspects of Stevens' perception of himself which he presents. This is illustrated, too, by his analysis of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction;" he enlarges the scope of "supreme fiction" to mean, as he says, "anything and everything"[65] and then proceeds to deal with anything and everything that comes into view when reading with a philosophical or allegorical eye, but the fact that it is a poem, a spontaneous "cry of its occasion"--an utterance bearing or hiding the feeling of a man at a certain moment in his life--eludes him.

This aspect eludes James Baird as well, another critic who should be taken into consideration on the way to understanding Stevens because he perceives the oneness, the wholeness of the structure of the corpus and because he lights on some important aspects in relation to the poet's life and development, though he invariably gives poor readings of the most central of Stevens' poems, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,"[66] "The Emperor of Ice Cream,"[67] "Sea Surface Full of Clouds,"[68] and "Anecdote of Canna," among others. Baird's is a strangely disturbing book because the general outlines of the poet's preoccupations, which are presented in the Introduction and

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in the first chapter, are never fully elucidated. The critic's chosen metaphor imposes its own order; and then, in the last chapter Baird briefly considers the most significant factors in American Puritanism which affected Stevens, showing that he is aware of their place in the study of the poet yet ignoring the seriousness of the implications to be derived from their use in critical application. This leads him to the rather simplistic and incorrect conclusion that in his poetry, "Stevens calls the tradition of Connecticut joy [emphasis mine] the true mythology of the region"[69]! Baird seems to vaguely perceive the possibility of real meaning beyond and beneath his neatly imposed critical structure, but he sees it too late so that he only provides these tentative hints at the end of his study.

Nonetheless, Baird presents some of the essentials coming out of the consideration of Stevens in his wholeness. For example, he notes that for the poet, "The imagination is subject to the discipline of the will. To exact it under discipline is to shape."[70] He does not, however, connect this either to its roots in American Pragmatism[71] as a reaction to Romanticism where the "spontaneous overflow" of emotions and imagination was sufficient to identify the poet, nor to its earlier roots in the Medieval, and before that in the Classical Greek, division of mind into memory, will and understanding; doing this perhaps would have enabled Baird to read the poems with more depth and to see how profoundly

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Stevens attempted to begin a "mythology of the region"--of our place, America--tying us through those roots he taps to what is most primary in our collective past. In the same way, Baird correctly marks the precedence of the physical world to idea for Stevens[72] but does not connect it to either the poet's real experience nor to those same roots from which we draw our definitions of mind and experience; he also does not question, nor even point out, how Stevens' poetry changed as he grew older, becoming less attached to the physical world. Baird's most illuminating perception is that, "The poet's process must create a myth of the self as it proceeds."[73] This should inform the structure of his book but doesn't because whenever he comes close to spotting real meaning in the poems, he consistently avoids it by pointing ahead to "the task of a biographer" who will elaborate it. So instead of seeing Stevens, the poet, as a man, he sees the projected self only as a closed metaphor without recognizeable terms--as the figure of the "arc" which he says provides the poet with "self-reference, prefiguration and quotation,"[74] describing his movement, like the sun's, from perihelion ("high poetry") to apogee (or "low poetry").[75] As models for this use of a figure he cites Milton and Matisse; because he does not fully develop the parallels he perceives, however, the references seem ill-joined and distract us from the work of the poet rather than inform the work with additional levels of meaning. (Baird also makes parallels to

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painters elsewhere--pp. 129-135 and pp. 167-170--but does not use the parallels effectively to deepen our understanding of the poems.)

In tracing Stevens' ties to his American and European pasts, Baird is sometimes helpful and sometimes confusing. He begins pointing out European antecedents by stressing Steves' ties through technique to the French Impressionists (especially Monet in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," which is, as we have seen, a technical affinity which has prevented critics from seeing anything beneath that surface) and credits Michel Benamou for his pioneering work in that field.[76] With this imaginary background, Baird proceeds to postulate, as Stevens controlling metaphor, a "house," combination of "dome" and "rock," which "remains an English-French structure."[77] This figuration is useful to the critic because it provides a framework on which he can hang all details he notes, but it is misleading because it, again, imposes rather than discovers order; specifically, it prevents the critic from understanding Stevens' rejection of the Romantics and his attempted rebellion against European origins in his desire to express his Americanism. Contrary to what Baird writes, Stevens did not find "tradition the enemy of poetry"[78] (Baird separates him in this way from Eliot), but wanted to express those parts of the tradition which were not inimical to "American soil."

Because of the screen provided by his controlling metaphor

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and his own "misreading" of Roy Harvey Pearce,[79] Baird stresses "nakedness," "singularity," and "Adamic vision" as the only marks of the American poet--a view which means seeing each American poet as an isolationist who cannot, by definition, have any relation to previous literary or cultural history. Accordingly, he writes that what Stevens shares with his predecessors, from Cottom Mather to Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau and Dickinson, is that they all "rather than move toward a theistic resolution" (like English poets of Romanticism), "move toward the unique self shaped from the aboriginal source in man."[80] This concentration on the "aboriginal" and uncommunal nature of Stevens as an American poet leads Baird to the incorrect conclusion that Stevens had "no epic pretensions"[81] (that he did was mentioned and illustrated earlier in various contexts) and also blinds him to Stevens' relationship to Poe (a relationship which was very meaningful and useful to Stevens;[82] see Chapter 5). According to Baird, "There is no antecedence in Wallace Stevens of Poe;"[83] but, in fact, as we have seen, though far more subtle than Poe, Stevens was actually aware of the function of "musicality" in his poetry, of the power of insidious, snake-like rhythms; this is clearest in "The Man With The Blue Guitar" (see Chapter 7).

And when Baird develops Stevens' "native feeling for the land" as parallel to Emerson's, he also misses the important element of difference between the two poets. Baird

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says Stevens was an "Emersonian poet-as-namer of American perception;"[84] but he never mentions the irony which exists in Stevens but not at all in Emerson. In Stevens this irony results from his implicit recognition of his European inheritance and his separation from his physical self, and it is in large measure this irony in Stevens which contributes to his "modernism." Baird makes a very good point in noting that "Stevens celebrates American place in a conformity to the life of the mind,"[85] but he does not develop what he means by defining what he thinks, or what Stevens thought, was "the life of the mind," considering the place of Reason in Stevens' poetry and in America. Using this statement of his as a jumping board, he goes on to a very inadequate reading of "Anecdote of Canna."[86]

Baird is very good at perceiving the abstract function of verbal design as structure, but, unfortunately, not as bearers of meaning. In this context, he writes of the connection between Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and Stevens' "grand Poem" and significantly sees the play of "leaves" as pages.[87] Had he allowed the metaphor to develop further, however, to grow organically in the soil of his imagination, perhaps he would have seen a much more profound connection between Stevens and Whitman in Stevens' use of the metaphor of the "harmonium," an instrument employing "leaves of grass" to make its sound. This aspect, seen in the fullness of the use of metaphor, certainly adds much greater depth to our

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understanding of how one poet grows and uses others before him than the simple marking of an external formal connection. Taking it only on the formal level, Baird draws his design from the "multileaved" quality[88] of Stevens' work and builds his structure, not the poet's, without even preserving the integrity of a poem--so he has no meaningful readings.

Baird's criticism is most interesting because it illustrates how a structuralist's perspective can reduce and distort poetic meaning and intent, how it can have all the proper information and material at its disposal but use it to its own artificial advantage rather than to the advantage of illuminating the text, which really puts the critic in his place of being a secondary character in the action of the poem--a position many find impossible to accept. Matthew Arnold's heirs have become our moral arbiters, trying to prevent us, like them, from taking direct pleasure from art. And even in this aspect of following Arnold, Baird presses his particular case for the importance of "sacredness" for Stevens to the extreme of seeing the "sacredness" of poetry as a substitute religious faith for the poet rather than as the personal and necessary salvation it was.

In contrast, Helen Vendler presents herself as a critic who does submit to the power of Stevens' poems and who begins to read them as they should be read, that is, not as "doctrinal poems of ideas" or as baroque expressions of hedonism; she writes that she attempts to express Stevens' stated subject,

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"his sense of the world,"[89] and that she sees the inadequacy of considering the poet as a philosopher. However, in spite of her seeming attempts to "receive his poetry," because the basis of her criticism is that the poet wanted his poetry to be only "utterance as utterance," she concentrates on the surface alone--on what "seems to be"--and does not go below that surface, though she perceives the tones of the surface more keenly than any other critic, and for this her work is valuable. She takes as her starting point Stevens' dictum that the poet manifests his personality by his style, but instead of seeing the style, then, as a reflection of the personality and including that as a subject for her analyses, she limits herself by dealing with the style alone,[90] illustrating the "three major moods" of Stevens' irony without connecting them to the poet's actual experience, which because he is a poet and, therefore, more acutely aware of the "facts" of the reality in which we all live, can reveal aspects to us of which we are aware but which we cannot express for ourselves. In addition, Vendler's choice to examine only the longer poems because she feels that they represent Stevens' best work where he is most "original" in style, developing emotional effects under the "discipline" of "devoted attention to one thing," blinds her to the effect of the only one real long poem which is "The Whole of Harmonium" and what it contains in the form of the most successful short poems--some of the most genuinely moving passages revealing felt experience in

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post-Elizabethan poetry. As a result, after reading Vendler's book, we come away with mixed feelings. On the one hand, we appreciate her sensitive attention to Stevens' "experiments in style--in diction, in rhetoric, in syntax, in genre, in imagery, in voice and in meter," but, on the other hand, because she only names the particular effects and tones ("elegiac," "sardonic," "poignant," "mordant," "antagonistic," "ironically resigned") as marking the poet's general style of "qualified assertions," we end up feeling deprived of the essential pleasure of poetry--feeling beneath that style the sense of the man who had to write his poems in order to survive.

It is rather strange that Vendler becomes caught in the trap of looking at the style alone since she closes her Introduction by indicating that she will go beyond the two critical statements she finds "most central" about Stevens.

> One, concerning "the poem of the idea," comes from John Malcolm Brinnin: "Stevens is the banished poet storming the Republic . . . involved by nature or by the Platonic equivalent of original sin in sensuous reality and sensuous imagination, yet burning to come to whiteness and ascetic innocence." The other, concerning "the poem of the words," comes from Blackmur: "I would think that he has all his life wanted to make supreme statements discreetly, so that their beauty would show before their force." An ascetic by nature and temperament, thinking less of doctrine than of feeling: this Stevens is of course the obverse of that other Stevens shown us by critics, the doctrinal poet of ideas, advocate of hedonism. Both views will be corrected by history. . . . And in the end, all the views will combine to redescribe the "total grandeur of a total edifice/ Chosen by an inquisitor of structures/ For himself."

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> Of that total edifice, the longs poems are a considerable part, and since "a change of style is a change of subject" (OP 171), it is to Stevens' style, and to his changes in styles, that we must look in order to understand those residual satisfactions, beyond the intellectual, offered by his poems.[91]

Instead of going beyond Brinnin and describing the contours of Stevens' sense of "original sin" and his desire to return to "ascetic innocence" (though this latter aspect represents a misreading of the poet since it ignores the knowledge he came to in his maturity) or going beyond Blackmur and discovering a reality beyond words, Vendler simply elaborates what they seem to have indicated to her. For example, after taking her clue to reading Stevens from Jarrell (without acknowledgment) who pointed out Stevens' "unlikely tenderness" in writing of "--the one, the not quite-the-other,"[92] etc., Vendler writes of the same thing giving it a slightly different name, the "complicated logical discrimination," the "even if . . . since . . . it may be . . . if . . . or" which "implicate the various alternatives" offered in Stevens' poetry, but she regrettably misses the direction sensitively hinted at by Jarrell and writes that, "To separate out his inferences and insist on the demarcations of his (the poet's) logic would be to run counter to the intent of the poem. This is true in general of Stevens' use of logical form: he uses it not as a logician, but as a sleight-of-hand man."[93] Contrary to what Vendler writes, those tricks of the sleight-of-hand man must be given attention and seen through if we are to perceive

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reality "as it is" and not "as it seems." Stevens' tricks, what Jarrell correctly sees as marks of the poet's imaginative caressing of reality, are not simply verbal counters whose "inferences" are to be dismissed at the critic's discretion, but the very things behind which true meaning lies hidden.

Vendler is excellent at indicating where in the poems she examines we hear the "skeptical music," where we see the poet's "world of hypotheses," of the "possible," as seen in the reflection of style and she is correct in perceiving that this quality of suggestion indicates a "drift from one mood to another" and that what Stevens presents are "programs for action not description of action." Within this "drift" she also perceives Stevens' "unsatisfied desire," but never begins to ask why he felt this or what he desired so that we consequently feel "unsatisfied desire" after reading what she has written.

There is also a great element of uncertainty in Vendler's understanding of Stevens which manifests itself both in her stopping her examination with the analyses of stylistic elements and in certain equivocations concerning the poet's relationship to his poetic past. For example, after writing that Stevens' "austere temperament" is "very different from Whitman, or Wordsworth or Keats or Tennyson, or French poets,"[94] she goes on to say that he is the "dependent heir" of the Romantics without elaborating in what ways he is different

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and why, and without clarifying how he is the Romantics' "dependent heir." When it comes to looking closely at a certain poem, like "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (our index poem), the effect of this inadequacy becomes marked because not dealing with Stevens in his very uneasy relationship to his Romantic fathers (with the exception of noting that the "little kin," the "firefly" and the "crickets" of Section V are descendants of Keats' "gnats"--a bit of information which presented in critical isolation does nothing to deepen our understanding of the poem) excludes from consideration that whole area of Stevens' involvement with his cultural background that makes him so important as a "modern" American poet.

Considering Vendler's treatment of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" provides a clear illustration of both her good and bad points as a reader of Stevens. After stating that, "Grotesque as it sometimes becomes, 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle' comes nearer to encompassing, however awkwardly, the whole of Stevens,"[95] she neither elucidates why the poem becomes "grotesque"--which is an extremely meaningful stylistic device here--other than saying that it defends against "fugal requiems," nor what that "whole of Stevens" is of which this is a prime part. This poem is major for many important reasons (for a full analysis, see Chapter 10) having to do with both the situation of the poet's personal life and with the cultural traditions that helped to make that situation what it was. Unlike most of the critics who

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came before her, Vendler unhesitatingly sees "her" in the poem as Stevens' wife; she also rightly but partially understands that "first and foremost law" as sex (what this law is is left intentionally ambiguous by the poet though the adjectives modifying it point to its specificity), but she does not feel the poem because she sees it primarily through the eyes of other critics, like Riddel, and so concludes of this, one of the most successful of Stevens' poems, that it is, "both uncertain and derivative, uncertain in its wild variations of mood and self-regard, derivative in its blank verse."[96] Her analysis lacks the depth which would have been provided had she considered: why there are so many variations in this poem; the forms pointed to by each of the variations; and, the blank verse in terms of its relationship to its literary past, as Winters did for "Sunday Morning." Her analysis also lacks what is most important and necessary in order to understand the "richness of poetry," the human element.

Similarly, in reference to "The Comedian as the Letter C," Vendler arrives at the conclusion that the problem of Crispin, like that of Stevens, "is not a universal one . . . it is only a dilemma from Stevens' very special vantage point . . . the vantage point of a man for whom the senses do not provide transcendent moments, who is repelled as the provocation of the senses reach excess, who is almost indifferent by temperament to any world except an arranged or speculative one--and who nevertheless 'knows' that this world is all there is,

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that this is the unique item of ecstasy."[97] She is right; what she says of Stevens is true and agrees with the perception that we get from the surface of his poems, but we are frustrated by what she presents because she stops there, never asking why the poet has the relationship to his senses that she so accurately describes. Because she provides this first half of perception, however, she must be accepted as one of the critics who is on the way to discovering Stevens and "The Whole of Harmonium." It seems as though she is afraid to go farther; perhaps this is because of her understanding of criticism. Unlike those critics who seem not to understand that they must remain secondary to the text, Vendler makes herself tertiary because she does not complete her part of the poetic act; she only begins it. It may be that her insistence on the predominating irony of Stevens' poems precludes her from perceiving the real feeling that prompts and issues as irony--in which case she really does not understand the basis of the style on which she spends so many words.

Her own critical style, also a way of "changing one's subject," is often disconcerting for two main reasons. First, her vocabulary makes us overly conscious of her rather than the text; since the book deals primarily with the text, this is very distracting. Consider, for example, this extract, including both her critique and the part of the text it is supposed to illuminate (Section iv of "Esthétique du Mal"):

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> The elegiac mode rises to its finest lines ... when it is tinged with scorn of the quotidian:
>
> The genius of misfortune
> Is not a sentimentalist. He is
> That evil, that evil in the self, from which
> In desperate hallow, rugged gesture, fault
> Falls out on everything: the genius of
> The mind, which is our being, wrong and wrong,
> The genius of that body, which is our world,
> Spent in the false engagements of the mind.
>
> The alloy here of bitterness and praise yields the point and railing of the final phrase, which uses to its advantage, like some other closings in the poem, a resolution by anti-climax, as the social triviality of the mind's "engagements" puns on the other more serious meanings of the word--whether by English suggestions of solemn promises or French overtones of moral undertakings. Even the deservedly praised endings of "Esthétique" does not match the firm ongoing momentum of this passage, and the bitter pressure of its tone.[98]

What we realize after reading countless passages of this nature is that Vendler is not providing us with meaningful analyses but with elaborate and obscuring paraphrases which make it seem as though she is saying something we should try to understand when, in reality, we have understood much more than what she presents from reading the poems ourselves.

Second, where what is needed in order to understand the "sense of the world" which is Stevens' stated subject, as Vendler reminds us, is a unified critical perception of the whole, she presents us with fragments of what in Stevens is not fragmented. As an illustration of this we can look at what Vendler writes apropos of one of the last sections of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (III,x), a poem she feels

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is "the most harmonious expression of Stevens' late flowering genius,"[99] and a poem she reads wholly as a meta-poem. In her analysis she consistently diverts attention from the movement and reality of the lines to an abstract idea of a poem she has in mind constructed from the bits of information written about it by other critics.

> The last poem proper of "Notes" attempts a naturalistic apotheosis: earth is to be no terra paradise, no very varnished green, but a green and fluent mundo, incarnated in a terrestrial Muse. Stevens' mode of address to the interior paramour (though the Spanish "mundo" harks back to the quasi-Spanish primitivism of the "Blue Guitar") is neither primitive nor worshipful like his address to the One of Fictive Music; rather by turns it is idyllic, ironic, peremptory, tender, and detached, as Frank Doggett has so finely shown: Stevens "is expressing in his conclusion, then, the genesis of a poem from the imagination of it pictured in procreant terms ("Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night") through the evasions and transformations of its conception, with the arduous work of composition ("Bent over work, anxious, content, alone") to the realization of his conception in language (calling it by name), when it is fixed in the crystal of a poem." The poem is one of Stevens' successes by his own criterion; it resists the intelligence almost successfully, in its elusive changes:
>
> Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
> How is it I find you in difference, see you there
> In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?
>
> You are familiar yet an aberration.
> Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
> A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires
>
> That I should name you flatly, waste no words,
> Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
> Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,

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> Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
> You remain the more than natural figure. You
> Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational
>
> Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
>
> They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
> We shall return at twilight from the lecture
> Pleased that the irrational is rational,
>
> Until flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by your name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

The poem is all the more touching because Stevens had begun "Notes" in a professorial role, instructing the ephebe in his own Sorbonne. The effect of this canto is an abandonment of the preceptorial role (though he is tempted to that role in the wish to name his paramour flatly, wasting no words, checking her evasions). The intent of the poem is not to resolve theoretical difficulties but to evoke some of the hues controlling Stevens' relation to the "untrue" mundo, as it seems from moment to moment celestial, familiar, exasperating, solacing, pleasing, and irrational. In the suavity of the last five lines, the poet is already, even before the stability to come, in control of his images, not beset by them: he will be pleased, not solaced or exalted; he will be flicked by feeling, not moved by passion; and the final civilized calling-by-name will take place not under a tree but framed in crystal in a gildered street, as the green primitive is at last seen for what it is--a beginning leading to the crystal, not an end in itself.

After the fine fluidities of the last canto the epilogue to "Notes" is something of an anticlimax, repeating earlier material and resting on the rather too simply put interdependence of the man of action and the man of words. It dwells chiefly on the poet's war and its contribution to active life, never giving equal time poetically to what the soldier might give the poet. . . .[100]

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The unity that should have been preserved when considering this particular section of "Notes," includes its ties to what it echoes of the earlier parts of "The Whole of Harmonium," as well as its ties to the real and imagined realities in which the poet lived. The "mode of address," for example, is not limited to being that to the "interior paramour;" it changes in the second stanza to that same form used to address "The High-Toned Old Christian Woman"--the internal enemy with whom Stevens warred throughout his life. In his imagination, he has tried to change her completely into his "Fat girl, terrestrial," but she has resisted--she is "a change not quite completed." In addition, the poet is both placing himself "underneath/ A tree," as Vendler notes, but he is also indicating that he is (his being, his nature) underneath a tree, Santayana's figure that Stevens has used to such advantage throughout his corpus to identify himself. As the canto progresses, the figure in his mind changes again and becomes actualized in the person of his wife, the only woman (besides his mother--an allusion which also plays here) whom he would have known, "Bent over work, anxious, content, alone." This description also evokes certain paintings of women bent over ironing of Degas, Manet, and Picasso; with these allusions, these lines indicate that even when he tries to conceive her as she is in his mind, she is aestheticized, imagined, like the canvasses recalled here. In other words, she has never been perceived by him; she has always been "the

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more than natural figure" no matter "however fragrant, however dear." In this there is both loss and gain--the absence of real sexual experience becomes replaced by "the fiction that results from feeling," "the more than rational distortion" that reveals, because it is not rational, the precise moving contours of the experience of the poet with the woman he loved, or thought he loved, the primary relationship of his life out of which the shape of his reality grew. What the poet gives us here is one of his most meaningful descriptions both of his life and of the making of his poetry because he connects them. The constant for both is feeling; it is when he will be "flicked by feeling" that he will need to name, to make, to fix her, just as at another time, in another place "flicked by feeling" he would have tried to love her--the roots are the same.

In addition, the intrusion of the soldier is connected to another intrusion of a soldier at the end of the poem, "The Bouquet" (CP 448). There the soldier clearly represents reality breaking in and destroying an actual sensual thing of beauty which had prompted the poet to feel and thus to create; it reminds us of the importance of memory and of art--that were it not for the artist's use of memory, the things of beauty would be lost, broken by time and reality. In "Notes," the soldier at the closing serves the same purpose, again reminding us that had the poet not fixed his memories in the crystal of his poetry, we would not have his

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additions to the body of beauty. When Stevens wrote that "Poetry is part of the res not about it," he was suggesting the existence of that great body of Beauty, of Good, of Truth, which pre-exists the poet in outline and in partial attributes added by past makers. As the poet discovers truth, beauty, and goodness as one for himself and tries to describe it in the language of his time, like the Comedian, Dante, he is simply adding attributes to the res; the more attributes there are describing it, the easier it becomes to see, to feel, to hear, to smell it. The attributes added are "more than rational distortions" since they are personal and, thus, idiosyncratic, but the rational framework, its genre and species, are already known to be the forms of reality and the beauty, goodness and truth of those forms. The soldier of reality periodically intrudes and breaks the concrete forms; because of this, the imaginative fixing, revolving in crystal, is all the more urgent and necessary. The critic, if he or she is not to act as another soldier, must stop and appreciate the additions to the body of Beauty and help us to recover the memories out of which they grew. The critic must remember with the poet that, "We never arrive intellectually but emotionally we arrive constantly" (OP 173).

Harold Bloom is a critic who is painfully aware of the memories of the poets. In his devoted attention to Stevens, Bloom has become aware of the kind of criticism that is

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necessary, even though his own vocabulary prevents him from achieving it. Speaking of Stevens as a "belated strong poet," he writes,

> . . . the spirit in him insists upon priority and autonomy, yet the text he produces is condemned to offer itself for interpretation of other interpretations, rather than as what it asserts itself to be, an interpretation of life. No illusion about his status and function is more difficult to shed, as I have learned through being denounced by virtually every poet I meet. Yet I am puzzled by one aspect of these denunciations, energizing as it is to be denounced. The function of criticism at the present time, as I conceive it, is to find a middle way between the paths of demystification of meaning, and of recollection or restoration of meaning, or between limitation and representation.[101]

Accordingly, he vigorously opposes Vendler, for whom he says, "Stevens is wholly an ironist, whose one true subject is dessication."[102] In spite of the handicap of his overly erudite, theoretical vocabulary, however, Bloom has done more than any other critic (with the exception of Jarrell) to help us understand the poet primarily because he has taken the historical perspective fully into account in his reading. It is from Bloom that we begin to perceive the actual relationship of Stevens to his poetic fathers--for Bloom, the Romantics and the American Trancendentalists; Bloom's theory of misprision, including the six tropaic shapes it takes, is probably the most illuminating critical formulation of our time, even when it is over-complicated, because it awakens us to the complexity of the operation of sensibility,

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and because it meaningfully acknowledges the place of Freudianism and the necessity of dealing with the sub- and unconscious when reading modern poetry--as we must accept its presence and effect in our lives; Freud's work, like Einstein's and Marx's, has conditioned our reality to an extent that cannot be ignored.

To recount the particulars of Bloom's criticism of Stevens is unnecessary here since whatever he has done to sharpen our apprehension of the poet's relationship to his poetic and philosophic fathers has become part of how we read the poet because it is accurate and rings of Truth. And so whenever there is an echo of this sort, there is an implicit acknowledgement of the extraordinary effort of this critic. The only problem with Bloom's work is that it does not make the poetry more available because it is addressed to other critics rather than to other readers of the poems. Again, Bloom also forgets that "It Must Be Human." Because of this, he misses the most vital level on which Stevens' poetry operates.

When Bloom writes of Stevens' relationship to his precursors, they are always literary or historical beings; when he writes of what the poet represses, he names only the work of other poets or philosophers. But there is another life besides that of the mind. Stevens' real parents and grandparents were also his precursors; the material he repressed was not only literary, but also included those aspects of his

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real, lived experience which threatened his being and so had to be defended against by trope against trope. All men have experiences of this kind, and not to address attention to discovering what they were in Stevens' case is to avoid the "world of facts" in which we all live and where the poet speaks, as well as he can, for all men. Bloom is infuriating because he moves around this central experience, troping with critical rather than poetic devices. Consider this passage, quoted at length because only in this way can we perceive its effect, where Bloom gives with one hand what he takes away with the other:

> . . . What is most important about the First Idea is that it is intolerable: we cannot live with it. Re-imagining the First Idea is for Stevens the only act of the poet, and since we are men of sun, the First Idea is both an unacceptable idea of Man and an unacceptable idea of the sun. The major error in Stevens-criticism is to follow Stevens too closely in his working assumption (not his deepest conviction) that the First Idea is the Truth, albeit intolerable. The First Idea cannot be the Truth, for if it were, then we would be content to live with nature as the animals live with nature. For Stevens, the Truth necessarily is a fiction, the fiction that results from feeling, or the re-imagining of the First Idea. Even the First Idea is an imagined thing, and not a thing only. . . .
>
> What does Stevens forget, in his poetic repression, in order for him to be able to present his dialectic of the First Idea in the place of what is being forgotten? I would say that he forgets the darkest insight achieved by our native strain, by the Transcendental tradition of American Romanticism: In the beginning was the Lie. All later lies are made against this giant Lie at the origin, and so all strong American

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poems whatsoever, being later lies, lie against time. But what was the Primal Lie, in an American imaginative context? Surely, it was the Emersonian denial of Nachtraglichkeit, of being as a nation "after the event." This denial is our national revisionism, that made of all previous cultural history only a deferred action that prepared for our new stage of development. . . .

