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WALLACE STEVENS: THE MAJOR POEMS.

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WALLACE STEVENS:

THE MAJOR POEMS

by

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PREFACE

This dissertation grew out of a fascination with the poetry of Harmonium, particularly with what the writer considers to be Stevens' finest poem and the gateway to his work, "Sunday Morning." This study analyzes, explicates, interprets, and evaluates Stevens' major poems in greater detail than they have been accorded hitherto. For the purposes of this study, the major poetry is not necessarily to be interpreted as Stevens' best; it comprises those crucial long poems which, though not uniformly good, contain much that is Stevens' best and all that is essential to an understanding of his work as a whole. These are the poems most deserving of detailed explication.

It was the intention, by examining these poems closely, to see how Stevens' themes and techniques had evolved throughout his long career. Despite marked changes in style from the luxuriant, somewhat mannered poetry of Harmonium through the prosaic style of The Man with the Blue Guitar to the spare and restrained though often somberly magnificent poetry of Stevens' late phase, his vision is seen to have remained remarkably constant throughout his work. From beginning to end, he continually celebrates the conflicts and conjunctions of imagination with reality.

No thesis seemed large enough to accommodate Stevens' major poetry but this rubric that he himself set up of the

interdependence and interinanimation of mind and world. This theme held great urgency and profound meaning for the poet. Just what imagination and reality mean to Stevens is discoverable from a close study of his poetry, his prose essays, and his letters. In a world deprived of the grandest imaginative projection of the human imagination--the belief in God--all that is left to believe in is reality. But reality can be known only through the mind, and the unprecedented pressure that contemporary reality exerts upon us is rendered endurable only by the imagination's necessary and inevitable transformation of it.

Much criticism of Stevens has been vitiated by the adoption of too narrow or rigid an approach. Critics have mangled, oversimplified, and falsified the poetry in order to make it fit some procrustean scheme. To label Stevens a comedian is to ignore the seriousness of his work. To call him a hedonist is merely frivolous. And to insist that he is a Platonist is absolutely incorrect. The method adopted here has been first to consider each poem individually in its own right, and then to draw conclusions. The approach is empirical, inductive, and eclectic. In order to achieve satisfactory readings, technique has been examined as well as theme to demonstrate how, as well as what, the poems mean.

The chief reason for tackling Stevens' key poems, besides enabling one to trace the main outlines of the poet's evolution, has been the desire to discover whether Stevens might justly be acclaimed a major poet. Though original and accomplished, his is

the work of a grand amateur, much of whose work is uninspired, incomplete, and unpolished. More important, Stevens' poetic vision lacks the drama and universality that only human sympathy and involvement can supply. Parts of the Stevens canon are poetry of the first rank, but only the verdict of time will tell whether Stevens can be considered a major poet.

Because the essential raison d'etre of this study is a close reading of the major poems, the reader is exhorted to read the poems alongside the text. This discipline, together with consultation of the footnotes, is essential to the understanding of this study.

It remains only to express my gratitude to Irving Howe.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO STEVENS' POETRY

I. Stevens' Themes

1. Reality and the Imagination

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

Wallace Stevens

Guarding the portals to any understanding of Wallace Stevens' poetry and poetics are two couched sphinxes, one with the head of a man. They confront each other with relentless courage, and us with a mystery. Stevens called them the imagination and reality, and represented them in one of his poems as "the lion in the lute/Before the lion locked in stone."[1] The ceaseless confrontation, reconcilement and momentary concord of the human mind with reality, celebrated in poetry, was Stevens' absorbing theme. It generated his characteristic poetic technique--alternating meditative fluctuations between these opposite poles. This framework, which the poet set up for himself, is the only one large enough to accommodate his major poetry.

Why call the terms reality and imagination mysterious when, in slightly different guise, they have haunted both philosophy and poetry since the beginnings of both? For imagination we may substitute the word spirit and for reality,

matter, and thus recognize that what Stevens' poetry dramatizes is the isolation of human consciousness in an alien and seemingly insensate universe. (What makes Stevens' poetry different from that of other poets who confront the same indifferent universe is that Stevens frequently celebrates this alienation with positive delight.) Or we might transpose reality and imagination into the Platonic terms, Truth and Beauty--though Stevens, contrary to the assertions of many critics, is strictly speaking no Platonist.[2] In his youthful journal, Stevens remarks aphoristically, "Truth is the warrior and Beauty only his tender hide."[3] For Stevens, poetry embodies the only truth we can know or hope to live with. We find Stevens making as exorbitant claims for the imagination as Coleridge ever did, and wedding it to nature as urgently and persistently as Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Keats. But Stevens' imagination, though it is a substitute for God,[4] is not transcendent. The universe Stevens inhabits, like Keats's, ends with death: "Land and sea, weakness and decline are great separators, but death is the great divorcer for ever."[5] Stevens' imagination and reality are also close to Emerson's Man and Nature, and pregnant with Emerson's spirit--but, once more, minus the transcendentalism.

What is mysterious about Stevens' preoccupation with his theme of the interdependence of imagination and reality is what these terms actually meant to Stevens himself. They are for him a speculative obsession, not merely the dry bones of a poetic theory.[6] It is important to realize this. Stevens lived, as all

poets do, in the imagination, but he lived in it to an extraordinary degree. At an early age he appears to have discovered that only this faculty, preternaturally developed in him, could make life endurable. Poetry, he said repeatedly, provides a sanction for living that no other activity can supply. By poetry Stevens means not only the writing of verse, but the imaginative perception and recreation of life. He feels that the modern age in particular cries out for the healing and saving grace of imagination. Only through imagination can our brute and destitute reality be reclaimed. The reconciliation of mind and matter, and the mind's truthful but satisfying transformation of reality can be achieved only in poetry.

The question why Stevens thinks of life as poetry, and of poetry as a transaction between imagination and reality, may be put in another way, which will eventually lead us into a consideration of his second major theme--the problem of belief, or the necessity of a supreme fiction. What does one put in God's place when God has disappeared, has been dethroned as Prime Mover of the universe? Stevens could not put man in his place, because man as god stubbornly remained man, and frequently showed himself to be something less and worse--a demented beast.[7] In the twentieth century we have, by our own behavior, poisoned the healthy current of Renaissance humanism and discredited the forlorn Victorian hope in the perfectibility of man. A contemporary poet would not put reason in God's place. (Nor is reason commonly regarded as the chief instrument of the poet's mind.) Reason,

too, as the prime solution to the human problem of how to live in an alien world has also been undermined and discredited in our time. Nineteenth century optimistic materialism has been as radically undercut in our century as that of the Enlightenment was by the first romantics. We are still romantics; Stevens asserts that poetry is by nature romantic, but we must constantly purge the romantic of its stale, factitious elements.[8] According to Stevens (whose mind is essentially mythological, not historical), we have recently had an obsession with fact, and only imagination can save us from it.[9] He would agree with Matthew Arnold that faith in the fact has failed us, and that poetry has to take the place of religion, of "empty heaven and its hymns."[10]

Stevens continually defines the imagination as an inward pressure responding to an outward pressure, and finds this outward pressure particularly violent in our age.[11] Because brute, neutral, unvalued matter threatens to crush us in the twentieth century, our imaginations have to respond with equal force in order to galvanize this dead or dying universe into life. "This is a time for the highest poetry. We never understood the world less than we do now nor . . . liked it less. We never wanted to understand it more or needed to like it more."[12] But the appetite for nobility and vitality which is one aspect of romanticism must digest the hard grit of present fact as its daily diet. Above all, our new romanticism must be cleansed of transcendentalism, of those "residual pieties" in which few any longer believe.

Stevens sees the imagination as "the sum of man's faculties."[13] As such, it is larger than reason (reason seems to

be the far smaller province of imagination codified), larger even than mind, for it includes the senses, our link with the world. Stevens finds imagination the obvious clue to reality, since it is the whole man, body as well as spirit, and if we do not find reality in the interaction of spirit and flesh, we shall never find it.

It is of the utmost importance to realize that for Stevens the conflict between imagination and reality--though only from man's point of view--is one between two equal and inseparable forces, here and now. Stevens' poetry, like his thought, is open-ended, unresolved; he desired that it should be, since he felt that life was. The key to an understanding of his work is contained in this statement: "I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that . . . ."[14] Stevens found imperative the "recognition that here . . . as between these poles, the universal interdependence exists."[15] The conflict cannot be resolved, any more than the secondary, correlative conflict between reason and imagination for the possession of our world can be resolved.[16] Stevens is both materialist and spiritualist.

How can one speak of a conflict between two inseparable entities, inexorably and inextricably involved in one another, as imagination and reality are? The idea is a paradox only when reduced to the rigor of logic. Stevens himself, insofar as he

was a philosopher at all, was a dualist.[17] (However, he betrayed monistic tendencies or yearnings.)[18] In any case, he owes a dual allegiance, continually shuttling back and forth between the claims of imagination and those of reality; this oscillation is that of "the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice."[19] It is essential to realize that Stevens believes reality without imagination to be dead, while imagination without reality is false. The urgent claims of both must be met in a marriage. As John Peale Bishop puts it, we must find a way to "wed Desdemona to the huge Moor,"[20] to see "things-as-they-are" with the imagination that, like light, adds nothing but itself,[21] yet nevertheless irradiates everything it touches.

Stevens believes that the imagination is part of our instinct for self-preservation. But the imagination, whole, comprehensive and comprehending, miraculous as it is, is not as great as reality: "There are so many things which, as they are, and without any intervention of imagination, seem to be imaginative objects that it is no doubt true that absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes. This is our intimidating thesis."[22] We should be tempted to regard Stevens' "intimidating thesis" as arguing only for equality between imagination and reality, were it not that he insists on the brevity, transience, and intermittence of consciousness. There was something here aeons before we evolved, not the mind of a creator who made us in his image, but a creative principle alien to all mind, a "muddy centre." Though Stevens holds man's imagination to be his highest, widest, and deepest faculty, both

godlike and godmaking, in his evolution as a poet one observes an increasing allegiance to reality, though a reality located more and more firmly in the mind.

The term reality, as Stevens uses it, needs careful definition. (He himself acknowledged that it was a veritable jungle.)[23] It has two basic meanings in Stevens' work.[24] Reality is the inert world of matter which the human imagination instinctively seeks to energize and transform. It is necessary to add that we can never come into direct contact with this bare reality because we live in the mind: "We do not see the world immediately but only as the result of a process of seeing and after the completion of that process."[25] But, as well as stark reality, Stevens' "third world . . . in which no one peers,"[26] Stevens uses the word reality to signify the world transfigured by imagination; it is nature (in Emerson's definition, everything outside man's mind) interfused with man's spirit. Or as Stevens expresses it, most eloquently, in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven:

> . . . we seek
> Nothing beyond reality. Within it,
>
> Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
> Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
> And through . . . .[27]

This second definition of reality is, of course, synonymous with Stevens' use of the word poetry. For true poetry is the momentary but perfect concord of self and world achieved through and in the human imagination. As C. Roland Wagner says, absolute spirit is as inconceivable to the human mind as absolute matter; the human mind itself constitutes a bridge committed to connecting both, and it does this through poetry.[28]

Stevens altogether rejects otherworldly transcendence. Reality for Stevens is here and now--not somewhere else, and not divested of the body. Anyone who can read that superb statement

> Beauty is momentary in the mind--
> The fitful tracing of a portal;
> But in the flesh it is immortal[29]

and then declare Stevens to be a Platonist is simply not reading Stevens. This is not to say that Stevens had not felt the attraction of Platonism, and of monism generally; he had. He was "a student of all the nostalgias."[30] Like Coleridge, however, he felt compelled to dismiss the realm of the ideal as "Plato's dear, gorgeous nonsense."[31] Similarly, Stevens resisted the pull of the monistic impulse to which many romantics and transcendentalists succumbed. For Stevens, Wordsworth's "sense of something far more deeply interfused" proceeds unmistakably from us; it does not proceed from some supernatural source to roll through things. This spirit of imagination is essential to us because it enables us to endure the otherwise intolerable physical laws of our universe. As Stevens says, "When we look at the blue sky for the first time . . . experience it . . . [we] have a sense that we live in the center of a physical . . . geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there . . . ."[32]

Though, like the Symbolists, Stevens at times expended much poetic energy feinting at masks ("Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is a relatively lighthearted example), it was always with the realization that mask and face constitute a single reality or entity, and that if you strip the mask away, the face comes with

it.[33] Stevens' most profound and mystical expression of his sense of the absolute interdependence or interinanimation of spirit and matter occurs in The Necessary Angel, where he speaks of the need for a "prodigious search of appearance, as if to find a way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance [whether potential or actual] are one and that it is only through reality in which they are reflected or, it may be, joined together, that we can reach them."[34] [Italics mine.]

2. The Supreme Fiction and the Problem of Belief

Although Stevens was no transcendentalist, and although he did not believe in God in any accepted sense of the word, he cannot properly be called an atheist. For he raised the imagination's power to discover and to create order and harmony out of the chaos of reality to such a height that it became for him a kind of divinity, though always tentatively proposed: "We say God and the imagination are one . . ./How high that highest candle lights the dark."[35] He declared that "after one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."[36]

Stevens is considered a thoroughly modern poet because he has weathered the dynamiting of the gods and passed beyond the crisis of belief.[37] "For this emancipated poet," as C. Roland Wagner says, "all literal beliefs are gone except the supreme need for belief."[38] This is so, and yet much of Stevens' poetry is filled with nostalgia for traditional religion, as it could hardly fail to be in view of his devout Lutheran upbringing.[39]

The poem in which Stevens most poignantly yet resolutely deals with the problem of belief is "Sunday Morning." But it is a problem Stevens keeps coming back to in countless shorter lyrics, in, among the longer poems, Esthétique du Mal, and ultimately in his grand coda on this theme, Notes toward a Supreme Fiction. The supreme fiction is that belief which, in an age of disbelief, might take the place of the idea of God.[40] Could we evolve some imaginative accord between ourselves and reality sufficiently fine, valid, and ennobling, it would become, for a while, a supreme fiction.

Stevens believed that in the twentieth century "we had reached a point at which we could no longer believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction." Stevens noted further, however, that "there are many things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief," so why not in a fiction if this were persuasive, valid, and sustaining?[41] Indeed, Stevens declared, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."[42] For, although all the gods are dead, the will to believe persists, and life continues to demand some supreme sanction.

There are several ways in which Stevens is a thoroughly modern poet, and these are a corollary of his rejection of all residual pieties. He rejects anthropomorphism in all its forms, and in his celebration of nature wars continually on the pathetic fallacy. Thoroughly impregnated with the evolutionary view of

things, he realizes what a comparatively recent phenomenon is man; even more recent is man's mind with its indomitable itch to rule over its environment and make it over in man's own image. The urge to adapt one's environment (as to adapt to it), the subject of The Comedian as the Letter C, is a suasion not to be denied; but we find Stevens constantly resisting the temptation to see nature as anything but alien to man.

Stevens' war on the pathetic fallacy is waged most impressively in the winter poems, finding its finest expression in two masterly pieces, the early "The Snow Man," and the late "The Course of a Particular." In the first, the poet reveals that one has to have a mind like winter's, stripped of all the seductive evasions and animistic enhancements of metaphor, to behold in nature "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."[43] In the second, one realizes that being a conscious part of nature is "an exertion that declines"; on the point of losing consciousness, it sharpens and detaches itself from the human, and one begins to merge with the thing itself and to hear its sound as a cry that, in the last analysis, "concerns no one at all."[44]

What is striking about Stevens' refusal of the "stubborn, man-locked set" of ideas is the ruthless joy with which he contemplates a reality stripped not only of god's image but of man's. In "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," he celebrates our isolation as an opportunity for courage:

> It's a strange courage
> you give me, ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part!

I

Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

II

Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light . . . .[45]

This is exhilarating; it is with a shock that one realizes that in this and similar poems what Stevens is celebrating is essentially --nothing! He is the great poet of positive negation, in this respect as great as Mallarmé, though different, for Mallarmé was celebrating the ideal, while Stevens knows, even in those poems in which he luxuriates in the imagination's rainbow weavings, that these are merely "iris frettings on the blank."

In "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," he recognizes once again that "it is the human that is the alien," and prays,

If there must be a god . . . let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness

A . . . nothingness, any stick of the mass
Of which we are too distantly a part.[46]

Stevens is always aware that "to get at the truth, we must use the imagination to transcend it symbolically, but must recognize that fulfillment comes only within the circle of the imagination which symbolic truth satisfies."[47] The sense of the interdependence of the imagination and reality has its obverse: the realization that each is, in a sense, a closed circuit which remains separate except in those moments when each sparks the other into life. This sense of the closed circuits of matter and spirit is

obvious in "Less and Less Human," but is also present in Stevens' most ardent apotheosis of imagination, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour":

> Light the first light of evening, as in a room
> In which we rest and, for small reason, think
> The world imagined is the ultimate good.
> . . . . . .
> We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
> A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.
>
> Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
> We say God and the imagination are one . . .
> How high that highest candle lights the dark.
>
> Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
> We make a dwelling in the evening air,
> In which being there together is enough.[48]

Note how Stevens validates by undercutting his deification of poetry ("the world imagined," "the central mind") and of the imagination: "for small reason, [we] think/The world imagined is the ultimate good." But for the best reason also, because in our experience it <u>is</u> the ultimate good. The next stanza quoted suggests that whatever arranged the rendezvous of imagination with reality probably partook equally of the nature of both partners, and thus points to some obscure order within reality itself which transcends the mind and is beyond human ken. The careful punctuation adds to the calculated ambiguity of the poem. "Within its vital boundary, in the mind." This is not a sentence, but Stevens has end-stopped it so that we do not know whether it refers back to the knowledge which arranged the rendezvous, or to the statement that "God and the imagination are one," or to both.[49] As a unit of meaning, this line insists on itself, and reminds us that whatever the mind is communing with will not speak to it, that

this is a soliloquy, the mind speaking to itself. But the line may well point, too, to that knowledge of the mind that enables it to meet reality halfway and thus to transform it so that, within its vital boundary, it can create from the conjunction of mind with matter its god. "The central mind" may well refer to that "centre" within reality, that obscure order which Stevens sought throughout his life: "I do seek a centre and expect to go on seeking it. . . . It is the great necessity even without specific identification."[50] When imagination and reality dwell together in vital harmony, we find being here enough.