Nachtraglichkeit, in Freud, rhetorically considered is a metaleptic or transumptive notion. The memory-trace is revised belatedly so as to adjust either to new experience or to a new vision of experience. Freud's crucial statement here comes in 1896 in a letter to Fliess: "I am working on the assumption that our psychical mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a re-arrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances--to a re-transcription."

This appears to mean that memory-traces that have undergone the defense of isolation tend to be revised after-the-event. Presumably, the motive for the revision is that isolation yields to another defense, which I assume must be a greater repression. Since sexual development tends to provide the model for Freud's idea of Nachtraglichkeit, we can surmise that it is the temporal oddity of sexual maturation that suggests the temporal oddities of cultural and intellectual maturation, or the temporal vagaries of all insight. . . .

. . . But I want to dissent, as before, from earlier canonical readings and, again, my own included. The critics of Stevens have misread his intricate evasions as his version of Modernism, yet the study of misprision will reveal how traditional and overdetermined are the patterns of his defensive tropings. It is the peculiar triumph of Stevens' poetry that he constructed, out of his intense anxiety of belatedness, the Sublime of his strongest poetry. His isolating metonymies are restituted by the personality constructed pattern (largely following Valéry) in which he re-imagines his ironically conceived First Idea, a re-imagining that brings back again the Transcendental strain of American poetry.[103]

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Here, and again in a more recent essay in Figures of Capable Imagination,[104] Bloom clarifies, in his terms, his earlier readings of Stevens[105] and places him securely in the tradition of American Romanticism with its necessary expression of the Sublime. Whether or not we agree with this final categorization, we appreciate the touchstones Bloom provides, though we balk at his own overt clinamen away from considering his own strongest father, Freud. He lights on sexual experience, on its relationship to how we perceive the events of our own lives as well as the events of history and the inheritances of cultures, but he flies off just as quickly and goes back to dealing with the abstraction of literary history alone. Nonetheless, we are grateful for at least "the touch of the hand" because it opens the way for criticism which will take it into account without becoming over-determined by it--that is, criticism which will not omit the importance of history, of time and place, and of culture, while considering those more human aspects.

Because Bloom misreads Freud in his own way, he perceives the poet he studies, in this case Stevens, as being tossed ruthlessly between super-ego (in the form of his "precursors") and id (in the form of his overwhelming desire to speak in his own irrational voice--as the absolute solipsist) and does not understand the poet as ego, the mediating function, that determines sanity and uses what comes down from super-ego and up from id to communicate who he is--a blending

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of both, neither pure inheritor nor absolute solipsist.

This aspect of Bloom's criticism grows out of his using Milton's Satan as a model for all poets. In The Anxiety of Influence[106] he finds the model for the cycles of poetic representation he proposes in the action of Milton's Satan. The problem with this is that Satan is a literary model that makes fictional Satans out of all "belated poets;" these Satan-poets are condemned to live in anti-worlds longing for the lost paradise. What Bloom forgets to consider when looking at subsequent poets is the equally important present in which the poet lives and where the function of his ego determines the success of his life. The present poses real challenges to the past's memorial ones. In this light, Bloom would have done better to consider Milton rather than Satan as his model and seen then that the then present reality of the poet's blindness, perceived through the controlling metaphors of the poem, as the fact that makes Milton the one and only precursor in Bloom's world (in the same way as Milton's blindness, Beethoven's deafness, progressing by stages, must have had the greatest bearing on the kind of modulation and innovative orchestration he achieved).

The work of a poet (maker) is strong or weak to the extent that it is informed by a present reality as well as by the intellectual/imaginative past; Milton's genius is directly proportional to his struggle with blindness. To make Milton/Satan the model against which to measure all

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later poets is to suggest that there must be suffering equivalent to the loss of sight and to ignore the relative reality of each poet as he struggles in it. In other words, are we to say that we want deprivation as great as Milton's to make our poets strong or do we simply accept Milton as an anomaly? In the same context, in The Ringers In the Tower, Bloom speaks of Milton's final solipsism in Satan;[107] accordingly, then, the strong poet, for Bloom, will necessarily be solipsistic. What he does not consider is that solipsism is the only possibility for a man gone blind who is still concerned with finding something imperishable. That all later poets should use him as a model, however, obviating the peculiar reality that was his alone, is somewhat absurd.

After observing these bits of Bloom's reading, we must re-evaluate the bases he presents for considering Stevens as a "belated strong poet." Contrary to what Bloom writes, and as has been dealt with above in various contexts, Stevens did not consider himself a "strong poet." The mark of solipsism which the critic uses to identify him as such was, for Stevens, a mark of failure; and we must judge a poet by his own standards, his own intentions. The poems which are most successful escape solipsism and approach an utterance which is not at all in the American strain of Romanticism, but an utterance which is epic and rejects the isolationism of the self; there are not many of these poems. Those poems which are within the tradition Bloom indicates are there to instruct

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and bespeak the failure which Stevens knew. His own greatness is that, like Milton, he made his weakness a strength; unfortunately, or fortunately--depending on whether or not one follows Bloom absolutely--his loss was not heroic, but comic. It was the loss of everyman who, because of his time, his circumstances, and what he was taught, created out of words for himself and the woman he "loved," spiritual beings, angels, who could unleash the lion in the lute but never the lion in their own natures.

The following chapters of this section (together with the earlier chapters where individual poems are discussed) begin a fuller exploration of Stevens' poetry than exists at present. I say "begins" because only certain of the strongest poems of Harmonium reflecting Stevens' struggle with both his literary and real daemons are presented for analysis. A complete reading of the poet would trace the roots uncovered here to their full out-branching and flowering through the entire corpus. At the same time, these chapters extend the concept of literary criticism in our century to include "impressionism" discarded by the New Critics and their descendants. Impressionism has the advantage, by virtue of its requiring "devoted attention to one thing over a long period of time"--as Stevens said poets give to long poems and lovers to their mistresses--of drawing out from the seeds planted in our own Imaginations both the fruits of older poems and myths remembered, whose

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tastes are too vague in the poem to yield to direct scientific analysis, and the flower of the re-created "sense of the world" of the man who wrote the poems. My hope is, however, that with the roots uncovered, any devoted reader will be able to follow their growth and taste the fruits in all their richness and variety.

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Notes to Chapter 9

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[3] The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950.

[4] Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, Durham: Duke University Press, 1963.

[5] Wallace Stevens: The Poem as Act, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970.

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20 From a review in the New York Times Book Review, February 27, 1977, p. 24.

21 In The Third Book of Criticism, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1965, pp. 55-76.

22 Ibid., p. 56.

23 As described in Creative Criticism and Other Essays.

24 On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.

25 The Third Book of Criticism, pp. 59-60.

26 Ibid., pp. 63-64.

27 Ibid., p. 64.

28 Ibid., p. 71.

29 "Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation" and "Wallace Stevens: The Skeptical Music," in The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry, English and American, New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.

30 Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967, p. 281n.

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31 Ibid., p. 10.

32 Ibid., pp. 12-14.

33 Ibid., p. 7.

34 Ibid., p. 30.

35 Ibid., p. 35.

36 Ibid., p. 38.

37 Ibid., p. 39.

38 Ibid., p. 28.

39 Ibid., p. 56.

40 Ibid., p. 53.

41 Ibid., p. 56.

42 Ibid., p. 15.

43 Ibid., p. 20.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 56.

46 Ibid., pp. 88-89.

47 Ibid., p. 90.

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48 Ibid., p. 25.

49 Doggett, p. viii.

50 Ibid., p. 88.

51 Ibid., pp. 55-74.

52 Ibid., p. 109n.

53 Ibid., pp. 51-52.

54 Ibid., p. 52.

55 Ibid., pp. 90-91.

56 Ibid., pp. 68-69.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., p. 84.

59 Ibid., p. ix.

60 Ibid., p. 115.

61 Ibid., p. 63.

62 Ibid., p. 116.

63 In this context, it is interesting to remember the earlier Homeric myth of Narcissus as contained in a Hymn of the seventh or eighth century, rather than Ovid's commonly

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known one. Stevens plays on this earlier version in reinterpreting Narcissism for the twentieth century. The narcissus was a lovely bloom of silvery purple (We are reminded, of course, of Stevens' application of this color, especially in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon"). According to Edith Hamilton (Mythology, New York, Mentor, 1942, pp. 87-88):

> Zeus called it into being to help his brother, the lord of the dark underworld, when he wanted to carry away the maiden he had fallen in love with, Demeter's daughter, Persephone. She was gathering flowers with her companions in the vale of Enna. . . . Suddenly she caught sight of something quite new to her. . . . A hundred blossoms grew up from the roots, and the fragrance was very sweet. . . . Only Persephone among the maidens had spied it. . . . Wondering she stretched out her hands to take the lovely plaything, but before she touched it a chasm opened in the earth and out of it coal-black horses sprang, drawing a chariot and driven by one who had a look of dark splendor, majestic and beautiful and terrible. . . . The next moment she was being borne away from the radiance of earth in springtime to the world of the dead by the king who rules it.

This version, carrying with it implications of being drawn into early periodic death by the attraction of the beautiful and strange, has a great deal more to do with Stevens' fears and the actuality of his life than the other where, by application, it is by falling in love with his own image that the poet-hero dies. There is also a very sexual aspect in this earlier myth that Stevens also picked up and insinuated into his poetry as we see in the analyses of some of his poems.

64 Doggett, p. 108.

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65 Ibid., p. 67.

66 The Dome and The Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968, pp. 98-101 et passim.

67 Ibid., pp. 248-250.

68 Ibid., pp. 186-187 et passim.

69 Ibid., p. 241.

70 Ibid., p. 5.

71 See Chapters 1 & 2 of this study for a fuller discussion of this aspect.

72 Baird, pp. 14-15.

73 Ibid., p. 32.

74 Ibid., p. 97.

75 Ibid., p. 116.

76 Ibid., p. xxiii.

77 Ibid., p. 57.

78 Ibid., p. 35.

79 "Wallace Stevens: The Last Lesson of the Master," The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens,

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Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965, pp. 121-142; and, "The Modern Age: Wallace Stevens and the Ultimate Poem," The Continuity of American Poetry, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 376-419.

80 Baird, p. 76.

81 Ibid.

82 Any doubt there may be concerning Stevens' incorporation of aspects from Poe is quickly dispelled upon looking at "Contray Theses (I)" (CP 266):

> Now grapes are plush upon the vines.
> A soldier walks before my door.
>
> The hives are heavy with the combs.
> Before, before, before my door.
>
> And seraphs cluster on the domes,
> And saints are brilliant in fresh cloaks.
>
> Before, before, before my door.
> The shadows lessen on the walls.
>
> The bareness of the house returns.
> An acid sunlight fills the halls.
>
> Before, before. Blood smears the oaks.
> A soldier stalks before my door.

Besides the obvious rhythmic and sound parallels, Stevens' naming of "seraphs," which he also uses elsewhere in a number of poems, carries with it Poe's meaning of those who envied him and his Annabel Lee and so judged them and caused her death. These "seraphs" are figures for the super-ego; Stevens uses them consciously in his poems as pointing to his own

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internalization of that societal conscience that prevents, or prevented, his own affective fulfillment.

83 Baird, p. 59.

84 Ibid., p. 232.

85 Ibid., p. 235.

86 Ibid., pp. 235-36.

87 Ibid., p. 73.

88 Ibid., p. 154.

89 Vendler, p. 3.

90 Ibid., p. 7; she acknowledges Stevens' stated subject but does not describe what that "sense of the world" is other than naming it as a kind of "irony."

91 Ibid., pp. 10-11.

92 Jarrell, The Third Book of Criticism, pp. 63-64 as cited above.

93 Vendler, p. 37.

94 Ibid., p. 2.

95 Ibid., p. 58.

96 Ibid., p. 63.

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97 Ibid., p. 50.

98 Ibid., p. 210.

99 Ibid., p. 205.

100 Ibid., pp. 204-205.

101 "Wallace Stevens: The Transcendental Strain," Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, p. 270.

102 Ibid., p. 273.

103 Ibid., pp. 286-288.

104 New York: Seabury Press, 1976.

105 In The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp. 217-234; A Map of Misreading, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 177-206; "'Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction': A Commentary," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963, pp. 76-95.

106 New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

107 Ibid., p. 19.

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10. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle."

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is a poem of disillusionment written by a man of forty. Of it Stevens writes: "I had in mind simply a man fairly well along in life, looking back and talking in a more or less personal way about life" (L 251). What Stevens is looking back to contrasted to his present state is the "occasion," the poem, "the cry." What first strikes us is both the anguish and anger of this cry:

> "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
> There is not nothing, no; no, never nothing,
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."

Opening the poem is an invocation; of it Stevens later writes: "My recollection is that the Mother of Heaven was merely somebody to swear by, and that the reference was not symbolic" (L 251). To whom these lines are addressed and why he is swearing are both questions answered by the time the end of the first stanza is reached: the addressee is his wife, Elsie, and his mocking anger is the result of his disillusionment upon looking back. The next questions to be answered are: why he expressed his feelings in his particular form, and how we can assume that the addressee is Elsie, and not the poet's Muse, or Fate, or some other equally abstract being.

The poem tells us that he "mocked her in magnificent measure" at some time, previous to the writing of the poem. The quotation marks encapsulating the invocation make it

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appear as though these words were actually spoken and then recalled and recorded at the time of writing. It is equally possible, however, that he mocked her in silence, recalling perhaps what he would have liked to have said to her, but was unable; or, not wanting to injure her, the words meant for her turn and mock him. Or, it could be the silent cry of a man of forty, full of anger, frustration, and disappointment, sitting in his room filled with paintings by painters he never knew, sent from abroad by people he never saw, and figurines sent from the Orient by the sister of an acquaintance, recollecting an argument between himself and Elsie, and in his imagination saying what he didn't say, or possibly did say but not in "magnificent measure." What makes this opening ambiguous is the clothing of the anger in a kind of sacred magnificence. Stevens perceived this ambiguity, reflected in his realization that he could be mocking himself alone. This point should be set aside for the moment, however, since the rest of the poem, by revealing the nature of its maker, will give its answer as to the nature of this opening utterance. The strength of the sextet of negatives and the "clashed edges of two words that kill" will also for the moment point to nothing beyond themselves; that is, we will accept them as part of a statement made in anger at some time previous to the writing of the poem, the recollection of which provides the occasion of the poem. The reading of the whole poem will elucidate the meaning of these lines.

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Looking closely at the first stanza, we can distinguish at least three and possibly five temporal-psychological moments; these "moments" are not significant in themselves, but serve here only as markers. The first is marked by the invocation which seems to define a specific incident in the past. The second moment, "And so I mocked her in magnificent measure./ Or was it that I mocked myself alone?/ I wish that I might be a thinking stone," is ambiguous and the most complex because the first line refers to the four lines of the first moment (that is, "magnificent measure" refers directly to the words spoken and quoted in the first four lines), but together with the second line ("Or was it that I mocked myself alone?") it also indicates another distinct temporal moment where the first four lines represent "emotions recollected in tranquility." These lines are the pivot of the stanza both temporally and psychologically. "And so I mocked her in magnificent measure" provides the temporal transition; "Or was it that I mocked myself alone?" establishes the doubt, in a neo-Cartesian phrasing, as the psychological pivot on which not only this stanza but the whole poem turns. The next line, "I wish that I might be a thinking stone" is both part of this second moment as pivot but also marks the third moment which, like the second, serves as a comment on what has come previous to it. It is an extremely strong statement and, at the same time, an extremely desperate one made by a man who has never been able to deal effectively with certain aspects

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of his emotional life. After the previous lines, this line comes with the sound of finality--finality not as pronouncement, however, but rather as a brake on the emotions stirred up by what he has recollected. Rather than be the "prim letter-writer in a wig" struggling with "the more vigorous warrior" of his body and senses, he wishes he were a "thinking stone"; this line with its resonances of Descartes, points to what is a major epistemological problem for Stevens. The weight is tremendous, reinforced by the final end rhyme of alone and stone,[1] as well as by the switch of this line into the present.

It should also be noted at this point that his wished for description of himself as "thinking stone" is directly opposite to the numerous other statements concerning his self and his life as fluid (". . . he conceived his voyaging to be/ And up and down between two elements") and points ahead to the finality of "The Rock" with its associations to the solidity of St. Peter. The abrupt shift between the sixth and seventh lines, between the questioning doubt of "Or was it that I mocked myself alone?/" and "I wish that I might be a thinking stone" indicates a very emphatic unwillingness to continue the train of thought pointed to by the question. The wish to be a thinking stone in fact replaces an exploration of whether or not he mocked himself alone. The line carries the weight of him as a thinking stone; that is, it frustrates the emotions by making a futile, if very meaningful,

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wish, instead of pursuing the stream of thought prompted by the recollection of the first moment of mocking in magnificent measure.

The next moment, "The sea of spuming thought foists up again/ The radiant bubble that she was. . .", defines another distinct present in contrast to the previous moment when the wish to be a thinking stone is made, while at the same time continuing the metaphor of himself as "thinking stone." We feel him girding himself against his emotions, imagining himself as stone-like, invulnerable. In contrast to the wish to be a "thinking stone" is "the sea of spuming thought," of thought coupled with spume, with Venus-Aphrodite, the female, sexual. The sea tempts him with recollection, foisting up "The radiant bubble that she was." The final moment comes upon him and the reader suddenly, ". . . And then/ A deep up-pouring from some saltier well/ Within me, bursts its watery syllable," describing the surge of tears coming up out of him. He, as thinking stone, perceives deep within himself a "saltier well," saltier even than "the sea of spuming thought" because it represents the joining of the salt of that sea with the eroded salt of his interior, his emotions. (This image also evokes Bosch's inhabitants of hell; Stevens may or may not have been aware of this, yet it does add another dimension to what Stevens is dealing with in this poem.) The reference here, "its watery syllable," is intentionally ambiguous; it can refer either to "the radiant bubble" or to "A deep up-

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pouring." In case of the former, it translates as his bursting into tears thus obscuring the recollected image of what she was; in the latter, it indicates that feeling of a lump in one's throat or chest that precedes the welling up of tears. The final moment, charged as it is with emotional and psychological weight and meaning, is made even more intense by the way Stevens uses syntax to explode this meaning. The moment begins in line nine with an enjambed "And then," which prepares the reader for another descriptive statement in the past tense--i.e., as one would say "And then we went, etc.," and it is not until the final line of the stanza, after a controlled pause provided by the comma, that this "And then" is resolved by an unexpected present which "bursts" the import of the entire stanza into what he really feels, because we as readers experience the pain of the cry at this point. Meaning is exploded; all that is left at the end of the stanza is a man of forty crying.

At this point emotion stops; by the beginning of the next stanza and on until the end of the poem Stevens has gained control of himself and becomes "the thinking stone" he wished to become, meditating on his disillusionment. The poem becomes a hymn to the loss of faith, faith not only in the narrowly defined religious sense, but faith as an illusion, as the expectation and dreams of youth. For Stevens, this faith has a quasi-religious aspect, sublimated on many levels, which colors his life and poetry to an extraordinary extent.

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His many attempts at reconciling his pose as comedian (an extremely complex role involving him in a jester-like pose as well as in a deeply felt desire to offer himself and his verses to an idealized woman; here, of course, as in his earlier poetry and letters, Elsie) with his role as meditative ascetic lead eventually to the crumbling of the ideal. What happens when this occurs and reality takes the place of the ideal is the crisis described by this poem; this crisis is the taking off point for all his future dealings with the difference between imagination and reality. This is the event that informs his poetry.

Looking only at this first stanza for the moment, however, reconsider the opening invocation. Although Stevens writes that "Mother of Heaven, regina of the clouds" was only something "to swear by," the fact remains that this particular expression and its form, continuing with "O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon" strongly resembles the epithets of the Virgin found in litanies to her. (This has been noted by other critics as well.) Bearing this in mind, we should look at the following excerpts from letters written to Elsie Moll. On December 8, 1908, only a few weeks before he proposes marriage to her he writes:

> Now you have a blue ribbon in your hair and I have on slippers and I don't see why we should be prim and prudent and proper.--Once upon a time there was a beggar who scraped together a living by juggling; and that was all he could do. One day he thought it would be easier for him to become a monk, so he

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> entered a monastery. Being a man of low degree, he knew of no way to worship Our Lady except to juggle before her image. And so, when no one was looking he did his few tricks and turned a somersault; and, thereupon, Our Lady, being much pleased by his simplicity, smiled upon him as she had never smiled on any monk before.--Now, supposed that, instead of doing his best, he had grieved about his shortcomings and offered only his grief. Would the image have smiled?--And a jig--and a jiggety-jiggety-jig. There is my juggling, my dear--and my somersault. I inscribe a record of it in the last chapter of "The Book of Doubts and Fears" --And for yourself--never look "in a cracked glass"--The theory that this is the best of possible worlds was short-lived; but for all that, no one ever doubted that two sinners could make each other happy and so forget themselves. --. . . . (L 114).

And, on January 6, 1909, addressing her as "O Muse" and referring both to the fact of their engagement and to the months ahead until their marriage, he writes:

> I am not sincerely mirthful, for the last night's endless sleep has clapped me in a mental cellar, and I shall need a day or two to get back to the daylite--and more until I reach the ancient crystalline tower. --I do not return placidly, as if it had never happened. I do not attempt History. I shudder at Art.--I only write turbulently to say that I am back again--and that I wish you were with me--wish it immensely. --I could say more--there is a great, sleepy, jumble in me seeking to be arranged, to be set in order, and then to be spoken.--But if I pull Silence over me like a cloak and retire to a corner, I am not less stormy; and this little letter is my corner, for the minute. . . . --Hidden in that cloak I make ready for the next stage of the Inky Pilgrimage--through snow, through wind, through rain, through early warmth, through May and

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> June and summer--until the Pilgrimage is over. . . . And we have been otherwise upset. Holidays play hob with the serene mind. Shortly, however, the adventure will cast longer shadows and then for History--and Art--the art of recalling the day colorless except for the shadows of silver-white and blue-snow and sky,--and silver itself--on the icy crusts of high fields.--I need meditation for that. --Yet forgetting all that, and thinking only of yourself--the cloak must shelter me, to-night at least. The newspapers with their "white sales;" the President's messages, the news from Italy seem like tedious messages from earth to a blazing inhabitant of Mars--or of some planetary Terra Incognita, where only Elsie lives always, and where I visit and have become half-native with her.--But I cannot, and will not, enter so lofty a serenade; and promise you only the plain contents of an idle spirit and, bye-and-bye,--inquiries regarding Moly & Mr. Toad. How soon we came together after that first conquest of myself, so necessary to be made by me. Could you fail to see the prim letter-writer being mauled by the more vigorous warrior--yet still clining to his wig?--Now the wig is resumed. We exchange the lamp for the sun. We exchange paper for what paper can only print.--But I warn you, the warrior with his button-hole bouquet is the stronger and the prim scribbler will come to a bad end. You will see. It will exceed all Faery.--Adieu! Another night and I shall be more myself. . . . (L 115-116).

In the first excerpt are the seeds of the illusion that will eventually wither without ever blooming to become the disillusionment found in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." In paralleling himself and the juggler-monk of the fable,[2] Stevens provides the clue necessary to the understanding of this poem, as well as of his poetry considered as a whole. Furthermore, his relationship to Elsie, here described as the kind of

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relationship existing between the juggler-monk and the Virgin, informs us that his vision of himself as a poet is no ordinary, that is, contemporary vision; rather, it is a vision of himself as troubadour poet, as "juggler," even if it is an ironic vision. But, counterbalancing this is the equally strong definition of himself as monk, as moralist, evidenced by the fable in the first excerpt, and also by the lines in the second where he refers to the months of his engagement to Elsie as an "Inky Pilgrimage" ("inky" because of the continued letter writing). Also in this second excerpt is additional evidence suggesting that Stevens was himself aware of a duality in his personality, between the "prim letter-writer" with his wig and the "more vigorous warrior;" at this point, he describes the latter as the stronger. The reference to him and Elsie as "two sinners" in the earlier letter, coming after the description of himself as juggler-monk and Elsie as "Our Lady," strongly points to the existence of a conflict between the desire for an idealized, moral life, and the suggested existence of a base, sexual relationship, characterized by his reference to them as sinners.

That Stevens had difficulty in accepting "things as they are" without the cloak of imagination is evident from his many letters to Elsie both before and after their marriage. In a letter to her dated March 21, 1907, he stresses, with a strange desperation for so young a man, the importance of his illusion:

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> Elsie. . . , you will never grow old will you? You will always be just my little girl, won't you? You must always have pink cheeks and golden hair. To be young is all there is in the world. The rest is nonsense--and cant. They talk so beautifully about work and having a family and a home (and I do sometimes)--but its all worry and headaches and respectable poverty and forced gushing. Still you must not remember this against me. By gushing, I mean: telling people how nice it is when, in reality, you would give all your last 30 years for one of your first thirty. Old people are tremendous frauds. The point is to be young--and to be a little in love, or very much--and to desire carnations and "creations"--and to be glad when Spring comes. . . . Yet here I am, twenty-seven, practicing law in New York, and writing letters to my princess. . . .

Taking the preceding material from the letters into consideration of the first stanza provides us with a clearer perception of what "the radiant bubble that she was" was, in fact, for Stevens. What emerges is a pattern of his repeated attempts at placing Elsie on an imaginary pedestal (to say the least), to have her approach as nearly as possible the role of sacred Virgin, pure, young, and chaste. At the same time, there emerges a self-portrait of the poet describing as well as he can the two aspects of his personality. The one is prim, proper, monk-like in his devotion to his Lady, and always religious (in the sense of living not for himself and the gratification of his pleasures and desires, but because of faith or illusion coming out of a reticence and fear that are markedly Christian); the other, whom he describes as "juggler," as "vigorous warrior," is extremely sensual, strong,

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and loves to "display his muzzy belly in parade." Interestingly, this latter aspect Stevens associates with the "Jew" in him. In a letter to Hi Simons much later in his career apropos of some inquiries made by Mr. Simons about certain poems, Stevens writes: "Notwithstanding his exacting intelligence, the Jew is a good example of the man who drifts from fasting to feasting. I ought to say that it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. I don't necessarily mean some substitute for the church, because no one believes in the church as an institution more than I do. My trouble and the trouble with a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe."

Bearing all of this in mind, we look at the last four lines of the stanza (also remembering the litanic overtones of the first four lines, and the poet's paralleling of "her" to the Virgin):

> The sea of spuming thought foists up again
> The radiant bubble that she was. And then
> A deep up-pouring from some saltier well
> Within me, bursts its watery syllable.

"The radiant bubble that she was" refers back to the image of her he held in his past, of her described in the letters, and then, by extension, to that image contained in the opening invocation. But, his body, his senses, his emotions want her physically, and at the same time threaten to destroy and do destroy this morally proper image. In his mind, the physical reality of their relationship is associated with sin and so, too,

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with the portrayal in Bosch's hell of creatures contained in "watery syllables." The physical aspect defiles the "radiant bubble," his imagined, ideal Elsie. With this secondary reading, the use of verb tenses and the enjambed "And then" are realized as additional layers of ambiguity. In this case the "And then" indicates that this entire sentence refers to the past; "bursts," then, in the present indicates that the poet is speaking to himself, emphatically reproaching himself for his behavior (in the same way that one might say "And then I go and ruin everything" in the present tense, although referring to a past event, as could be inferred from the statement itself).

What emerges at the end of the stanza is a personal description of the basic irony involved in man's consciousness, reworked in a very particular way. The occasion of the poem is prompted by thought, recollection. But the poem is deeply anti-thought, anti-consciousness, since it is consciousness that is the source of our difference from Nature (i.e., in saying "I know I am a gourd distended, etc."). Stevens is here challenging Descartes' "I think therefore I am," saying that it is not enough to think; thought alone does not define being, since it does not at any point take into account the emotional effect of that knowledge, that thinking. And so the sextet of negatives in the third line here gains meaning in denial, and the wish to be a thinking stone is clarified. The only way of satisfying the Cartesian dictum is to be of stone.

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In this stanza Stevens describes the emotional effect of thought and suffers a desperate anger because it is, together with its counterpart of imagination, all he has.

The second stanza is very different both in tone and in effect from the first. It is an awkward stanza, full of false starts, unfit poses, and clumsy language. Beginning the stanza are the lines describing the "red bird." Until line seven, the reader cannot make the association to Spring necessary to make the image of the red bird emerge as the robin or the cardinal, heralds of Spring. The image completely distracts attention away from what has occurred in the first stanza and places us, together with the poet, in a completely poetic, unreal world, in the "fluent mundo" of the imagination where red birds and golden floors exist quite naturally. The emotional outburst prompted by thought at the end of the first stanza yields to this imaginary world where the poet can "make believe a starry connaissance." Unfortunately, however, the product of a "make-believe" world is "fancy"--and these first four lines appear, at first, as the memorabilia of one of those "fops of fancy" Stevens abhors. It is quite fitting then that these four lines should end abruptly with "finds;" not only the bird, but Stevens as well, needs to find something, and that is a proper voice, his "choir" ("Bravura adequate to this great hymn," "the music and manner of the paladins/ To make oblation fit").

Stevens' awkward use of "choir" in this stanza which,

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apparently, when the red bird "finds," will cause "A torrent [to] fall from him" is very intriguing. On the most immediate level it suggests religious ceremony (as does the opening invocation) in spite of its figurative meanings which also function here; but it is awkward within the context of these four lines; it is as though its usage here was contrived, forced from fancy to fit a conception of how the opening of a stanza on the coming of Spring and the mortality of man should sound. It appears as though Stevens chose the word choir arbitrarily, or, at best, from a stock of Elizabethan language re-worked in a neo-Romantic fashion (in the same way as "meridian"); it emerges as an instance of dead language, un-revitalized by its usage or context. When we come across this use of choir in the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, or Shelley it is not awkward and does not arrest our attention because in the context of Romantic poetry it is completely natural, but here it does stop us. Possibly, Stevens meant these lines to show the inadequacy of this kind of utterance; it is almost as though he had written them simply in order to get to line five, "Shall I uncrumple this much crumpled thing?", which coming as it does after the abrupt ending of the previous line provides an image of Stevens sitting in his room, holding in his hand the crumpled and re-crumpled piece of paper on which he has written these lines only to reject them.

The "much crumpled thing," would then refer simultaneously

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to the actual piece of paper as well as to the stale, withered expression contained in these lines. This is conceivable, and perhaps in part true, yet it still does not satisfy the reader of Stevens that this is all there is. A man capable of communicating experience directly through words as he does in the first stanza--why does he choose such a circuitous and extremely intellectualized voice here? This voice blocks the reader from sharing the poet's experience instead of gently guiding his eye, his heart, and his tongue through the felt moment of the poem; in an inverse example of what Blackmur describes in Stevens' poetry; these lines clothe meaning with language rather than reveal meaning with language.

Yet, around 1893 there was a photograph taken of young Wallace, aged approximately fourteen, wearing the habit of a choir-boy and holding in front of him a hymn-sheet. (He also wrote about this, and that his mother sang as well.) It is quite possible, then, that Stevens picked "choir" out of all the possibilities open to him, not guided by that part of the imagination he used to construct intellectual edifices, but "from some saltier well/ Within" him. Following the Baudelairean connection between repetition and obsession and supporting this is the fact that choir appears not once but four times in seven lines. There is also the supplementary evidence found in his letters and in other poems concerning the nature of religious experience which points to "choir" as having a felt memory hidden in it. One of the most

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interesting bits, already quoted earlier in a similar context, comes from his Journal and was written during a summer spent in Berkeley, Pa., one year before he graduated Harvard, when he was almost twenty years old:

> Birds sing at edge of field at sunset--thoughtlessly; . . . with some development this might be made the seed of a song. Simple, earthly happiness; singing for delight in beauty, or more sympathy of beauty for beauty. A full-hearted thoughtless lilt.
>
> Thought for sonnet: Birds flying up from dark ground at evening: clover, deep grass, ants, etc., to circle and plunge beneath the golden clouds, and in and about them, with golden spray on their wings like dew. Produce an imaginative flutter of color. (. . .)
>
> The feeling of piety is very dear to me. I would sacrifice a great deal to be St. Augustine, but modernity is so Chicagoan, so plain, so unmeditative. I thoroughly believe that I get none of my chief pleasures except from what is unsullied. The love of beauty excludes evil. A moral life is simply a pure conscience: a physical, mental and ethical source of pleasure. At the same time it is an inhuman life to lead. It is a form of narrowness as far as compansionship is concerned. One must make concessions to others; but there is never a necessity of smutching inner purity. . . .

Here are the beginnings of Stevens' concern with his religious, ethical nature; at twenty he would "sacrifice a great deal to be St. Augustine," and at forty he writes a poem of doubt, questioning faith in anything.

The fifth and sixth lines: "I am a man of fortune greeting heirs;/ For it has come that thus I greet the spring." are again ambiguous. Either he is a "man of fortune greeting heirs," or he seems to be that because of the way he greets

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the spring. How does he greet the spring? "The choirs of welcome choir for me farewell./ No spring can follow past meridian." The questions raised come from the words used: what is his fortune? Who are his heirs? What does meridian refer to? Again, why so many repetitions of choir? The importance of the stanza is that it informs us that it is spring and that the poet greets spring in a particular way (uneasily, as he describes in his letters from the time he was a young man). "Thus" in line six can refer to either the previous line, or it can refer to the previous stanza. In reality, he has no sons or heirs so that the meaning revealed is that he is a man of fortune greeting heirs because he acts in a certain way; his fortune, his heirs do not exist, only the farewell exists for him. His youth is gone; there is "No spring . . . past meridian;" he stands at forty at the midpoint of his life, like Dante at 33, seeing the futility of trying to make Elsie his Beatrice. The uses of "choirs" and "choir" again point to the indifference of Nature; the birds will sing their prescribed song every year, without time, without change, without consciousness. This stanza is a kind of Romantic realization and development of the difference between man and Nature, of man's constant attention to himself and change and Nature's "benign indifference."

The last two lines: "Yet you persist with anecdotal bliss/ To make believe a starry connaissance." reinforce the ambiguities that have been set up in the first stanza. The

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"you" could refer to Elsie or to himself (in the manner of self-address or self-mocking pointed to in stanza one); in either case, the addressee makes believe the starry connaissance. If this is Elsie, Stevens could be referring to some lack of development on her part within their relationship (i.e., that it has remained only a kind of polite connaissance). It is more likely, however, that the "you" is Stevens himself who until this point has continued to maintain the pose of "prim letter-writer" rather than become the "vigorous warrior," and who is, at the same time, conscious of this and at forty laments his unfulfilled youth. Or, the "you" refers to himself functioning only in his imagination that has conjured, and continues to conjure, "anecdotal bliss," while reality intrudes at this point forcing him to reconsider his life and evaluate it.

The next stanza again deals with the conflict between the flesh and spirit, but this time in a brief historical way--and for nine lines the examples further distance the poet and the reader from the poignancy of the moment of pain at the end of stanza one. Notwithstanding what has been written about the significance of "Chinese" or "coiffures" or "curls" and "barbers," vis-a-vis Stevens' realization of the conflict between artifice and reality, these nine lines distract us from meaning rather than inform us of it. They serve, like the opening lines in the previous stanza, precisely to lessen the effect of the first stanza. The images in this stanza,

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except for the last sentence (the last two lines) are products of Fancy, of Imagination separated from the internal reality of the poet. Knowing Stevens, we can imagine him in his room, being prompted to use these examples because of some small ceramic or oriental print he was looking at. The meaning of these lines is easily paraphraseable.

With the last two lines, however, there again seems to be the intrusion of a real present, and it is these two lines which give meaning to the whole stanza. The expression "in her hair" refers to the young girl, the uncoiffed girl wearing her hair loose, signifying her innocence and purity.[3] Here Stevens clearly seems to be addressing Elsie or speaking to himself about her. These lines are another way of saying, "Yet you persist with anecodtal bliss/ To make-believe a starry connaissance," but on a more historical level. He is asking why she can so easily ignore what has caused him such pain--the passage of time and the movement of history, in contrast to relentless, unchanging Nature. This then gives meaning to the preceding two lines: "Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain/ That not one curl in' nature has survived?";[4] there is something more powerful than any imaginings or embellishments of man that will survive beyond him and his creations. It is this affirmation of faith in something so awesome that is hateful (and certainly a deterrent to man's creating anything) which here provides the central conflict. It is the cruel knowledge of the Fall, the realization of mortality,

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prefiguring the next stanza where this is clearly delineated.

> This luscious and impeccable fruit of life
> Falls, it appears, of its own weight to earth.

These lines open the fourth and key stanza of the poem. In describing the fall of the "fruit of life," Stevens is at once describing: 1) the actual fall of fruit from a tree according to the laws of gravity; 2) the beginning of the fall from youth, the "fruit" of life describing the parabola of time, like the sun past meridian, or himself after forty; 3) the fall of the "impeccable" fruit of innocence which while it is there cannot be touched (so cannot be tainted with sin; "impeccable" here having its original meaning restored). The image of nature conjured here and in the previous stanzas is a very particular one that should be understood clearly in order to appreciate fully Stevens and his poetry. It is an extremely Christian view of Nature and one that could not have been without Milton,[5] nor without the Romantics, beginning with Rousseau and the call of "back to Nature." The problem with the Romantics' relation to nature, however, was sentimentality--their problem with almost everything, Schiller and Shelley notwithstanding. In their rebellion against mechanism and Reason ruling all, the Romantics looked at Nature through rose colored glasses and saw only what they wanted to see. When they spoke of Nature's indifference, or talked of the cruelty of Nature which always changed yet always remained the same, they

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separated themselves from Nature, stressing their individuality and consciousness; they forgot their own place in the cycle. They did recognize in Nature something beyond Reason, as they recognized their own subconscious, but what they refused to recognize was the negative power of Nature, that, in fact, Nature was as cold and as destructive of humanity as Reason. This is an aspect which begins to become very clearly exposed during the late nineteenth and the early part of this century, for example, in the paintings of Rousseau, and in the work of Hardy and Thomas Mann (especially Death in Venice where a painting by Rousseau haunts the hero). Nature is depicted as lush, fertile, almost enchanted, dream-like, but there always lurks something unseen which gives a feeling of uneasiness, of malevolence to any scene. It is this picture of Nature that Stevens is heir to, especially at this point, 1917-18, the armistice marking the end of World War I also marking the end of innocence.

So here is Stevens, Endymion twenty years and a century later, reworking not only the Romantics and his relationship to them, but Milton's Paradise Lost,[6] and the Christian myth of the Fall and their meanings for him as a man of forty during the second decade of the Twentieth Century (these parallels will be developed more fully later on). One could look at this poem as Stevens' equivalent to Eliot's The Waste Land, the difference between them being that Eliot saw the reality outside of himself fragmented, while Stevens sat and observed

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that his own internal reality was fragmented. Stevens, no matter how he would protest, is clearly the Romantic here. He is the lyric poet, Eliot the dramatic. Although Eliot is aware of being a dramatic poet and consciously uses "the three voices of poetry," Stevens also uses separate and distinct voices in his poetry so that it is dramatic in some respect; but he remains essentially a lyric poet and heir to the Romantics because, unlike Eliot, his eye turns inward not outward (this is slightly paradoxical because of Eliot's pose as prophetic poet using Tiresias as his voice in The Waste Land, when it is Stevens who like Milton actually sees from the inside looking out). What is frustrating about Stevens is that with that eye turned inward, he refuses to really let go, to allow himself to escape from his dialectical form. This makes us reconsider the split between rhetoric and dialectic, to look back to Ramus and go on from there.

Again, in this key stanza, the addressee is the moving force. "When you were Eve, its acrid juice was sweet/ Untasted in its heavenly, orchard air." The "its" here refers, of course, to the "fruit of life," so it is clear that he is here comparing Elsie to Eve in Paradise.[7] It is Milton's Eve, too, as we know from the disrespect shown by her as described in the previous stanza ("Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,/ Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?"); and she will succumb, she will tempt him and cause the Fall. The additional implication here is that she is

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no longer Eve--that with age comes the knowledge of "things as they are," and that this in itself is the fall from innocence. On another level this could refer as well, to Stevens' relationship to Spring as Circe who magically changes things and causes the poet great pain (See Letters, p. 87; Journal entry, April 4, 1904). From the fifth line on,

> An apple serves as well as any skull
> To be the book in which to read a round
> And is as excellent, in that it is composed
> Of what, like skulls, comes rotting back to ground.
> But it excels in this, that as the fruit
> Of love, it is a book too mad to read
> Before one merely reads to pass the time,

Stevens takes his own experience of the Fall and expands it by comparing the apple, the fruit, to the skull of the medieval Dance of Death, and implicitly to Yorick's skull which prompts Hamlet's confrontation with death. The comparison, on one level, he says "is as excellent" because both the head (the intellect) and sexuality come "rotting back to ground;" but "excels in this, that as the fruit/ Of love, it is a book too mad to read/ Before one merely reads to pass the time." In effect, he is saying that now he does read to pass the time, since he is reading this so-called book. But what is most interesting about this stanza and the terms of the comparison is what is revealed about the different kinds of knowledge and their relationship to life and death. We recall the conflict between the monk and juggler, the prim letter-writer and vigorous warrior, and reconsider this stanza. It is as though at this point in his life he is actively choosing his

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own Fall, the end of innocence, although we know from letters and Journal entries that it is not only his fortieth year, but Spring as well that is partially responsible for his state of mind and this meditation. The counterpointing of skull and apple restates the conflict between flesh and spirit in obviously Christian terms; the changing of apple from "fruit of life" in line one to "fruit/ Of love" (the enjambment is important here because of this shift) in line nine and ten, adds yet another aspect to this conflict for Stevens. He has equated life with love and in this way has reinterpreted, on a very personal level, the meaning and effect of the residue of Christian belief in himself.

> When you were Eve, its acrid juice was sweet,
> Untasted, in its heavenly, orchard air.

In imagination, as evidenced in the letters from the period of their engagement, before carnal love between them existed, the fruit was sweet; in reality, later, he finds it to be acrid. This poem represents a coming to terms with the limits of his being, an attempt to integrate, for the first time, who he thought he was and thinks he is, with what, in fact, he is--what is possible. The comparison between skull and apple also points to the realization that he can intellectually rationalize away his place within a Christian tradition as not a real one for him, but that on a much deeper level he cannot escape from it, from associating death with sexuality, with the particular kind of knowledge that

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comes with the fall from innocence. The closing lines, ". . . it is a book too mad to read/ Before one merely reads to pass the time," restate this attempt at integration by saying that at this age one can begin to apply what one has learned of oneself in the hope of neutralizing the effect--to try and read this as one reads other things, in other words, without direct emotional involvement. This book, the apple as fruit of love and life, cannot be read (intellectually understood) before a certain age, or without a certain knowledge; and, by the time one can read it, youth is gone, imaginings of it gone too.

The fifth stanza continues the thought of the previous stanza, and at the same time brings both the poet and the reader back to a concrete, tangible reality. It begins with a reference to the star, Venus, and for five lines speaks of her effects as star and symbol:

> In the high west there burns a furious star.
> It is for fiery boys that star was set
> And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them.
> The measure of the intensity of love
> Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.

Then comes the contrast of this to himself, and to Elsie's relationship to him and this reality:

> For me, the firefly's quick, electric stroke
> Ticks tediously the time of one more year.
> And you? Remember how the crickets came
> Out of their mother grass, like little kin,
> In the pale nights, when your first imagery
> Found inklings of your bond to all that dust.

Besides recalling Keats again, the evocation of "fiery" in "firefly" joins this to the second stanza with its remembrance

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of the "red bird," himself as vigorous warrior. But now all that this reminds him of is his separation from that vigorous warrior. This comes with a felt and somewhat painful remembrance quite different from the imagined abtraction of Elsie as Eve in the previous stanza. The meaning is extremely poignant and non-intellectualized, yet he cannot fully sustain it. Smack in the middle of the tangible scene conjured here, where we can feel the "pale nights" and hear and see the crickets coming "out of their mothers grass" (remembered because of his looking at a very real firefly), we are frustrated by an overly vague abstraction, "your first imagery," which successfully obscures the real subject. What is this "first imagery" that found inklings of its bond to all that dust? It must be or have been something quite important in order to have perceived its own mortality. But the prim letter-writer has won out and the stanza has lost; he is over the hill, past meridian; he has opted for this. We cannot begin to re-write Stevens to make what could have been out of what is, but this does show quite clearly that there was still vigor and "virility" possible for him and his poetry at forty (only consider the concrete power of these lines without "your first imagery"), but he actively and consciously chooses the role in which he feels least exposed, least threatened by that "more vigorous warrior."

In stanza six, he begins proscribing what the men of forty must perceive:

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> If men at forty will be painting lakes
> The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one,
> The basic slate, the universal blue

That is, if one has chosen to paint (i.e., to be an artist), then by the age of forty he must have found some truth, the "one," "the basic slate, the universal blue." Embedded in these lines is the crisis of Stevens, the man of forty who feels he has not succeeded and yet has past his meridian. The next sentence, "There is a substance in us that prevails," is dropped almost casually, yet we have been expecting a statement of belief of this sort from the end of the second stanza when "To make believe a starry connaissance" is disdained. The "substance that prevails" is what "Utamaro's beauties sought" as "the end of love," but Stevens chooses to find it not "in love" but beyond love. This is an Aschenbachian conflict prompted by the fear that the indulgence of the flesh does rob the spirit. Yet, in the previous stanza, Stevens has already stated and knows that "The measure of the intensity of love/ Is measure also of the verve of earth."

What has happened? Why the contradiction? The reason is that the poet here is of two minds (if not three), and that both have voices which speak; the one is physical and prefers the blackbird singing, and the other is meditative and prefers "just after." This produces something like the medieval debates between mind and body, but without the external appurtenances of such a dialogue, so that the reader is often left frustrated and confused, dismissing what he

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cannot understand as simply over-cerebration, extremely intellectualized poetry in lyric dress. While, in fact, this judgment may be true, it is nonetheless an accurate self-portrait by a man torn between the two halves of himself and constantly mediating between them. At the same time, the poetry reflects a reworking and interweaving of all that he has read and experienced that has held any meaning for him, from landscape in Berkeley, Pa., to stanzas of Shakespeare. So here we have him at forty looking for the universal hue, truth outside of himself, when, in fact, any truth that there is must be found inside. The poem is a record of discovering just this. The tension he feels, though he never expresses it explicitly in his poetry, is between man as sinner and man as saint; perhaps if he had faced this squarely in his poetry, instead of hiding behind castles made of logic and words, it would have more body, more of what makes what he calls "the virile poet," the "man-poet."

In any case, here in this stanza, he sets the "substance in us that prevails" against "amours" with their "fluctuations." Then sadly, he goes on,

> When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink
> Into the compass and curriculum
> Of introspective exiles, lecturing.
> It is a theme for Hyacinth alone,

with a kind of restatement of what closes the fourth stanza: understanding which comes with introspection precludes "amours;" they are shrunk to become the theme for lecturing; feeling is

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separated from emotion, seen as something clinical to be examined and lectured on. The reason for this is contained in why it is a theme for Hyacinth alone: Hyacinth was beloved by Apollo but also by Boreas and the Zephyrs; one day while throwing the discus with Apollo, Boreas became enraged with jealousy and caused the discus to turn, hit Hyacinth in the head and kill him. The split is the same for Stevens; his affections are shared between what is sensual and alive in Nature and what belongs to his imagination alone.

The seventh stanza obviously has a great deal to do with the Christian myth of heaven, and tangentially with the death of Christ, so connecting, too, to the end of the preceding stanza with its mention of Hyacinth. Stevens is here getting further and further away and yet closer to the core of what has caused his pain and the ensuing meditation. We have angels and embodied spirits set against centurions; all flesh disrespectful of anything spiritual. All that arrives of the spirit is what is heard, "Descensions of their tinkling bells arrive;" we do not know whether they, the mules and muleteers, will ever really arrive, yet the image we have of them persists, whereas what is physical "comes and goes at once." To hold on to one means never to taste the honey of earth; to hold the other means to live totally without illusion of any kind. Then, in the last two lines, Stevens throws in the clinker and shows how the myth of heaven did and can work: because these muleteers, these "couriers,"

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do bring "a damsel heightened by eternal bloom," the illusion of eternal life, of Elsie always as the young girl with golden hair. It is illusion, imagination which allowed and allows him to see Elsie and himself in a particular way, but, at the same time, this vision precludes the real satisfaction of the flesh; this is the trap he is caught in. (This represents a personal expression of what Freud would later explicate in The Future of an Illusion.)

With this knowledge now formulated, he looks back:

> Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love,
> An ancient aspect touching a new mind.

He begins now, at forty, to see that love, physical love, de-Christianized love, is nothing more than physical fact; "It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies," and it is this which is the only truth: "This trivial trope reveals a way of truth." The truth is change, "That first and foremost law." And his truth follows, stated bluntly, strongly, certainly with more feeling than anything since the first stanza:

> 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, rayed.
> The laughing sky will see the two of us
> Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

Unlike the damsel heightened by eternal bloom, their bloom is gone; the myth is exploded. There is nothing to say about these lines because they are self-sufficient, without need for explanation or paraphrase. The voice speaking here is an

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honest one, un-self-conscious, one that has faced "truth" and is able to integrate that truth, that reality, with Imagination. Consider the difference between the effect of these lines and those of the second stanza; one carries reality with it, while the other remains a product of Fancy. That is not to say that the second stanza should have been omitted, or that all utterance should be like these lines, but that the difference between them allows the reader to perceive the change in Stevens himself as he writes the poem. In or through the process of writing, of meditation, of recollection, he has come to a certain truth concerning himself and has come to accept it. We see the poem then as a record of this growth.

With the next stanza comes the beginning of acceptance with a kind of celebration. The tone of this stanza is different from the previous stanzas; there is no anger, no bitterness, yet there is still a touch of irony together with a humorous self-assurance and self-acceptance. Here he is addressing himself as "ward of Cupido," as prisoner of love, of his physical nature. He is trying this on for size. The voice here is certainly not the same one that spoke in the previous stanza, but the voice of the "vigorous warrior" grown older. He is telling himself to celebrate the faith of forty by writing

> . . . verses wild with motion, full of din,
> Loudened by cries, by clashes, quick and sure
> As the deadly thought of men accomplishing
> Their curious fates in war, . . .

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He is telling himself to conquer real feeling, like that in the previous stanza, and to "quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything/ For the music and manner of the paladins/ To make oblation fit. . . ,"--and these verses, after this knowledge would be "sure/ As the deadly thought of men accomplishing/ Their curious fates in war" because the activity of writing like this would be as alien as war, yet would accomplish a "curious fate," one that would not follow organically from the nature of the poet, or for men in war. Yet this does constitute a real posture for Stevens. But the last sentence, "Where shall I find/ Bravura adequate to this great hymn?" is again ambiguous; there is no way of knowing whether it is spoken sincerely or ironically, and probably the poet doesn't quite know himself. What is this hymn?

The next stanza points to reading these preceding lines ironically since he here attacks the "fops of fancy," those who do violence to their own natures, or simply do not heed their own inner truths and attach "memorabilia of the mystic spouts" to empty intellectual constructions ("watering their gritty soils," which cannot produce growth). Of himself he says, "I am a yeoman, as such fellows go." This we know because his fruits are "acrid," "streaked and rayed," not "silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion." With this statement he separates himself not only from poets like Yeats, and certain of the Romantics, but from Milton and the Christian tradition as well (though he does this more intellectually than emotionally,

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as will be seen further on);

> I know no magic trees, no balmy boughs,
> No silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits.
> But, after all, I know a tree that bears
> A semblance to the thing I have in mind.
> It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
> To which all birds come sometime in their time.
> But when they go that tip still tips the tree.

He is making a very clear epistemological and ethical statement here, finding his roots in a neo-Platonic tradition, but one firmly based in reality, however. In fact we know he has and will continue to celebrate not only "gold-vermilion fruits" (he has done it even in denying it), but he is examining what it means "to know" in all its aspects; this is what the poem is essentially about. He sets reality/"knowledge" against illusion/"belief." He explores what Coleridge called secondary imagination in his own experience, and discovers that illusions, like "silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits," cannot sustain themselves without a basis in reality. Though we may have an idea, an illusion of perfection, it comes only out of what we <u>know</u>; and within what we know is the first and foremost law of change; we cannot believe in what we cannot experientially know, i.e., "a damsel heightened by eternal bloom." His tree is real; "I <u>know</u> a tree;" it is the reality to which all men, all minds must come at sometime, against which all imaginings must be tested.