II. Distinguishing Characteristics of Stevens' Poetry

1. A New Kind of Nature Poetry

Let us begin with this announcement from Stevens' Adagia: "Poetry is the statement of a relation between a man and the world."[51] Stevens' poems present such relationships between self and environment, which is only another way of saying that they represent successive engagements between the imagination and reality. Whereas the categories of imagination and reality provide not only the practical but the theoretical framework of Stevens' poetry, the relationship of man to nature is Stevens' entire materia poetica.[52]

In Stevens' poetry, however, the emphasis is always on nature, never on man--except as the perceiving mind or eye. Stevens' poems are a series of landscapes or still-lifes, nature volatile en plein air or nature transported into the studio,

nature morte, which the poet's imagination causes to vibrate with color, shape, vitality and sometimes--not always--with significance. There is no living drama in this poetry because there are few people. The only drama is the drama of perception, which for Stevens was sufficiently exciting, but may not be for the reader.

Such people as exist in Stevens' verse are caricatures or masks for the poet, agents for his perspective or spokesmen for his various points of view. Consider, for example, the woman in "Sunday Morning," my uncle in "Le Monocle," Crispin in The Comedian, the singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the letter-writer who appears briefly in Esthétique du Mal, and the rider in the glass coach in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." There are countless other personae: soldier, hero, giant, reader, rabbi, queen, bride, fat woman, as well as all those variants of these types endowed with proper names. They are all masks for the poet and speak, if they speak at all, with his voice. As masks, they serve several purposes. They enable the poet to assume a detachment he could not command if using his own voice directly, and they provide a certain immediacy and specificity which Stevens, an abstracting and generalizing poet, finds useful. (For Stevens writes with the sense that, as T. S. Eliot says, "What is true is true only for one time and for one place.")

It is no liability that Stevens' poetic figures should speak with his voice, for that voice is at times the most eloquent possessed by an American poet of this century. When

Stevens' personages seem gratuitous it is because they are not fulfilling their function--providing a point of view for the poet to argue with or qualify or pronounce upon. Against the charge of lifelessness it is hard to defend such figures, for they are, after all, only a ventriloquist's puppets. Lacking all mimetic ability, Stevens could not project himself into other people's minds, inhabit and recreate other temperaments than his own, and make these issue in appropriate action or speech. He was incapable of writing a dramatic poem in which a speaker confronts and resolves a situation that challenges his emotions. Stevens could not write a dramatic monologue, either in the external mode of Browning or through the internal stream-of-consciousness of Eliot. Some of Stevens' poems disguise themselves as dramatic monologues, but since the speaker is always the poet's dummy, never existing in his own right, these poems do not really qualify as dramatic monologues.

Stevens diagnosed his greatest limitation when he declared, "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble."[53] Stevens' letters bear witness alike to his intense feeling for landscape and to his fine perception of naturalistic detail, as also to his distaste for and mistrust of people. Therefore Stevens' landscapes, so magnificently rendered, remain unpeopled.[54] His own essential nature as a poet is captured in Stevens' remark, "Men and the affairs of men seldom concerned/ This pundit of the weather . . ."[55]

The earth, for Stevens, still dwarfs humanity, as he records in his journal:

> . . . how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate montrosity . . . . It still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens + orchards + fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless. And it is a proper question, whether or not the Lilliputians have tied him down.[56]

Stevens' feeling for landscape is Wordsworthian, with the important difference that the spirit of immanence proceeds from the onlooker. The onlooker realizes this.

Stevens took long walks all his life--he once walked forty-two miles in one day.[57] It is interesting to know that much of Stevens' poetry was composed while walking.

> I have no set way of working. A great deal of my poetry has been written while I have been out walking. Walking helps me to concentrate and I suppose that . . . my own movement gets into the movement of the poems. I have to jot things down as I go along since, otherwise, by the time I got to the end of the poem I should have forgotten the beginning. Often, when I get to the office, I hand my notes to my stenographer. . . . Then I pull and tug at the typed script until I have the thing the way I want it, when I put it away for a week or two until I have forgotten about it and can take it up as if it was something entirely fresh. If it satisfies me at that time, that is the end of it.[58]

Not only was such a method of composition necessary to a busy man who spent most of his life making money, not writing poetry, but

it was peculiarly appropriate to one whose real subject was always nature, and who paid delighted and delighting attention to its minutest details. As in Whitman, one can hear the long, loping stride behind Stevens' free verse rhythms, and sense the same "determination to cover the ground."[59]

Stevens was also an impassioned gardener who insisted (surprisingly, perhaps, in view of his comments on man's cultivation of the earth as "mere scrapings") that what made even the tropics most interesting was what man added to them by way of cultivation. Stevens loved Florida with all his capacity to love anything; nevertheless, he writes,

> Florida is not really amazing in itself but in what it becomes under cultivation. . . . Once a space has been given attention it turns into something extraordinary. But the ordinary jungle is not impressive. There are brilliant birds and strange things but they must be observed.[60]

This is something readers of The Comedian as the Letter C, and of Stevens' poetry as a whole, would do well to bear in mind. Not only may landscape refresh imagination, but imagination vitalizes and transfigures landscape.[61] Stevens' attitude to nature, in this last respect, is perhaps closer to Coleridge than to Wordsworth--unless we include the Wordsworth of "Elegiac Stanzas" who acknowledged "The light that never was, on sea or land."

An artist's creativity may express itself mimetically, in the projection of fictive character and action, or it may concentrate on metamorphosing objects. This is what Stevens did. Stevens had a strong sense of time and place, and a deep-rooted preference for depiction of scene rather than

delineation of character. Stevens is a painterly poet with a strong, Matisse-like sense of composition and outline; his poems are painted landscapes and studio pieces, whose titles read like an art exhibition catalogue--such catalogues being a favorite item of his reading matter. Stevens would rather gaze on herrings and apples than on people, because they are more tranquil, and his poetry springs more naturally from the contemplation of fruit and pottery than from the effort to visualize man. What he gets when he tries to do so is "a hero's head," a piece of statuary. This may be why most critics, as well as fellow poets, prefer Stevens' early to his late work. For the later verse, beginning with The Man with the Blue Guitar, constitutes a change not only of style but of subject:[62] an endeavor to grapple with a recalcitrant and uncongenial theme, the grubby masses in their grimy cities. "My North is leafless and lies in a wintry slime/ . . . a slime of men in crowds."[63]

Before considering the later Stevens, let us examine some of the qualities of the poetic painter of landscape and still-life. Stevens as a poet shares the desire of the Impressionist painter to make his medium so transparent as to capture reality in all its fleeting nuance, as well as the desire of the Cubist painter to view objects from many angles in order to come to grips with them. Stevens does not manipulate reality; he describes what he sees as he sees it, but he does place the objects in his poems in necessary, meaningful relation to one another, as in "Anecdote of the Jar," for example. The subject of his poetry,

Stevens says, "is the life that it lived in the scene that it composes."[64] The preoccupation with still life, with forms that do not move except as the observer moves, and that suffer external rather than internal changes, suggests a desire for composure.[65] But the composure Stevens sought, particularly in his later poetry, was more often that of discovery, of sudden illuminating insight, than that of conscious, painstaking research, repeated chiseling and polishing to achieve a studied perfection.

Much of what Stevens says about Pierre Tal Coat, the non-objective painter, one of whose canvases inspired the poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," applies equally to himself:

> It is commonly said that a still life is a problem in the painting of solids. Tal Coat has not interested himself in that problem. Here all the objects are painted with a slap-dash intensity, the purpose of which is to convey the vigor of the artist. Here nothing is mediocre or merely correct. . . . Moreover, this is not a manifestation of crude strength of a peasant. . . . It is a display of imaginative force: an effort to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality.[66]

Vital insight achieves transparence more surely than subjective expressionism.

Stevens' poetry comprises a series of cries of particular occasions which are "part of the res itself and not about it."[67] But these are rarely cries that proceed from the heart.[68] In fact, much of Stevens' best poetry not only lacks a human center (though the imagination's response to reality is a subject of central human concern), but breathes forth what can only be

described as an inhuman ether. The fact that Stevens is so much engaged by abstractions and inhuman objects, not by human beings, accounts for the lack of emotional tension in his poetry. Nevertheless, his devotion to nature (even in the face of--perhaps because of--the death blow he deals the pathetic fallacy) is, as he says, "a suasion not to be denied."[69] Stevens said that his poetry was concerned to capture "the morality of the right sensation."[70] Irving Howe comes even closer to the truth in naming Stevens' preoccupation as being with the morality of right vision.[71]

Stevens has a fine feeling for American landscape and weather. One does not find crude transcriptions of either in his poetry, however. (He deplored realism as a corruption of reality.)[72] What one finds in Stevens is the extracted essence of something as difficult to seize, for example, as the special quality of the air in America, an essence captured and imaginatively rendered:

> Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night,
> We drove home from Cornwall to Hartford, late.
>
> It was not a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna
> Or Venice, motionless, gathering time and dust.
>
> There was a crush of strength in a grinding going round,
> Under the front of the westward evening star.
>
> The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins,
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . an insolid billowing of the solid.[73]

That "vigor of glory . . . glittering in the veins" captures perfectly the peculiarly invigorating quality of the air of America

which, having neither the luminosity of Mediterranean light, nor the liquidity of the air bathing the western coasts of Europe, has nevertheless a peculiar dry vigor all its own.

2. Stevens' Styles

Were it a question of style only, there would probably be little argument about Stevens' claim to be a major poet, and perhaps the finest American poet of this century. For Stevens is a virtuoso of the English language. The power of his poetry lies as much in his rhetorical and rhythmic control and linguistic command as in the brilliance and originality of his imagery. Rhetoric is a matter of syntactic and rhythmic sense. "I know noble accents/And lucid, inescapable rhythms," Stevens says, and it is no idle boast. If Stevens' diction is often pretentious and fussy, his rhythm has the lithe, powerful stride of Wordsworth, that "articulate energy" which Donald Davie detects as the moving power behind Wordsworth's transmutation of poetry into prose.[74] Stevens can be as grandly arresting as Milton, and as sensuously mellifluous as Keats. His command of cadence rarely flags, even when his imagination fails. Stevens' rhetoric runs the gamut from the oracularly grand to the easily colloquial, from the vividly spectacular to the soberly elegant. He mastered the traditional forms of poetry early. Stevens is, as Harvey Gross observes, "the superlative modern master" of blank verse,[75] as readers of "Sunday Morning" and "The Idea of Order at Key West" will surely acknowledge. And Stevens' free verse, in which variations of line length and of internal rhyme reflect and set

off the words so as to draw maximum attention to their suggestive quality and meaning, is extremely sure-footed.

Stevens' diction is, probably, his single most distinctive characteristic. His vocabulary is prodigious, startling, precise, quaint, and esoteric--nowhere more so than in The Comedian as the Letter C, where he indulges his taste for the quirky and recherché to an unprecedented degree and bids it a premature and merely theoretical farewell. Stevens' choice of words, though extremely precise, often strikes the reader as equally misguided and unfortunate. One may agree with him that there is no inherent reason why "Anglo-Saxon should higgle and haggle all over the page,"[76] but neither is there any necessity for a poet to resort to such words as principium, lex, and opusculum, to the longeurs of Latin and the langeurs of French, when English can supply a word as accurate, intelligible, and, to the English speaker, more vital. Stevens frequently coins words and makes up proper names--some random examples are rattapallax, gubbinal, and chidder; Lady Lowzen and Hoon. The sound is intended to embody the meaning, and often does so most effectively. (But Lady Lowzen and Hoon suggest nothing out of context.) Sound is extremely important to this poet, and occasionally, though rarely, assumes priority over the attention to sense. Stevens' choice of words that are highly specialized or already archaic--for example, dits, femes, halidom, haggardie, mulctings--suggests that his poetry is likely to date quickly.

One would expect Stevens' tones to be as varied as his styles, but the most all-pervasive tone, the one that leaves the

most persistent and puzzling aftertaste, is Stevens' irony. Stevens continually undercuts his positive assertions, thus contriving to be simultaneously flippant and serious. One thinks of the mock-heroics of "Le Monocle" and The Comedian, his two most consistently ironic poems. The Comedian reveals an undercurrent of the heroic beneath its mockery, but the irony strikes me as extremely diffuse and somewhat unfocused, and I agree with Graham Hough that Stevens' irony is apt to operate as a smokescreen.[77] The poet uses irony as camouflage to such a degree that the reader often does not know what attitude to take; he even begins to suspect that the poet may not have settled on his own.

In an illuminating article, "The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," J. V. Cunningham defines four main styles of Stevens which he calls, respectively, the imagistic, the mannered, the grandly rhetorical, and the plain style.[78] What Cunningham calls "the nineteenth century rhetorical style" is Stevens' most impressive, when unadulterated by other styles, and when the poet's imagination is able to sustain it. (It should be noted, however, that Stevens' bravura is sometimes excessive, given the barrenness of his subject matter.) There are poems or parts of poems in the grand manner that could scarcely be improved--and could certainly not be matched by another poet. I would cite as examples "Sunday Morning" (which could be perfected by the omission of the Lawrencian seventh stanza), the first, fourth, and fifth stanzas of

"Le Monocle," the greater part of "Credences of Summer," and sections II, III, VIII, IX, XI, XIV, and XV of Esthétique du Mal.

Thus it can be seen that Stevens uses the grand style only intermittently; often he blends it with the mannerist, the imagistic, or the plain style. Examples of poems which are pastiches or compendia of all four styles include "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, and An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.

Stevens' second basic style is the plainer, more stripped style that began to appear with The Man with the Blue Guitar, which perhaps presents it in its most rudimentary form. This style is the staple of much of the middle and late work, as the more bizarre mannered style is probably the staple of Harmonium. However, I would trace the genesis of the plain style to the simpler, more stripped imagist poems (what I would call Stevens' first winter poems) in his first volume. These poems have an austere elegance that was not to reappear until the very end of his life, in such late lyrics as "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" and "Of Mere Being." Whether early or late, these are poems of the purest kind because they cohere about a single image or a small group of carefully selected and related images. (It is important to note that these images, as is characteristic of Stevens, are usually symbolic.) In Harmonium, there are several poems that cohere about a single image, such as "Explanation," "Valley Candle," and "The Snow Man," which I consider the consummate poem in this mode.

Before composing the concentrated, crystalline late lyrics which possess, as Cunningham says, "a quietness so apt it is heard,"[79] Stevens wrote a great many poems in a plain style which, though not particularly pure or concentrated, possesses colloquial ease, fluency, and grace. It may be sampled in such poems as "The Motive for Metaphor" and "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man." But there are a great many poems which slump from the merely prosaic into the plain prosy. Prose may be the object in parts of The Man with the Blue Guitar and Examination of the Hero in Time of War, as it certainly is in "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" and in "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly." Among the many poems which are wearisomely prosy or which deteriorate into prose without, presumably, the author's intending them to, I would cite "Description without Place" and "Man Carrying Thing" (both of which are, nonetheless, theoretically interesting, with a style that tends to reinforce their dogmatism); then "Gigantomachia," "Crude Foyer," "Imago," "Two Versions of the Same Poem," "Reply to Papini"--the examples are too numerous to cite. For some examples of Stevens at his poetic nadir, one should consult Examination of the Hero, Parts II, IV, and IX.

Although J. V. Cunningham's categories cut accurately through the body of Stevens' work, accounting for all the major styles, the imagist category bulges uncomfortably when it is made to include poems that are obviously symbolist. An imagist poem is concerned solely to present sharp, concrete

images, whereas most of Stevens' poems in this manner point to an implicit meaning beyond the scope of the images themselves. Thus, for example, even in a poem which begins as simply and imagistically as "Life is Motion," the image of two girls in calico dancing around a stump is compelled (one concedes that this particular poem is strained) to illustrate "the marriage of flesh/And air." There are relatively few purely imagistic pieces in Harmonium, and this volume contains the only poems Stevens wrote while under the influence of the Imagists. I suggest as examples of pure imagism "The Load of Sugar-Cane," "In the Carolinas," "Of the Surface of Things," and, with some misgivings, "Tattoo." This last poem might more accurately be termed Metaphysical--even Surrealist--the images employed being, in effect, farfetched conceits. "Tattoo" belongs with such other heightened symbolist pieces as "The Glass of Water," and "Poetry is a Destructive Force." (The kind, degree, and intensity of symbolism with which imagery is charged will determine whether a poem is to be classified as symbolist or metaphysical. If there is no symbolism, and yet the image is the poem's central focus, the poem is likely to be imagist.)