Here, considering "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is helpful. The blackbird is the metaphor for the mind attached to reality, the tree:

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I was of three minds
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

This description is unlike that of the "thin men of Haddam" who "imagine golden birds," or the Berkeleyan statement of, "The river is moving./ The blackbird must be flying." That is, it is the individual mind which perceives reality; the question remains as to whether there is any life separate from the life of the imagination. This is the major epistemological problem for Stevens, and he accepts in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" that there is something else; there is change which exists apart from the imagination, and even challenges the imagination, and this he knows because he has experienced it. Here the tree remains tipped with its certain tip even after all minds, all birds, have come to it sometime. It is a very clear and strong statement of belief in the "faith of forty," so that now we begin to take even the previous stanza more seriously, that is, less ironically. In spite of personal suffering and bitterness at the effects of "that first and foremost law," here Stevens does begin to celebrate a faith in something beyond himself that is not cerebral or religious, and at the same time, not of his own creation. This poem is then seen as an attempt at reconciling all the tensions that were generated by the coincidence of the loss of his youth, the coming of Spring, and his resentment of Elsie, that open the poem.

In the eleventh stanza he comes to accept what he could

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not accept earlier in the poem, that sex is not all; he accepts that their "bloom is gone" with some measure of equanimity. Here he is the opposite of what he wished to be at the opening of the poem, "a thinking stone." He is happy that there is more than squeaking "like dolls, the wished-for words." The "unconscionable treachery of fate" he refers to is what has been responsible for self-consciousness insulated from consciousness of the outside, external reality with "its first and foremost law." The "Anguishing hour!" is the hour of knowledge, of the Fall from innocence, the moment of the poem. And after the exclamation comes the observation of the outside, of Nature, in a new light. Instead of the "furious star burning in the west," what matters now is

> . . . a pool of pink,
> Clippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes,
> Keen to the point of starlight, while a frog
> Boomed from his very belly odious chords.

This is not a fanciful observation or recollection, but a very real one (in a letter to Elsie dated June 9, 1909, he writes, ". . . We might possible make a special memory of that pond on the hill, with its population of frogs"). After the "Anguishing hour" comes a peace which allows the poet to focus outward in a new way, replacing "natural feelings for literary emotions" (L 27). Unlike the birds he used to admire who sing "thoughtlessly . . . of simple, earthy happiness; singing for delight in beauty, or more sympathy of

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beauty for beauty," he wants to attempt to sing with thought, with knowledge.

Here is his answer to Descartes and philosophy in general; the philosopher has only one road open to him, the poet two. To know and yet to want to celebrate (not simply to pass the time) because there still is cause for celebration in spite of man's transience is what Stevens hopes for. But how does one do this? Should it be done flamboyantly, flauntingly, displaying one's "muzzy belly in parade," or, like a saint, only in the contemplation of beauty and perfection outside of the self? Stevens wavers constantly between the two. The words written when he was twenty must be remembered: "The feeling of piety is very dear to me. I would sacrifice a great deal to be St. Augustine. . . . A moral life is simply a pure conscience, a physical, mental and ethical source of pleasure. At the same time it is an inhuman life to lead. It is a form of narrowness so far as companionship is concerned." These words clearly prefigure the crisis of forty, and the resolution in the poem is not by any means a final one, but simply an acceptance for the time being of things as they are for him as he is. In the same letter, he speaks too of the necessity of being a man of the world,

> . . . not as a University Professor, a Retired Farmer or Citizen, a Philanthropist, 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

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> 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. (L 32).

The same epistemological conflict exists whether or not there is any reality or any necessity beyond the life of the imagination. At twenty-one at the end of college, he writes:

> . . . The same birds are back in the garden --the same flowers; but somehow I do not have the affection for them that I used to have. To be sure they still delight me-- but the delight is not the enchanting kind that I experienced last summer. I am conscious that when I leave Cambridge I shall leave all the surroundings I have ever lived in--Reading, Berkeley, the mountains --and perhaps the clouds. I am going to New York, I think, to try my hand at journalism. If that does not pan out well, I am resolved to knock about the country-- the world. Of course I am perfectly willing to do this--anxious, in fact. It seems to me to be the only way, directed as I am more or less strongly by the hopes and desires of my parents and myself, of realizing to the last degree any of the ambitions I have formed. I should be content to dream along to the end of my life--and opposing moralists be hanged. At the same time I should be quite as content to work and be practical--but I hate the conflict whether it "avails" or not. I want my powers to be put to their fullest use--to be exhausted when I am through with them. On the other hand I do not want to have to make a petty struggle for existence--physical or literary. I must try not to be a dilettante--half-dream, half deed. I must be all dream or all deed. . . . (L 34).

And, at forty, he regrets that he has been and still is "half-dream, half deed," doing both, never taking the risk necessary

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to be fully one or the other.

In the last stanza of the poem, Stevens accepts these two aspects of himself in an open-ended, unqualified way. Here he sees himself as the white pigeon, "that flutters to the ground/ Grown tired of flight," and as a rose rabbi observing himself and the shades made by his fluttering, and accepts this as the only possible sphere of exploration. The contrast is first to the blue pigeon that continuously "circles the blue sky,/ On sidelong wing, around and round and round." This blue pigeon is he who is wholly part of his element (the blue sky), who does not grow tired, who does not question, does not doubt. One might prefer to be a blue pigeon, but one does not really have a choice after a certain point; either one is alienated or one is not because of a whole series of circumstances existing apart from the individual. These accidents of existence also form part of that reality against which all imaginings must be tested. The other contrast is to himself when young, "Like a dark rabbi," who observed, instead of himself as the only clue to the nature of mankind, the nature of mankind itself, and this "in lordly study," above and apart from the rest of mankind, not yet aware, un-knowing of "that first and foremost law." Finally, he sees himself as a "rose rabbi," with a specific color, not merely dark, with a marked personality, one who "pursued and still pursues the origin and course/ Of love" as the alternative to the "nature of mankind." Love is the fit subject because it is the first

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and most perfected of human emotions, and specifically that which has prompted the whole meditation. He chooses to name himself as "rabbi" because the rabbi has no claims to holiness; he is only a wise man, a Jew committed to "feasting" rather than "fasting," not the symbolically castrated priest of the Christian tradition. This is essential for Stevens because he wants to accept and include his physical nature in his spiritual explorations; he wants spiritual knowledge to grow out of, or with, physical knowledge. The "fluttering thing," is, of course, himself as white pigeon ("that flutters to the ground"); and what he has come to know that he didn't know before is his effect, the effect of his shadow on what is, on Elsie, on himself, on the world around him. The world is as it is seen; "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," is only a "particular way of looking at things," but the world is always the world, the reality outside, even if "fluttering things do have so distinct a shade."

That shadow comes, of course, from Stevens' personal inheritance of Puritanism--the especially restricting form of Christianity that made him desire so ardently to be either the pilgrim in search of the virginal ideal or the clown juggling before it, but never the man who whipped from life, from experience, a jovial hullaballoo of sensual satisfactions. In this context, it is most illuminating to consider how many borrowings there are in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" from Milton's "Paradise Lost," the strongest expression of Puritanism in

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English literature--one which defends and destroys simultaneously--and the paradigmatic source for the poet's dissociation of sensibility.

Like "Paradise Lost," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" has as one of its major themes the passage from St. James (i,15) which Milton allegorizes in Book II: "Then when lust hast conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." Stevens, in whom this belief was internalized at a pre-conscious level by what he was taught as a child (and reinforced by the impression made on him by its literary expression in "Paradise Lost") is afraid to begin even to feel the lust described by James. And when he does, it is checked by his wife since he has, from the beginning of their relationship, over-idealized her, separating her even more from her animal self than she may already have been. The consequence for him is to feel the anger mixed with guilt he expresses at the beginning of the poem, which then yields to self-mockery when he begins to perceive the roots of his situation. He explores each of these roots in the series of meditations which follows, beginning with the most recent in historical terms--the attitude of the Nineteenth Century Romantics--and going back, finally, through philosophers like Descartes, through Milton, to the sources in proto-Christian and, ultimately, Judaic tradition. In this exploration, Stevens manages in his own way to transcend the tradition of which he is obviously a part, as Milton transcended that of which

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he was so much a part, by implicit parody.

We can begin by considering the parallel function between Milton's opening invocation to the Muse and Stevens' mocking invocation of his Muse, Elsie. Both serve as devices prompting in quick outline the major themes of the poem, and also indicate the very important difference between what was and what is. Just as for Milton's hero, so for Stevens, ". . . for now the thought/ Both of lost happiness and lasting pain/ Torments him." More, the closeness between Satan's address to Light opening Book III, and Stevens' opening lines cannot be ignored:

> Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born
> Or of th'eternal Coeternal beam
> May I express the unblam'd?

and,

> Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon.

Stevens' free verse rhythms seem to attempt an echoing of Milton's carefully measured lines; though Stevens' attempt could be seen almost as comic, its effect is, strangely, no less strong than Milton's and seems much closer rhythmically than it actually is. In addition, Milton's question, "May I express the unblam'd?" is implicitly what Stevens asks both of his Muse, as representative of the imaginings which distract and keep him from the acceptance of the world of fact, and of Elsie, whom he would like to hold equally responsible for the condition in which they are. In a very profound way, the poet of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is asking about their own

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creation, about what made him and his wife the way they are. In doing this, he is mimicking Adam in Book VII[8] of "Paradise Lost" when he asks Raphael what "was done/ Before his memory." Milton's metaphor for his manner of asking is, "as one whose drouth/ Yet scarce allay'd still eyes the current stream,/ Whose liquid murmur heard new thirst excites." For Stevens this "liquid murmur" becomes the "watery syllable" of memory that answers his question so directly.

As we continue through "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," we find many additional parallels between the two poems indicating that Stevens was conscious of his parodying. For example, in Section II, it is the use of "meridian" that evokes the earlier work. In Book IV we learn that Satan descends to Eden at noon--"meridian:"

> . . . now conscience wakes despair
> That slumber'd, wakes the bitter memory
> Of what he was, what is, and what must be
> Worse; or worse deeds worst suffering must ensue.
> Sometimes towards Eden, which now in his view
> Lay pleasant, his grieved look he fixes sad;
> Sometimes towards heaven and the full-blazing sun,
> Which now sat high in his meridian tow'r.

Like Satan, Stevens too has tasted "the bitter memory/ Of what he was, what is, and what must be/ Worse;" he has metaphorically descended into his own personal hell made out of words. Later in Book IV, the eternal spring-like walls of Paradise are described as being unable to soothe the despair that follows this meridian descent, "Vernal delight and joy, able to drive/ All sadness but despair;" and Gabriel tells

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Uriel in Book IV, "but such as come/ Well known from heav'n; and since meridian have/ No creature thence;" Stevens laments and echoes the same situation, "No spring can follow past meridian."

At the same time, there is another allusion to "meridian" which adds another level to this stanza for Stevens. In Book V, Raphael visits Eden at noon, "To sit and taste, till this meridian heat/ Be over." And during this rest, he tells Adam:

> . . . and what surmounts the reach
> Of human sense I shall delineate so,
> By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,
> As may express them best; though what if Earth
> Be but the shadow of heav'n; and things therein
> Each to other like, more than on earth is thought.

Covertly, then, by telling us that he has passed "meridian," Stevens lets us know that he has acquired this knowledge that Raphael brought. He has been instructed in the application of metaphor--"What surmounts the reach/ Of human sense I shall delineate so,/ By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,/ As may express them best." This covert intrusion of "shop-talk" with Milton--which is actually what it is--also refers us back to Section I, where, in describing the effect of "the clashed edges of two words that kill," Stevens is, in fact, expressing another theory of metaphor, this time Hegel's: a metaphor is two words struggling for survival. So, inside this obliqued description of the poet's passing into a sterile middle age, there is also the reflection of his devotion to the craft

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which marks him, in his own eyes, as one of the elite brotherhood of "studious ghosts."

In Section III, after the lines about the Chinese and Japanese and "the mountainous coiffures of Bath" (which, as indicated earlier, evokes Emerson's passage in "Nature" where he makes his point about the necessity of man's acknowledging his animal nature which exists in spite of "curls"), we come to the lines where we feel directly with the poet: "Why without pity on these studious ghosts/ Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?" These lines mark Elsie's difference from the poet showing that she has not read and so does not respect the very important formative influence exerted by history and literature on her husband (just as in the previous stanza, she unconsciously is able "to make believe a starry conaissance"). What she does not know, the poet does; these lines, also from Book IV, describing Eve "dripping in her hair" gives us a clear indication of this:

> Her unadorn'd golden tresses wore
> Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets waved
> As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied
> Subjection, but required with gentle sway,
> And by her yielded, by him best received,
> Yielded with coy submission, modest pride
> And sweet reluctant amorous delay.

This passage is significant because of the aspect of "wantonness" that belongs to Eve who is not aware of its effects--just as Elsie is not aware of the effect she has on the poet (who becomes one of the "studious ghosts" because he is their embodiment). Stevens, in imitating Milton, at the same

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time reduces this archetypal myth first by the Romantic parody of Section II and then by distracting attention from it for most of Section III, and also implicitly acknowledges its power since it has conditioned him so greatly that he cannot escape its images and impressions. Like Milton, who in the voice of Satan, after comparing himself to other blind poets and prophets like Homer and Tiresias, proposes this different kind of poetry--a poetry of the self heavily veiled in Biblical myth (the poem, on the most primary level, with its repeated controlling metaphors for the loss of light, reflects his increasing blindness), Stevens also proposes a poetry of his self and experience here, but heavily veiled in the words of "these studious ghosts," the greatest of whom is Milton. Stevens also hopes that his poem, like Milton's, will have the same power precisely because it expresses a direct human experience through the language of the older poetized myth. The effect appears parodic, however, because the experience of being sexually rejected by one's wife is not on the same level with losing sight. Stevens is aware of this, but he tries to make his point because this is the Twentieth Century which has learned from Freud that the instinct for sex and what is experienced through it as a sense are as necessary as sight and what we learn from it--"The tongue is an eye" is a rather delicate way of expressing this--and the deprivation of sex is as serious as that of vision. It was not out of caprice that Stevens saw Freud as a hero: "Freud's eye was the

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microscope of potency" (CP 367).

In Section IV the allusions to Genesis are direct. There is one reference to Milton--a rather blatant one which mirrors the falling fruit of life: ". . . till like ripe fruit thou drop/ Into thy mother's lap." Milton's description comes in Michael's description to Adam that the way to live a full life is by observing temperance in all things; he tells Adam that this is the only way to "come to death" without "painful passages." This obviously suggests the way of life Stevens thought he should choose. (We remember his many Journal entries where he admonishes himself for indulgence in excess and desires moderation as a goal instead; the only problem for Stevens was uncertainty concerning the part sexuality was to take according to this "mean" way.) The fact that Stevens presents this allusion here is important because he will pick it up in a later section to show the effect of observing what angels teach.

In Section V the thread tying Stevens to Milton is the "furious star," "In the high West." On one level this star is Venus, but it is also the beam on which Uriel rides to the West after telling Gabriel that Satan might be in Paradise (Book IV). In this way the poet reminds himself and the reader of the connection between sexuality (Venus) and the fear of Falling and of punishment (Gabriel's warning of the presence of Satan). Even though Stevens makes it appear that he is untouched by the power of the Christian myth ("For me,

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the firefly's quick, electric stroke/ Ticks tediously the time of one more year"), and that he is tied to the older pagan myth in which Venus was honored without fear of punishment, in writing his denial, there is the underside of truth which reveals his actual fear of the presence of Satan.

In Section VI the last line provides the clue linking the poet to Milton: "It is a theme for Hyacinth alone." Again as above, behind the obvious reference to the Greek mythological hero, there is one to the human hero of the Christian myth, Adam. In Book IV, connected to the description of Eve in her hair, there is one of Adam: ". . . and hyacinthin locks/ Round from his parted forelock manly hung." In this way Milton connects his Adam to Classicism and also suggests the theme of rebirth. Stevens, whether aware or unaware of this particular connection through Milton, has made it nonetheless. In Section VII Stevens makes direct references to the Christian theme and so makes no allusion to Milton. The function of this section seems to be to provide the concrete connection which, after a time of following hints, takes us back to "Paradise Lost."

Section VIII is the focus of disillusionment and also the center of the attack on Milton where Stevens does transcend him. In this section the promise of a full arc of life described by following temperance, as Milton tells us Michael promised to Adam, is supplanted by the <u>fact</u> that Stevens provides. Quite unlike the promise of paradise where "fruit

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burnish'd with golden rind/ Hung amiable," the poet and his wife, after following their temperate ways are,

> 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.

In this passage Stevens is master. The lines represent more than the poem of fact in the language of fact because they express the fact in an inherited language that was not of fact but of spirituality, but through the poet's usage they become fact. Here Stevens equals, if not surpasses, Milton.

Section IX continues, and here the allusion to Milton is in the form of the "ward of Cupido" who, after the knowledge of fact as described above, the poet has decided to become. He is following Satan now; he has abandoned the hope of Paradise. We know this because in "Paradise Lost" Satan disguises himself as Cupid in order to fool Uriel when he asked him the way to Paradise. Implicit in this, now, the poet is taking a different tack; he is becoming the "comedian," the one who will disguise himself and use trickery like Satan simply to challenge previous "creations"--both the Christian myth and Milton's powerful verse transcription. So, in Section X, still in the guise of the "ward of Cupido," the poet says he does not know "ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits" because he has not seen Paradise and doesn't hope to. In this, he rejects Milton as well in whose words it is that the fruit of Paradise is described as "Ruddy and gold. . ."

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Section XI presents the most complex reworking of Milton in which the poet makes Milton Satan, not in the accepted sense in which he is a hero, but in the fact of his having been responsible for the Fall into unhappiness caused the poet and countless others because he had re-created the Christian myth in verses which insinuated the powerful and fearful meanings into the soul. The first allusion is in the opening lines, "If sex were all then every trembling hand/ Could make us squeak like dolls the wished-for/ words." On one level, the poet genuinely means what he writes here, but on another level, these "words" come from another voice which wants to deny passion, sex, altogether; this is the voice of Milton internalized by the poet. These "words" come from the end of Book VIII where, in making his case for the supremacy of the rational faculty and love as an expression of it and not of passion which it should surpass, Milton has Raphael speak these words to "half abash'd Adam:"

> But if the sense of touch whereby mankind
> Is propagated seem such dear delight
> Beyond all other, think the same vouchsafed
> To cattle and each beast; which would not be
> To them made common and divulged, if aught
> Therein enjoyed were worthy to subdue
> The soul of man, or passion in him move.
> What higher in her society thou find'st
> Attractive, human, rational, live still
> In loving thou dost well, in passion not,
> Wherein true love consists not: love refines
> The thought, and heart enlarges: both his seat
> In reason, and is judicious; is the scale
> By which to heav'nly love thou may'st ascend,
> Not sunk in carnal pleasure; for which cause
> Among the beasts no mate for thee was found.

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The association between the "touch" here and in Stevens' line is more than obvious. How Stevens transcends and corrects these lines is contained in the rest of the stanza. He, too, acknowledges the role and place of "love" in human life, "that makes us weep, laugh, grunt and groan, and/ shout/ Doleful heroics," but he also remembers that it is part of "that first, foremost/ law" which is the precedency of sex, bearer of change within continuity, like the sea.

In the next line, painting the scene of the "Anguishing hour!", Stevens condemns Milton and Christian belief using their own terms turned against them. By telling us that "Last night we sat beside a pool of pink," the poet reveals how he and Elsie were before ("Last night") their Fall into knowledge; before, they were in Paradise, like Adam and Eve next to the "fresh mountain side," as in the celestial Heaven with its "bright/ Pavement, that like a sea of jasper shone, Impurpled withe celestial roses," of which the pool is an imitation. There they hear the frog who "Boomed from his very belly odious chords." The "frog" is Satan, the toad who whispers to Eve toward the end of Book IV; the temptation is at the time of the full moon, and in Stevens' poem we also know there is moonlight because of the "bright chromes" reflected in the pool. For Stevens, the toad becomes the frog who is Milton voicing the "odious chords" that prevent men from perceiving the absolute necessity for sex, "that first, foremost law." The temptation Milton presents to become super-Christian is "odious"

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because it is posited on Reason rather than on the Passion Satan represents. As such, it denies that aspect of life which ties men to the earth and makes them human animals; instead, it tries to make men angels, disembodied rational spirits. The attraction is appealing but deadly, as Stevens tries to show us, using himself as an example. This more than anything else is "the unconscionable treachery of fate," that we should see love as an attribute of Reason alone and not of Passion.

We come to Section XII in the poem remembering that there are twelve books in "Paradise Lost" and hoping that a satisfactory conclusion or solution will be offered to us by the enlightened poet in his response to Milton. We are given the cryptic descriptions of the pigeons and rabbis, blue, white and rose. The symbolic urban birds like the rabbis will make constant reappearances in Stevens' later poetry, the pigeons descending downward on extended wings like Satan and his angels, who "with expanded wings" or "with extended wings," describe the soaring and spinning movements, "the dark descent, and up to reascend" which reflect the life of the spirit carried passionately by the breath of Nature searching in dying light for true being. (Here we must understand that Passion yields to Nature, being passive and female, the opposite of imposing Reason.) The rabbis reflect the only solution possible without losing faith or the connection with our controlling myth at the same time as they represent Stevens' absolute rejection

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of the Christian ministry which produced Milton. The flutterings of the pigeons that the rabbis observe describe the fallen soul who accepts his state of living in the real world and not in Paradise and who is, therefore, always suspended between man and god, between animal nature and angelic aspiration, and who always seeks knowledge because he is half angel.

This brings us to the point of finally considering the impact of the third line of the poem, "There is not nothing, no no never nothing." If we look again at Book IV of "Paradise Lost," we find that just before Satan comes as a toad to tempt Eve, there is this description of and silent address to Adam and Eve:

> These, lull'd by nightingales, embracing slept,
> And on their naked limbs the flowery roof
> Shower'd roses, which the morn repair'd. Sleep on,
> Blest pair, and O! yet happiest if ye seek
> No happier state, and know to know no more.

The last line with its four negatives provides the model for Stevens' line with its six. He covertly plays on the senses of know/no that are explicit here. In addition to the syntactical playing which, with its three double negatives, equals, "There is something, yes, something/ Like the clashed edges of two words that kill," what is implicit in Stevens' borrowing is his awareness that when these lines were uttered, or shouted, in the past, he and Elsie were naive and innocent, as Adam and Even in their dreamy sleep in Eden. By the time of the writing of the poem, however, there is knowledge, "something" because the Fall has occurred. Consequently, he can

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use the knowledge both to reflect the innocence of the past with its "doleful heroics" and the experience in the present which allows him to forge the words that kill his ancestors--Milton and what he represents most of all.

At the end of his poem Stevens remains contemplating love, not Milton's Reason. In forging his poem, he becomes the groom of Venus, Hephaistus, ugly and limping but favored by the gods because they need both his armor and his beautiful ornamented utensils.

Centered in political unrest and personal pain, Milton felt his only recourse was to Reason. In the closing book, Michael's speech to Adam expresses most succinctly Milton's position:

> yet know withal,
> Since thy original lapse, true liberty
> Is lost, which always with right reason dwells
> Twinn'd, and from her both no dividual being;
> Reason in man obscured, or not obey'd,
> Immediately inordinate desires
> And upstart passions catch the government
> From reason and to servitude reduce
> Man till then free.

It is easy to accept this necessity in a political situation; Stevens would not argue with it on this level, just as he does not want to forget Reason but wants to incorporate it together with Passion in Imagination. What Stevens did perceive and reject, however, was the overly strong connection Milton stressed between Passion, sex, and Sin--telling man not to enjoy any but the rational aspects of woman's companionship. What we must remember, as Stevens no doubt was conscious of

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since it was still not rare during his youth, is the connection between blindness and syphillis. Whether or not a man, Milton, went blind because of this disease, there must have always remained a suspicion that it, and therefore a form of promiscuous sex sought solely for pleasure because of Passion, was the cause. The Greeks did not hide the fact that Tiresias' blindness was somehow connected to sexuality and that his resultant dual sexuality, allowing him to have the experience of both man and woman, was what gave him the sensual knowledge to be a prophet. Milton in Puritan England could certainly not accept such a basis in reality without the elaborate apology of "Paradise Lost."

Four hundred years later the inheritor of the Puritan tradition on our "native soil" (". . . him to follow thou art bound;/ Where he abides, think there they native soil"), Stevens made "Paradise Lost" the nature to which he held his mirror and affixed the beam of his lamp. Through him we see Milton's poem not only as a Seventeenth Century political statement, or as a personal railing against blindness, but also as a metaphor for the relationship which exists between our Puritan ancestors across the Atlantic and still-young America. Stevens deals with the set of beliefs set up by Milton in "Paradise Lost" and he experiences disillusionment because he finds that that invented set of beliefs still has reality and power in his being even though since the Seventeenth Century, Reason as he understands it, America's ideal, has been

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consistently attempting to break down the premises of that invention.

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is not unusual in its apparent theme, the passage into middle age, but it is unusual in being Stevens' first honest poem and the poem in which he announces himself and his power as a poet by slaying his father. It is clearly a development of what has come before, but it is the first major poem because he brings together in one voice what he had been able to deal with previously only in the guise of an adopted, ill-fitting role, as in "Sunday Morning," or on a completely abstract level as in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier." A major part of Stevens' poetry explores his relationship to Christianity as he received it through his Calvinist inheritance, and, consequently, it also deals with death and the function of religious myths. Chronologically, before "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," those poems which do not deal with these topics celebrate the physical world of colors, sights, smells, sounds, but there is no joining of these two aspects, no immediately perceivable involvement of Stevens himself with his experience in the poems, only a disembodied voice or voices without concretion. Beginning with "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and continuing after, these two distinct aspects remain, as evidenced by the difference between "Sunday Morning" and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (this observation is obscured, of course, since Stevens in The Collected Poems has "Sunday

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Morning," "Peter Quince," and "Thirteen Ways" appear much later than "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," when, in fact, they were written years before).

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Notes to Chapter 10

1 This is a good example of something Stevens described in an early letter to Elsie Moll:

> It is astonishing how much poetry I can read with sincere delight. But I didn't see much that was "new or strange"--except an expression about rhyme being "an instrument of music"--not that that was "new or strange" --but it struck me as being so; and it was a pleasant thing to think about. . . . Indeed, none of my rhymes are (most likely) true "instruments of music." The words to be rhymed should not only sound alike, but they should enrich and deepen and enlarge each other, like two harmonious notes. . . . (L 157).

This also recalls what Mallarmé wrote about the effects words should have in a poem, setting one another off like jewels in a setting.

2 The reference is to Alonso de Berceo's Miracles of Our Lady.

3 This is according to an application found in The Oxford English Dictionary under "hair."

4 Here we have another instance of a personal expression of what Pound described in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly:" "For two gross of broken statues/ For a few thousand battered books."

5 As Eliot described that Milton was responsible for the "dissociation of sensibility" that began in the Seventeenth Century and continues into the Twentieth.

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6 "Paradise Lost" was read aloud to Stevens while he was a young man by his friend, Livingood. It was also part of his library from the time he lived alone in New York; Milton, together with Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, Browning, and Tennyson, was one of Stevens' "man-poets."

7 As he does in many letters quoted in the text or in the notes.

8 This is also interesting because at the opening of Book VII Milton again addresses the heavenly Muse, Urania, and asks for help against the "barbarous dissonances/ Of Bacchus" and his revellers who tore apart the poet, Orpheus, at Rhodope. In evoking this, Stevens covertly voices that over-powering fear in himself that if he yields to passion, he will be destroyed like Orpheus. This is rephrased for Christianity by James in the passage which Milton allegorizes in Book II.

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11. "Sunday Morning."

"Sunday Morning" can be read as a less mature version of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle;" there is no resolution of the problems raised as there is in "Le Monocle." The title resounds not only with cultural and religious implications, but also with Stevens' personal celebrations of Sunday evidenced by his letters and Journal entries. Stevens observed Sunday in ritual fashion, whether or not he, as an adult, admitted to its having any religious significance. In the poem, the voice of the subject is female; this is quite interesting in view of what Stevens felt defined "female:" passivity, receptivity, mysticism, sexuality. (Consider these lines from "Six Significant Landscapes:"

> The night is the color
> Of a woman's arm:
> Night, the female,
> Obscure
> Fragrant and supple,
> Conceals herself.)

It is also important to note in this context the difference in attitudes he expressed about himself and about Elsie, as a woman, in relationship to religion and the church. In a letter written on Sunday evening, March 10, 1907, after describing his Sunday walk, he writes the following:

> . . .--I was more interested than you may
> believe in what you said about religion.
> A.T.'s opinions are quite elementary. I
> have never told you what I believe. There
> are so many things to think of. I don't

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> care whether the churches are all alike or whether they're right or wrong. It is not important. The very fact that they take care of A.T.'s "stupid" people is an exquisite device. It is undoubtedly true that they do not influence any but the "stupid." But they are beautiful and full of comfort and moral help. One can get a thousand benefits from churches that one cannot get outside them. They purify man, they soften life. Please don't listen to A.T., or, at least, don't argue with her. Don't care about the Truth. There are other things in life besides the Truth upon which anybody of any experience agrees, while no two people agree about the Truth, I'd rather see you going to church than to know you were as wise as Plato and Haeckel rolled into one; and I'd rather sing some old chestnut out of a hymn-book with you, surrounded by "stupid" people, than listen to all the wisemen in the world. It has always been a particular desire of mine to have you join church; and I am very, very glad to know that you are now on the road.--I am not in the least religious. The sun clears my spirit, if I may say that and an occasional sight of the sea, and thinking of blue valleys, and the odor of the earth, and many things. Such things make a god of a man; but a chapel makes a man of him. Churches are human.--I say prayers every night--not that I need them now, or that they are anything more than a habit, half-unconscious. But, in Spain, in Salamanca, there is a pillar in a church (Santayana told me) worn by the kisses of generations of the devout. One of their kisses are worth all my prayers. Yet the church is another for them--and for us.

It is not surprising, then, in light of the double standard set up for himself and Elsie, that when he speaks of his attachments to beliefs of this sort, he puts a female subject in his place. The letters show, in addition, the importance of Sundays in his life from the time he was a boy, when he attended Sunday school and sang in their choir, and later after

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he left Pennsylvania and went to New York. From 1900, when he began living in New York, Sundays became the days when he would try to re-establish his contact with Nature in the "country" around him; and later, after he meets Elsie, he makes a habit of writing especially long letters on Sunday evenings recounting what he has done and seen on his walks, revealing to her his inner thoughts and feelings, all of which have been prompted by this ritual observance.

The first intimations of this are found in his Journal in entries made during his first extended period in New York. On Saturday, August 9, 1902, we have this: "Tomorrow, if the sun shines, I shall go wayfaring all day long. I must find a home in the country--a place to live in, not only to be in." And, on the next day, Sunday:

> . . . In the early part of the day I saw some very respectable country which, as usual, set me contemplating. I love to walk along with a slight wind playing in the trees about me and think over a thousand and one odds and ends. Last night I spent an hour in the dark transept of St. Patricks Cathedral where I go now and then in my more lonely moods. 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. What incessant murmurs fill that ever-laboring, tireless church! But today in my walk I thought that after all there is no conflict of forces but rather a contrast. In the cathedral I felt one presence; on the highway I felt another. Two different dieties presented themselves; and, though I have only cloudy visions of either, yet I now feel the distinction between them. The priest in me worshipped one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another

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> shrine. The priest worshipped Mercy and Love; the poet, Beauty and Might. 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. As I sat dreaming with the Congregation I felt how the glittering altar worked on my senses stimulating and consoling them; and as I went tramping through the fields and woods I beheld every leaf and blade of grass or rather betokening the Invisible.

Here, including excerpts from these Sunday letters over a period of years will allow the reader to understand more fully the importance of this ritual for Stevens. There are three excerpts from 1909, the year of their engagement, and two from years following their marriage. Interesting to note while reading is the marked change of tone in the letters following their marriage and the fact that after their marriage, in spite of what he has written earlier to Elsie about his own feelings concerning the church, he is attending services.

From a letter to Elsie Moll, Sunday Afternoon, Feb. 28, 1909, we have this:

> . . . Last night I thought of you too, and longed to have you with me. I had spent the afternoon and evening at the Astor Library looking through the books of Paul Elmer More, oneof themost discriminating, learned and soundest critics of the day. He has a very marked tendency to consider all things philosophically, and that, of course, gives his views both scope and permanence. I quote a thing quoted by him-- in Latin for the sound and sight of it:
>
> > O vitae Philosophia dux! O virtutem indagatrix expultrixque vitiorum!

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Oh, Philosophy, thou guide of life! Oh, thou that searchest our virtues, and expellest vices!--That struck me as such an admirable inscription for the facade of a library--or of one of those temples, bound to be built someday, when people will seek in a place not specially dedicated to religion, those principles of moral conduct that should guide us in everyday life--as distinct, say, from the peculiar life of Sundays. . . .

--In poetry, anyone sensitive to beauty or emotion feels the beauty or emotion that the poet desires to communicate. That, I mean, is the common experience. Curiously, this is not true of painting, quite probably because painting does not make an altogether objective impression: that is, instead of seeing the thing seen, you see the thing itself. The result is that the appreciation of painting is not as acute as the appreciation of poetry. It is not as common, nor as just. People's pleasure in good poetry is simple pleasure. But people's pleasure in good painting is a timid, unbelieving thing, involved somehow with the idea that the pleasure is incomplete without some understanding of the technique of art. We see people admire painting in a mysterious way--whispering about it--venturing remarks of the "drawing," the "color," the "composition," the "style." That is all nonsense. A good painting should give pleasure, like any other work of art.--The same people who consider a painting so professionally ought, logically, to consider a pretty girl's "pattern"--"design"--and so on. I used to think that I was putting on airs to pretend to like a picture. But I am satisfied now if it gives me pleasure, I am right in not caring about "scale," or "balance of tones" or anything of the kind; just as I can boldly enjoy the lines:

> "This then perceivest, which makes they love more strong,
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long."

without knowing that they are a Shakespearean couplet composed of decasyllables;

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From another letter to Elsie, dated Sunday evening, May 3, 1909:

> (sitting in St. John's chapel) . . . It happens that last night at the Library I read a life of Jesus and I was interested to see what symbols of that life appeared in the chapel. I think there were none at all excepting the gold cross on the altar. When you compare that poverty with the wealth of symbols, of remembrances, that were created and revered in times past, you appreciate the change that has come over the church. The church should be more than a moral institution, if it is to have the influence that it should have. The space, the gloom, the quiet mystify and entrance the spirit. But that is not enough--And one turns from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus --temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness--tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem.--I do not wonder that the church is so largely a relic. . . .
>
> --I dropped into a church for five minutes, merely to see it, you understand. I am not pious. But churches are beautiful to see. . . .
>
> --Reading the life of Jesus, too, makes one distinguish the separate idea of God. Before today I do not think I have ever realized that God was distinct from Jesus. It enlarges the matter almost beyond comprehension. People doubt the existence of Jesus--at least, they doubt incidents of his life, such as, say the Ascension into Heaven after his death. But I do not understand that they deny God. I think everyone admits that in some form or other.--The thought makes the world sweeter --even if God be no more than the mystery of Life.

and, from Letter to Elsie dated Sunday evening, May 9, 1909:

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--You wonder why I didn't go into the country to see apple-blossoms and the like. The truth is, or seems to be, that it is chiefly thesurprise of blossoms that I like. After I have seen them for a week (this is great scandal) I am ready for the leaves that come after them--for the tree unfolded, full of sound and shade.

--The quotation from Shakespeare is particularly serviceable to me now,* (*"What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty!" Hamlet II,ii, 315) for I have lately had a sudden conception of the true nobility of men and women. It is well enough to say that they walk like chickens, or look like monkeys, except when they are fat and look like hippopotamuses. But the zoological point of view is not a happy one; and merely from the desire to think well of men and women I have suddenly seen the very elementary truth (which I had never seen before) that their nobility does not lie in what they look like but in what they endure and in the manner in which they endure it. For instance, everybody except a child appreciates that "things are not what they seem"; and the result of disillusion might be fatal to content, if it were not for courage, good-will, and the like. The mind is the Arena of Life. Men and women must be judged, to be judged truly, by the valor of their spirits, by their conquest of the natural being, and by their victories in philosophy.--I feel as if I had made a long step in advance: as if I had discovered for myself why Life is called noble, and why people set a value on it, abstractly. It is a discovery, too, that very greatly increases my interest in men and women. One might say that their appearances are like curtains, fair and unfair; the stage is behind--the comedy, and tragedy. The curtain had never before been so vividly lifted, at least for me; and my rambles through the streets have been excursions full of amateur yet thrilling penetration. I respect the chickens; I revel in the monkeys; I feel most politely toward the hippotamuses, poor souls (. . .);

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and another to his wife, dated Sunday morning, August 6, 1911:

> . . . I fully intend to continue along my present line--because it gives me a living and because it seems to offer possibilities. I am far from being a genius--and must rely on hard and faithful work. It is not hard to see why you are discontented here. It is undoubtedly lonely--and if by nature you are not interested in the things to be done in a place like New York, you cannot, of course, force your nature and be happy. If I could afford it, there are many things you might do. But there are many thousands of us who do not look too closely at the present, but who turn their faces toward the future--gilding the present with hope--to jumble one's rhetoric. And then you know, there is no evil, but thinking makes it so.--There's the sexton announcing morning services with the bell. After an hour at church, I am going out into the country somewhere--haven't had any fresh air for a long time. I may go to Yonkers, cross the river and walk down the Palisades among the locusts.
>
> With my love, Your
> Bud.

Wuxtra!

There were no locusts. I saw <u>one</u> thing distinctly pleasant. A path in some woods was surrounded by black-eyed susans--(flowers, of course). Three yellow birds in a group were swinging on the yellow flowers--picking seed, or something, and chattering.--But in the midsummer grandmother Nature is not specially interesting. She is too busy with her baking.--To-night as I came out of the Earle, I saw the moon, beautifully soft over Washington Square. The Weinmans have been up on the roof--gazing.--Such nights are like wells of sweet water in the salt sea (to repeat an ancient fancy)--like open spaces in deep woods.--Why cannot one sit in such rich light and be filled with--tableaux! At least, why cannot one think of new things and forget the old round--past things, future things? Why cannot one be moonlight through and through--for the night?--The learned doctors of men's minds know the reason why. I read it all once in the <u>Edinburgh Review</u>.

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> Psychologically, the obscurity of twilight and of night shuts out the clear outline of visible things which is a thing that appeals to the intellect. The clear outline having been obliterated, the emotions replace the intellect and
>
> > Lo! I behold an orb of silver brightly
> > Grow from the fringe of sunset, like a dream
> > From Thought's severe infinitude--
>
> I swear, by dear Bo-Bo, that it's a great pleasure to be so poetical.--But it follows that, the intellect having been replaced by the emotions, one cannot think of anything at all.--At any rate, my trifling poesies are like the trifling designs one sees on fans. I was much shocked, accordingly, to read of a remark made by Gainsborough, the great painter of portraits and landscapes. He said scornfully of someone, "Why, the man is a painter of fans!"--Well, to be sure, a painter of fans is a very unimportant person by theside of the Gainsboroughs.--I've had one of the candle-sticks over at the table to write by and find that the wax has been melting over the table. Poor table-top--as if all its other afflictions were not enough! --Adieu, my very dearest--and many thoughts of you--and kisses;

again to his wife on August 11, 1912:

> . . . and then went to St. Bartholemew's church for the morning service. I was so bleary that one of the hymns quite affected me, and I even thought the sermon good, when it wasn't. Then I bored it through the Park to the M-tr-p-l-t-n M-s- -m of -rt (I hate the place). My hobby just now is the 17th Century, a very remarkable period in modern history. Fancy my pleasure then in realizing that <u>all</u> the pictures in the Flemish room and in the Dutch room were 17th Century pictures. I was perfectly enchanted by two--or by two--of them by Cornelis de Vos (the elder). Such fresh color: one of a woman with two children (one of the children very pretty, with a dish of bright flowers); the other of a girl of about fifteen in a brown dress. I looked at several cases of English

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> silver. . . . Then I plodded down to the L-br-ry, because I wanted to find out who the devil Saint Anthony really was (I only found out that I could find out in the unreadable works of Saint Athanasius!) and who Saul was (confound my ignorance) and the story of Jacob and Esau--and I felt sound asleep over the Jewish Encyclopedia. I remember something about Jacob's ladder and Esau's mess of pottage and how the amiable tortoise Jacob beat the disagreeable hare Esau, all of which is portrayed at large in a sermon on Saul preached by the Archbishop Trench of Dublin at Cambridge University. . . Aint this the most brilliant picture of an August Sunday? I feel like jumping out of my skin. I shall be sincerely glad to be at the office tomorrow and hope I shall find a mountain of work there.(. . .) It was pleasant to have your postcards--two of them together (at) once. The country at home seems far away to me. Some day I shall leave this monastic life here and see all your leafy roads again--and, of course, like the saintly Anthony shall have been so preserved by my love of good things that the roads will be a good deal more withered than I. Certainly my feelings do not wither--whatever may be said of that monster, the body. Tonight the monster is full of capon and fresh peach pie.

What we notice most about these letters are his particular concern with Jesus as distinct from God, and his interest in other religious figures like St. Anthony, Esau and Jacob. This repeated voicing of his preoccupation with sainthood and a monastic life, which he associates with a "love of good things," is most important and should be considered over and over again in relation to Stevens' poetry and development. We should also note here the reference to "that monster, the body" as something distinct and separate (a distinction made in an earlier Journal entry about the worth of life as spirit).

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Considering the above evidence, we should look again at "Sunday Morning." In spite of the female subject, the room described in the poem bears a marked similarity to Stevens' first room in New York, the clue being the "green cockatoo" (which is a "peacock" in his room as described in his Journal) on the rug: "The carpet on the floor of my room is gray set off with pink roses. In the bath room is a run with the figure of a peacock woven in it--blue and scarlet, and black, and green, and gold." (L 38). The scene in the first stanza describes the effect of a dream-like preoccupation with the "truths" of Christianity on the reality of the room. How at first, things that are pleasing (late coffee and oranges) and a part of the immediate tangible reality "mingle to dissipate/ The holy hush of ancient sacrifice;" but "She dreams a little and she feels the dark/ Encroachment of that old catastrophe" (ancient sacrifice) so that the things which just gave pleasure are transformed into participants in "some procession of the dead." Here, illusion has won out over reality because it is not her (his) illusion or personal fiction, but a much more powerful one, one that denies rather than one that gives life.

In the next stanza, another voice questions why this should be so:

> Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else

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> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
> Divinity must live within herself:
> Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
> Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
> Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
> Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
> All pleasures and all pains remembering
> The bough of summer and the winter branch.
> These are the measures destined for the soul.

In the next line, beginning the third stanza, the poet gives the answer: unlike "Jove in the clouds [who] has his inhuman birth. . . ," Christ had a human birth, a mother did suckle him, and his sweet land was real (see Stevens' letter about the life of Jesus, quoted above). It is from this that the power and endurance of the myth derives: that Jesus was human and yet achieved and promised paradise.[1] The myth of Jove was separate, yet at the same time more human; but in man's desire for divinity, he invented for himself a myth of a demi-god, half-god, half-man--"our blood, commingling. . ./ with heaven"--to replace the older myth. The question posed by the poem is whether this myth is viable ("Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be/ The blood of paradise? And shall the earth/ Seem all of paradise that we shall know?"). If this last is so, that the earth shall be our paradise,

> The sky will be much friendlier then than now
> A part of labor and a part of pain.
> And next in glory to enduring love,
> Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

In other words, without the myth of Christianity, man would be able to feel at home on the earth rather than feel like the

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expelled child of some unseen paradise. That we are separate is a Romantic, pantheistic statement, but is is nonetheless a fact that each individual must experience in his own flesh through his own emotions and grow through himself, no matter how well he grasps the intellectual reality of alienation.

We know from his letters that Stevens was terribly concerned with the problems of death and the function of religion in his own life. At the time of writing this poem, however, although he has intellectually understood the inviability of Christianity, it is not possible for him to appreciate the emotional results of this understanding in his own life, so the statement he makes here is not strong. There is a sense of his being somewhat afraid of facing all the implications of this on his own emotional development, so he hides behind the mask of "she" and traces historically what he experiences emotionally.

The following stanza voices the next question by paralleling the birds who test their reality with man testing his own reality, and asks what happens when this is gone, no longer possible. There is not a pressing need for the idea of paradise while one is directly involved in testing one's reality; then one is content; the problem is what happens later. The poet's other prophetic voice answers this by saying that no illusion of immortality can have the power to sustain itself like the remembrance of something experienced in external reality, especially something in which there has been active involvement:

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There is not any haunt of prophecy
Nor any old chimera of the grave
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits get them home
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

In these lines, Stevens discounts all the myths of immortality, Christian and pre-Christian, as well as his own imaginings of eternity. The implications of what he says in this stanza are covert, and are not made explicit until "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," after which they constitute the central issue of the rest of his life. Perhaps (more than likely) they were not even apparent to Stevens himself at this point. But if the propositions here are extended, what we have is a doubting of the value or worth of any myth, of anything imagined by man without his direct involvement in the outside world. What endures is what partakes of external reality in an active way, not illusions, abstractions which intellectually explain being. The crisis of forty described in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is rooted in this realization. The act of creating another mythology is useless; words are nothing; man separate from his reality, without language that is meaningful within that reality is like the Church separated from the reality of the life of Jesus--an empty, meaningless abstraction. This is why much later in his career Stevens will say that the only poem is the poem of

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fact, written in the language of facts, because facts are all we have in the Twentieth Century. What Stevens really asks for is a reinvention of what it means to be human, because the myth of Christianity, or any myth of immortality, is fundamentally alienating.

But, unfortunately, what follows from this realization is an implicit devaluation or questioning of what was previously considered one of the fruits of creativity, namely, immortality. This presents real problems for Stevens, as it would for any poet, and provides a possible reason or, at least, an understood rationalization of why he couldn't take the writing of poetry as seriously as he often said he would have liked to. There are many statements of this sort made over the years, from 1915 when he writes to Elsie, "I wish I could give all my time to the thing [writing poetry], instead of a few hours each evening when I am often physically and mentally dull. I takes me so long to get the day out of my mind and to focus myself on what I am eager to do. It takes a great deal of thought to come to the points that concern me--and I am, at best, an erratic and inconsequential thinker. (. . .)" (L 186); until thirty-five years later when he writes in a letter to Thomas McGreevy:

> . . . the book (Auroras of Autumn) may go better than any book that I have ever had. And yet, for my own part, I feel that it is something of an improvisation and not at all what I should like it to be. However, at my age one cannot move in the circles of spaciousness in quite the grand way that one moved

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> a generation ago. If Beethoven could look back on what he had accomplished and say that it was a collection of crumbs compared to what he had hoped to accomplish, where should I ever find a figure of speech adequate to size up the little that I have done compared to that which I had once hoped to do. Of course, I have had a happy and well-kept life. But I have not even begun to touch the spheres within spheres that might have been possible if, instead of devoting the principal amount of my time making a living, I had devoted it to thought and poetry. Certainly it is as true as it ever was that whatever means most to one should receive all of one's time and that has not been true in my case. But, then, if I had been more determined about it, I might now be looking back not with a mere sense of regret but at some actual devastation. To be cheerful about it, I am now in the happy position of being able to say that I don't know what would have happened if I had had more time. This is very much better than to have had all the time in the world and have found oneself inadequate. . . . (L 669).

To have perceived this and to have continued writing points either to his having seen his relationship to poetry as merely something to pass thetime, or, on the contrary, having seen his involvement as an attempt at using language in a new way, in a way which would not remove us from reality but which would bring us closer to it.

Early in his career this question is posed but its answer remains ambivalent for the poet himself: "There is something absurd about all this writing of verses; but the truth is, it elates and satisfies me to do it. It is an all round exercise quite superior to ordinary reading" (letter to Elsie, Aug. 7, 1913). In one of his last poems, "Planet

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on the Table," Stevens sets down his feelings again:

> Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
> They were of a remembered time
> Or of something seen that he liked.
>
> Other makings of the sun
> Were waste and welter
> And the ripe shrub writhed.
>
> His self and the sun were one
> And his poems, although makings of his self,
> Were no less makings of the sun
>
> It was not important that they survive.
> What mattered was that they should bear
> Some lineament or character,
>
> Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
> In the poverty of their words,
> Of the planet of which they were part.

Here, almost forty years later, is the poet as "Ariel," disembodied spirit, like "she" in "Sunday Mornings" still stressing the endurance "of a remembered time/ Or of something seen that he liked." "Other makings of the sun," other than the makings of the self (as man who perceives only a certain spectrum of light and is possibly the only creature who sees a "sun"), we cannot know, except that they "waste and welter," and cause the ripe shrub to writhe. Here he clearly denies eternity and the idea of immortality for himself as achieved poet, and tells us that the important thing is that his work give, "Some affluence, if only half-perceived/ In the poverty of their words,/ Of the planet of which they were part."

The naming of himself as Ariel and his realization of having only "half-perceived," are clues about himself which

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are given to justify his not having taken the risk necessary if his work was really to overcome the "poverty" of words. That risk for him would have been an active engagement of both his spiritual and physical natures with the world around him. It is the taking of this risk which constitutes the difference between what Stevens called "man-poets," "virile poets," and others.

In "Sunday Morning," Stevens at thirty-five is still trying to test the limits of his intellectual and emotional realities which are still very much involved with Christianity. It is not easy to shrug off a myth of two thousand years and at the same time discover that those things that are attempting to replace it--reason, scientific data, mechanization--have no transcendence, no echo of humanity. Of course, yearning for "some imperishable bliss" will remain, even in contentment. The prophetic voice answers in oracular fashion, "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,/ Alone shall come fulfillment to our dreams/ And our desires," but this is still postulating the condition of happiness, of fulfillment, of beauty, on something in the future, death. Because the earth is not Paradise, because there is continual change, beauty must of necessity be conceived of as permanent in the mind, in imagination and remembrance. This is another way of saying that the condition of beauty is perishability and that only in the mind does it remain imperishable, in "the idea of the thing,

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not the thing itself." That is, in order to appreciate beauty, abstraction is necessary, and that same abstraction, that distorting perspective, is what allows us to know of death, of mortality. It is at the same time the source of both pleasure and pain. Unfortunately, this stanza itself gets lost in abstraction so that what is really meaningful for the reader is obscured by rhetoric.

"Sunday Morning" is the first poem in which Stevens attempts to deal with the effect of his father's and his mother's deaths, as well as what the closing up of the old family house meant for him. The latter part of this stanza is clearly connected to "The Emperor of Ice Cream;" with just a slight change in predicates, we see the closeness:

> Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
> As they are used to wear, and let the boys
> Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.

compared to:

> For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
> Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
> She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
> On disregarded plate.

Both poems are connected to what Stevens records concerning his experience of his mother's death in 1912; the difference is that "The Emperor of Ice Cream" is a much stronger statement of feeling, far less removed than the earlier attempt. In his Journal we find the following entries concerning the death of his mother, and his continued preoccupation with death:

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> 6/25/12
> About a year ago (July 14, 1911) my father died. And now my mother is dying. . . . She liked the flowers that had been brought. . . She seemed to be perfectly conscious of her surroundings. She smiled and nodded her head, but seemed to be trying to gather her thoughts --or else to let them wander far away.--All the feelings that are aroused create constant desire or hope of something after death. Catherine [his sister] writes that mother wishes it were over. Fortunately for mother she has faith and she approaches her end here (unless her mind is too obscured) with the just expectation of re-union afterwards; and if there be a God, such as she believes in, the justness of her expectation will not be denied. I remember how she always read a chapter from the Bible every night to all of us when we were ready for bed. Often, one or two of us fell asleep. She always maintained an active interest in the Bible, and found there the solace she desired--She was, of course, disappointed, as we all are. . . (L 172-73);
>
> 7/7/12
> --You know, all this meditation on old age, death and the other barebones of the scheme of things, would be dissipated in easier surroundings--;
>
> 7/29/12
> It was only a week ago that I returned to town. For several evenings I sat around, thinking chiefly of my poor mother. . . . Our old home will, no doubt, be broken up for good, after thirty-five years, at the end of the summer; and I should want to spend at least a few hours there, among its familiar objects. This you will understand. . . .

The only clue in the poem that there is real emotional (rather than intellectual) meaning for him in it is the mention of "disregarded plate." We should look at what Stevens writes to Harriet Monroe about retaining this image, even in its obscurity:

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> The words "On disregarded plate" in No. 5 are, apparently, obscure. Plate is used in the sense of so-called family plate. Disregarded refers to the disuse into which things fall that have been possessed for a long time. I mean, therefore, that death releases and renews. What the old have come to disregard, the young inherit and make use of. Used in these senses, the words have a value in the lines which I find it difficult to retain in any change. (L 183).