Stylistically, it can be seen that Stevens writes two kinds of seemingly imagistic poems, the ornate and the simple. Generically, however, I think it is important to distinguish those few poems that are really imagist from those that are symbolist. (Cunningham makes no such distinction.) Stevens' ornate poems may be flashy or precious, full of ostentatious,

often jazzy sound effects, exotic names, and nonsense syllables. These poems presumably belong to what Cunningham identifies as Stevens' mannerist style. There are many poems of this type, some obvious successes, some equally patent failures. Cunningham mentions as an example of an unqualified success "Bantams in Pine-Woods," which bristles with sound effects and is a cacophonous "clickety-clack" from start to finish, but which is validated by a clever, extended conceit whereby a self-congratulatory cock is compared to a poet equally jaunty and egotistic. "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" also comes off, despite some extraneous "tunk-a-tunk-tunk," as do far more brilliant, but basically gaudy poems, such, for example, as "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Such poems are examples of the essential gaiety or gaudiness of Stevens, when this is still under control. "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" and "The Emperor," both written in a flauntingly florid, rococo style, are yet fine symbolist poems, compressed and economical. So are several of the symbolist poems written in the quiet manner, such as "Domination of Black" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Whether such early poems crystallize about a single image (like "The Snow Man" and "Valley Candle") or cohere about a cluster of related images (like "Domination of Black" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"), the unity which concentration on such carefully selected and related images confers is something one looks for in vain in most of the later poetry, where the images become less

focused and cohesive, more heterogeneous and confused. Throughout his career Stevens continues to use the variations-on-a-theme technique pioneered in "Thirteen Ways," a poem in which the visual images are extremely sharp and their symbolic connotations correspondingly tenuous. In addition, there are those masterly symbolist mood pieces, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." In the first, sound magically evokes vision and color, sound and vision being beautifully blended. In the second, it is as though a succession of Impressionist canvases had been joined together, again in a veritable symphony of sound and color.

Hi Simons says that Stevens naturalized for American poetry the intellectual lyric composed of a single image or a small collocation of images, which the Imagists copied from the French Symbolists.[80] To demonstrate the clarity and effectiveness of Stevens' best poems in the Imagist-Symbolist tradition, let us examine some of those that appear in Harmonium. Take as an example "Valley Candle."[81] The candle is the light of life fitfully illuminating the darkness out of which it has emerged and to which it will return. The candle's image is the imaginative experience and recreation of life by the mind, which may outlast the life of the individual, further illumining the darkness--but only until the wind blows. Without knowing precisely what the wind means, it is clear it is the agent of change, signaling both the flame's emergence and its extinction.

"The Snow Man" is a masterpiece of studied simplicity and concreteness, presenting a terrifying clarity of vision.[82] It comprises a single sentence of supple free verse with insidious cadences and a subtle use of assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme. The details of the winter landscape--"pine-trees crusted with snow," "junipers shagged with ice"--are rendered by incisive verbs in crisp, precise images, as they glitter before the snowman's vacant gaze. He is the speaker who, in order to behold "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," has to become nothing himself, has to lose human consciousness.

The austerity of Stevens' winter poems is unsurpassed, but there are also some fine pieces in his lush, exotic, bizarre vein. One of these is "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws."[83] The "parakeet of parakeets" is a parodic vision of the paraclete, the poem presenting an amusing evocation of a completely naturalistic deity, painted in brilliant, surrealistic form and tropical technicolor.[84] This potent, predatory creator is at the same time impotent, for he is locked within his creation--the epitome of blind, motionless, yet relentless power of will.

Stevens' finest poems blend the hard clarity of Imagism with the mysterious suggestiveness of Symbolism. The images are presented often with an almost shocking clarity, as in the poem just described and in "The Men that are Falling" and "The Hand as Being." What these images mean is, in the most highly wrought poems, perfectly clear from the context, but it is left to the reader to discover for himself. There is a sense in which

Stevens carries both Imagism and Symbolism to their separate and joint conclusion. I believe it is more valid to see him as the heir of Symbolist and Imagist techniques than as a descendant of the Metaphysicals, though Simons claims for him the ability to convey the "direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling" which T. S. Eliot attributes particularly to Chapman and Donne.[85] While experience is the essence of poetry, and while many of Stevens' poems do present thinking or perceiving as an experience, his poetry is far less intellectually tough than that of Donne or Marvell, for example. He shares with the Metaphysicals a penchant for obscurity, and for startling comparisons, but Stevens' obscurities are due not nearly so much to actual complexity of thought (which is rare) as to complicated imagery, diction, and--particularly in the later verse--syntax. It is important, nevertheless, to realize that Stevens is bent on presenting thought as experience, and to that extent, his poetry has something in common with that of the Metaphysical school. He defines a poem most cogently: "A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it."[86] What is this but the sensuous apprehension of thought or the thoughtful apprehension of felt experience?

Stevens uses metaphor not merely as decoration but as "the means of discourse," often stretching "its communicative possibilities . . . to the utmost--often, in fact, to the point

of obscurity," observes Simons.[87] This is true, but it is important to note that this obscurity is as much a result of Stevens' peculiar methods of using his images and symbols as it is of his images and symbols themselves. In fact, Stevens' symbolism has a naturalistic basis, for the most part, much of its meaning being readily accessible. In addition, it remains fairly consistent throughout his work. The meanings of certain large dualities running through his poems are obvious even to the beginning reader. Thus, sun, day, daylight, and summer stand for reality and plenitude, while moon, night, moonlight, and darkness represent imagination shading off into sleep, death, and non-being. (Winter may represent an access of reality in its barest form, or the death of imagination.) The enduring, immitigable hardness of rock is a prime symbol of reality, but so is the mysterious amorphousness of the ocean, source and end of life. Jung might well have approved such archetypal symbols. But, though basic enough to appeal to the collective subconscious, even these symbols of Stevens are often placed in such surprising contexts and so arbitrarily deployed, the reader being required to screen out their unwanted associations, that elucidating a Stevens poem may well come to resemble solving a sophisticated and slippery algebraic problem. The meanings of those many images and symbols that are not immediately obvious have to be inferred from similar usages in other poems.

Stevens employs climatic conditions as symbols: cloud or shadow represent imaginative nuance. Winter and summer, spring and autumn embody the states of mind these seasons customarily

evoke. Stevens' poetry is full of animals, birds, and plants of all kinds. Animals remarkable for their strength, splendor, or wild shyness are likely to symbolize poetry. Thus, we frequently find the lion, peacock, parrot, pheasant, cock, blue jay, pigeon, or rabbit standing for poet or poem. The poet may also be represented by musician, painter, scholar, reader, or rabbi. Trees may, in a single context, represent both transience and permanence or fixity, as in the tenth stanza of "Le Monocle," for example. Stevens' images often exhibit this curious doubleness. Man-made artifacts (vases, porcelain, statues) or architectural constructs (cathedrals, houses, hotels, rooms) represent the art, science, and thought of which they are the products. They may be used with favorable or pejorative connotations, or with both at once--as in "Anecdote of the Jar." The jar dominates and orders nature, but, in comparison with its fertile chaos, is barren and sterile. Towards the end of his career, Stevens grows increasingly fond of prismatic or mineral images of transparence--glass, diamonds, crystal--all of which represent in the most abstract terms the ultimate reality of matter realized in the mind.

The difficulty of interpreting Stevens' images and symbols is greatest in those poems where he does not concentrate sufficiently on bringing out even the primary nuances of their meaning, but glances from one to another in rapid succession, so that the impression made is sometimes like that of a flashlight playing over a junkpile. In effect, large tracts

of the later poetry convey such an impression of randomness and disorder.

As with his imagery in general, Stevens' use of color symbolism shows some naturalness and a degree of consistency, though interpretation must allow for changing nuances and for occasional capriciousness, arbitrariness, and mystification.[88] Green consistently stands for reality, predicated on its being the color of vegetation. Blue always represents imagination, and is predicated on the illimitable blue spaces of the sky. Black and white both represent an ultimate reality beyond human consciousness, and both therefore have connotations of death. (Grey, their intermediate, being the color of ashes, often connotes decreation or detritus.) All the variants of blue deepening into black--mauve, purple, violet, indigo--share blue's imaginative connotations, deepening in intensity as the color deepens. This is also true of those shades that hover between red and blue or red and white, the roses and pinks that evoke for Stevens romantic nostalgia. There remain yellow, gold, and red, and it would appear that Stevens uses these three colors more anomalously. Yellow and gold, the color of the sun, should--and frequently do--represent reality.[89] In fact, however, these colors may be used, like blue and purple, to represent the imagination's projections.[90] Red, as the color of blood, is most often the color of stark, unmediated reality, of a vitality harsher and more lethal than that represented by green. However, there are occasions when red (presumably a deeper, duller shade

of red) stands for a faded reality, or what George McFadden calls "the dying or dead past," as it does in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, III.iii, and Esthétique du Mal, III.[91]

Stevens' color symbolism, then, is often both perfectly intelligible and appropriate. There are occasions, however, when he uses his color values consistently, but when the colors themselves appear to be used heraldically or surrealistically, their use being startling, seemingly inappropriate. When, for example, Stevens says "Green is the night,"[92] this is tantamount to saying that darkness is the ultimate reality, but far more sensuously and intellectually disturbing--which is why Stevens says it this way. From this example, it can be seen that Stevens uses colors, like images, emblematically, with certain rigid core significations. Throughout his poetic career, his use of image and color grows increasingly abstract, and detaches itself more and more from the control exerted by context. The forms and colors of the late verse have become surrealistic characters or counters.

The question of Stevens' poetic evolution has already been skirted and will be taken up in further detail in the Conclusion to this dissertation. His poetry swings continuously between the two poles of reality and imagination, but its increasing abstractness, what Joseph Riddel in The Clairvoyant Eye calls its "graduating inwardness," supports the notion that the line of development from the lush opulence of Harmonium to the bare elegance of The Rock represents a transference of

interest from the fully imagined world of summer, youth, and the senses to the starkly realistic world of winter, age, and the mind.[93] However, it is important to recognize that both these streams of interest were present and mingling from the beginning, and that the later verse does not represent a simple triumph of reality over imagination, or of the prosaic style over the baroque. Along with an increasing awareness of the exigencies of the times went Stevens' insistence that reality, the poet's material, had to be abstracted by and in the poet's mind.[94] Thus Stevens' poetry paradoxically reveals reality being more and more firmly grasped, yet moving further and further into the mind. The later poems are shot through with the spirit's alchemicana, as he says reality must be in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. There is still an obvious continuity in Stevens' poetic development, a continuity evolving out of the inevitable change in sensibility that he himself described most simply thus: "When one is young everything is physical; when one is old everything is psychic."[95]

Remarking the evolution of Stevens' style from luxuriant rhetoric to barest statement, J. V. Cunningham has recourse to a Miltonic phrase of the poet's own to describe the late Stevens--"The appointed power unwielded from disdain."[96] The phrase accurately pinpoints both Stevens' powers of expression and his integrity. Though facility continued to vie with integrity, though Stevens sometimes indulged himself in matters of vocabulary and rhetoric, though he produced too many poems that demonstrate no more than the pleasures of merely circulating, still the

finest of the late poems achieve an austere simplicity and naked elegance of expression that is unparalleled. They represent that final transparence that Stevens continually strove for:[97]

> The barrenness that appears is an exposing,
> It is not part of what is absent, a halt
> For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.
>
> It is a coming on and a coming forth.
> . . . . . .
>
> The glass of the air becomes an element--
> It was something imagined that has been washed away.
> A clearness has returned. It stands restored.
>
> It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
> It is a visibility of thought,
> In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.[98]

At its best, Stevens' poetry constitutes such a "visibility of thought." This passage, which is about both the onset of winter and the confrontation of death, expresses Stevens' abiding desire to write a central poetry, a poetry that would feel its way not only to the center of the universe but into "the central of our being," to the center of other men's minds.

Stevens has himself shed considerable light on his poetic aims and the course of his poetic development in a letter he wrote to Hi Simons in January 1940:

> I suppose that the way of all mind is from romanticism to realism, to fatalism and then to indifferentism, unless the cycle recommences . . . from indifferentism back to romanticism all over again. . . . what the world looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new belief.
>
> About the time when I, personally, began to feel round for a new romanticism, I might naturally have 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. . . . I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central. . . . 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 . . . convinces me that there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve.[99]

This confirms a suspicion about Stevens based on the overwhelming evidence of his extraordinary poems, and remarks scattered throughout his prose works and letters. One gathers from these that the poet's own imagination was so strong, so vivid, that at times, in comparison with others, it must have made him feel something of a freak. As he remarks in The Necessary Angel, "a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own."[100] It even raises the question whether its own reality, so different from others', may not be largely illusive. Stevens obviously gloried in the keenness of his imagination, yet he seems to have been afraid of becoming isolated in a world of his own, a paradise for one, wholly divorced from the mundane world inhabited by other human beings. Thus it was that Stevens flung himself, constantly longing--perhaps, also, dreading--on the form of the commonplace. It evaded him as constantly. Yet Stevens, to offset his innate tendency toward the exotic, the marginal, and the potentially distorting, set himself to pursue the quotidian, the central, and a selfless transparence.

Hence, too, Stevens' insistence on the problem of domesticating the abnormal, which finds expression in several

of the essays in The Necessary Angel and in the Adagia: "Literature is the abnormal creating an illusion of the normal."[101] "The chief problems of any artist, as of any man," says Stevens, "are the problems of the normal and . . . he needs, in order to solve them, everything that the imagination has to give."[102] In both these quotations, the normal is paradoxically presented as the product of illusion and imagination. And in both the poet is concerned not to curtail his own vision so as to bring it into line with other people's, but to raise and enlarge theirs to conform to his own. Again we see the centrally important role Stevens assigns to poetry and the imagination in modern life.

Is Stevens a romantic or a classic poet? He has all the earmarks of the romantic poet except transcendental subject matter. His subject is, quite simply, this earth, and he neither desires to nor believes that he can escape it--except in death. One detects transcendental yearnings, however, in Stevens' apotheosis of imagination; furthermore, his affirmation of reality is a substitute for the loss of religious faith.

Neither classicism nor romanticism has ever been satisfactorily defined, but voluntary confinement to the celebration of this life might be seen as typically the subject matter of a classic poet. Stevens' poetry is unmistakably romantic in style, however--in its unfettered ebbing and flowing, its fortuitous rising and falling, its open-ended, seemingly casual evolutions. As Robert Langbaum affirms in his book The Poetry of Experience, "Romanticism is one pole of

the eternal alternation between emotion and intellect, freedom and discipline . . . it is the attempt of modern man to reintegrate fact and value."[103] Fact and value are interchangeable with Stevens' terms, reality and imagination. The dichotomy between subject and object, realized as a result of the loss of belief in God, is the abiding preoccupation of both romantic and post-romantic modern poetry. Stevens' poetry takes its place within the romantic tradition because it seeks to achieve the reintegration of fact and value, and to do this through poetry of experience, poetry that presents--or appears to present--"what happens before selection and analysis take place."[104] Like the great romantic poets, Stevens finds the imagination the only faculty equal to the exploration, discovery, revelation, and revaluation of reality.

III. Stevens' Poetic Theory

1. The Prose Writings

As a background to the special critical and interpretative problems Stevens' poetry poses, it is helpful to review the main preoccupations of his poetic theory. Stevens' essays, collected in The Necessary Angel and Opus Posthumous, read like prose poetry. On first acquaintance they are ravishing, but, as Stevens says of Plato's figure of the soul as a charioteer, the first effect is the greatest they will ever have. With successive readings, these essays, which have all the aphoristic charm of Emerson's without their tough fiber, may come to seem tiresomely oracular.

On close inspection, the vagueness and meagerness of the thinking underlying the neat epigrams emerges undisguised. There is a disproportion of manner to matter, as there sometimes is in Stevens' poetry. Still, one is very glad that Stevens has written these essays, since, without them, it would be even more difficult to come to grips with his poetry. They provide a few essential handholds.

Stevens' poetic theory, like that of most poets, is a rationale, a justification for, and a validation of his particular way of looking at the world. The successful poems are those in which the poet has communicated his vision of the world and fulfilled the needs of his special temperament. The poems are, generally speaking, the theory put into practice. As Stevens says in his poem "A Primitive Like an Orb," "One poem proves another and the whole." The corpus of Stevens' poetry forms a whole, each poem commenting on the others. This is truer of Stevens' poetry than of that of any other American poet one can think of, and it poses certain critical problems that will be taken up at the end of this section.

Philosophy plays a seemingly dominant role not only in Stevens' theory but also in his practice of poetry. Yet Stevens is not really a philosophic poet, as Frank Doggett also concludes at the end of his study, Stevens' Poetry of Thought. Stevens is not a systematic or rigorous thinker, nor was he an ardent student of philosophy. As he himself repeatedly acknowledged, his philosophical ideas were learned at secondhand, often in capsule form. Nevertheless, Stevens' poetry is increasingly

meditative. Since it often presents the mind seeking what will suffice to sustain it in the face of reality, it may aptly be described as poetry about the act of perceiving or thinking rather than poetry of simple experience or pure thought.

The innate dualism of Stevens' mind reveals itself throughout his comments on poetry. He distinguishes two central streams of poetry: the kind of poetry that, however imaginative it may be, cleaves to reality and, however irrational it may be, is accessible to the probing of reason; and the kind of subliminal, subrational, or surrealist poetry written by those poets who sink themselves in the subconscious. Stevens wrote the first kind of poetry, believing that the supreme problem is to achieve normality, centrality, and transparence--not their opposites, abnormality, aberration, and opacity.[106]

Stevens recognizes a further duality between what he calls "the true subject" and "the poetry of the subject."[107] Ideally, style and subject should cohere to form a unity[108] but, in fact, there is always a gap between the subject that obsesses the poet and which he seeks to reveal in his poem, and the linguistic means through which it is to be revealed. For Stevens, words are forever separated from the objects they describe by "a breach in reality." Not only are words separated from their objects, but so is the mind. Our knowledge even of inanimate objects can never be immediate. Things are apprehended in the mind.