In this light, we can read the "She," in the lines of the poem quoted above both as death and as his mother in death. Once we have seen the letters, the poem is seen in an entirely different way; one layer of abstraction is removed, giving body and reality to the words. At this point, Stevens is very afraid of at all revealing himself, his emotional self. Perhaps this is partially because of his residual reaction to his years at Harvard, about which he had the following to say: ". . . . Harvard feeds subjectivity, encourages an all-consuming flame and that, in my mind, is an evil in so impersonal a world. Personality must be kept secret before the world. Between lovers and the like personality is well-enough, so with poets and old men, etc., and conquerors and lambs, etc.; for young men, etc., it is most decidedly well-enough to be left alone" (L 79). Or, perhaps it is because of his association of a certain kind of out-pouring with being "lady-like"[2] (after all, his Pantheon of man-poets does not include any who bare themselves in their work; he celebrates, rather, those where the "I" is dissolved). Whatever the reason, Stevens tries, like his heroes, to write about the world and

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and the condition of humanity with its great issues of change, of death, of love But the words still reveal him and his own experience, even if he does try to hide as best he can.

From his brief note to Harriet Monroe apologizing for his "talk about death" (L 201), we sense the extreme embarassment he felt at having revealed himself openly; it is no surprise, then, that the poignancy of his feelings about his mother's death should become as veiled as it does here, hiding behind questions like those which form the sixth stanza, with its contorted syntax:

> Is there any 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?
> Why set the pear upon those river-banks
> Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
> Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
> The silken weavings of our afternoons,
> And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!

The "inarticulate pang" here is his, accurately described. The only real meaning of the stanza is in the five lines beginning with "Why set the pear upon those river-banks?" where following the kind of transformation recorded in the first stanza, we understand that here the "disregarded plate" has become for "her," in her adherence to illusion, the "river-banks and shores" of Palestine, and that the poet himself is recording his actual reticence or inability to communicate with the one who experiences reality through the veil

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of the idea of immortality. His answer, again, to this is that

> Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
> Within whose burning bosom we devise
> Our earthly mothers, waiting, sleeplessly.

The implications of these lines is that those who substitute the myth of Paradise and eternal life (like his mother) cannot know beauty; and also, paradoxically, that it is at the same time, death that makes us "invent" other realities, "devise/ Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly." The essential question, then, is about the function of the human imagination--if we believe in immortality, that there is no change, no death, why invent?

In a rephrasing of Shelley, Stevens says that there must be some kind of basic naïveté in relation to the external world if a man is to be a poet; adhering to any of the old myths precludes direct participation in the external world, and means that any experience is at least one level removed from reality. The question he doesn't ask here, that he will ask by attempting to answer later on, is how to achieve that one-to-one primal relationship not only with the world around one, but with oneself and other as well. (A clue to this can be found in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" where because the sun, which in Stevens' poetic vocabulary is the vehicle for direct perception, is clouded, the poet imagines, invents, various scenes as substitutes for direct participation without the mediation of words; see Chapter 5.) At the same time, any invention, including "Our earthly mothers waiting,

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sleeplessly," attempts to make the condition of beauty, which is death, acceptable, a reality that we can live with. The fact that it is mother of beauty, the condition of beauty, and that we have intellectually grasped this realization is not enough; there is still the need of "some imperishable bliss" beyond temporal beauty, beyond any myth or invention.

In these lines, Stevens implicitly makes an extremely important point: the distinction between two moments in perceiving. In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," he calls these two moments "inflection" and "innuendo" ("I do not know which to prefer,/ The beauty of inflections/ Or the beauty of innuendoes,/ The blackbird whistling/ Or just after"). Because there is death as well as change, we perceive beauty; we are attentive to it. If ripe fruit never fell, or if boughs hung always heavy in that perfect sky, there would be no reason to be attentive. At any moment that we are actively engaged in the world around us, we participate in the beauty of inflection; at the same time this causes the "inarticulate pang," inarticulate because at the moment of participation there can be no innuendo, no distance. This kind of involvement is not and cannot be articulated; for that there must be separation. The good, the true, and the beautiful, then, cannot be one except in those brief moments when there is no distance, no separation, when all sense are actively perceiving "the planet of which we are a part."

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But what about innuendo? It is there because we are not naïve. As soon as there is speech, we are no longer naïve. We must then question Shelley's apprehension of the problem when he says in his Defense that in the beginning all men were poets because they were naïve. To be a poet means to be no longer naïve, but it does not necessarily follow that to be a poet means to be sentimental. Stevens realized this and tried to avoid sentimentality by systematically excluding personality, seeing that the Romantics in seeking the naïve had indulged the personality only to achieve sentimentality, and so had failed. Stevens traces the basic problem to its source, this separation between two ways of knowing, of seeing, and begins to explore all avenues from there. In avoiding sentimentality, Stevens chooses irony, its obverse, to reveal himself. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," he expands this apprehension in all its aspects and implications, beginning where "Sunday Morning" left off. "Sunday Morning" explores, on one level, Stevens' reaction to death, probably prompted by his mother's death, as a man still very much tied emotionally to the myths of his mother, and using the poem to argue with these myths in an implicit attempt to explain his own inability to feel for her in death. After all, what he speaks of in his letters does not even remotely hint at real, experiential pain, either in compassion for his mother's or his own, but of his preoccupation with the idea of "death" and what it means in terms of his relationship to

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his past and his family. This poem is an apology for not feeling; "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," on the other hand, is a poem which begins with feeling, and goes on from there to explore all the reactions to this feeling, both intellectual and emotional. It is the perfect example of Eliot's description in "From Poe to Valéry" that poems begin from emotion and go on to explore thought and action which emotion prompts.[3]

The next stanza, VII, Stevens himself saw as somewhat "different in tone" from the rest of the poem, but regarding the appearance of the poem in Poetry, he thought it not too detached to conclude with (since VIII became the second stanza). It tells of some future time which evokes a past time, since in our imagination the image that is conjured is of some ancient druid or pagan rite being performed, when the sun shall replace Christ as the venerated object of a new mythology. But devotion, then, will be quite different from that of Christian devotees; it will be Dionysiac and will celebrate the sun as sun, "Naked among them, like a savage source." This stanza, however, does not succeed because it, in itself, creates another myth, one reflecting the lack of experienced reality; its language and tone mark this. As in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," there is the use of "choir" pointing to some past, felt, yet still hoped to be renewed religious participation. And again later, as in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," man is contrasted to Nature ("The windy lake. . . . The trees, like serafin, and echoing

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hills" (which will survive and continue to choir long after man is gone. The tone is of human despair without acceptance.

In the last stanza, the attempt at resolution is in seeing through the myth of Christ to the perception of the reality that Christ is only a man, not like the sun; though he may have posed or been transformed into "a savage source," he did not partake of divinity, and his tomb "Is not the porch of spirits lingering," but only a grave. This "she" hears still through the veil which changes the day into that "wide water without sound," across which the procession mourning her death winds (like a shroud). Then, again, the voice of the poet comes in and explains why things are as they are:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

Here he says that there is no reason for being other than being itself; that, like the pigeons, he as poet and we as men, also make "ambiguous undulations," as we sink towards death, towards darkness, and that there is no reason beyond this itself. In this poem, Stevens opens many doors, but goes through none. It is his quarrel with Christianity, the beginning of a long argument that will last throughout

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his lifetime, taking different shapes at different points in his development. At this point, he is still thinking in terms of creating another myth that will replace Christianity, one that will include and celebrate this life and at the same time be transcendent, so he thinks of one which will celebrate the sun which allows us to <u>see</u>, as beings who are a part of the external, perceivable reality.

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Notes to Chapter 11

[1] In this context, it is interesting to note that the same issue is developed by Dostoevsky in Crime and Punishment when the hero notices the reproduction of Holbein's Christ in the home of his demonic counterpart. What was considered almost heretical about that painting is the fact of its depiction of human suffering in the face of Christ.

[2] Stevens makes reference to his writing of poetry as being a "lady-like" activity in his Journal and in some letters to Elsie already quoted.

[3] For a fuller discussion of this aspect see Chapter 5.

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12. "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" Accompanies "Peter Quince at The Clavier."

Both "Sunday Morning" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" show Stevens to be preoccupied with specifically Christian problems touching his own life; the concern begins for him, as it did for Dante, at the mid-point of his life, and so takes on, in the poems, a meditative, reflective quality. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is the turning point in Stevens' development even though it comes at the apparent beginning of his poetic career; it is the beginning of what can be called his Comedy, his coming to terms with his own morality and his task and place as a poet in the historic society of poets which exists in the mind.

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is the next important step in Stevens' consideration of the epistemological and moral problems raised first in "Sunday Morning," and then again in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." By 1922, when he writes this poem, he has already provided some clues as to how he sees himself and his role as a poet: he has given himself the name "comedian," and has developed an ironic distance that was not present in either "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (even though the title suggests a kind of distance, it is the distance between himself as he is at the time of the writing and an irretrievable past, not the distance between himself

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and another part of himself, he being both observer and observed) or in "Sunday Morning." This role of comedian allows Stevens a great deal of freedom because of the complex way in which he interprets this role, both historically and personally.[1] He revitalizes the concept of comedian because we discover through the poetry what it means; we are not told explicitly at any point that this was his intention.

The meanings assigned to both "comedy" and "comedian" in the OED can all be understood in terms of Stevens:

> comedian 1. One who plays in comedies, a comic actor, Sometimes a player in general, a stage player.
> b. One who acts a feigned part in real life.
> 2. A writer of comedies, a comic poet.
>
> comedy (. . . originally either the 'bard of the revels' or the 'village bard')
> 1. A stage play of a light and amusing character with a happy conclusion to its plot. Such are the comedies of the ancient Greek and Latin writers, and of the modern stage. But in the Middle Ages, the term was applied to other than dramatic compositions, the 'happy ending' being the essential part of the notion. In the English use of the term, the following stages may be distinguished:
> *a. Its medieval use for a narrative poem with an agreeable ending (Probably taken from Italian; cf. The Divine Comedy, the great tripartite poem of Dante, called by its author La Commedia, because in the conclusion, it is prosperous, pleasant, and desirable', and in its style 'lax and unpretending', being written in the vulgar tongue, in which women and children speak.').

About the name "Comedian" in the poem "Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens writes that it is "what may be called an anti-mythological poem. The central figure is an every-day man who lives a

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life without the slightest adventure except that he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do." (L 778). In other words, like Dante, Stevens wants to explore his spiritual role as poet but in a way that is simple and anti-heroic, in language that is accessible, "comic," belonging to the common man. This is not to say that the common man could write either the words of Dante or of Stevens, but that what the language points to and celebrates is what the common man can understand and celebrate. Regarding the definitions of "comedian," Stevens as man and poet fulfills each one: in many poems, and in his letters as well, he plays the part in the comedy, assigning himself various roles. Beyond this, he suggests in various ways that he himself does feign a part in real life; "It seems insincere, like playing a part to be one person on paper and another in reality. But it is only because I know I command myself there." (L 88). His assumed role does not include that aspect of himself he calls the "vigorous warrior," the "monster;" and, he is, of course, by his own definition, a comic poet. All of these aspects will become clearer as we continue.

One of the basic premises of comedy is that it reflects the attempted, and sometimes successful, integration of the hero into an existing society; and since comedy grows out of the low mimetic, the characters of the comedy are of human proportions. It is not the struggle of Prometheus for the fire that comedy records, but the effects of this struggle

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on those who are for the most part completely unaware of it, yet who are touched by the vagrancies of fate nonetheless. In this sense, the comic poet is essentially anti-romantic; he does not fight for his individuality, but for his communality with the world around him. Apropos of "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens states his own perception of this in the following:

> . . . I have spoken of the way of all mind, but the mind, like one of St. Francis' crickets, is a pretty hard thing to catch. About the time when I, personally, began to feel round for a new romanticism, I might have naturally been expected to start on a new cycle. Instead of doing so, I began to feel that I was on the edge: that I wanted to get to the center: that I was isolated, and that I wanted to share the common life. . . . People say that I live in a world of my own: that sort of thing. Instead of seeking therefore for a "relentless contact," I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central. So stated, this puts the thing out of all proportion in respect to its relation to the context of life. Of course, I don't agree with the people who say that I live in a world of my own; I think that I am perfectly normal, but I see that there is a center. For instance, a photograph of a lot of fat men and women in the woods, drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo convinces me that there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve. (L 352)

Stevens' role as comic poet is an attempt to de-mythologize not only Christianity, but the residues of Nineteenth Century Romanticism as well, with its "memorabilia of the mystic spouts." The Romantics rejected Christianity in favor of a "return to nature," a pantheism, but in rejecting this myth

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of almost 2000 years, they saw themselves as new Prometheans and instead of the vulture nibbling at their livers, they suffered from their own "bile" and "spleen", and metaphysical "angst," the other side of their sentimentality. They refused to see themselves as common men, even though some, like Wordsworth, recognized the importance of returning to the common man for their words; they preferred seeing themselves as demi-gods. In spite of what Winters and other critics who see him as an unfulfilled Romantic, Stevens wants no part of this, even though he does realize that he has inherited much from the Romantics. When he says "A dead romantic is a falsification," he de-mythologizes, de-categorizes even the term itself, saying that to live is romantic, since each man must live in creating his own individual order or illusion. Stevens, too, rejects Christianity but at the same time realizes that there are certain subliminal effects of Christianity that will not go away so easily, even by challenging the gods and becoming oneself godlike. The cardinal sin of Christianity is pride together with its concomitant vanity. In order to neutralize Christianity, it is necessary to expunge the fear of punishment for committing this sin. This is quite simple to do intellectually, but quite a different matter when it comes to the emotional response. The concept of vanity is a Christian one; to be vain is to be the opposite of what it means to be truly Christian, that is, humble. The Romantics seemingly

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obviated this problem and its consequences by reinventing themselves as pre-Christian, in a sense, choosing their models from ancient myths or from previous literary examples who challenged dogma, Milton's Satan, for example.

Stevens addresses this problem directly, as will be seen in discussing "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," as well as in many other poems. Stevens often apologizes for his preoccupation with religion ("Yet if I prattle so much of religious subjects, Psalms and things, my girl will think me a bother" he writes in a letter to Elsie, [L 141]), but he continues to deal with its nonetheless because he senses in himself the residual psychological effects of Puritanical Christian tradition. It is not at all arbitrary that he often chooses for himself the metaphor of the "rabbi," or addresses some part of himself as "that jew in me." In very simple terms, (as mentioned earlier) the difference, as he puts it, between being Christian and being a Jew, is the difference between "fasting and feasting." Stevens is afraid of vanity, of indulgence, even to the point of not wanting to indulge his own personality. Historically, the Jew sees himself as one of God's chosen people;[2] this has a significant effect on the way in which he sees himself in the world, and on the kind of communication or dialogue he will have with other men and with the godhead as well. For Stevens, the rabbi is a wise man because of his own reading and experience not because he is the representative of some god on

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earth who possesses more or less miraculous powers. "The rabbi (in "The Sun This March") is a rhetorical rabbi. Frankly the figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the figure of a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human progress" (L 786).

The punishment for excessive pride in Hebraic terms is not eternal burning in hell, but being sent out into the world in order to discover oneself by finding one's limits (as evidenced by the stories of Cain, of Joseph, of others like the prodigal son). God's punishment to the Jews is never final; there is always the future possibility of remaking a covenant, of dialogue. The Judaic God is not an unreasonable, punishing Father, but more, an older, wiser friend. Judaism is dedicated to life in the present, on this earth, not to life conditioned by the threat of future punishment for acts committed on earth. All of this is, of course, much more complex than what appears here, but it is meant to be only a brief outline of certain concepts which are essential to the understanding of what lies beneath the surface of the man we call Wallace Stevens.

Stevens' idealized role of himself as comedian includes that of jongleur. The jongleur not only recited or sang ballads, chansons, but entertained in other ways as well, telling stories, playing tricks by sleight-of-hand, and generally acting the jester or buffoon. Since he was itinerant, he owed allegiance to no man, no king, and so could

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afford to criticize where others feared criticism would bring opprobrium; in addition, because of his guise as fool, he was automatically protected from the consequences of anything he might say. Stevens played with words like the jongleur with oranges or knives; sometimes they simply enchant, sometimes they point danger, sometime they're held in a perfect moving balance, sometimes they fall. The words are often simply delightful, but just as often they reveal painful facts about himself, but for which he does not take the consequences.

This aspect of Stevens never exists in isolation, however, but acts as a foil to that other aspect which could best be identified as the attitude of a high-toned old Christian woman, puritanical and prim, afraid to be self-indulgent or vain, that same attitude which marks his earlier expressed desire to be monk-like, ascetic. The ideal monk devotes his life to the pursuit of the evanescent, the transcendent, and, in so doing, takes the vows of poverty, chastity, and obediance to an order that is not at all perceiveable. The ideal jongleur devotes his life to manipulating what is until what is not becomes apparent, and, in doing this, indulges himself in play, and bears responsibility to no one. The friction generated by the constant interplay between these two masks is what characterizes the irony found in Stevens' poetry. Stevens is unable to join these two aspects of himself in his being. On the one hand, he associates asceticism

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with the attenuated spiritual rewards of contemplating the good, the true, and the beautiful, which he very much desires; and, on the other, he recognizes in himself an equally strong desire to indulge himself, to play, to allow "that monster, the body," its satisfactions.

Nortrop Frye, in his Anatomy of Criticism,[3] provides a good working definition of both irony and ironic comedy:

> The conception of irony meets us in Aristotle's Ethics where the eiron is the man who deprecates himself, as opposed to the alazon. Such a man makes himself invulnerable, and, though, Aristotle disapproves of him, there is no question that he is a predestined artist, just as the alazon is one of his predestined victims. The term irony, then, indicates a technique of appearing to be less than one is, which in literature becomes most commonly a technique of saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or, in a more general way, a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning. . .
>
> The ironic fiction writer, then, deprecates himself, and like Socrates, pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic. Complete objectivity and suppression of all moral judgements are essential to his method. Thus pity and fear are not raised in ironic art: they are reflected to the reader from the art. When we try to isolate the ironic as such, we find that it seems to be simply the attitude of the poet as such, a dispassionate construction of a literary form, with all assertive elements, implied or expressed, eliminated. Irony, as a mode, is born from the low mimetic; it takes life exactly as it finds it. But the ironist fables without moralizing, has no object but his subject. Irony is naturally a sophisticated mode, and the chief difference between sophisticated and naive irony is that the naive ironist calls attention to the fact that he is being ironic, whereas sophisticated irony merely states, and lets the reader add the ironic tone himself. . . .
>
> In studying ironic comedy we must start with the theme of driving out the pharmakos

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> from the point of view of society. This appeals to the kind of relief we are expected to feel when we see Jonson's Volpone condemned to the galleys, Shylock stripped of his wealth, or Tartuffe taken off to prison. Such a theme, unless touched very lightly, is difficult to make convincing, for the reasons suggested in connection with ironic tragedy. Insisting on the theme of social revenge on an individual, however great a rascal he may be, tends to make him look less involved in guilt and the society more so. This is particularly true of characters who have been trying to amuse either the actual or the internal audience, and who are the comic counterparts of the tragic hero as artist. The rejection of the entertainer, whether fool, clown, buffoon, or simpleton, can be one of the most terrible ironies known to art, as the rejection of Falstaff shows, and certain scenes in Chaplin. . . .
>
> One notes a recurring tendency on the part of ironic comedy to ridicule and scold an audience assumed to be hankering after sentiment, solemnity, and the triumph of fidelity and approved moral standards. . . .

Frye here is addressing himself mainly to problems found in dramatic and fictional works where the irony is played out in the action of the narrative, but his insights can be applied as well to lyric poetry where the voice of the poet is split into two or many voices, as is the case for Stevens.

In his poetry, and particularly here in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens plays both the parts of alazon and eiron. (After Frye's definition, alazon "means impostor, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is. The most popular types of alazon are the miles gloriosus and the learned crank or obsessed philosopher".)[4] That aspect of Stevens as the comedian-jongleur, the sensualist, playful

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and indulgent fool is the alazon; the restrained, prim aspect of "a high-toned old Christian woman" which speaks as the voice of the super-ego is the eiron. Unlike the French poets, Laforgue, Baudelaire, Gautier, who use irony to shock the bourgeoisie, Stevens uses irony to explore his own being, sometimes shocking the bourgeois in himself in the process.

The alazon in Stevens wants nothing more than to delight in being, in the world around him, in the satisfactions of his own body, in words as they reflect this joy. It is this aspect of the poet that enjoys big cigars, occasionally drinks too much "Parfait Martinique: coffee mousse, rum on top, a little cream on top of that" (OP 158), and which is responsible for those poems that are nothing but a celebration of reality and language, like "O Florida, Venereal Soil," where the poet is nothing but lover who makes his reader a lover as well. This aspect of the poet as amorist prefers the "beauty of inflection" to that of innuendo; like the juggler, he simply plays with the reality around him, tossing words like oranges in the air, disclosing the beauty of their own reality and revealing him as he who can balance them in perfect harmony.

The other aspect, that of eiron, is puritanical and censures the amorist, not only in the poetry, but in reality as well. In order to see this, we have only to look at a few early Journal entries:

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> December 29-31, 1902,
> What I have resolved to do next year so far as possible is this: to drink water + to abstain from wet-goods--not that I booze but that I love temperance + that the smallest liquor is intemperant. . . . And in the second place to smoke wisely;
>
> July 26, 1903,
> 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 crème de cassis melée, through Burgundy, Chablis etc. to sloe gin with Mexican cigars + French cigaroots. I have lunched daily on--Heaven knows what not (I recall a delicious calf's heart cooked whole + served with peas--pig that I am). . . ;
>
> October 20, 1903,
> . . . Overhead in the clair de crépuscule lay a bright star. I've grown such a hearty Puritan + revel in such good health that I felt scarcely the slightest twinge of sentiment. But to-night I've been polite to a friend--have guzzled vin ordinaire + puffed Villar y Villar and opened my dusty tobacco-jar--and my nerves, as a consequence, are a bit uneasy; so that the thought of that soft star comes on me most benignly. Tomorrow, however, I shall resume the scrutiny of things as they are. . . ;
>
> February 7, 1904
> My pleasures seem illegitimate because they are pleasures;

and an excerpt from a letter to Elsie Moll:

> The only brilliant things in life are friendship, self-denial, and similar evidences of civilization, as far as men are concerned.

This strongly Puritanical bent comes not only from an inherited religious, cultural (Victorian) tradition but is associated

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for Stevens with what his father instilled in him about the value of work and what was necessary to be a "man." This aspect as it became developed is the force that strives to make the poet want to "fit" into the society of which he is a part, and to drive out the pharmakos--for him his own self-indulgent aspect, the playful alazon who threatens to undermine the very values that define him as a "successful man." Stevens seems to have enjoyed a close relationship with his father, and his father must have understood not only his desire to be a poet (he too wrote poetry) but his son's proclivity for self-denial and rigor as well, because while the poet was still in college, his father wrote this in a letter to him:

> A little romance is essential to ecstasy. We are all selfish--Self-denial doesn't seem to be a good thing excepting in others--the world holds an unoccupied niche only for those who climb up--work and study, study and work--are worth a decade of dreams--and romantic notions--but I do not believe in being so thoroughly practical that what is beautiful, what is artistic--what is delicate or what is grand--must always be deferred to what is useful. And there is no better exercise than an effort to do our best to appreciate and describe to others the beauties of those things which are denied to the vision of the absent.
>
> I suppose with Whittier [a friend] you saw the red jackets of the English soldiers --and heard the crack of the Yankee shooting from the fence corners as they crossed the bridge at Lexington! [referring to Wallace's having been in Concord and Lexington]--And yet those unfamiliar with the early history of Boston see nothing about the place to extract a passing thought.
>
> When we try to picture what we see, the

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> purely imaginary is transcended, like listening in the dark we seem to really hear what we are listening for--but describing real objects one can draw straight or curved lines and the thing may be mathematically demonstrated--but who does not prefer the sunlight--and the shadow reflected.
>
> Point in all this screed--Paint truth but not always in drab clothes. Catch the reflected sun-rays, get pleasurable emotions --instead of stings and tears. (L 14-15).

Together with this, however, his father also stresses the importance of a profession (other than one attached to letters) for "self-sustenance" ("really preparing for the campaign of life--where self-sustenance is essential and where everything depends upon yourself," [L 18]), and "It will not do to put off the thought of subsistence as drone matter, ignoble + unworthy--The "Crack a Jack" is the fellow who is always ready in any emergency, and meanwhile fills his pockets with more stones + his head with more wisdom," (L 20). Three years later, after the young Wallace has tried his hand at Journalism (an attempt which his father told him in a letter, before he began working for any newspaper, "would be of greatest value as a stimulus or to cure you," [L 19]), we find the following among his Journal entries (already cited earlier in Notes to Chapter 1, but presented again here because of the context):

> March 11, 1901,
> . . . Went home last Thursday for a few hours. . . . I had a good long talk with the old man in which he did most of the talking. One's ideas don't get much of a chance under such conditions. However, he's a wise man. We talked about the law which

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> he has been urging me to take up. I hesitated--because this literary life, as it is called, is the one I have always had as an ideal + I am not quite ready to give it up because it has not been all that I wanted it to be (. . .).

and, the next day,

> I recently wrote to father suggesting that I should resign from the Tribune and spend my time in writing. This morning I heard from him +, of course, found my suggestion torn to pieces. If I only had enough money to support myself I am afraid some of his tearing would be in vain. But he seems always to have reason on his side, confound him.

What we see here is that this "high-toned old Christian woman" aspect of Stevens which characterizes his role as eiron is also tied to parental-societal expectations internalized by him as a young man. We know that Stevens did follow his father's advice and went to Law School; we also know that he did become a poet, and became what it was that he was afraid of becoming, by his own definition "a dilettante, half-dream, half-deed." The conflict does not go away, but emerges in the ironic interplay of voices found in the poetry. The eiron striving to fulfill expectations of himself both as a successful societal model, and as a "Man-poet," is taunted constantly by the bawdy alazon who becomes in Stevens' comedy, the pharmakos who must be driven out so that the eiron can integrate himself into society. Stevens' self-conscious pose as poet is as eiron: he deprecates himself, appearing to be less than he is in his self-irony (as well as in his external

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life, where not even some of his close business associates ever knew of Stevens' life and success as a poet); he makes himself invulnerable to the outside, the reader, by the apparent impersonality of his tone, and to himself as well because while using the masks of irony, he never is forced to address himself directly if he doesn't want to; he "says as little and means as much as possible," he takes life exactly as he finds it, does not moralize and, on the surface, has no object but his subject, the poem itself.

Before Stevens starts working with these different aspects of his self, and before he develops them into the application of irony, as discussed above, he hides his "self" behind the counterpart of irony, sentimentality. We should consider, for example, the opening of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" where at first he makes a major epistemological statement about the nature of poetry:

> Just as my fingers on these keys
> Make music, so the selfsame sounds
> On my spirit make a music, too,

saying that not only does he make poetry, but poetry ("the self same sounds,") to the same extent make him. In these three lines, he says that poetry, language, is the shaper of his reality as much as he is its shaper (and so defines the triple metaphoric process of the poet, which also operates on the reader but in a different reciprocal relation); the words themselves become inventors of the self, the disclosers of reality. He then covers the tracks leading to

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this discovery first with a stilted, pompous statement about what he feels:

> Music is feeling, then, not sound;
> And thus it is what I feel,
> Here in this room, desiring you.

Then he forces the analogy with music and so minimizes the impact, the strength, of his feeling:

> Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
> Is music.

This makes it sentimental, separated from real feeling by Fancy, prompted by an unwillingness to reveal his self as "that vigorous warrior."

The second stanza seriously mars the poem, though it clearly shows the difference between "poetry of Imagination" and "poetry of Fancy." It checks the adventure of the words in their way to discovering a self, and substitutes instead an artificially derived conclusion which is not only redundant ("Music is feeling, then, not sound;"), since the first stanza, as theory, is complete in itself, but misleading as well because that is "not what he meant, not what he meant at all." The only way he can express his "feeling" at this point is by "thinking." ("Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk./ Is music."), and what does he think of but the Apocrypha story of Susannah and the Elders. His erotic feeling is transmuted into "The strain/ Waked in the elders by Susannah." After this transition, the poem does invent its own reality and creates an atmosphere charged with real feeling, but aestheticized:

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Of a green evening, clear and warm
She bathed in her still garden, while
The red-eyed elders watching, felt

The basses if their being throb
In witching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizicatti of Hosanna.

etc.,

until the last section where again there is a shift back to the sententious, unfeeling tone of the second stanza in Section I.

Joseph Riddel offers a very cogent analysis of this poem, seeing its form as "musical analogy . . . sensitively developed, though not explicitly: the four parts of the poem are stretched casually upon the three-part sonatina framework of exposition, development, and recapitulation with coda. The two part development, with its strikingly divergent style, is Stevens at his lyrical best, while the opening and closing sections reveal his ability to shift keys without violating the basic chords."[5] He also says that this is really the first noteworthy poem; it is a poem about poetry describing the paradox that "the ideal must take body, and thus become less than ideal, before man can know it."[6] And further, "The forms of poetry, accounting like music for change, create and preserve beauty; the blind laws of moral convention, the Puritan distortions of the elders, leave it spent and dissipated."[7] The exegisis, in its entirety, is accurate and perceptive; however, it does not account for the stiffness we feel about some parts of

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the poem which prevents it from being wholly successful. It is not only attributable to the fact that Stevens is here working with an experimental form which he has not perfected, as Riddel points out, but that the form itself is artificial and somewhat forced. It is this way because neither Stevens nor his critics have expanded on a very important element, the "occasion" of the poem. Even in looking at a "poem about poetry" (which on one level, this poem is, but only on one), we cannot ignore the poet as maker of that poem, or the poem ceases to be a poem (a communication between poet and reader) entirely and becomes criticism.

The metaphor of Susannah and the Elders is used to express, in the poet's words, "what I feel,/ Here in this room, desiring you,/ Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk." Specifically, what he feels "is like the strain/ Waked in the elders by Susannah." The poem tells us, then, that he is not talking about poetry, but his own feeling about a particular reality, in this case, his desire. And the pose of the poet who writes of his bodily desire is that of Peter Quince, another mask of the comedian-jongleur. The poem is about what happens when the comedian-jongleur tries to express what he feels by playing on a clavier, and it comes out, "like a child on a recorder; a sound but not in government."[8] Peter Quince is "a yeoman as such things go," a physical shaper, a carpenter, turned play maker, newly come to his art. In Shakespeare's play, he produces the story

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of Pyramus and Thisbe. Pyramus kills himself because he finds Thisbe's mantle bloodied by the lion who frightened her away; Thisbe returns, finds Pyramus dead and kills herself. The lion is the metaphor for sexuality, the physical lust which threatens to destroy the purity of their love. In "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Susannah's purity and beauty is threatened by the desire, the lust, of the Elders. Stevens uses all of this to express his own feelings about himself. Because of a Calvinist's religious sense of shame and guilt and because of left-overs of Victorianism, Stevens as Peter Quince sublimates physical desire into "music," poetry, a "sacrament of praise." But the clavier is not a piano with its modulated range capable of expressing all moods and feelings, but a formal and outdated instrument best suited to bodying out form alone; hence, the form of the sonatina, simple and somewhat playful, but still stiff. So, for Stevens-Quince, the "sound" produced is not in "government" of his feelings; he has imposed an outdated form almost in order to control his feeling, his desire, again, as in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" and much in the same way a medieval poet, like the author of Pearl, used an extremely rigorous form as a damper on the overwhelming emotions he felt upon the death of his daughter.

The initial statement of the poem,

> Just as my fingers on these keys
> Make music, so the selfsame sounds
> On my spirit make a music, too.

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is forgotten, transformed by the rest of the poem, because the music he plays is not his own; he does not explore his own feeling by inventing his own music, but chooses instead the story of Susannah and the Elders, as well as the more covert story of Pyramus and Thisbe. So from the opening three lines where he tells us that he is made of his music as much as he makes the music, what emerges is a poem that appears to be about poetry alone, and not its maker. In this poem, Stevens has failed to reveal himself, or better, has managed successfully to hide himself once again, and the first three lines remain as an echo of the beginning of an adventure towards disclosure that was given up.

Before "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," other poems which do, in certain measure, reveal the poet, like "The Snow Man" (as well as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "Sunday Morning"), are overly serious, self-conscious without irony, and separated from the "vigorous warrior" aspect of Stevens' self. In "Peter Quince at the Clavier," this self is absorbed by the aestheticizing of his feeling in a religious, memorializing fashion, and his feeling is made into a "sacrament of praise." In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens confronts both aspects of his self head-on for the first time. He is able to do this because of the transformation of sentiment into irony made possible by the recognition of his own insignificant place in the universe which he came to

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terms with in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle."

In considering Stevens, we must always keep those first three lines of "Peter Quince" in mind: the poetry is Stevens. The words have discovered and disclosed their maker as much as being made by him. The complaint that his poetry is unsatisfying, incomplete, overly cerebral, is there, but it reveals the Stevens who is there as well:

> Let be be finale of seem,
> The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.

If the language is often dense and difficult, sometimes frustrating we would do well to remember Eliot's advice in the "Three Voices of Poetry," that if a poet's language does appear this way, we should consider that what he has to say has never been said before, and that we should take the trouble to learn the language if we want to understand.

Before clearly revealing the conflict between the two aspects of his self in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens has already established his role as comedian--a comedian not only in the sense of jongleur who tosses words like oranges in circles around his head, but a comedian like Dante whose search was after beauty, perfection, and who also began at the midpoint of his life to consider the world around him through the mirror of the self. Stevens' projected "Whole of Harmonium" is Dante's Commedia (the "Divine" became attached later, sometime in the 16th century). We know from his letters and his Journal that he did read Dante; in fact

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he used Dante to translate from Italian,[9] and considered him to be one of the "man-poets." Stevens' Comedy is the tale of a man whose fruit did fall of its own weight to earth, instead of describing its arc gracefully through the air like a palm, and his poetry reveals why this is the way it is, why things are the way they are. His words invent another self, one who looks back wisely at what was, and at what was not, and tries to answer why.

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" opens with the line most identifiable with Stevens, "Poetry is the supreme, fiction, madame," and continues with what Riddel has called a kind of body-soul debate. This poem is usually read on only one level as such, but there are actually many levels of irony operating within the poem. The addressee is the poet in his "high-toned old Christian woman" aspect, with which he wages an ongoing struggle. The poem is often read as criticism, describing the value of poetry over religion, poetry as body, religion as soul, in Riddel's terms. But beyond and including this, it is a poem, a poem within a particular context, specifically that of poetry as religion, as ethos, equivalent to "the conscience converted into palms."

This idea of poetry was articulated by Matthew Arnold. "The Study of Poetry" opens with this paragraph:

> 'The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its highest destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an

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> accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact; it has attached its emotions to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea <u>is</u> the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.'[10]

Contained in this we see the basis on which Stevens modelled his own idea of poetry as ethos, as expressing what is "central." (In the same essay, Arnold uses the word "central" in describing the success of Chaucer's poetry.) Stevens knew Arnold, and at different points in his life makes reference to him, and also to his "Notebooks." From his Journal on February 21, 1906, comes the following quotation, which Arnold had quoted himself in his "Notebooks:"

> "la destination de l'homme est d'accroître le sentiment de la joie, de féconder l'énergie expansive, et de combattre, dans tout ce qui sent, le principe de l'avilissement et des douleurs."

and Stevens' comment on it follows:

> As far as one thing by itself can be true, that is true. I think; but for the word "destination" I should substitute "virtue." Yet is is only one phrase of "infinite" wisdom, like the fear of the Lord etc.

About a year later, in a letter to Elsie, he cites another of Anrold's quotations:

> "Angelica hilaritas cum monastica simplicitate"; and here is what I guess it to mean: "Angelic hilarity with monastic simplicity."

And finally, in one of his Sunday letters to Elsie (already

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quoted in part above in another context), after having spoken of his mediations on the "sleeping" dead, which he says is a proper subject for a "Lenten Sunday," and after he tells her of having gone to church, that "it is very impressive to go to church if you do not go mechanically, and especially an old church full of memorials," he quotes Paul Elmer More, quoting Cicero, and goes on:

> O vitae Philosophia dux! O virtutum indagatrix expultrixque vitiorum!
>
> Oh Philosophy, thou guide of life." Oh, thou that searchest out virtues, and expellest vices!--That struck me as such an admirable inscription for the facade of a library--or of one of those temples, bound to be built some day, when people will seek in a place not specially dedicated to religion, those principles of moral conduct that should guide us in every-day life--as distinct, say, from the peculiar life of Sundays,--My mind is rather full of such things today, and so resembles the mood that fastened me, a year or more ago, so intently upon Matthew Arnold--and maxims!--But each for himself, in that respect; and I do not, therefore, make a point of what may not interest you.--To think occasionally of such things gives me a comforting sense of balance and makes me feel like the Brahmin on his mountain-slope who in the midst of his contemplations--surveyed distant cities--and then plunged in thought again.--To plunge in another direction: [Paul Elmer] More, speaking of the herbalists, botanists, and the like who go about examining Nature with microscopes, says,--"I sometimes think a little ignorance is wholesome in our communion with Nature; until we are ready to part with her altogether. She is feminine in this as in other respects, and loves to shroud herself in illusions, as the Hindus taught in their books." I think that that is a very fascinating observation. It makes one aware of the love of mystery among damsels--and accounts (though you will not admit it)

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for a certain pair of hidden slippers--that would have looked so pretty coming down the stairs. Bo-Bo is nothing if not feminine.--Collateral with that love of mystery among damsels, should go the gallantry of youths; for from the two spring all that is enduringly fine and pleasant between them.--And while this would be dull stuff to Princes, I think it is a pardonable subject for speculation on a Lenten Senday, on the part of one neither born nor bred a Prince, and yet a willing courtier and aspirant.--The sunlight is gone, & I must light my lamp. . . .--The ceremony of taking tea is gone, too.--Ought I not suddenly pull off my black wig and black gown and put on a white wig, full of powder, and a suit of motley--or maybe, the old costume of Pierrot? For when I sit at the window and write, I look on real things and am a part of them; but with my lamp lighted and my shade down--there is nothing real, at least there need not be and I can whisk away to Arcady--or say Picardy. Yes,: Picardy, and sit there in the rose, misty twilight and watch the gold, misty moon come up over the trees--

> Till, in the late starlight,
> The white lilies creep,
> Like the dreamt dreams
> Of Columbine, asleep.

[He then speaks of a painting exhibition in Philadelphia and goes on]

--In poetry, anyone sensitive to beauty or emotion feels the beauty or emotion that the poet desires to communicate. That, I mean, is the common experience. Curiously, this is not true of painting, quite probably because painting does not make an altogether objective impression: that is, instead of seeing the thing seen, you see the thing itself. The result is that the appreciation of painting is not as acute as the appreciation of poetry. It is not as common, nor as just. People's pleasure in good poetry is simple pleasure. But people's pleasure in good painting is a timid, unbelieving thing, involved somehow with the idea that the pleasure is incomplete without some understanding of the

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> technique of art. We see people admire painting in a mysterious way--whispering about it--venturing remarks on the "drawing," the "color," the "composition," the "style." That is all nonsense. A good painting should give pleasure, like any other work of art.--The same people who consider painting so professionally ought, logically, to consider a pretty girl's "pattern"--"design"--and so on.--I used to think that I was putting on airs to pretend to like a picture. But I am satisfied now that if it gives me pleasure, I am right in now caring about "scale," or "balance of tones" or anything of the kind; just as I can boldly enjoy the lines:
>
> "This then perceivest, which makes thy
> love more strong,
> To love that well which thou must
> leave ere long"--
>
> without knowing that they are a Shakespearean couplet composed of decasyllables. (L 33-35).

Stevens fully absorbed Arnold's ideas about poetry, and here in his early preoccupation with Arnold, he expands the aspect of "joy," of "pleasure" involved in it. Accordingly, he notes the above quotations having to do with this sentiment: "Angelic hilarity with monastic simplicity" provides what could be seen as a motto for Stevens, divided as he is between his desire to indulge the "instinct of joy" and his aspiration to the asceticism which yields knowledge of the one. The attention paid to pleasure as a quality of poetry comes only indirectly from Arnold; Stevens focusses on it because he understands that in order for poetry to fulfill the function of a de-mythologized secular religion, it must give pleasure as well as "common" knowledge. Stevens

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develops this awareness throughout his career, and finally articulates it for himself as part of his own poetic canon in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

Stevens is able to grasp the importance of this concept because of his own personal proclivity to what he calls "bawdiness" in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." Bawdiness, however, is incompatible with "mystery among damsels" and "the gallantry of youths;" for the courtier, courtesy must rule. At night, however, when "there is nothing real" and imaginings are free, Stevens dons his suit of motley and indulges bawdiness. Implicit in what he is saying in this letter, (that during the day, with the light of the sun, when, as he says "I look on real things and am a part of them") is the realization that man is separated from Nature by his "instinct for joy," for play.[11] There is no play in Nature apart from animal life; everything is ordered, does obey regular, calculable laws, even the weather (an important element in Nature for Stevens because it "appears" as play) follows a predictable meteorological pattern. In order for poetry to become an effective ethos for man, a creature who partakes both of external Nature and the play instinct of animals, it must express both. It must, in other words, be moral and playful, couple "Angelic hilarity with monastic simplicity." Morality, the habits of life in regard to right and wrong conduct, ensures the survival of man as the priviliged creature in Nature; morality tempers the play

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instinct, which is a biological precondition, channeling it to "productive" ends. Unfortunately, morality for the "high-toned old Christian woman" is puritanical, denies the instinct for joy, for "bawdiness."

Poetry as ethos cannot be the poetry of the "madame." There is another kind of poetry which he describes as well:

> But take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets. Thus our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
> Is equally converted into palms,
> Squiggling like saxophones.

Paradoxically, however, this poem is clearly not an example of this kind of poetry; it does not "make widows wince;" it is not a "fictive thing." "The Comedian as the Letter C" does indulge "bawdiness," however; but, what happens to Crispin is that he integrates himself wholly into his world, indulges his instinct, and ceases to be an "introspective voyager;" he settles down instead to a quiet life with daughters in curls. This expresses the apprehension Stevens himself has about indulging his own "bawdiness" to the fullest extent, and partially explains why this poem is not one of those "fictive things" that "make widows wince."

The two kinds of poetry differ in that the first begins from the "moral law," what should be, and to keep things as they should be builds "haunted heaven;" this is the kind of poetry that belongs to the lady of "Sunday Morning" as well. This kind of poetry will not make widows wince because it

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will agree "in principle" with the tenets of Christianity. The second kind begins from the "opposing law," which is the absence of any law, the opposite of moral--"amoral," with hints of "immoral" as well--and makes a peristyle, rightly associated, as other critics have noted, with reality, with things as they are. The "masque" will project "Beyond the planets," that is beyond any of the laws which govern Nature; the masque will be incapable of being contained in any logical system. This kind of poetry will "make widows wince." The first kind is "like windy citherns hankering after hymns," incomplete in themselves, in the music they make, "hankering" after completion by something else, "hymns," the religious expression of joy. ("Unfortunately there is nothing more inane than an Easter carol. It is a religious perversion of the activity of Spring in our blood," April 23, 1916.) The second kinds does not demand completion; its words are its "bawdiness." Its reality does not need the words of hymns; it is "unpurged by epitaph" because it rejects the religious myth of an afterlife to explain its value or the value of life in general. This kind of poetry, too, "Is equally converted into palms, Squiggling like saxophones;" the action of squiggling is complete in itself. This kind of poetry has not yet been written by him, so "May, merely may" have its desired effect of making widows wince. The opposition is between conscience and bawdiness, here seen as mutually exclusive because for Stevens, himself, they were; it is between those

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"two elements" that he conceived his voyaging to be," as he tells us in "The Comedian as the Letter C," where he lays down the whole outline of his introspective voyage, "The Whole of Harmonium." He chooses "widows" and the pose of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" particularly to express that element they and he lack in their affective lives--bawdiness. It is the confrontation of the "vigorous warrior" with the "prim letter writer in a wig" that is expressed here. And in this poem, as in most of his poems, it is the wig-wearer who wins the battle.

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame
>
> But fictive things
> Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

These, the first and last lines of the poem, reveal something very important about Stevens' feelings about his work, that is that it does not represent what he considers the "supreme fiction." "Fictive things wink as they will"; they make their own realities, winking, revealing both what is there and what is not, both what is seen when the eye is open and what is seen when it is closed; it looks out, then in, teasing both the observer and observed; it is the lines and also what is between the lines. This poem does not "make widows wince"; Stevens is hiding and he knows it, and the reasons for it are as complex and obscure as the poetry itself. In order to make poetry of the kind he wants to make, "bawdiness" must be indulged, but Stevens, like the "high-toned old Christian woman," fears this indulgence; it makes

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him wince. Consider this excerpt from a letter to Harriet Monore in October, 1922, a few months after the publication of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," concerning his gathering together the poems for the first edition of Harmonium:

> . . . Gathering together the things for my book has been so depressing that I wonder at Poetry's friendliness. All my earlier things seem like horrid cocoons from which later abortive insects have sprung. This book will amount to nothing, except that it may teach me something. I wish I could put everything else aside and amuse myself on a large scale for a while. One never gets anywhere in writing or thinking or observing unless one can do long stretches at a time. Often I have to let go, in the most insignificant poem, which scarcely serves to remind me of it, the most skyey of skyey sheets. And often when I have a real fury for indulgence I must stint myself. Of course we must all do the same thing. Ariosto probably felt the same thing about the solid years he spent on Orlando. If farmers had summers ten years long what tomatoes they could grow and if sailors had universal seas what voyages they could take. Only, the reading of these outmoded and debilitated poems does make me wish rather desperately to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluent speech for myself. By that time I should be like Casanova at Waldheim with nothing to do except to look out of the windows. So that I shall have to swallow the rotten pill.

He writes that he wishes "that I could put everything else aside and amust myself on a large scale for a while. One never gets anywhere in writing or thinking or observing unless one can do long stretches at a time," and yet in a letter written one month earlier he denies the possibility of doing this: "I have no desire to write a great deal . . . having

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elected to regard poetry as a form of retreat." Again, in October's letter, he implicitly denies the possibility of writing real poetry because, as he says, "often when I have a real fury for indulgence [emphasis mine] I must stint myself." The result of this, however, makes him see his own poems as "outmoded and debilitated" and makes him wish "to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible" until he has "perfected an authentic and fluent speech." He knows, in fact he knew as far back as 1899, that in order to do this "bawdiness" must be indulged, that poetry in order to perfect an "authentic and fluent speech" must partake of a complete and authentic life ("What does not have a kinship, a sympathy, a relation, an inspiration and an indissoluability with our lives ought not, and under healthy conditions could not have a place in them" [L24]).

In his own terms, to do what he felt was necessary to create poetry, he would have had to take a risk that he, raised as he was, and considering the facts of his life as they were, could not take. This is the root of something he wrote to Elsie in a letter written in March, 1907: "They talk so beautifully about work and having a family and a home (and I do too sometimes)--but its all worry and headaches and respectable poverty and forced gushing. Still you must not remember this against me. By gushing, I mean telling people how nice it is when, in reality, you would give all your last thirty years for one of your first thirty. . . ."

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He is faced with a dilemma which remains insoluble for him because of his view of poetry and what it meant to be a poet. He makes a split between his life as a poet and his personal life. Nowhere in his poems do we find explicit references either to his professional life or to his personal life; he does not see them as fit subjects for poetry; this separation makes the "indissolubility" with his life impossible. The question is obviously why, but the answer can come only from close observation of the man through his work. An additional clue is provided in an early Journal entry: "Savage [an acquaintance] was an admirable fellow, Mason calls his attempt at self-support 'praise-worthy though quixotic!' This is absurd. Savage was like every other able-bodied man--he wanted to stand alone. Self-dependence is the greatest thing in the world for a young man and Savage knew it. I cannot talk about the subject, however, because I know too little about it [he had just begun working and supporting himself]. But, for one thing, Savage went into the shoe business and still kept an eye on Sun sets and red-winged blackbirds--the summum bonum" (L 46). At this point, young Stevens thought it was possible to separate what it took to be a man, in his father's words, "self-sustenance," and what he calls here the "summum bonum." Stevens tries to resolve the conflict between his conscience, his morality, and his "instinct for joy" by trying to satisfy both, living the "temperate" life Milton outlines for the sons of Adam,

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a life well-woven into the fabric of his society and writing poetry on his walks or at night in his room.

> It must be a satisfaction to be without conscience. Conscience nowadays invades one's smallest actions. Even in that cell where one sits brooding on the philosophy of life, half-decided on 'joyousness'--one observes one's black brother in a corner, and hears him whisper 'The joyous man may not be right. If he dance, he may dance on other people's ashes.' It's the may that dashes one. Professor (George Edward) Woodberry remarks in 'The Torch' that Milton in all his studies sought beauty--as the origin of nobility. But why not holiness, temperance, justice, etc. The truth is that beauty without conscience, holiness, temperance, justice, etc., without conscience, are--all of them--triumphant. While saying so, that voice in the dark corner says: 'But may not any defeat be as much a victory as any triumph?' (L 89-90)..

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" expresses this same conflict. Conscience belongs to Stevens as eiron, as the writer of this poem: joyousness belongs to the muzzy-bellied alazon, the "disaffected flagellant."

In the same letter in which he speaks of Easter carols as perversions, we find the seeds from which this poem grows. (He is speaking about Easter celebrations.): "Why a man who wants to roll around on the grass should be asked to dress as magnificently as possible and listen to a choir is inexplicable except from the flagellant (sic) point of view. The blessed fathers have taken even the rabbi, good soul, under their government. . . ." The eiron is the perfect ironist; Stevens in this poem is the perfect ironist. We cannot isolate

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who he is; he simply sets out a situation as he finds it, the situation being the conflict between the "high-toned old Christian woman" and the "disaffected flagellant." He, as writer, is an abstract voice; this is in keeping with his reticence to reveal his self: "I don't believe in holding up the microscope to one's self . . . but only to the dolts and others whom I dislike."; "The plain truth is, no doubt, that I like to be anything but my plain self, and when I write a letter that does not satisfy me--why it seems like showing my plain self, too plainly" (L 108-09). The voice in this poem, however, speaks the language of the high-toned old Christian woman; he does not here "whip from [himself]/ A jovial hullaballoo among the spheres;" only "disaffected flagellants. . . . May, merely may" do this ("The joyous man may not be right. If he dance, he may dance on other people's ashes). The constraint comes from this fear, which is the voice of conscience, of the "high-toned old Christian woman" whose belief oppresses instead of liberates. This is the voice that places the label of "disaffected" because the poet is disloyal to the constituted authority of Christianity; he is also regarded with aversion because he "will make widows wince" if he indulges "bawdiness" and flaunts his "muzzy belly in parade."

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Notes to Chapter 12

[1] The reader would do well to consider George Meredith's "An Essay on Comedy" (Comedy, New York: Doubleday, 1956) which Stevens recommended to Robert Pack in a letter to him concerning his study of the poet's use of the comic.

[2] Stevens often compares himself to a Jew or a "rabbi" in a wish to be "one of the chosen" who does not have to lie to himself like the Puritans who had thought themselves such but realized, without admitting it, that they were not.

[3] New York: Atheneum, 1968, pp. 172-176.

[4] Ibid., p. 39.

[5] Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, pp. 73-74.

[6] Ibid., p. 75.

[7] Ibid., p. 76.

[8] A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act V, Scene 2.

[9] "The quotations [from Matthew Arnold's "Notebooks"] are in a half-dozen different languages. It gives me a sort of delight to guess at the Latin ones; and last night I hunted all through Dante for translations of several Italian ones" (L 101).

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[10] Collected in The Great Critics, ed. Smith and Parks, p. 624.

[11] Again, Huizinga's Homo Ludens is very helpful in this context.

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13. "The Emperor of Ice Cream."

Written in the same year as "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "The Emperor of Ice Cream" explores irony in a completely different way. The most obvious irony is on the surface; the treating of death in trivial terms, the tone being set by the title even before one begins reading the poem. In this poem, Stevens again speaks of himself to his literary ancestors, but in a way that is most deliberately obscure. It is, on the surface, the most negative of all of Stevens' poems, affirming only what appears at first to be nonsense:

> Let be be finale of seem.
> The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.

This poem is not only about death as an abstraction, but specifically about the inherited Christian concept of death, received through two of our greatest poets, Dante and Milton. Stevens here conjures as comedian-jongleur, using his words and images to clothe much deeper meaning. He calls it one of his favorite poems because of its "gaudiness:" "This wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet it seems to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry" (L 263). Gaudiness here means not only showiness, but "trickery" as well because real meaning is hidden behind a "deliberately commonplace costume." He also says that "this poem is an instance of letting myself go," that it "represented what was in my mind at the moment, with the least possible

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manipulation." This last comment seems to contradict what he says earlier about its being clothed "deliberately." The poem itself must be examined in order to find out what Stevens meant.