Because of the words which, for centuries, ordinary men and poets have used to describe different objects, these objects

come trailing clouds of their own particular associations, bathed in auras of their own. Unless the poet is so single-minded in his pursuit of the means of expressing his own unique vision that he is able to screen out stale or outworn associations, he cannot be truly imaginative. The imagination is a pioneer of reality, but fancy uses counters already supplied by others through the courtesy of memory. (What is at stake here is the Coleridgean distinction between imagination and fancy. Stevens' essays in general reveal affinities with Coleridge's theory of imagination.)

Stevens recognizes, furthermore, the problem of the two languages, the poetic and the commonplace. No doubt his life as part businessman, part poet, helped to drive home the difference between them. In his essay "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens refers to an "unwritten rhetoric," the primer of the popular language, which the poet must continually be consulting. One may be pardoned for thinking that Stevens, on the evidence of his poems, rarely consulted it. He had to, however, as every poet must if he does not wish to become unintelligible. Though poetry can never be written wholly in the common tongue,[109] it must bear some relation to it, however distant. This is why the language and idiom of poetry change constantly, just as the common language and idiom change. Poetry is written in an inherently artificial (in the sense of extraordinarily heightened) language, but it cannot afford to be completely artificial; it must bear some relation to contemporary common speech. In Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, II.ix, Stevens muses upon this problem of reconciling the poetic with the popular language.

(To think of this particular preoccupation is one way of understanding the evolution of Stevens' style.) Though he recognized the necessity of toning down the more precious and farouche elements of his own language, Stevens continued to pep or spice up what he called the "vulgate." Though what he was after, as he says in his own inimitable way, was "the lingua franca et jocundissima," his language can scarcely seem anything but peculiar. Nor is time likely to make it seem less odd.

Stevens' attitude to metaphor is an ambivalent one, which might well condition a sensitive critic's response to his metaphors. The loci classici for an understanding of Stevens' attitude to metaphor are his two essays, "Three Academic Pieces" and "Effects of Analogy." Metaphor is the creation of resemblances, and the quality and degree of a poet's ability to perceive and create such resemblances is his greatest poetic talent. The positive aspects of metaphor are (1) that it intensifies a "partial similarity between two dissimilar things,"[110] and (2) that it resolves and unifies diversity by creating a single image out of a plethora of discrete objects.[111] Metaphor brings to light and intensifies our sense of the interrelations between things, particularly between things and ourselves.

To give a humble example of how metaphor intensifies or sharpens our awareness of the actual, imagine a student leaning listlessly in his seat listening to a lecture. We might describe him as slumped over like a sack of flour. The only valid analogy between the student and a sack of flour is his sagging posture.

But by the reference to an otherwise dissimilar object, we have, on the narrow base of what they have in common, galvanized the subject. (Galvanized his languor, as it were.) The way in which metaphor can create unity out of diversity is harder to illustrate. The underlying principle is selectivity, but even very heterogeneous objects may be made to compose a single complex image. Perhaps "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" might best illustrate how this feat is achieved. The poem presents a whole kaleidoscope of strangely assorted things and people: cigars, cups, wenches, boys, flowers, newspapers, a deal dresser with glass knobs, an embroidered sheet, the feet of a corpse, a putative lamp and a putative emperor, and, most important of all, ice-cream. Ice-cream, and the antithetical values it is made to assume by its juxtaposition with all these diverse but carefully selected items, is what enables the poem to create unity out of diversity. Through its qualities of coldness, whiteness, and tasty transience, ice-cream is made to seem the essence--the emperor--of both life and death.

Metaphor provides an essential and abiding pleasure in poetry. Yet Stevens shows repeatedly that he regards it as essentially false, an evasion of reality. In "The Motive for Metaphor," the motive is seen to be both a desire for change and a shrinking from reality.[112] In "The Pure Good of Theory," metaphor is plainly recognized as factitious.[113] We believe in poetic metaphor because we want to, because we have to, because we could not live without trying to render meaning

out of nonsense and order out of chaos. And occasionally Stevens is hopeful--and humble--enough to suppose that there may well be an order and meaning beyond our ability to perceive: "A great disorder is an order," he says in "Connoisseur of Chaos."

There are more than one hundred poems of Stevens which, instead of stating "x is y," as metaphor customarily does, use the phrase "it is as if . . . ."[114] This shows the tentativeness of Stevens' faith in metaphor, and suggests the dichotomy he senses between the mind's mutations and those of matter. It is as though he were trying or testing how far the analogies he perceives may take him in face of reality. Or as though he were, by this means, trying out the full range and potentiality of the imagination's versions of reality, ringing the entire scale of those "metaphysical changes that occur,/Merely in living as and where we live."[115]

Still, there is always present Stevens' awareness that the resemblances the mind perceives are created by it, that they do not bespeak necessary relationships between things themselves, but are a willed product of the self, an importation of the unreal, or metaphysical, into the real, or physical. In "Anecdote of the Jar," the jar, a human artifact, by its careful placement on the hill, makes the slovenly wilderness stop sprawling and rise up to greet it--but only for a moment, and from one particular vantage point. And thus it is with the orders imposed on nature by the human mind. Meaning is a

product of particular perceptions and perspectives, which are constantly changing, both from the inside and the outside, as time and space produce their necessary dilapidations.

In addition to Stevens' mistrustful delight in metaphor, there is in his poetic theory and practice an uneasy relationship between the abstract and the concrete, the general and the particular. This relationship appears to grow more overtly uneasy as we proceed from the early to the late verse. Many of the poems in Harmonium are consistently concrete, and cohere to suggest an abstract meaning that is not stated in the poem but hovers clear above it. But the later, longer poems, such as The Man with the Blue Guitar and Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, for example, make certain generalizations which a host of oddly assorted details are called on to illustrate or substantiate, but which either do not, or do so very awkwardly. In the thirtieth and thirty-first stropes of The Man with the Blue Guitar, the items selected and the way in which they are described are scarcely conducive to a realization "of things as they are." Modern man is described as "the old fantoche" eyeing smokestacks cutely disguised as "dew-dapper clapper-traps." The modern suburb, Oxidia, is described as an "amber-ember pod" from which Olympia will evolve. Similarly, in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, III.v, one wonders what the colorful repast including Meursault, lobster bombay, and chutney does for the comparison of Canon Aspirin (a nebulous figure at best) and his more austere sister? (Perhaps it merely illustrates a fastidious palate.)

As Randall Jarrell remarks, "Stevens has a weakness . . . of thinking of particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths, or else as aesthetic, abstracted objects, simply there to be contemplated; he often treats things or lives so that they seem no more than generalizations of an unprecedentedly low order." Jarrell invokes Goethe to express his dissatisfaction with the abstractness of Stevens' late poetry:

> It makes a great difference whether the poet seeks the particular in relation to the universal or contemplates the universal in the particular. . . . [In the first case] the particular functions as an example, as an instance of the universal; but the second indeed represents the very nature of poetry. He who grasps the particular as living essence also encompasses the universal.[116]

The late Stevens must have been aware of the dangers of abstraction and have sensed the liabilities of his groping directly for universals when he said that "imagination applied to the whole world is vapid in comparison to imagination applied to a detail."[117] In other words, the larger and more abstract one's poetic subject grows, the weaker becomes one's ability to conceptualize and embody it.

What Stevens appears not to have realized is what Jarrell rightly points out as part of his greatest weakness--the inability to celebrate objects for their own sake, the irresistible urge to put them through paces so that they may be made to illustrate some abstract proposition. (This applies particularly to the later, longer poems.) In this connection, it is interesting to know that Stevens often thought up the titles for his poems before composing the poems themselves. He wrote poems to illustrate preconceived

tags. Most critics find the majority of Stevens' titles meaningless, but many of them have meanings. (Some of these are private, however--for instance, "Some Friends from Pascagoula" and "Lions in Sweden.") Some titles provide clues to what their poems mean, but glancing, attenuated, highly abstract or tangential clues--for example, "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock," "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," "Man Carrying Thing," "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters," and "Madame la Fleurie."

A poem which illustrates well the difficulty Stevens sometimes had in making his concrete particulars jibe with his abstract meaning is "Metaphors of a Magnifico." This poem sets out with enormous promise and potential, with twenty men crossing a bridge into a village. It ends in a few concrete details unrelated to the meaning it started with, devoid of any but visual significance. It is an intensely disappointing poem because it begs the problem it set out to explore. It is a poem about perspectives, or, philosophically speaking, about the One and the Many. Seen from a sufficient distance of imaginative height or detachment, the twenty men crossing the bridge become one man crossing a single bridge into a village. But if one moves closer and marches with the men, one sees how unavoidably a single bridge into a single village becomes twenty bridges into twenty different villages. From this one moves back to the commonsense, external view that, after all, twenty men are twenty men but one village is only one village. The poem then dwindles (the verb suggests itself because the poem is abandoning the objective it set itself at the outset) into an imagist poem of the type of

William Carlos Williams' "So much depends . . . " Just as Williams gives us no indication of what depends on his red wheelbarrow, but is content to leave us with the assertion that much does, Stevens resumes the march with his twenty men and simply concludes by describing the village as it might have appeared to one of them. He asks, "Of what was it I was thinking?" and then adds, resignedly, "So the meaning escapes." The poem collapses like a pricked balloon.

This poem is an example of the confusion that results when concrete details fail to support an abstract theme. In Section XXVIII of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, there is again an uneasy relationship between the concrete and the abstract. Here an essentially abstract meditation is illustrated by a disturbingly concrete still life:

> If it should be true that reality exists
> In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread
> on it,
> The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her
>
> Misericordia, it follows that
> Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven
> Before and after one arrives . . .

There follow further particularized details--

> Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,
> Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes
> Or Paris in conversation at a café.

(These last are apparently intended to represent the breach in reality effected by the mind, not, as the tin plate, loaf, and knife appear intended to suggest, the abstract concretized, but the real abstracted.) However, the concrete particulars are disturbing in the abstract context they are chosen to illustrate.

They seem picked by the poet at random: something else might have done just as well--or better. But Stevens leaves it at this because, as an analogue of his conviction of the unbridgeable abyss between words and things, he is equally sure of a yawning gulf separating the concrete from the abstract.

2. The Role of Philosophy in Stevens' Work

The word philosophy might be placed in quotes because, as has already been indicated, Stevens was neither a systematic nor a rigorous thinker. It is, however, both possible and necessary to describe what he believed, though not with any finality--since Stevens himself did not believe in finality. Stevens believed matter would go on forever evolving new forms, while consciousness underwent its own transformations. Existence, as Stevens sees it, is not teleological, and Stevens' poetry, beyond the desire to achieve a blissful liaison with his environment, will be found to be essentially goalless.

It should already be clear from the investigation of his poetry and prose that Stevens was a dualist. The letter already cited on the subject of the endless projections of imagination and reality, expressing Stevens' wish that the two go on battling forever, demonstrates Stevens' dualism and his disbelief in final solutions. Stevens delighted in duality. Perhaps the strongest expression of this delight appears in the essay "On Poetic Truth": "And the wonder and mystery of art, as indeed of religion in the last resort, is the revelation of something 'wholly other' by which the inexpressible loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched."[118]

Yet several fine critics have insisted on Stevens' monism.[119] What is usually meant by those who insist that Stevens is a monist or a Platonist is that he is a realist, in the original sense of this philosophical term.[120] It seems to me doubtful, however, that Stevens can be accurately described thus. For Stevens is a realist in the modern sense. He believes in the reality that is "out there," even though he says repeatedly that it can be apprehended only in the mind. (In fact, Stevens' ultimate definition of reality, given in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, is fact as realized by the mind.)[121]

In those poems--and there are many of them--in which Stevens seeks the unity that lies within or behind diversity, he is careful to make clear that this unity is something either imposed or intuited by the mind. Usually what he says is that we seek unity and oneness behind the welter of appearances, and occasionally we discover such a unity, but that does not ratify its existence anywhere outside the mind. Thus, R. P. Blackmur calls Stevens "a nominalist longing to find his names realities."[122] This seems valid and well expressed.

In "Connoisseur of Chaos," Stevens goes further than he is accustomed to do. He begins with two antithetical assertions:

A. A violent order is disorder; and
B. A great disorder is an order.

An order imposed by the mind which is violent (because it excludes or walls out too much of chaos) is a disorder inasmuch as it sets up an imbalance leading to disharmony between imagination and reality. But a great disorder, one that accommodates a great

diversity of things in harmony, constitutes an order--whether or not we can perceive its internal coherence. That is why it is better to discover an order than to impose one, as Stevens comes increasingly to feel. "Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,/Out of nothing to have come on major weather."[123]

But if the opening of "Connoisseur of Chaos" is significant in presenting one of Stevens' most affirmative, though cryptic, assertions that this furious, teeming millpond of a universe may be inherently orderly, the end of the poem is also worthy of remark. "The pensive man . . . He sees that eagle float/For which the intricate Alps are a single nest." Obviously, in all the marriages of mind with matter, the objective is unity. We would not "fling ourselves, constantly longing, on this form" if we did not desire union with it. But it takes two to make a marriage; the desire for union would not exist without the separation of matter from mind, body from soul, reality from imagination, or fact from value. At the conclusion of "Connoisseur of Chaos," Stevens does not say, in effect, "Lo! I behold unity, the ideal realm," but something like "I see a cherub who sees it." And where does this cherub--or eagle--see it but in reality? Thus, it is more correct to say that Stevens has monistic impulses than that he is a monist. At the same time, it is important to realize that the monistic impulses are the occasional by-product of a sustained and joyful dualism.

There are even poems by Stevens celebrating the "dreadful sundry of this world," rejoicing in multiplicity, where the desire for unity is wholly in abeyance. For example, there is "On the Road Home":

> It was when I said,
> "There is no such thing as the truth,"
> That the grapes seemed fatter.
> The fox ran out of his hole.
>
> You . . . You said,
> "There are many truths,
> But they are not parts of a truth."
> Then the tree, at night, began to change,
>
> Smoking through green and smoking blue.
> We were two figures in a wood.
> We said we stood alone.
>
> It was when I said,
> "Words are not forms of a single word.
> In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
> The world must be measured by the eye";
>
> It was when you said,
> "The idols have seen lots of poverty,
> Snakes and gold and lice,
> But not the truth";
>
> It was at that time, that the silence was largest
> And longest, the night was roundest,
> The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
> Closest and strongest.[124]

This poem celebrates the multiplicity of the phenomenal world. It is its irreducible concreteness and diversity that gives everything in it its savor. "On the Road Home" is a potent and poignant parable, expressing the realization that "the indifferent experience of life is the unique experience, the item of ecstasy" which only fools pass by "for another time and place, loftier and more secluded."[125] Abandoning the search for a single, ultimate, heavenly truth makes the proximate, earthly

here and now infinitely precious. Thus, as the fox is driven out of his lair, the grapes seem fatter, the season more fragrant, and, because the two figures face the night alone yet together, the relationship between them seems dearer, more intimate. Stevens' pluralism--if there is no absolute truth, then everything in the world possesses its individual truth--finds expression in the second stanza. In the third, the speaker and his companion stand in the midst of life's wood--"nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita"; they have forsaken "parades in the obscurer selvages" of the mind; they realize that they stand alone. The abandonment of the search for a single transcendent truth that human nature appears innately to crave confers on them the courage and dignity of resolution. Things do not cohere to form a noumenal whole; each has its unique, individual integrity. It is the naked eye, not the myth-making, illusion breeding mind, that perceives this. Our idealistic projections (the idols) have always presided over the chaos that bred them--"Snakes and gold and lice." The fragrant intimacy of the autumn night closes about the two figures for whom this irrational earth is paradise.

Perhaps the most apt philosophical label for Stevens is that applied by Howard Nemerov: Stevens is a phenomenalist.[126] Phenomenalism acknowledges only phenomena, and recognizes the impossibility of knowing ultimate reality. Kant's version of phenomenalism divides the world into three realms: the subjective world of mood and feeling; the world of natural phenomena, of sense perception, and of knowledge, and the

noumenal world of reality beyond the reach of the senses or the mind. Surely these are the three worlds of Esthétique du Mal, XII. Though Stevens' later poetry is constantly striving to penetrate to ultimate reality, the third world, it knows that this is only to be reached in death.

3. Critical and Interpretative Problems

From the critic's point of view, there are several problems peculiar to the interpretation of Stevens' poetry. One is the little that is yielded--particularly in the best (and worst) poems--by an attempt to paraphrase their meaning alone. Without an appreciation of Stevens' use of language in all its color, texture, sound, and movement, about two-thirds of the effect of his best poetry is lost. This is particularly true of the early work, the poems of Harmonium.

Stevens himself appears to have had what amounted almost to a phobia concerning explication. Only to a chosen few critics, poets, translators, publishers, and friends with whom he felt deep affinities (such as Ronald Latimer, Hi Simons, Henry Church, Renato Poggioli, and Samuel French Morse) did Stevens deign to reveal what certain of his poems "mean." In explanatory correspondence with these men, Stevens could be both prolific and painstaking in his commentary. His general attitude toward explaining his poems, however, is summed up in the following remarks.

> A long time ago I made up my mind not to explain things, because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed: that is to say, they are no longer able to seize the poem.[127]

> When people think of poems as integrations, they are thinking usually of integration of ideas . . . of what they mean. However, a poem must have a peculiarity, as if it was the momentarily complete idiom of that which prompts it, even if that . . . is the vaguest emotion.
>
> . . . while taking a poem to pieces seems to be a legitimate exercise, it is definitely not an exercise for poets themselves. You examine what you do as you go along, and you examine it afterwards, yet there is a point at which you are bound to stop. If you do not stop, you soon become like anyone else who no longer has anything in which to believe. If you don't believe in poetry, you cannot write it.[128]

Poetry has many more meanings than are susceptible of rational paraphrase--otherwise, it is not poetry. However, Stevens' best poems are not, as he appears to have feared, "undone" by sensitive analysis. A prose paraphrase and technical analysis can never be the equivalent of, say, "The Snow Man" or "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" or "Anecdote of the Jar," but it can throw considerable light on the mastery with which such consummate poems are composed. The poems which suffer under analysis are those which are neither so inspired nor so highly wrought.