The first thing to be done is to uncover the identity of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Notwithstanding what has been said of ice-cream representing pleasure, thus suggesting that life should be celebrated even in the face of death, or of ice-cream as representing a particularly American commodity, and consequently the poem's being considered as a particularly American way of dealing with the pomp surrounding death, de-sanctifying it, ice-cream is also a play on the words "I scream," which Stevens must have been aware of (considering that the same kind of word play exists in the title "The Snow Man" which can be heard as "This No Man" and is, as such, very much in keeping with the tone and meaning of that poem which ends with "For the listener, who listens in the snow,/ And, nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."). Ice-cream (like snow) melts and loses whatever configuration it originally had; it is not fixed like external reality; it is a symbol of the imagination transforming external reality. This poem is a product of Stevens' imagination turned inward upon itself, not outwards; as such it marks a turning away from the greater part of the poems of Harmonium where the imagination focusses itself on a world external to Stevens' self. In the quotation

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cited on the previous page ("This represented what was in my mind at the moment, with the least possible manipulation"), Stevens tells us as much. Considering that death is something which cannot be apprehended from external reality, this focussing inward in order to contemplate it is not surprising.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is Stevens' Satan. He is both Dante's and Milton's Satan re-dressed. It is from this contrast that the internal irony of the poem grows. In Canto XXXIV of Dante's Inferno, we find the following description of Satan:

> The Emperor of the sorrowful realm was there,
> Out of the girding ice he stood breast high,
> And to his arm alone the giants were
>
> Less comparable than to a giant I;

It is from this that Stevens' image of the Emperor comes, as well as from Milton's Satan, "The muscular one." But Stevens adds another dimension here; in calling him "the roller of big cigars" and in bidding him "whip in kitchen cups concupiscent curds," he identifies himself with this figure. Stevens did smoke "big cigars" and in his role as comedian-jongleur, metaphorically did "whip in kitchen cups concupiscent curds;" that is, he wanted to celebrate the "concupiscence of life" in and with his words. "Whip" here is associated with the manner in which the poet as "disaffected flagellant" expresses himself, as seen in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman."

In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "Sunday Morning," and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens attempted to liberate himself from the controlling myth of Christianity by de-

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mythologizing its God and its dream of an afterlife or Eden; he wanted to see himself in his role as creator as the only god, or as partaking of the only god there can be, Imagination as manifest in reality. In this poem, he attempts to destroy the idea of Satan as well, both as the symbolic embodiment of pride and evil, and as the Romantics' (esp. Shelley and Byron) idealization of Milton's rebellious hero. (In this way, he continues his battle against Milton begun in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.") Stevens destroys him by incorporating him into his mask as poet and simultaneously banalizing him; in so doing he attempts to destroy that aspect of himself which was inheritor of Dante, of Milton, and of the Romantic tradition.

In rebelling against tradition in this way, Stevens is, in spite of himself, like Milton's Satan. In saying,

> Let be be finale of seem
> The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

his pride is not unlike that of Satan who describes himself as

> One who brings
> A mind not to be changed by Place or Time.
> A mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

Both desire an absolute solipsism as a refuge against what are felt to be greater powers. For Milton's Satan the greater power was God; for Stevens in this poem the greater power belongs both to death and to the inherited mythology transmitted by tradition, both things "that are," part of that "pressure of reality" he speaks of in "The Noble Rider and

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The Sound of Words."

Satan acts out of his revenge against God by tempting Eve, enticing her to taste the fruit of knowledge, which she does, thus causing the Fall; the "Emperor" tempts by whipping "in kitchen cups concupiscent curds;" like his predecessor he uses "concupiscence," lust, as his device to destroy exactly those effects of the myth of the Fall: shame, the fear of pride, and the living of life for rewards after death, all engendered by the knowledge of our own mortality, that came with the tasting of the fruit. The bid to "whip in kitchen cups concupiscent curds" partakes of the "nobility" Stevens writes of which resides in the "sounds of words." "The imagination gives to everything that it touches a peculiarity, and, it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility. . . . I mean that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth" (NA 33-34). This nobility, imagination, is god for Stevens, and to assert it as such denies the validity of any myth which subjugates man by investing that power in a being other than man.

In this way Stevens' "Emperor" transforms concupiscence into an expression of that "nobility," a quality to be sought instead of one to be shamed and feared. This represents a direct challenge to Christian dogma, and to Milton especially. In Book IX of "Paradise Lost," after Adam and Eve awake, their innocence gone, Adam says the following:

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> O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear
> To that false Worm, of whomsoever taught
> To counterfeit Man's voice, true in our Fall,
> False in our promis'd Rising; since our Eyes
> Open'd we find indeed, and find we know
> Both Good and Evil, Good lost, and Evil got,
> Bad Fruit of Knowledge, if this be to know,
> Which leaves us naked thus, of Honor void,
> Of Innocence, of Faith, of Purity,
> Our wonted Ornaments now soil'd and stain'd,
> And our Faces evident the signs
> Of foul concupiscence; whence evil store;
> Even shame, the last of evils; of the first
> Be sure then. . . .

Milton goes on to blame this "concupiscence" for the subjection of "Understanding" and "Will:"

> but high Winds worse within
> Began to rise, high Passions, Anger, Hate,
>
> Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord, and shook sore
> Their inward State of Mind, calm region once
> And full of Peace, now toss't and turbulent:
> For understanding rul'd not, and the Will
> Heard not her lore, both in subjection now
> To sensual Appetite, who from beneath
> Usurping over sovran Reason claim'd
> Superior sway:

Stevens answers Milton and Plato as well--who was originally responsible for the tripartite division of the soul into the rational, the irascible, and the concupiscent elements, and who elevated the rational against those lesser irrational, though necessary because existent, parts. His answer reverses the precedence, making the rational, "be," grow out of the irrational, "seem."

Milton's "evil hour" becomes transformed for Stevens into that "Anguishing hour" in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." It is not "evil," because evil does not exist; it is invented;

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but it is "anguishing" because at a certain point awareness of mortality does come, and we have to learn to live with that knowledge. The reading of that eleventh stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" as a reply to the above quoted lines of Milton, as indicated earlier, reinforces what we find in this poem.

> If sex were all, then every trembling hand
> Could make us squeak, like dolls, the wished-for
> words.
> But note the unconscionable treachery of fate,
> That makes us weep, laugh, grunt and groan, and
> shout
> Doleful heroics, pinching gestures forth
> From madness or delight, without regard
> To that first, foremost law.

It is not the Fall that has caused "high Passions, Anger, Hate,/ Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord, and shook sore/ Their inward state of Mind," but the "unconscionable" (because not in accord with what is right or reasonable) "Treachery of fate/ That makes us weep, laugh, grunt and groan, and shout/ Doleful heroics." Stevens takes the burden of guilt off man, and sees man's condition as pre-conditioned by what he calls "fate" which also does not obey reason; it is "unconscionable." In this stanza, Stevens rewrites Milton and all of Christian, and pre-Christian thought, as it were. It is parallel in substance, as well as in some of its rhythmic echoes, to Milton's lines above quoted. And it should be considered here together with the "Emperor of Ice Cream" because it represents the action of "The Emperor" as Satan who challenges those greater powers.

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The guise of Stevens-as-Emperor, however, is as comedian, the clue provided by the consonance of "C" sounds in "kitchen cups concupiscent curds" which mark the identity of "the Comedian as the Letter C." Following what Ellman writes about the "directions," the voice which gives the directions for this funeral is the poet as eiron, who deprecates his importance by deflating the power and majesty of himself as Satan, as well as all conceptions of Satan before him. The persona of the "Emperor" is the alazon, the impostor who takes over and actually transforms the role of Satan in the poem by whipping "concupiscent curds," making ice-cream instead of fire. The poet as eiron is the artist who integrates the alazon into what is; the idea of Satan as an ice-cream maker is much easier to accept and live with than the idea of Satan as the prideful hero who caused our Fall and suffering, and who will punish us with eternal fire if we do not fight dilligently against his force.

The directions for the funeral given by the voice of the poet as eiron, and the participation of the poet as alazon in the funeral are also deflationary. The situation presented is comic in depicting the enforced ordinary and trivial ceremony. There is an interplay between this sense of the poem and the seriousness that emerges both from its rhythms, and from the sense of unimportance itself and the real sense of absence created which provides another level of irony. Because of this irony, the sense and shape of the poem are elusive. At

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first, like ice cream, it presents itself in a definite form, like directions for the right way of running a funeral, or directions for the writing of a poem in terms of directions for a funeral, and seen as such its implicit tone is one of mockery; but the poem melts into different shapes and meanings the longer one sits looking at it, yielding finally to meaning by being considered as the conclusion of what "seems" to be there. In other words, what Stevens has done in this poem is forced the reader into an experiential engagement with what appears or seems to be presented, considering all the "seemings" suggested until what "is" emerges. This is the product of the poet as comedian-jongleur, who forces the members of his audience into participation with what is, on the surface, nonsense, to use their own minds to provide the sense that is there. This is the reason why the poet includes "Let the lamp affix its beam" as part of his directions. The lamp is the figure for the imagination exploring its own recesses instead of being attached only to what is external. As Stevens expresses in an early letter to Elsie, during the day by the light of the sun, he feels part of the world around him that he can see, but at night, when he lights his lamp is when the fluent world of the imagination is explored. This is not imagination unpurged by reality, however, since what exists in the imagination for the person (and that person is the poet) who also considers the world outside of himself with imagination, partakes of that world outside.

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Involved in this is the core of the dialectic between reality and imagination. A careful reading of this poem makes the reader experience, not only understand, this dialectic. (In other poems, like "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," Stevens tells the reader about this same phenomenon.) For the reader, the poem is part of external reality; as Stevens says, "A poem is part of the res itself, and not about it." Learning to read the poem gives us an access to looking at the rest of external reality the way the poet does; it restores to us the imagination of the child for whom nothing is only what it is by name, by fact, but is all seemings of what it can be as well; what is fact, name, being only the convenient container of all those seemings. "The true sense of Let be be finale of seem is let being become the conclusion or dénouement of appearing to be" (L 341). That is, what is, including the poem, is only the ending, from which and for which, we imagine a whole, given the possibilities inherent in the thing itself.

Stevens expresses what he is doing in this poem in the following excerpt from a letter to Leonard C. van Guyzel, written on May 16, 1945:

> The ice cream poem is a good example of a poem that has its own singularity. . . . But after all, the point of that poem is not its meaning. When people think of poems as integrations, they are thinking usually of integration of ideas: that is to say, of what they mean. However, a poem must have a peculiarity, as if it was the momentary complete idiom of that which prompts it, even

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> if that which prompts it is the vaguest emotion. This character seems to be one of the consequences of concentration. I should like to undertake the job of establishing the place of concentration in this sort of thing.

The point of the poem is not its meaning, what is, and the way to disclosure is through concentration. Stevens realizes the importance of what he is doing in this poem. The poem at first baffles the reader; it gives the appearance of being absurd, nonsensical. But the reader is stopped from dismissing it merely as such by two things: the funeral rhythm, and the uncovering of the body in the second stanza, especially by the lines,

> If her horny feet protrude, they come
> To show how cold she is, and dumb.

There is a sense of seriousness coming from these lines and from the rhythm which forces the reader to imagine the scene described. Again, one is faced with the absurd, and after the scene has been mentally conjured and realized to be a funeral, the absurdity attaches to the funeral itself.

I know of one avid reader of Stevens who was drawn to the poem over and over again because of its sounds and rhythms and after getting to this point in considering the poem could get no further, but sensed that it held within its words something vitally important, and so memorized and recited it to himself and to others countless times over a period of five years before the "seemings" of the poem began to emerge for him. In "The Name and Nature of Poetry, A.E. Housman

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expressed the view that poetry cannot be explained or analyzed, but is recognized by its almost physical effect on the reader. This is what Stevens meant when he wrote that "One reads poetry with one's nerves." Whether or not we agree that this is all there is to poetry, there is no doubt that the incantatory cadence of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" does haunt even the first-time reader or hearer of this poem. This quality, learned from Poe, together with its apparent absurdity is part of what Stevens called its "gaudiness," and it is this which sooner or later forces the "concentration" on it which the poet wanted to establish.

What happens when one concentrates on the poem as a reality in itself, and looks at it "as a man looks at a woman" (as Stevens described the way the poet looks at reality) is that it discloses itself to its reader slowly, coyly, like a woman seductively tempting her lover. We get only glimpses of meaning at a time; "Fictive things wink as they will." In order to have disclosure, there must be, on the part of the reader, as on the part of the lover, a temporary suspension of the function of the mediating ego. This is what is behind Coleridge's call for the "willing suspension of disbelief" necessary to enter into a relation with a poem, and also what is behind the now-cliched metaphor of "falling in love." The suspension of the eminently reasonable ego functions allows an open interchange between the poem as reality and what belongs to that area of the self from whence

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the imagination emerges, namely the irrational unconscious. This is what Stevens meant when he said that "The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully." That part of the intelligence, the rational, comes only after the irrational, and provides the convenient envelope of "is" for all "seemings." The ego comes back only to articulate, or to attempt to articulate, what has been learned beyond appearances.

When in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens says that "It Must Be Abstract," it is necessarily involved with the function of the irrational element. As indicated earlier, in "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens makes a distinction between "the true Subject" and "the poetry of the subject."

> Now, just as the choice of subject is unpredictable at the outset, so its development, after it has been chosen, is unpredictable. One is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry. One is the true subject and the other is the poetry of the subject. The difficulty of sticking to the true subject, when it is the poetry of the subject that is paramount to one's mind, need only be mentioned to be understood. In a poet who makes the true subject paramount and who merely embellishes it, the subject is constant and the development orderly. If the poetry of the subject is paramount, the true subject is not constant nor its development orderly. This is true in the case of Proust and Joyce, for example, in modern prose. (OP 221).

The original meaning of "abstract" is "drawn away;" it connotes

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action or process; it is not simply the opposite of "concrete," an ordinary adjective used to describe what can be apprehended of the ideal. Stevens uses the word in this original sense to describe the irrational process of being drawn away from theinitial "true subject" to the more fecund "poetry of the subject." What is revealed in this "poetry of the Subject," when the irrational has been successful, is the poet's individuality, an understanding of who the man was or is, as derived from seeing all of his "seemings," his poems, his way of looking at the world around him and inside of him, at "the nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is."

For the reader, poetry that is abstract in Stevens' sense, is the most successful because it demands of him the same kind of engagement with the poem as an element of reality as the poet had with the reality which prompted the poem. "The Emperor of Ice Cream" is this kind of poem, a true "poem of Imagination." After the initial confrontations with the poem, the reader is "drawn away" from the poem itself, and is forced to consider the meanderings of his own imagination, the "seemings" that have been prompted by the words and configurations that are on the page. For Stevens, this remains what he considered one of his most successful poems because it is an example "of letting myself go. Poems of this sort are the pleasantest on which to look back, because they seem to remain fresher than others. This represented what was in my mind at the moment, with the least possible manipulation"

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(L 264). In this poem, Stevens indulged the irrational element, and in doing so revealed himself to the reader and to himself, and so even for him it remained "fresher than others." In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens says that "One such manifestation [of the irrational] is the disclosure of the individuality of the poet. It is unlikely that this disclosure is ever visible as plainly to anyone as to the poet himself." The disclosure comes because of the "automatic" aspect of the irrational:

> 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: thatis to say, beyond his power to change, it is irrational. Perhaps I do not mean wholly beyond his power to change, for he might, by an effort of will, change it. With that in mind, I mean beyond the likelihood of change so long as he is being himself. This happens in the case of every poet. (OP 220-219; emphasis mine).

For a man pre-occupied up to this point, however, with not revealing or disclosing himself, his "personality," this indulgence of the irrational comes seldom. More often for Stevens, his will does intervene and manipulates what begins to emerge of the irrational, as in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" or in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," as indicated earlier in the discussions of those poems. When too much of himself threatens to disclose itself too blatantly, he systematically interferes, and the poetry suffers; the "vigorous warrior"

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is conquered by the "prim-letter writer." More often than not, he is not being himself, his voice is not his own, but is borrowed from "the high-toned Old Christian woman." In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" he can afford to be himself because what emerges takes such an obscure form. But it is a poem of "I scream," that is, like a scream, an irrational indulgence. Resounding in this scream are the reasons for it as well; considering these reasons, these seemings, within the being of the scream, brings us back to looking at and listening to the poem itself.

Having already established the fact of the funeral contained in the poem, brings us to asking who the funeral is for. From the poem, we know that the being was female and that "she embroidered fantails once." The poet instructs the participants in the funeral, who are, in fact, the readers, to "cover her face" because he does not want her identity revealed. But, from his letters and Journal, and from certain poems (especially in Harmonium) where he takes on a female persona, we know that there is a certain type of involvement with poetry that Stevens associates with femaleness. "There is something absurd in all this writing of verses; but the truth is, it elates and satisfies me to do it. It is an all-round exercise quite superior to ordinary reading. So that, you see, my habits are positively ladylike (. . .)" Writing of "Poetry and Manhood," he says the following: "Those who say poetry is now the peculiar province

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of women say so because ideas about poetry are effeminate. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Browning, much of Tennyson--they are your man-poets." Poetry that is female is like "embroidered fantails," essentially decorative. It is "poetry of Fancy," "limited to the vaticinations of the imagination, it soon becomes worthless. The cognitive element involves the consciousness of reality . . . supreme peotry can be produced only on the highest possible level of the cognitive" (L 500). The cognitive element can only exist in poetry if there is a real involvement of the self with a reality outside; it cannot exist if the self is hidden behind the mask of "prim letter-writer" or the "high-toned old Christian woman." Stevens realized this and in a letter to Harriet Monroe (already quoted) speaks of his dissatisfaction with the poems of Harmonium because he had not found his voice, had not perfected a "fluent speech" for himself. His true voice cannot be partial; it must include all aspects of himself, both "prim letter-writer" and "vigorous warrior." It is the latter aspect which celebrates the "concupiscence of life" that makes "widows wince," but which he, unfortunately, later felt he had to reject because of its association to the aestheticism of the nineties for which he was severely criticized.

The female who is mourned at this funeral is that aspect of Stevens which was heir both to the Romantics and to a Puritanical ethic, neither of which allowed him "indulgence."

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Stevens saw his own involvement with the writing of much of the poetry of Harmonium as an evasion. For the most part, that poetry does represent "mere vaticinations of the imagination," thus, simply "embroidered fantails." In this poem, he becomes the "introspective voyager" Crispin thought himself. Introspection is necessary if the poet is to contribute anything to the reality outside of himself. "Mere vaticinations of the imagination" means looking at Nature, the world outside, without the application of the self. We now begin to see that, for Stevens, the self is the reality which must purge imagination. Imagination unpurged in this way remains Fancy, or, at best, continuing with Coleridge's terminology, Primary Imagination.

"The Emperor of Ice Cream" is the first poem where "indulgence" is achieved and sustained; as Stevens put it, it was an example of "letting himself go." It is the first poem where the "egotism" he speaks of in "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet" as necessary to poetry exists unmanipulated. Poetry,

> is a process of the personality of the poet. . . . To say that it is a process of the personality of the poet does not mean that it involves the poet as subject. Aristotle said: 'The poet should say very little in propria persona.'. . . This (the process of the personality of the poet) is the element, the force, that keeps poetry a living thing, the modernizing and ever-modern influence. The statement that the process does not involve the poet as subject, to the extent to which that is true, precludes

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> direct egotism. On the other hand, without indirect egotism, there can be no poetry. There can be no poetry without the personality of the poet, and that, quite simply is why the definition of poetry has not been found and why, in short, there is none. (NA 45-46).

This "indirect egotism" is in contrast to the direct egotism of the Romantic poets, and as such extends and transforms the concept of lyric poetry. The "I" in traditional lyric poetry is a static being; like the dead woman in the poem, "cold she is,/ and dumb." The voice of the static "I" cries out against the reality that exists outside of the self, proclaiming its isolation, unable to accept its "bond to all that dust." The most it can do is to decorate that external reality to make it more bearable, but even in doing this it separates itself from it. In this poem, there is only an implied "I," the equal of the "be" that is "finale of seem." The "I" here exists not in isolation, but as the sum of all attributes, both internal and external, that exist around it. The poem of this "I" is not a static cry, but is the only adequate expression or record of the becoming that is a result of all the forces impinging on that being at a certain moment. The poem is not a cry of the "I," but "the cry of its occasion," the occasion being what identifies the poet as "I."

"Occasion" comes from the Latin "occidere," meaning "to fall down." The OED gives the following main definitions:

> 1. A falling together or juncture of circumstances favorable or suitable to an end or purpose, or admitting of something being

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> done or effected; an opportunity. *In early use esp. in pregnant sense, opportunity of attacking, of fault-finding, or of giving or taking offense; a 'handle' against a person. To take occasion, to take advantage of an opportunity to do something;
>
> 2. A juncture or condition of things, an occurence, fact, or consideration, affording ground for an action or a state of mind or feeling; a reason, ground; . . .
>
> 3. An occurence leading to some result; hence, generally, that which produces an effect. . . .
> b. Something that contributes to produces an effect, by providing the opportunity for the efficient cause to operate. . . .
>
> 4. That which gives rise to discussion or consideration; the subject treated or debated. . . .
>
> 5. A juncture of circumstances requiring or calling for action; necessity or need arising from circumstances. . . .

The occurrence, condition of things, that contributes to produce the effect of the poem, the "cry," is perhaps best understood by looking at this passage from Henri Bergson's Creative Evolution:

> If immutability is more than becoming, form is more than change, and it is by a veritable fall [emphasis mine] that the logical system of Ideas, rationally subordinated and coordinated among themselves, is scattered into a physical series of objects and events accidentally placed one after another. The generative idea of a poem is developed in thousands of imaginations which are materialized in phrases that spread themselves out in words. And the more we descend from the motionless idea, wound on itself, to the words that unwind it, the more room is left for contingency and choice. Other metaphors, expressed by other words, might have arisen; an image is called up by an image, a word by a word.

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> All these words run now one after another, seeking in vain, by themselves, to give back the simplicity of the generative idea. Our ear only hears the words: it therefore perceives only accidents. But our mind, by successive bounds, leaps from the words to the images, from the images to the original idea, and so gets back, from the perception of the words--accidents called up by accidents--to the conception of the Idea that posits its own being. So the philosopher proceeds, confronted with the universe. Experience makes to pass before his eyes phenomena which run, they also, one behind another in an accidental order determined by circumstances of time and place. This physical order--a degeneration of the logical order--is nothing else but the fall of the logical into space and time. [emphasis mine] (pp. 320-321).

The "occasion" can be understood, then, for Stevens, as this "fall of the logical into space and time" that Bergson describes. It is what Stevens himself describes in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," when he says "A deep up-pouring from some saltier well within me/ Bursts its watery syllable." The single syllable, as the discrete expression of the logical self-contained idea, is exploded into the myriad of syllables and words which are the poem, all striving "to give back the simplicity of the generative idea." This "fall of the logical into space and time" is the fall from the innocence of believing that the world is ordered by the intellect, or by any structure that the intellect might impose; the intellect can only look back and order that which is not present. The present cannot be contained in any logical structure because it is a process of becoming, an active moving forwards of a being called the self through both the internal and external chaos

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of possibility. The ideal poet, the "figure of the youth as a virile poet," allows himself to fall away from the security of logic so that he might attempt to express the present, which extends both in space and in time. Stevens calls this, not "present," but "occasion," which is much more descriptive since it contains both the idea of "falling" from logic, and the idea of process, the occasion having been prompted by something other than itself, and, in turn, prompting something else; it is, like the self, only a mediating device.

When a poet gives us his words, he reveals his self in its act of "perpetual creation" (Croce, as quoted by Stevens, N 33); as such, it is a record of the momentary mediation between an internal reality belong to the poet from the past, and an external reality, not at all under the control of the poet, impinging on him as the embodiment of that certain internal reality which has, in turn, been formed by a succession of present confrontations with the external reality. The poet, or any individual, at any moment, has a choice as to how he will meet the present external reality: he can either depend on the ordered pattern imposed by the intellect, secure in its logic, which has interpreted his past experience, and transfer this interpretation onto the present, in which case, everything he perceives will have a name and place, and being identifiable in this way, will not be threatening; or, he can choose to "fall down" from the logical order which protects his being into an "order which

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is not an order," and perceive not the names and places of what he observes, but all "seemings." Words, in this latter case, are not mere counters, but encounters with the ineffable. "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (NA 32).

"The Emperor of I-scream" is the poet who cries of an occasion instead of telling about it in language that is logically structured; his cry will carry both inflection and innuendo, expression of both his intellect and his emotions, words and their peculiar arrangement of sounds and rhythms that yield to images. The "I" who screams or cries, however, is not self-conscious, like the lyrical "I" of the Romantics; the cry is spontaneous expression, expression without the critical moment of distinction between experience and the knowledge of that experience which brings with it self-consciousness and sentiment. Implicit in Wordsworth's poetic formula, "emotions recollected in tranquility," is the necessity of self-consciousness, of one self looking back at another who did experience what is about to be recorded by the first self. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," Stevens transformed this formula by first recollecting a certain experience in the past, but instead of recording that past experience through the veil of time separating the past from the present, he records his present reaction to that remembrance. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," Stevens kills the sentimental "I"; in "The Emperor of Ice Cream," he buries her.

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The banality of the burial ceremony, then, goes not only to de-mystify the aura surrounding death, but goes also to show the banality of she who died. The directions given by the irreverent comedian couple elements of reality: "Let the wenches dawdle in such dress/ As they are used to wear, and let the boys/ Bring flowers in last month's newspapers," with what belongs solely to the imagination: "Let be be finale of seem./ The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." Stevens says that ice-cream is an "absolute good;" it is because it represents the imagination in its function of resisting the "pressure of reality," in this case death, the absolute "be." In this poem, Stevens feels his vigor as "the muscular one," because he has indulged himself, let himself go; he has become the Emperor, Satan, defying what is by what seems, by retreating into his fluent mundo, and for the first time he recognizes this to be a good, the only way of making "life complete in itself" (OP 162). He is Milton's Satan emerging with confidence, successful. "One who brings/ A mind not to be changed by Place or Time./ A mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n."

The final irony that grows out of this is that this "introspective voyager" discovers that, contrary to what he expected, it is through this indulgence of the irrational that truth, good, is approached. In speaking of the irrational element, he says that it is a characteristic of what has been

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called "pure poetry,"

> All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational. If we descend a little from this height and apply the looser and broader definition of pure poetry, it is possible to say that, while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in the harmonious and orderly. (OP 222).

In order that this be so, the poet's "I" must be comprehensive; that is, it must see both what is outside and what is inside, and express what it sees and feels without manipulation by the intellect which is "cold" and "dumb," locked in its rational structures. After all, "The reason is part of nature and controlled by it," but in order to become equal to that nature, it is necessary to perceive that "the imagination is one of the forces of nature" (OP 170), that which breathes life into nature and makes it our own.

The final irony of the poem is contained in an expression of self-doubt: "If her horny feet protrude, they come/ To show how cold she is, and dumb." Stevens realizes that that aspect of himself which he has ritually killed and buried may "protrude," may emerge now and then. We know that it does and that he will later try and incorporate it, too, into his definition of Imagination and Poetry. When he succeeds, the poems will be "poems of Imagination" and when he does

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not, they will remain "poems of Fancy." When Reason alone "protrudes," as it will in the later philosophical poetry, we should see it as it is, "cold and dumb," and see it in contrast to what is alive, the Imagination partaking of reality and transforming it into all seemings. This poem proclaims for the poet a hope for a new kind of involvement with himself and the world around him, and as such it represents not only death but a new beginning.

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