While dealing with critical traps and pitfalls, let us also mention what W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks have named the intentional fallacy. Some of Stevens' own explanations of his poems--those of The Man with the Blue Guitar and Notes toward a Supreme Fiction are notable examples--seem excessive, as though the poet were reading far more into the poem than were there, describing, perhaps, what he intended to convey, but much more than even the most careful and sensitive reader would be able

to derive from the poem itself. Stevens' stance on the critic's obligation in such cases--and at all times--is this:

> . . . I think that the critic is under obligation to base his remarks on what he has before him. It is not a question of what an author meant to say but of what he has said. In the case of a competent critic the author may well have a great deal to find out about himself and his work. This goes to the extent of saying that it would be legitimate for a critic to make statements respecting the purpose of an author's work that were altogether contrary to the intentions of the author.[129] [Italics mine.]

Much of Stevens' poetry exhibits built-in ambiguities; he intended it to encompass a whole spectrum of meanings.[130] But he hoped for, must have awaited, and sometimes has found readers who get out of his poems precisely what he put into them in all its nuance.[131] Towards the end of his life, he wrote a mildly reproachful note to one critic who had said, "Mr. Stevens' work does not really lead anywhere." Responding to this, the poet pointed out, "This is not quite the same thing as get anywhere. . . . if it meant what it meant to me, it might very well mean the same thing to somebody else. That a man's work should remain indefinite is very often intentional."[132]

In interpreting Stevens, a critic may well find himself embroiled in an odd offshoot of the affective fallacy. There is--as both Marius Bewley and Irving Howe point out--the danger of over-responding to individual poems because they trigger responses that are appropriate to the work as a whole but have scarcely been earned by an individual poem.[133] Since Stevens, like Mallarmé, aimed at a grand oeuvre in which each poem would

be one fragment in the larger mosaic, since Stevens' poems do, indeed, form a corpus of cross-comment on each other, over-response to individual poems is virtually impossible to avoid. Often it is more than a temptation, it is a necessity to engage in cross-reference, because this is the only way of elucidating the more difficult poems. Thus, one finds Hi Simons asserting that "individual Stevens poems often have to be read in the light of the work as a whole to be understood."[134]

Stevens' symbolism is, after all, the most difficult feature of his poetry to master, especially in the later verse. It forms a hermetic system of its own, though based on the natural world. It becomes increasingly stylized and abstract. One has to accustom oneself to its extremely restrictive basis, and to become adept at screening out unwanted associations within and between images. If one does not--sometimes, even if one does--Stevens' symbolism may appear arbitrary, capricious, or self-contradictory. An example of Stevens' emblematic, surreal imagery has been given in the statement "Green is the night." The reader's mind should immediately substitute for the adjective the noun it represents--reality; he should not linger to visualize a green night, though this is the natural reaction. An example of how contradictory Stevens' symbolism may become is provided by The Man with the Blue Guitar, VII: "It is the sun that shares our works./The moon shares nothing. It is a sea." The initial proposition is easily acceded to by anyone familiar with Stevens' work, since the sun habitually stands for the primal reality of which we are a part. But the moon is defined

in this, as in many other poems, as the patroness of imagination and the arts. (To confuse us still further, the moon is here compared to a sea, and Stevens usually uses the sea as a symbol of reality.) In what sense, then, can the moon be said not to share our works, in fact, to share nothing? Obviously, Stevens is regarding the moon in a somewhat different light here. But in what light is not made clear by the poem as it develops; the meaning remains abstruse and is not clarified even by the poet's explanatory comments.

Because of the way in which his mind glances from image to image in rapid succession, relying at times on only the slightest threads of connection between ideas and images, Stevens' poetry often resembles what he once said life was--an aspic, a vast heterogeneous jelly full of strangely assorted ingredients. Many poems are mosaics of images, individually brilliant, but only tenuously held together. (One of the better examples is "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery.") Others are poetic refuse heaps, like that described in "The Man on the Dump," in which the juxtaposition of disparate images often lays Stevens open to the charge of breaching imagistic decorum. Extreme heterogeneity is the hallmark of such poems as "Homonculus et la Belle Etoile," "Montrachet-le-Jardin," "Ghosts as Cocoons," and the longer poems, The Man with the Blue Guitar, Esthétique du Mal, Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, and An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. Each of these has its jarring images, an effect of indiscriminate collage, sudden

dilapidations, and awkward transitions. There are moments in even the finest poems when we sense a sudden lapse from the imagination's power to fuse disparate images when working at its fullest intensity. For example, the fifth stanza of "Sunday Morning" is disconcerting and extremely difficult to interpret. In a natural setting, under a willow tree suggestive of death, maidens sit on the grass while boys pile pears and plums on "disregarded plate." Stevens explains plate as referring to family plate, and says that what he intends to convey by this image is release and renewal through death: "What the old have come to disregard, the young inherit and make use of."[135] But the single word "plate" is not only inappropriate and disturbing in such a natural setting; alone, it cannot suggest all that Stevens intends it to. It is, in any case, ambiguous, with an ambiguity that is out of control, like the puzzling movements of the maidens in this stanza. In Esthétique du Mal, XIII, the man in his Mediterranean cloister who establishes "the visible, a zone of blue and orange" strikes one as a jarring, somewhat frivolous peg on which to hang a meditation on fate. There is much in Stevens' poetry that seems ill-considered, unfinished, inaccessible, and unintegrated. "I twang it out and leave it there," as he says in The Man with the Blue Guitar. I transcribe the imaginative moment as it occurs to me. But this is not enough. The imaginative moment has to be not merely apprehended, but apprehended well in order to be expressed well, communicated.

IV. Stevens' Heritage and Influences

In Stevens' case, one means by influences the poetic air he breathed, particularly while he was a student at Harvard. Influences are something in the air, in his case, not cases of deliberate emulation but of inherent sympathy. He continually denied influences on himself, as also his own influence on others. To Richard Eberhart he wrote:

> I sympathize with your denial of any influence on my part. This sort of thing always jars me because, in my own case, I am not conscious of having been influenced by anybody and have purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously. But there is a kind of critic who keeps on dissecting what he reads for echoes, imitations, influences, as if no one was ever simply himself but is always compounded of other people.[136]

Stevens goes on to say that probably the reason a poet often resents the assignment of influences on him is that "with a true poet his poetry is the same thing as his vital self."[137]

Stevens is uniquely and inimitably himself. He is a thoroughly original poet.[138] However, the poetic atmosphere he inhabited as a young man left its impress on his poetry. If the word influences seems too strong, we may at least discuss them as "elective affinities." Though Stevens was constantly repudiating influences, he did admit this much: "The time to read poetry is before you start to write it." And he did. He steeped himself in the Elizabethan lyrists and dramatists, in Shakespeare, Milton, the Metaphysicals, and the Romantics pre-eminently. "After you start to write poetry,"

he said, "you are afraid to read other people's. . . . I don't want to pick up anything. In fact, there is probably no one who reads less poetry than I do."[139] We should take this last statement with a very large grain of salt, but it is probably true that Stevens read very little of his great contemporaries, Pound and Eliot. Nor can I find evidence of his reading much of Yeats.

An important part of Stevens' heritage is the English poetic tradition. Stevens owes a particular debt to Milton, Marvell, Wordsworth, and Keats. Occasionally, too, one picks up echoes in his work of Spenser, Coleridge, Shelley, and Tennyson--even of Browning and Swinburne.[140]

Though Stevens' grand manner, described briefly in the section on his styles, is inimitably his own, it is full of echoes. One finds outcroppings of the grand manner throughout Stevens' poetry, shining through the rifts in drabber rock.

The following, for example, is a juvenile exercise in the Shakespearean manner:

> All things imagined are of earth compact,
> Strange beast and bird, strange creatures all;
> Strange minds of men, unwilling slaves to fact:
> . . . . . .
>
> Even the dead, when they return, return
> Not as these dead, concealed away;
> But their old persons move again, and burn.[141]

In "Sunday Morning," one hears echoes of Milton, Marvell, and Keats, as well as Shakespeare. (See Chapter II.) Even more reminiscent of Milton are parts of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.

> When at long midnight the Canon came to sleep
> And normal things had yawned themselves away,
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . Forth then with huge pathetic force
> Straight to the utmost crown of night he flew.

And

> What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud
> Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
> Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,
>
> Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
> On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep
> space . . .[142]

Shades of Marvell are to be detected in the brilliant green and gold coloring of the opening stanza of "Sunday Morning";[143] the darkening shadow cast by the woman's mental journey through time-space reminds us of "Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near" in "To His Coy Mistress." Stevens shares Marvell's sense of urgency in celebrating transient pleasures, and he occasionally does so in a tone almost as sardonic as that of "The grave's a fine and private place,/But none I think do there embrace."[144] Many of Stevens' happier conceits have a Marvellian resonance. Stevens visualizes the mind in the same way, as "that Ocean where each kind/Does straight its own resemblance find,"[145] and pictures the green grass as a mirror or sea, as Marvell does in his garden poems.[146] Finally, in the superbly simple magic of Stevens' last poem, "Of Mere Being," Marvell's image of the soul as a silver-plumaged bird preening iridescent wings becomes Stevens' gold-feathered bird waving its fire-fangled plumes in the palm at the edge of space.

Stevens read the Romantic poets with avidity and absorption. This is particularly true of Keats, whom Stevens read by the hour as a student, and whose profound feeling for the poignancy of transient things made a very deep impression on Stevens. In one of his letters, Stevens quotes Keats's Verse Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds; here is a passage which epitomizes the whole spirit of "Sunday Morning":

> It is a flaw
> In happiness, to see beyond our bourn,--
> It forces us in summer skies to mourn,
> It spoils the singing of the nightingale.

Then there is the purely sensuous, swooning pleasure of Stevens'

> Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
> And spring's infuriations over and a long way
> To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
> Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
> Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.[147]

There has been nothing closer to Keats than this, and if Cunningham is right about this sumptuously sensuous vein being no longer available to young poets,[148] there may not be again for a long time.

But of all the English Romantics, it is Wordsworth with whom Stevens shows the deepest, most consistent, affinities. This is nowhere better exemplified than in the second stanza of "Sunday Morning." For Stevens, however, it is the human imagination that imbues nature with immanence and is the spirit rolling through all things; that spirit is not supernatural. It is an important difference.

A study of the influences on a poet, particularly such a poet as Stevens, should be undertaken in the spirit in which HiSimons compared Stevens' poetry with Mallarmé's.[149] Although

Stevens has denied the influence of Mallarmé, declaring that Verlaine probably meant more to him, although he might have absorbed more of Mallarmé than he thought,[150] there are significant similarities--as well as differences--between the American and the French poet. In any case, Simons makes some general observations on the tracing of influences which are valid and worth quoting. While everyone acknowledges the originality of Stevens, and the comparative absence of direct influences, says Simons,

> yet every literary style has its natural history; it is affected by the conditions, including the current literary influences, amid which it matures. If a given style is really original, to show what one of those influences was and exactly how it acted on the writer cannot belittle the individuality of his work but will rather enrich our pleasure in it by enlarging the context of which we are aware while we read.[151]

It is with this aim in mind that I propose to examine in some detail the influence on Stevens of French Symbolist poetry. The French Symbolists, much in vogue when Stevens was a student at Harvard (1897-1900), operated on his natural sensibility and poetic bent, determining to some degree the kind of poetry he would write and its general tone.

Recognition of Stevens' resemblance to the Symbolists must, however, be tempered by a sense of the ways in which his poetry differs radically from theirs. Though his poems reveal, like theirs, a heady blend of clarity plus suggestiveness; though they strive for, and sometimes attain, a high degree of musicality; though Stevens is equally skilled at composing mood

pieces, and at mingling verbal sound, color, and aura or fragrance to achieve symphonic and synesthetic effects--indeed, Stevens uses more synesthesia than Baudelaire--it is essential to realize that Stevens' correspondences are confined to this world. At the utmost, they represent no more than the mind translating the potential into the actual, the negative into the positive. Unlike Baudelaire's, Stevens' correspondences are of the human senses alone; they do not bespeak a "starry connaissance," the merging with some ultimate order beyond the universe. They are not validated by a poetic philosophy positing existence on some transcendental plane. This is the most important difference between Stevens and the Symbolists, as it is between Stevens and the first and second generation English Romantics, or between Stevens and the American Transcendentalists.

When Stevens speaks yearningly of "a land beyond the mind," he does not long, like Baudelaire, to escape out of this world. He is not spinning a warm web out of the transient mercies of the drugged senses that may waft him out on the black winds of chaos to a haven beyond. Nor is he, like Mallarmé, poising himself for a flight directly into the empyrean. Stevens' reality is in and of this world and this world may be transcended only in imagination. Though Stevens obviously yearns to reach "the still point of the turning world," there is nothing in his poetry of the horrified disgust with life that Baudelaire expresses, nor yet of the melancholy weltschmerz of Mallarmé. Stevens does not cry "n'importe où hors du monde"

(anywhere out of this world), but wishes to reach the heart of this world. Life is, for Stevens, "a holiday in reality," not a weary sojourn in a hospital, as it is in Mallarmé's "Les Fenêtres." Stevens often turns the pages of life with robust or quiet delight. There is nothing in Stevens like Mallarmé's utter world-weariness: "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres"--surely one of the saddest lines ever written. Rather, it is

> . . . the reader leaned above the page,
>
> Wanted to lean, wanted much, most to be
> The scholar to whom his book is true . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
> The access of perfection to the page.[152]

Among those of the French Symbolists who influenced Stevens only in a minor way there was Laforgue. His attraction for the American poet was his dandyism, his studied elegance, and his incisive, colloquial irony. As Robert Buttel suggests in The Making of Harmonium, Stevens' largest debt to such poets as Laforgue, Corbière, Apollinaire, and Baudelaire was the sense of irony they bequeathed him.[153] Laforgue's influence appears most sharply in his early clown poems and Pecksniffiana pieces, in poems similar to "The Weeping Burgher" in Harmonium, and later in "The Greenest Continent" section of Owl's Clover.

Another French Symbolist whose influence on Stevens was slight is Rimbaud. Rimbaud contributed little to Stevens because of Stevens' innate aversion to poetry which explores and exploits the subconscious. Nevertheless, Stevens' references to Rimbaud

in "The Irrational Element in Poetry" are respectful.[154] Robert Buttel insists that many of the poems in Harmonium glorify the irrational--as, for instance, "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock" and "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" do--and this is so. But everything depends on how the irrational is explored and presented. Stevens, though frequently deriding dreams, obviously delights in them. He could never, however, approve (though he might admire with a certain fascinated distaste, from a distance) Rimbaud's "dérèglement de tous les sens." Stevens' translation of this phrase, his substitution of "unruliness" for the more deliberate "derangement" is revealing: it shows how Stevens' bourgeois side, with its strong aspirations to a "well-kept life," could scarcely either envision or express what Rimbaud had in mind.

Stevens has declared that he was considerably influenced by Verlaine and Samain.[156] The influence of Verlaine is easily seen in Stevens' mood music, his mastery of mellifluous sound effects to create moods, especially slightly melancholy moods. (Those who hear in Stevens the accents of Tennyson, as Harvey Gross does in parts of "Sunday Morning,"[157] may be confusing Verlaine's melancholy cadences with Tennyson's. This is easy to do, for these two poets' voices have much in common.) Verlaine announces his aim of rendering poetry into music in his "Art Poétique," and there are poems of Stevens which are profoundly musical, even using music as their vehicle, as "Peter Quince at the Clavier" does.

Stevens shares Verlaine's sensitivity to seasonal mood, particularly his feeling for autumn, as expressed so onomatopoeically in Verlaine's "Chanson d'Automne." But Stevens' feelings and his expression of them are acuter, less blurred than Verlaine's. Nobody--except Keats--has ever captured the spirit of autumn as Stevens has: "We are just entering what is the most moving part of our calendar: the early autumn. Nothing could be lovelier than these cold nights and the warm days that follow. . . . It is like a kind of old age in which everything comes to rest."[158] This was written at the beginning of October, but at the end of the month Stevens is feeling what Keats, who never reached even middle age, felt at the end of his last autumn: "How this oozing away hurts, notwithstanding the pumpkins and the glaciale of frost. . . . It is finished, Zarathustra says; and one . . . looks down the spaces of the river and participates in the disintegration, the decomposition, the rapt finale."[159]

Some critics, among them Simons, assume that Valéry exerted an influence on Stevens, but an examination of Stevens' Letters makes this seem unlikely. Although he read Valéry's prose works Eupalinos and Dance and the Soul in order to write introductions to them,[160] we find Stevens acknowledging as late as 1945 that he is scarcely on nodding terms with Valéry, having never had time to read him.[161] Though Stevens read other French poets--for instance, Apollinaire, Fargue, and Supervieille--their influence upon him appears small beside that of Baudelaire and Mallarmé.

Proceeding, then, to the influence exerted by the two greatest Symbolist poets, we notice several significant resemblances between them and Stevens. Baudelaire matured in the disciplined school of Parnassianism. Like such poets as Gautier and Hérédia, he strove for clarity and hardness of image, and was able to combine this with the utmost suggestiveness, generally by making the vehicle of his metaphors sharp, while leaving their tenor to implication. Stevens, perhaps partly as a result of his submission first to Imagist, then to Symbolist techniques, is able to perform the same feat. Baudelaire is, however, consistently a more disciplined, polished poet than Stevens.

In both Stevens and Baudelaire we note the same striving to bring romanticism up to date. Stevens frequently declares the need for a new romanticism, as Baudelaire does in the section of his Salon of 1846 entitled "On the Heroism of Modern Life."

Both Baudelaire and Stevens--the one as a result of a sojourn in Mauritius, the other thanks to repeated stays in Florida--revel in exoticism. The tropical vein in each glories in brilliant suns, blue skies, white sands, and green palms. Stevens' celebration of nature, his love of the outdoor world, is more wholehearted than Baudelaire's, however. There is, as Michel Benamou points out, a preoccupation in both Stevens and Baudelaire with images of nudity and clothing.[162] In Stevens, this is often translated into seasonal contrasts; winter's bareness is the skeleton skulking beneath summer's florabundance. The opposition between Stevens' attitude to

nudity and Baudelaire's is neatly summed up in two amusing counterportraits, "Nudity at the Capital" and "Nudity in the Colonies."[163]

Nature, especially nature in her nakedness, often horrifies Baudelaire, revealing the putrefaction that lies seething just below the surface. (Baudelaire's disgust at the natural process by which decomposition fecundates the earth is horrifyingly embodied in his poem "Une Charogne," while his despair at the predatoriness of nature finds expression in "Une Voyage à Cythère." It is instructive to compare the beauty with which Stevens invests the idea of death as the mother of beauty in "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" with the mordant irony of "Une Charogne.") Stevens consistently celebrates nature and all natural processes; Baudelaire frequently shuns them. Indeed, sensing the putrescence beneath the most exquisite exteriors, Baudelaire, as Benamou says, attempts to transmute putrefaction into petrifaction, using "clothes to hide animality, make-up to hide time, jewels to replace flesh . . . ."[164] Though Stevens, too, in his later poetry cultivates hard, sharp images drawn from inorganic matter and metallurgy, this is not out of Baudelairean horror at life but out of an aspiration after Mallarméan clarity and transparence.

There are obvious echoes of Baudelaire throughout Stevens' poems: for instance, the same taste for azure that Baudelaire passed on first to Verlaine, then to Mallarmé. In "Two or Three Ideas,"[165] Stevens translates some lines

from Baudelaire's "La Vie Antérieure," and we note how Baudelaire's porticoes become Stevens' portals, and Baudelaire's center of azure Stevens' "azury centre," which haunted him throughout his life.[166] Then there are the references to "mes semblables" in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," and the apostrophes to the imagination in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."[167]

The closest affinity between Stevens and a French Symbolist poet is that with Mallarmé. Both poets believed in a concept they named the supreme fiction, since both had to pit against the void or gulf left by the withdrawal of God the belief in some human ideal. Mallarmé's arrival, through a process of negation and abstraction, at certain ideal forms qualifies as a kind of neo-Platonism, since these forms transcend the realm of matter. For Stevens, however, there is no such thing as transcendence. Mallarmé's consciousness, rendered pure and crystalline, no longer reflects a universe in flux. Stevens' does, but there remains his hope of reaching the heart of reality, the center of the turning globe, and transforming this into the crystal of poetry. Mallarmé's poetry asserts its independence of nature. Stevens' poetry acknowledges that the orders of reality and imagination are separate except when momentarily reconciled in a poem. This reconciliation is not permanent, however, but fleeting, for the flux of reality and of imagination alike will soon invalidate it.

Both Stevens and Mallarmé accord poetry a supreme place in the life of the world, and both exalt imagination. But, for Stevens, imagination has no supernatural source, even though

"The world imagined is the ultimate good." Furthermore, both poets conceived their work as a grand design in which the individual poems would fall into place to complete a larger whole--an ambition which both poets realize, to some extent. Up to his death, Mallarmé was gathering notes for what he called "le Grand Oeuvre," a great book synthesizing all art and all science in order to explain the universe and himself to man, while Stevens spent his life searching for a supreme fiction realistic enough to claim man's allegiance and to make a stay against chaos, yet sufficiently ennobling to sustain the human imagination. Inevitably, neither project was realized.

Mallarmé is a greater poet than Stevens because he worked much harder at perfecting his poems than Stevens did. He achieves greater condensation and concentration of effect, largely through more concentrated effort. There is in both poets, however, the same striving for purity and transparence, the same quality of abstraction and negation, with, as Hi Simons points out, the ability to concretize the abstract, to make negation assume positive form.[168] In both poets, too, there is an uneasy relationship between the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete.

Though there is in each the same soaring aspiration, Stevens aspires to reach nothing beyond reality, everything within it, as he says in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. For Mallarmé, the ideal realm which is the negation of being seems to exist, if only in the mind. As Thibaudet expresses it: "Il voit dans l'absence la somme des présences idéales,

évoquées, pensées grâce au fait même qu'extérieurement elles ne sont pas. . . . N'y-a-t'il pas un être du non-être?"[169] Perhaps, with Mallarmé, one should leave it at that question: is there not a being composed of non-being?[170]

Simons believes that Mallarmé exerted an influence on Stevens from 1915 to 1923. Buttel would push the date back one year to 1914. Benamou, however, makes the extraordinary assumption, in view of obvious allusions to Mallarmé in Stevens' early work, that Mallarmé's influence on Stevens was exerted from 1931 onward.[171] Simons believes that the greatest mark of Mallarmé's influence was his contribution to Stevens' symbolic use of color, particularly of blue and white. After 1919, Simons says, blue became for Stevens not just the color of the sky, the universal background to his poetry,[172] but took on symbolic value as the color of imagination. In fact, Stevens' blue and white have slightly different connotations from Mallarmé's colors of ideality and sterility, respectively. Stevens uses blue with some different, and white with less pejorative meanings. But it is interesting that, while the dominant color in Harmonium is green, the color of reality, blue becomes the most pervasive color in Stevens' later poetry.

There are many echoes of Mallarmé in Stevens' poetry. Stevens' "Virgin Carrying a Lantern" is based on Mallarmé's extraordinary "Une négresse par le démon secouée." The "empty bed" in Stevens' "Callant Château" recalls Mallarmé's "absence éternelle du lit."[173] The figure of the corpse in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" seems to owe something to the figure

of the nursing mother in Mallarmé's masterly poem "Don du poème."[174] But there is always that difference made by Stevens' naturalism and Mallarmé's idealism. In Baudelaire, too, the imagination can transport us beyond this world. But for Stevens it cannot. Stevens' jar in Tennessee is not "Le pur vase d'aucun breuvage," as Benamou points out.[175]

Some of Mallarmé's finest, though most difficult, poems have been written about inanimate objects. He composed a short sonnet sequence centering on vases, beds, curtains. Stevens' studio pieces bear some faint analogy, but are, in comparison, gay and brilliant, usually less suggestive and unearthly. The difficulty of the work of both poets seems due to similar causes. Granted that Mallarmé's poetry is more complex, subtle, and highly wrought, both poets seem to write primarily for an audience of one--themselves--and not to care to cater to common understanding. Their interests are narrow and intense; if one does not share them, one is apt to find the poetry dry and abstract, even arcane. Both write poetry about the writing of poetry.

Finally, there is among Stevens' influences what Samuel French Morse calls the "native element,"[176] that side of Stevens which, though he is consistently a more precise and exquisite poet, occasionally flexes its muscles and eases into the long, loping, boisterous stride of Whitman:

> In the far South the sun of autumn is passing
> Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore.
> He is singing and chanting the things that are
> part of him,
> The worlds that were and will be, death and day.

> Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see
> the end.
> His beard is of fire, and his staff is a
> leaping flame.[177]

Morse indicates that, though superficially unlike, Whitman and Stevens adopt similar attitudes toward poetry and toward the poet's central role as shaper of the vision of his age. Both Whitman and Stevens have, as poets, a certain "slap-dash intensity."[178] Though a far more elegant poet, his polyglot exclamations and nonsense cries more polished and decorous than Whitman's "barbaric yawp," Stevens sometimes exhibits a similar loose-jointedness and volubility. Joseph Riddel, while indicating certain similarities between Whitman and Stevens--their glorification of imagination, their fascination with process, and their acceptance of death and evil--draws attention to the important difference in viewpoint effected by the passage of a century. For Whitman, death is a rite of passage to the beyond, to ultimate union with the One. For Stevens, death is final dissolution.[179]

There have been several studies of philosophical influences on Stevens' poetry. Samuel French Morse's essay entitled "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater"[180] is interesting for its discussion of the relationship between these three figures. Stevens appears to owe something to Bergson's writings on comedy, and on those problems of perception that so fascinated Stevens. The debt to Pater seems to me overrated. The finest sustained study of philosophical influences on Stevens' poetry is Frank Doggett's Stevens' Poetry of Thought, although Doggett

concludes, somewhat surprisingly, against the evidence of his own book, that the search for philosophical affinities is not worthwhile.[181]

Plainly, Emerson exerted an influence on Stevens--though, again, this was an Emerson stripped of transcendentalism! Stevens does share, however, Emerson's somewhat mystical belief that all potentiality tends to realize itself in actuality.[182] There is in Stevens the same striving for pure vision as in Emerson; several of Stevens' poems and prose pronouncements remind one of Emerson, and of his picturing himself as a "naked Eyeball."

Santayana was an acknowledged influence on Stevens, a friend of the poet in his student days;[183] they even used to exchange poems. (Santayana's sonnets were published the same year as Harmonium.) Both Stevens and Santayana have a strong aesthetic sense suffused by a religious sense. Yet both reject organized religion. In Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, Santayana emphasizes the essential identity of poetry and religion which, he says, differ only in their application, not at their root. Perhaps Santayana's "essences" help to illumine the Idealist side of Stevens. These essences are universals, objects of pure thought or sense which, since they are without external existence, do not raise the question of belief. Santayana leaves undefined the relation between essence and existence, but seems to believe, with Stevens, that faith is compounded alike of those things seen to have objective existence plus the spirit's weavings. Santayana recognizes the flux of

matter as prior to that of human consciousness; so does Stevens. Stevens frequently describes consciousness as a light illuminating things or as nature regarding itself. So does Santayana. For both, the mind is nature's self-consciousness. Thus, the subject, for Santayana, is subsumed in the object (or, as Stevens' "intimidating thesis" would have it, reality would appear to include all that imagination does); still, there is for both a necessary duality between mind and world. Like Santayana, Stevens recognizes the existence of objects independently of the mind, yet believes that knowledge is never immediate. Stevens' "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" is an eloquent tribute to his friend and lifelong influence.

One often hears the opinion expressed that Stevens is a French poet writing in English. Despite his aspirations toward a "lingua franca et jocundissima," Stevens is neither a French nor an English poet. He is essentially an American poet, writing within the unpromising ambience of an American city, following a regimen that would appear inimical to the writing of any--let alone of great--poetry, resolve to be the native of a time and place seemingly the least promising for poetry. The fact that Stevens lived in Hartford, Connecticut, and spent the working hours and days of a long life as an insurance executive, yet contrived in spite of these (and no doubt, other obstacles) to devote his spare time to writing some of the finest poetry this century has produced will not of itself establish the essential Americanness of Stevens. This quality inheres in the fact that

Stevens writes a poetry of process; it is open-ended; it refuses to be contained. There are few compact poems, few wholly successful poems (particularly among the later, longer works), few organically integrated poems in which classic form is attained because nothing essential to the poem has been omitted and--more pertinent to Stevens--nothing superfluous has been added. Stevens' poems are, for the most part, like skyscrapers or urban developments in that they are variations on a theme, the units of which may be piled upon or added one to another endlessly. (In many of them, as this study demonstrates, it does not matter too much what order the units are arranged in; this is proven by the history of publication of even Stevens' finest poem, "Sunday Morning.") When the poems have a "finished" quality--complete, as opposed to polished, which they often are--it is, one feels, because Stevens knew, for once, when to stop, rather than because he had exhausted his subject. Stevens never exhausted his subject, for, as he said, the imagination's changing apprehension of reality is an inexhaustible theme.

The poetry of Stevens could not have been written by a European, I believe. In an interesting article entitled "What's American About America?" John Kouwenhoven tries to answer his question by considering what a dozen typically American products have in common. They are: the Manhattan skyline, the gridiron town plan, the skyscraper, the Model-T Ford, jazz, the Constitution, Mark Twain, Leaves of Grass, comic strips, soap operas, assembly-line production, and chewing gum. The common

denominator is an interest in process rather than product, production by the repetition of simple, infinitely repeatable units, an obsession with expandability and adaptation rather than with symmetry and proportion. An American art work rarely ends, as, for instance, Kouwenhoven represents a Beethoven coda as ending: "There now; that ties off all the loose ends; I'm going to stop now; done; finished; concluded; signed, sealed, delivered."[184] Certainly this is not Stevens' way. But despite the infinite repeatability of his units, the units are sometimes self-contained and often epigrammatically expressed. In fact, Stevens has a remarkable gift for epigram. Describing his technique in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, Geoffrey Moore illustrates the impression made by the whole of Stevens' work: "Stevens' sections circle like self-contained but dependent planets round the sun of his imagination."[185]

It is illuminating, as well as accurate, to see Stevens as an American poet firmly rooted in American soil, realizing how much that soil was the soil of his intelligence (as Crispin does in The Comedian), struggling with a violent time and ugly place, yet cleaving to them, returning to them again and again as the necessary bedrock for the splendid sorties of his imagination. Irving Howe sees Stevens truly as "an American poet reflecting upon solitary lives in a lonely age and searching for that 'inmost allegiance' by which men might live out their lives in thousands of Hartfords."[186] Stevens did this, and has shown us that we may do likewise. It is a signal achievement.

V. Stevens' Enigma

A certain mystery still clings to the figure of Stevens, which is no doubt as he would have wished. This will not be an effort to dissipate the mystery altogether, but to cast some illuminating beams on the greatest enigma of all--that of the double life. It is a mystery almost cleared up by studying the development of Stevens' career as recorded in his letters. Stevens insisted that he was not part-businessman, part-poet, but that he brought the same personality to each occupation. Nevertheless, he was engaged in two radically different activities carried on in two radically different worlds, and no doubt Stevens the businessman was quite a different person from Stevens the poet.

We know almost nothing about the businessman, although every now and then, in the letters, we catch illuminating glimpses of Stevens at the office--such as this one:

> How fortunate I am, in such weather, to have the office, where one lives in a sort of vacuum, containing nothing but the pastime of work. The great building is like a neutral zone, invulnerable to the weather. The leaves outdoors seen through the windows, belong to a perishable landscape, come from nowhere. My pen and inkwell and my blotter and memo. pads are what count. Every now and then, a colored boy places fresh mail on my desk, like a planet passing at night and casting its light on objects, but with more meanings than any planet.[187]

This is the poet writing from the neutral zone of the office. From such a letter, one may deduce that Stevens' office, with all its perquisites, probably constituted for the poet "a vigorous prose center, maybe what allows Stevens his luxury of uncommon speech."[188]

William Dickey, in his review of Stevens' Letters, laments the fact that Stevens' daughter has suppressed two-thirds of her father's correspondence, particularly his business letters. The reviewer opines that because of this we get only a partial picture of Stevens, so that the Letters are "more valuable to the general reader than to the scholar."[189] This last claim is absurd. With Stevens' business correspondence the student of his poetry has nothing to do. But Dickey is right to insist that what the reader confronts is one-third of the available correspondence, and perhaps only the tip of the poet's personality, the rest submerged like an iceberg.

What is plain from a study of the Letters is the why and wherefore of the double life. The explanation is very simple indeed: money. The Stevens family did not have much money. (For example, Stevens' father, though he contrived to give the poet and his two brothers a good education, expected them to refund the cost of this to provide dowries for their two sisters.) As a young cub reporter and apprentice lawyer, Stevens was very poorly off for some years--too poorly off to support a wife. There were some days when he had not even enough money to eat. Stevens did not enjoy this! He was not a poet who could have starved in a garret in order to write poetry. He craved commodious surroundings and had a taste for much more than the bare necessities of life--for luxury, in fact. He early recognized this, and in an illuminating letter to Ronald Latimer explains the double course of his business and poetic career.

> . . . a good many years ago, when I really was a poet in the sense that I was all imagination . . . 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 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.[190]

In fact, Stevens kept on working till the end of his seventy-five years, continuing to work spasmodically at the office even when he was dying of cancer. He refused the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry at Harvard so as not to have to retire from his Vice-Presidency of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. (The Chair was offered too late for him to accept it.)

Though Stevens refers to his work as a "pastime," it must have been a grueling one for the most part. In his early years in the insurance business, he traveled all over the United States most of the year, contesting or defending insurance claims. He was rarely at home. Between 1924 and 1930, his devotion to his business career was such that he wrote almost no poetry and published none. There is abundant evidence of the drain on his time and the strain on his energy exacted by his business career, of the long years when earning a living was a weary, thankless grind rather than a "pastime." Frequently he records the exhaustion with which he returned home in the evening, too tired to read, much too tired to write. "One shrivels up living in the same spot, following the same routine."[191] But Stevens never sounds the self-pitying note. He had great toughness, enormous persistence, and was always able to find compensations for his manner of living, for the poems he had not time to write, for the countries he did not visit. "The repetition of one's

experience year after year in a single spot is deadly," he acknowledges. "But, then, so too is a life without the need of a job and without the plans that one is constantly making to amuse oneself."[192] Perhaps Stevens' work, in the end, became a compulsion, but the poetry was equally one, and the claims of poetry could only be met after satisfying the daily needs of life.

Nevertheless, the toll taken of the poetry by the daily and yearly grind was unquestionably great. It was responsible not only for the great poems we do not have, but also for the large number of trashy ones that we have. Stevens' somewhat slapdash methods of composition have already been described. Had he had the time to devote to the conception, polishing, and perfecting of his poems that other poets have enjoyed, his stature would surely be even greater than it is. Stevens' summing up of his life's work is a characteristically clear-eyed accounting of the balance of losses and gains:

> 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 to making a living, I had devoted it to thought and poetry. Certainly it is as true as ever it was that whatever means most to one should receive most 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.[193]

Poetry for Stevens was the sanction of life. It was for him a vocation, although pursued privately in off hours and not originally intended for publication. The above quotation is the apologia pro vita sua of an amateur, but of an amateur of the highest rank and in the best sense--a loving practitioner of an art pursued throughout a long life in spite of varied and distracting pressures. Stevens is a very great amateur indeed.

Footnotes

[1]The Man with the Blue Guitar, XIX. Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), p. 175. Hereafter referred to as C.P.

[2]The number of critics who view Stevens as a Platonist is legion. Among them are A. Alvarez, "Wallace Stevens: Platonic Poetry," Stewards of Excellence: Studies in Modern English and American Poets (New York, 1958), and Delmore Schwartz, "The Ultimate Plato with Picasso's Guitar," Harvard Advocate, CXXVII (December 1940), 11-16.

[3]Entry for May 29, 1905, Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 92. Hereafter referred to as Letters.

[4]As in "Final Soliloguy of the Interior Paramour": "We say God and the imagination are one." (C.P., p. 524.) In Stevens' Adagia, too, the imagination is given divine attributes--see Opus Posthumous, edited with introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 178. Hereafter referred to as O.P.

[5]M. B. Forman, ed., The Letters of John Keats (New York, 1931), II, 564.

[6]J. V. Cunningham says, "We will never understand Stevens' poetry until we perceive that these ideas . . . are . . . specific kinds of experiences"--"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," University of Denver Quarterly, I (Spring 1966), 13.
Irving Howe also insists on the experiential basis of Stevens' imagination and reality in A World More Attractive (New York, 1963), p. 159.

[7]In his Letters, Stevens shows himself aware of the depths to which man has sunk in this century. He sometimes sounds the cynical note: "The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings," about whom one can only be sure when they are dead. Letters, p. 449.

[8]"What one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure: eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic," Letters, p. 277.

[9]The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1965), p. 33. Hereafter referred to as N.A.

[10]*The Man with the Blue Guitar*, V.

[11]See *N.A.*, pp. 16-19 and 36.

[12]*Letters*, p. 526.

[13]*N.A.*, p. 61. Cunningham defines six different gradations of meaning the word imagination holds for Stevens: the romantic, the fantastic, the expressionistic or surrealistic, the intuitive, the abstract, and the mythic. "The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," 14-16.

[14]*Letters*, p. 710.

[15]*N.A.*, p. 24.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 141.

[17]Stevens expresses throughout his work his delight in otherness, in the independence of matter from mind, as well as in their interdependence. In *O.P.*, discussing the monistic philosophy of Leibniz [*sic*], he finds it "lacking in anything securely lofty." *O.P.*, p. 185.

[18]As Cunningham asserts in "The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," 17 & 19.

[19]"Of Modern Poetry," *C.P.*, p. 239.

[20]"Speaking of Poetry,"

[21]*N.A.*, p. 61.

[22]*Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 26. See also Stevens' definition of reality as "the many realities which it can be made into"--*Adagia*, *O.P.*, p. 178.

[24]Frank Doggett, in his *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore, 1966), p. 200, agrees with me. "*Reality*, in Stevens' use of the word, may be the world supposed to be antecedent in itself or the world created in the specific occurrence of thought, including the thinker himself and the mind forming the thought. . . . Stevens usually means by *reality* an undetermined base on which a mind constructs its personal sense of the world."

Cunningham also acknowledges Stevens' use of the word reality to have several meanings: the external world, the humdrum routine of everyday life, and the ultimate reality beyond appearance--"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," 16-17.

[25]O.P., p. 190.

[26]Esthétique du Mal, XII, C.P., p. 323.

[27]C.P., p. 471.

[28]"The Idea of Nothingness in Wallace Stevens," Accent, XII (Spring 1952), 112. This idea is expressed in Stevens' Prologue to Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.

[29]"Peter Quince at the Clavier," IV, C.P., p. 91.

[30]See Esthétique du Mal, X.

[31]Cited by Wallace Stevens, N.A., p. 3.

[32]N.A., p. 65.

[33]My metaphor is revealing. It shows that I believe Stevens reversed the terms of Idealist philosophy: spirit is mask, reality is flesh, but both are real; both together constitute a reality superior to that of bare existence. For the human being, reality is inapprehensible without imagination. Here again we meet Stevens' two definitions of reality.

[34]N.A., p. 174.

[35]"Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour."

[36]Adagia, O.P., p. 158. Stevens cites the Abbé Brémond to the effect that one writes poetry to find God, or the "good which is . . . synonymous with God"--O.P., p. 222. Stevens frequently equated poetry with religion--see also O.P., pp. 167, 176 & 178.

[37]I believe, however, that both Irving Howe (A World More Attractive, p.160) and Graham Hough overestimate the extent to which Stevens has passed beyond the crisis of belief. Hough's article is "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Critical Quarterly, II (Autumn 1960), 203.

[38]"The Idea of Nothingness in Wallace Stevens," 121.

[39]Stevens says his mother read a chapter from the Bible to the family every night--Letters, p. 172.
As Denis Donaghue says in Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry (New York, 1965), p. 191, Stevens ceased to be a Christian at an early age, "but he retained a deeply religious sensibility and spent a lifetime trying to console it for its loss."

[40]Letters, p. 435.

[41]Ibid., p. 430.

[42]Adagia, O.P., p. 163.

[43]C.P., pp. 9-10.

[44]O.P., pp. 96-97.

[45]C.P., p. 18.

[46]Ibid., p. 328.

[47]C. Roland Wagner, "The Idea of Nothingness in Wallace Stevens," 120.

[48]C.P., p. 524.

[49]Ronald Sukenick points out that the period after the word "rendezvous" seems to be a typographical error, particularly as it did not appear in the poem's first printing in Hudson Review, IV (Spring 1951), and the line also ends with a comma in the Faber edition of Stevens' Selected Poems. Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York, 1967), footnote #52, p. 209.

[50]Stevens writes thus to Sister Bernetta Quinn, Letters, p. 584. "Centre" is Stevens' habitual spelling of this word; he seems to have meant by it the perfect conjunction of the imagination's center with that of reality.

[51]O.P., p. 172.

[52]Not, as Hi Simons says, just one of Stevens' themes--"The Genre of Wallace Stevens," reprinted in Marie Borroff's Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 44.

[53]Adagia, O.P., p. 158.

[54]The atmosphere of the poems is like that of a picture Stevens admired at the American Art Gallery in February 1906, which he said caught the "air of the world . . . abandoned of humans"--Letters, p. 88.

[55]"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," XXXV, C.P., p. 156.

[56]Entry for April 18, 1904--Letters, p. 73.

[57]As he records on the date of the above journal entry--ibid., p. 71.

[58]Ibid., p. 844.

[59]N.A., p. 71.

[60]Letters, p. 193.

[61]In this connection, it is interesting that Stevens wrote Ronald Latimer saying that "all of the Florida poems have actual backgrounds"--Letters, p. 289.

[62]"A change of style is a change of subject," Adagia, O.P., p. 171.

[63]"Farewell to Florida," C.P., p. 118.

[64]N.A., pp. 24-25.

[65]Ibid. Here Stevens cites Bergson, who evinces the same desire: "Bergson describes the visual perception of a motionless object as the most stable of internal states."

[66]Letters, pp. 655-56.

[67]An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XII, C.P., p. 473.

[68]In an essay "On Poetic Truth," Stevens says that art should supply not emotion but insight, but acknowledges that such insight is attended by aesthetic emotion. O.P., p. 238.

[69]N.A., p. 28.

[70]Ibid., p. 58.

[71]A World More Attractive, p. 164.

[72]Adagia, O.P., p. 166.

[73]"Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination," O.P., pp. 110-11.

[74]Donald Davie, Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry (London, 1955).

[75]Sound and Form in Modern Poetry: A Study of Prosody from Thomas Hardy to Robert Lowell (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 237.

[76]O.P., p. 205.

[77]"The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," CritQ, II (Autumn 1960), 210.

[78]University of Denver Quarterly, I (Spring 1966), 22-27.

[79]Ibid., 25.

[80]"The Genre of Wallace Stevens," Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 52.

[81]C.P., p. 51.

[82]Ibid., pp. 9-10.

[83]Ibid., p. 82.

[84]Interestingly, Mallarmé represents God by a similar image. During the spiritual crisis he underwent between 1867 and 1869, he wrote Cazalis of the necessity of ridding oneself of the belief in God, the need to overthrow "ce vieux et méchant plumage." (Cited in Mallarmé, edited with an introduction by Anthony Hartley [Baltimore, 1965], p. xvii.)

[85]"The Genre of Wallace Stevens," p. 52.

[86]N.A., p. 65.

[87]"The Genre of Wallace Stevens," p. 52.

[88]Critics show a broad range of disagreement as to how consistent Stevens is in his use of color symbolism. George McFadden's "Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens," Modern Philology, LVIII (February 1961), 187 claims that the poet worked out his color scheme deliberately over forty years, basing it on Newtonian optics. I find McFadden's claim pretentious and his interpretations of the significance of certain colors inflexible and sometimes incorrect.

Eugene Nassar's Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia, 1965) contains a less pretentious and more accurate account of Stevens' color symbolism.

[89]For instance, see the "yellow bloom," "yellow fruit," and "yellow grassman" of Esthétique du Mal. Such realistic values of yellow seem to be derived by analogy with summer.

[90]In Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, in sections III.i and viii, we find gold being used to represent imagination in "golden fingers picking dark blue air" and "the gold centre, the golden destiny." There is, perhaps, a slight distinction between yellow and gold, but this is also another demonstration of how reality shades off into imagination for Stevens.

Silver, like gold, but more consistently, is an imaginative color--see Esthétique's phantoms "Like silver in the sheathing of the sight." Bronze is the color of perdurable metals, of artifice, and of theatricality.

[91]McFadden errs in assigning "red as the color of the feebly real . . . the long, low frequency wave-length of the light of dying stars," "Probings for an Integration," 189. He acknowledges at one point that red, as color of blood, may occasionally signify an invigorating transfusion or rejuvenation, but this does not appear to him to be red's primary meaning, as it does to me. Eugene Nassar calls red "the color of reality unfalsified"--An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 26. McFadden insists that those colors which are close cousins to red--orange and brown, for example--represent, like red, fading realities or falsifications of reality.

[92]In "The Candle as Saint," C.P., p. 223.

[93]The names of the later volumes, from Transport to Summer through The Auroras of Autumn to The Rock, suggest that Stevens was engaged in a seasonal sequence. He denied this, however, saying that the general drift of his poems follows the drift of his mind, which keeps fluctuating between the fully imagined and the starkly realistic. See his letter to Bernard Heringman, Letters, p. 636.

[94]O.P., p. 236.

[95]Adagia, O.P., p. 167.

[96]From The Comedian as the Letter C, IV.24, quoted by Cunningham in his article "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens," reprinted in Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller's The Achievement of Wallace Stevens (Philadelphia & New York, 1962), p. 128.

[97]The essential problem, Stevens said, is "to get into focus, not out of focus." Letters, p. 432. The remark occurs in an interesting passage on Nietzsche, in which the poet remarks how strong minds tend to distort the world.

[98]An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XXX.7-10 & 13-18.

[99]Letters, pp. 350 & 352.

[100]P. 79.

[101]O.P., p. 177.

[102]N.A., p. 156.

[103]The subtitle of Langbaum's book is The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (New York, 1957), and it studies English poetry from Wordsworth to Browning. The quotation is from p. 21.

[104]Ibid., p. 22.

[105]For example, "A Collect of Philosophy" acknowledges itself to be a collection of gleanings from a letter presenting the encapsulated philosophies of various philosophers which Stevens coaxed from his philosopher-friends Jean Wahl and Jean Paulhan--Letters, p. 729.

[106]By and large, Stevens mistrusts sleep, dreams, and the subconscious mind--see the denigration of dreams in The Comedian, IV, for example, which declares that dreams are not "The oncoming fantasies of better birth," but mere wish-fulfillments of thwarted desires. Nonetheless, Robert Buttel points out that Harmonium contains many poems that glorify the irrational in Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium (Princeton, 1967), pp. 181-82.

[107]O.P., p. 221.

[108]See Stevens' remarks in "Two or Three Ideas" to the effect that "the style of a poem and the poem itself are one" (O.P., p. 202). He further notes that "a time of disbelief is precisely a time in which the frequency of detached styles is greatest. . . . By detached, I mean the unsuccessful, the ineffective, the arbitrary, the literary, the non-umbilical, that which in its highest degree would still be words." This reads almost like a self-indictment. Stevens notes further that "for the style of the poem and the poem itself to be one there must be a mating and a marriage, not an arid love-song." O.P., p. 212.

[109]Stevens says, "Every poet's language is his own distinct tongue. He cannot speak the common language and continue to write poetry any more than he can think the common thought and continue to be a poet." Letters, p. 873.

[110]N.A., p. 77.

[111]Ibid., p. 151.

[112]C.P., p. 288.

[113]See Part III, C.P., p. 332.

[114]It seems as though Stevens had recourse to H. Vaihinger's The Philosophy of 'As if': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind. This compendious volume, translated by C. K. Ogden and published in an English edition in 1925, examines all those fictions that the human mind has been inclined to elevate to the status of fact.

[115]Esthétique du Mal, XV, C.P., p. 326.

[116]Poetry and the Age (New York, 1953), pp. 140-41.

[117] *Adagia*, *O.P.*, p. 176.

[118] *O.P.*, p. 237.

[119] Notable among these is J. V. Cunningham--see "The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," 15 & 17.

[120] "What is sometimes called Platonic or conceptual realism is nearer to modern idealism than to modern realism. Assuming that the real is the permanent or the unchanging, Plato said that the concept, or the universal, was more real than the individual thing. The real, for Plato, is not in the flux of individual things but in what is common to all individuals of the class, that is, in the concept, or universal, which is beyond the world of sense. For example, the concept *man* has greater reality than an individual man . . ." "Realism & Its Implications," *Living Issues in Philosophy* (New York, 1946), p. 273. The author of this text is Harold H. Titus.

[121] As Robert Langbaum says in *The Poetry of Experience*, "Romanticism is both idealistic and realistic in that it conceives of the ideal as existing only in conjunction with the real and the real as existing only in conjunction with the ideal. The two are brought into conjunction only in the act of perception." (P. 24)

[122] "The Substance that Prevails," *Kenyon Review*, XVII (Winter 1955), 98.

[123] *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, III.vii, *C.P.*, p. 404.

[124] *C.P.*, pp. 203-04.

[125] *O.P.*, p. 213.

[126] In "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," *Sewanee Review*, LXV (Winter 1957), 7, Nemerov quotes Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* on the philosophy of Husserl. "Thinking is not unifying or making appearance familiar under the guise of a great principle. Thinking is learning all over again how to see. . . . [As Stevens would say, the world has to be measured by the eye.] "In other words, phenomenology declines to explain the world, it wants to be merely a description of actual experience. It confirms absurd thought in the initial assertion that there is no truth, but merely truths." This is highly apposite to Stevens' outlook. His best poems are usually those in which he does not seek to explain the world, but relaxes with a given experience.

[127]*Letters*, p. 346.

[128]*Ibid.*, p. 500.

[129]*Ibid.*, p. 346.

[130]To give a light example, there is Stevens' gleeful response to the bewilderment of the Amalgamated Ice Cream Association as to whether or not, on the basis of "The Emperor," Stevens was for or against ice-cream. Richard Ellmann records that, when told some readers interpreted "the only emperor" as life and others as death, Stevens remarked, "So much the better!" See "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," *KR*, XIX (Winter 1957), 93, and *Letters*, p. 502.

[131]Stevens was particularly happy in the deep understanding of his work shown by Samuel French Morse and Hi Simons--see *Letters*, pp. 437 & 539.

[132]The critic was Robert Pack--see *Letters*, pp. 863-64.

[133]See Marius Bewley's "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," reprinted in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, p. 144 and Irving Howe's *A World More Attractive*, p. 164.

[134]"Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé," *MP*, XLIII (May 1946), 253.

[135]*Letters*, p. 183.

[136]*Letters*, pp. 813-14.

[137]*Ibid.*, p. 815.

[138]Indeed, Howard Nemerov goes to the length of hailing him as perhaps "the only truly modern poet of his time." "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," *SR*, LXV (Winter 1957), 13.

[139]*Letters*, p. 491.

[140]Stevens is fond of the word "flakes," also much used by Spenser and Coleridge--see his "Nomad Exquisite," *C.P.*, p. 95. His theory of the imagination seems to owe much to Coleridge. Indeed, a reading of I. A. Richards' *Coleridge on Imagination* (New York, 1935) helps one to understand all that is implied by Stevens' imagination. Traces of Shelley and Tennyson are harder to detect, and inhere in image and cadence, respectively.

On the evidence of his Letters, Stevens was thoroughly familiar with Browning. As Robert Buttel points out (Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium, pp. 201-02), Stevens' "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds" appears to have been inspired by Browning's "A Grammarian's Funeral." Again I am indebted to Buttel for pointing out the resemblance between the sixth stanza of "Sunday Morning" and Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine." (P. 234.)

[141]Cited by Buttel, pp. 224-25.

[142]III.vi.1-2, 13-14 & III.viii.1-5, C.P., pp. 402-04.

[143]Cf. Marvell's "Bermudas," for example.

[144]See, for instance, Stevens' "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air," IV & V, or "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb."

[145]Marvell's "The Garden."

[146]Stevens uses the sea and the earth as mirrors in The Comedian and "Le Monocle." Compare Marvell's "The Mower's Song" with "Peter Quince at the Clavier"--"So evenings die, in their green going,/A wave, interminably flowing"--or The Man with the Blue Guitar, XXVIII--"It could not be a mind, the wave/In which the watery grasses flow." Stevens parodies Marvell's "green shade" in "The Garden" in his "Banal Sojourn," O.P., p. 63, according to Buttel, p. 201.

[147]"Credences of Summer," I, C.P., p. 372.

[148]"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," 23.

[149]In "Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé" MP, XLIII (May 1946), 235-59.

[150]Letters, p. 636.

[151]"Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé," 236.

[152]"The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," C.P., pp. 358-59.

[153]P. 180.

[154]Letters, p. 696, as well as O.P., pp. 219, 223, and 227.

[155]Buttel even believes that parts of The Comedian were inspired by Rimbaud's Le Bateau Ivre, but the claim is not convincing. Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium, p. 181.

[156]In Letters, pp. 635-37.

[157]Sound and Form in Modern Poetry, p. 238.

[158]Letters, p. 619.

[159]Ibid., p. 621.

[160]See his "Two Prefaces" in O.P., pp. 268-86.

[161]Letters, pp. 510-11.

[162]In "Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination," printed in Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller's The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore, 1965), pp. 92-106.

[163]Stevens explains the two poems thus: "The savage says to the civilized man . . . 'I am not naked because my body hides my self and I am naked only when my self is naked.' The civilized man replies . . . 'The more I wear the less I wear. What I wear disguises me, give me another self, and if I wore enough I should have no self at all.'" Letters, p. 347.

[164]"Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination," p. 105.

[165]O.P., p. 203.

[166]See "Peter Quince at the Clavier"--"The fitful tracing of a portal," and "The Idea of Order at Key West"--"Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred"--for example. For the "azury centre," see "This Solitude of Cataracts."

[167]Further, it is possible, as Benamou suggests, that Stevens' drunken sailor in "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock" was suggested by Baudelaire's "matelot ivrogne" in Le Voyage.

[168]As in the "iris frettings on the blank" of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, II.x.9.

[169]La Poésie de S. Mallarmé (Paris, n.d.), p. 100.

[170]Thibaudet goes on to say that Mallarmé did not locate his ideal realm in space, as Plato did, but evoked it as though it were a crown--"il le suscite comme un couronnement . . . le mystique du non-être" (ibid., p. 103). (Stevens may well have had Mallarmé--or Thibaudet's book on Mallarmé--in mind when he wrote "So-and-So Reclining on her Couch," see C.P., p. 295. Thibaudet's phrase also recalls Stevens' appreciative description of Sarah Bernhardt's rendition of Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be," weaving a circle above her head. (N.A., pp. 56-57.)

171 "Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé," MP, XLIII (May 1946), 238.
Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium, p. 104.
"Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination," p. 108.

[172]As R. P. Blackmur points out in "Examples of Wallace Stevens," reprinted in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 71.
Simons' observation on Stevens' use of blue is to be found in "Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé," 240.

[173]From "Une dentelle s'abolit."

[174]As Simons points out in "Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé," 257. It needs to be noted, however, that much of what Simonssays in his comparison is questionable. For example, there is no reason why Stevens should have had to depend on his friend Walter Arensberg, who translated Mallarmé's L'Après-Midi d'un Faune in 1915, to be introduced to Mallarmé, as Simons says. Also, certain of the parallels Simons draws between poems of Stevens and poems of Mallarmé's are unconvincing.

[175]"Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination," p. 114.

[176]"The Native Element" is reprinted in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, pp. 193-210.

[177]"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," C.P., p. 150.

[178]As Samuel French Morse observes in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 210.

[179]See Riddel's article "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens: Functions of a 'Literatus,'" reprinted in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 30-42.

[180]Printed in Act of the Mind, pp. 58-91.

[181]P. 213.

[182]"Everything tends to become real; or everything moves in the direction of reality," O.P., p. 165.

[183]There are references to Santayana in Letters, pp. 635, 637, & 731.

[184]The Beer Can by the Highway (New York, 1961), pp. 56-57.

[185]In The Great Experiment in American Literature (New York, 1961), p. 125.

[186]A World More Attractive, p. 158.

[187]Letters, p. 776.

[188]As William Dickey puts it in his review, Hudson Review, XX (Summer 1967), 324.

[189]Ibid., 322.

[190]Letters, pp. 320-21. Stevens is here referring to his early years in New York when he was just getting started in business.

[191]Ibid., p. 827.

[192]Ibid., p. 644.

[193]Ibid., p. 669.

CHAPTER II

"Sunday Morning"

> . . . It is a flaw
> In happiness, to see beyond our bourn,-
> It forces us in summer skies to mourn,
> It spoils the singing of the nightingale.
>
> John Keats

> . . . the great poems of heaven and hell
> have been written and the great poem of
> the earth remains to be written.
>
> Wallace Stevens

"Sunday Morning" proclaims a new religion celebrating the things of this world alone, without recourse to the supernatural. As such, it is an immensely courageous poem, and a poem of great significance for our age. Much of the appeal of the poet's statement of this theme, however, lies in the manner of his rejection of the old gods, rather than in his affirmation of the new.[1] For Stevens there is no god but the imagination, and there is no truth or purpose beyond the shifting, multifaceted interpretations of reality made by the human mind.

A purely logical analysis of the poem misses, as always with Stevens' poetry, a great deal.[2] The writer prefers to give a detailed textual analysis to see how Stevens achieves the effects he achieves, rather than why.

Stevens saw no need "to linger before the evidence" for disbelief.[3] He accepted it, and sought to counter it with what he called a "supreme fiction." His poetry, from beginning to end, constitutes the search for such a belief, so faithful to reality and so satisfying to the imagination that the human mind might rest in it. Stevens never attained his "supreme fiction," but "Sunday Morning" is certainly his most eloquent expression of the need to write "the great poem of the earth." It may even be the twentieth century's closest approximation to such a poem.

The over-all tone of the poem is meditative, the style rhetorical. The diction is not (as in Stevens' later poems) particularly tricky or original, though it is intricate and complex. The poem's surface is luxuriant, supple, and beautiful; the rhythmic cadences irregular, but subtle and persuasive, because the rhythmic movement is extremely sure, full of echoes from the masters of English blank verse, and faithful to the development of thought and feeling. (See, for instance, Stanza III, lines 9-15.) The imagery sometimes recalls Marvell's garden verse, but, particularly in Stanzas VI and VIII, that of Keats's odes. The rhetorical passages occasionally have the grandeur of the Miltonic heroic line, though much shorter and less involuted, but the "articulate energy," the forward surge of the syntax, is Wordsworthian.

"Sunday Morning" comprises eight stanzas of blank verse of fifteen lines each. The blank verse is far from regular; there are many trochaic, anapestic, and seemingly

spondaic feet. In the first stanza, for example, only line 5 is regular iambic pentameter. Most of the lines have four stresses (ll. 2, 3, 6, 8, 13 and 15). Though there is no definite metrical norm, the poem as a whole warrants scanning as blank verse in which, as Harvey Gross puts it, the "four stress structure peers through the pentameter."[4] Though there are, of course, no rhymed endings to lines, there is occasional internal rhyme or assonance. (For example, wings rhymes with things--I.9-10--and the vowel sound in comforts, sun, and pungent is repeated in II.4-5.) Stevens shows a consistently masterly use of assonance and alliteration. This cooperates with rhythm to create remarkable effects. Lines 11 and 12 of the first stanza are deliberately slow and stately; the reader must pause over the spondees in "across wide water" and "like wide water"; the slow pace, reinforced by long, open vowel sounds (the diphthongs i and ou), reminds one of the long drawn-out cadences of Tennyson.[5]

Unlike some of Stevens' later poems of comparable or greater length, "Sunday Morning" has unity. It is organized, as Michel Benamou has pointed out, pictorially or spatially, and comprises a diptych of this world set against the otherworldly paradise which is but a dim reflection of our earth.[6] As is customary in Stevens' poems, there is no progression of thought, properly speaking; there is instead a constant alternation or fluctuation from one world to the other, from reality to imagination and back again. In

Stanza I, a bright, particularized still life is juxtaposed to a mental journey or dim procession to the land of the dead. In Stanza II, we begin with the shadow world of pallid dreams and shades, and move back into the gusty weather of our planet earth. Stanza III comprises a mythological review of the increasingly human marriages of heaven and earth wrought by the human mind: earth and sky are brought ever closer together, but never close enough. In Stanza IV, the imagination's nebulous paradises continue to be contrasted with the terrestrial paradise, with its eternal cycle of recurrence. The movement is from this world to the other, and back again.

Stanza V continues the preoccupation with death and immortality revealed by the woman who first speaks in Stanza IV. Death is declared to be the only principle through which we shall find fulfillment of our dreams. It is death that gives life on this earth, our only home, its savor, a savor as pungent and acrid as fruit that ripens and rots. In Stanza VI, we view again the traditional heavenly paradise and find it to be an insipid imitation of the earthly paradise to which only death can return us. Stanza VII presents a hymn to the earth, such as will make a new heaven of this our globe--as tentatively adumbrated at the close of the third stanza. Stanza VIII presents the pictorial elements of the opening stanza in reverse: the other world is seen to be a grave, and this earth is celebrated as the only paradise.[7]

In "Sunday Morning," visual unity bespeaks thematic unity. The poem is integrated by trains of vivid imagery.[8] As usual, birds flutter through Stevens' stanzas. In the first, we find a cockatoo. The motif of bird's wings is picked up in the swallow's wings of Stanza IV. In the final stanza, quail and pigeons appear. (The significance of these various birds, and of birds generally in Stevens' verse, will be discussed in analyzing successive stanzas.) Fruit also plays a prominent part in a poem about garden paradises: oranges in Stanza I, pears and plums in Stanzas V and VI. In addition, there are integral, often contrasted and repeated images of earth, sky, and water. The natural and earthy is contrasted with the spiritual and cloudy--particularly in Stanzas II, III, VI, and VIII. Water undergoes subtle transformations and takes on protean meanings: water-lights and wide water in Stanza I; rain and snow in Stanza II; rivers and seas in Stanza VI; lake and dew in Stanza VII, and wide water or ocean again in Stanza VIII. Water is the source of life and the end of life, as the rivers seeking seas in Stanza VII suggest. It is implicitly compared to a fountain of blood uniting earth and sky in Stanzas III and VII.

There is a seeming inevitability about the arrangement of the stanzas of "Sunday Morning," such as one rarely finds in a Stevens poem of comparable length. The present arrangement seems the best, though it was not the original one. The poem first appeared in Poetry in November 1915, but it was published, at Harriet Monroe's request, in a truncated version of five

stanzas arranged in the following order: I, VIII, IV, V, and VII. Stevens declared that, if the poem was to appear in an abbreviated form, this order was "necessary to the idea."[9] The order may well strike one who is familiar with the final version of the poem as unthinkable: the magnificent eighth stanza, moved up to follow the opening one, seems thrown away, while the gawkiest stanza in the poem (Stanza VII) would bring "Sunday Morning"--for this reader, at least--to a jarringly boisterous close.[10] The effect of the abridged version is to present a dialogue of question and answer between poet and woman.[11]

The use that the poet makes of his woman is noteworthy. She is not the poet's persona because the poem develops into a kind of interior dialogue between poet and woman (or, alternatively, within the poet, or within the woman herself). One is not sure whether to call this colloquy a monologue or a dialogue, for the woman may well represent a part of the poet. She voices the conventional human longings and poses conventional questions about death and immortality, to which the poet puts his unconventional answers. But does the poem as a whole leave one with the impression of having heard one voice or two? It seems safest to say that the woman represents part of the poet and humanity in general. She may even be compared to examples of Stevens' more habitual use of a feminine figure to represent the human imagination, "the interior paramour," or the muse--as in "The Idea of Order at Key West," for example.

The opening word of the poem--"complacencies"--is ironic, for complacency is just what the poet is out to shatter. It is also a word literally linked, of course, to a number of others which might tempt an unwary critic to consider the poem purely hedonistic: such words as peignoir, late, dissipate, and comforts are designed to evoke the luxurious details of the scene amid which the lady reclines. The woman is never described, though her setting is rendered in vivid, concrete detail. She lounges in a sunny chair late on a Sunday morning. She is surrounded by coffee and oranges and a cockatoo (live or woven) on a rug.[12] The cockatoo, in the light of the rest of the poem, may even appear to be a parodic paraclete. In any case, it is a familiar technique of Stevens (as indeed of most descriptive-meditative verse) to begin with a series of bright, particular details, a landscape or still life, and then to move on to some meditation evolving out of this.[13]

As the woman lounges in her setting, the bright objects by which she is surrounded "mingle to dissipate/The holy hush of ancient sacrifice." (Line 5, with its aspirates and sibilants, is onomatopoeic, suggesting the mood of reverential revery into which the woman is drifting.) "She dreams a little" (l. 6), that is, she begins to muse upon religion (religion is a dream to Stevens); more specifically, she muses upon Christianity. (Perhaps the revery is prompted by church bells, though these do not sound in the poem. One visualizes the woman seated on an open balcony or terrace overlooking the ocean.) Then

> . . . she feel the dark
> Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
> As a calm darkens among water-lights.

Notice the absolute rightness of the word "encroachment" in this context. It suggests the creeping of a shadow over the sun, the stealthy overcasting of the brightness of the day, and the clouding of the woman's serenity. The old catastrophe referred to is, of course, the passion and crucifixion of Christ. That she is affected by the memory of it implies that this woman is still subject to the spell of religion, not yet wholly a freethinker.

The calm that "darkens among water-lights" suggests the way in which a cloud, a breeze, or an undercurrent ripples the surface of water, smoothing and darkening it simultaneously, as one does by stroking the nap of velvet the wrong way. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," there is another reference to "water-lights," though there it is evening and the lights are luminous or starlike, rather than glancing bright under the sun of "Sunday Morning." Nevertheless, the connotation of these water-lights may well be the same: they represent reason's demarcations, its fixing of bounds against chaos, though the light of reason is here dimmed by the floodtide of religious nostalgia. The water imagery is sustained till the end of the stanza, where the "wide water"--note the incantatory effect of the repetition and the slow, pronounced beat of the rhythm--represents time-space.[14] This water, "stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet," seems to contain an ironic echo of the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea, or (more visually

appropriate) of Christ walking on the waters of Lake Gennesareth; it is a composite image of infinite time and space, the woman's mental journey being a journey through time and space.[15]

The sharp color of the oranges and the bird's green wings are muted by these considerations. (In the word "pungent," Stevens has lighted on the most telling adjective, conveying the sharp smell of the fruit, as well as its texture and color.) The parrot's wings are green not only for naturalistic reasons, but because green is for Stevens the color of reality in all its integrity, triumphant over imagination. These bright objects are drained of color by the woman's abstracted revery; they come to seem like "things in some procession of the dead." Her mind has gone on its pilgrimage to Palestine. For purposes of alliteration and assonance, as much as of historical accuracy, Stevens uses the denotative Palestine instead of the more vital and evocative Holy Land or Judaea. The effect is to fix religious boundaries, to make Christianity seem something remote in time and space, while the final lines of the first stanza make of the Holy Land the Land of the Dead.

The finality of the concluding lines of the opening stanza has prepared us for a new beginning. The second stanza begins with the question, "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" "Bounty" carries meanings of abundance and generosity as well as tribute. What Stevens refers to in Esthétique du Mal as the "sleek ensolacings" of religion are here contrasted with "comforts of the sun," the tangible beauties of this earth, again exemplified by "pungent fruit, and bright, green wings." The

word "balm" in line 6 suggests that mortal objects have, as well as beauty, some healing power, and are "things to be cherished like the thought of heaven." The climax of this stanza is reached in the declaration, "Divinity must live within herself" (l. 8).[16] This is the response to the opening questions. Greater emphasis is drawn to both questions and answer by a skillful use of meter and sound devices. The interrogatives "why" and "what" in the first two lines are heavily stressed, as "shall" is in line 4. Stevens' line endings, as well as his beginnings, are extremely emphatic. In the climactic eighth line, the assonance on short i helps draw attention to (and thus underscores in the reader's mind) the meaning of the line, just as the question posed in lines 2 and 3, because of its somewhat tripping rhythm, seems to skip lightly over (and thus cast a slur on, or undercut) the very idea of divinity.

There follows a passage of nature poetry worthy to be compared with Wordsworth's at its best:

> 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 her soul.

All weathers and all seasons--so significant in Stevens' poetry and symbolism--figure here. "Passions of rain" recalls Wordsworth's "The sounding cataract/Haunted me like a passion."[17] Following the loneliness of winter (ll. 9-10) come the raptures of spring and summer (ll. 10-11), then autumn, presaging the return of winter (ll. 11-12). These are, perhaps, the most

brilliant lines in a brilliant passage, for "gusty" describes both the roads and the emotions generated by them, emotions wet and windy as autumn nights. The irregular rhythm of lines 11 and 12, and, conversely, the gravity and relative regularity of the concluding lines, reflect the nature of what is being expressed. The "bough of summer" and the "winter branch" receive equal stress. These are not simply seasonal symbols: they are the poles between which Stevens' theory of the interdependence of the imagination and reality hangs. Summer, with its proliferation of bloom and abundance of imagery, is reality fully found, realized, or imagined; winter is the bare skeleton of fact stripped of imagination. Summer boughs recur in the sixth stanza of "Sunday Morning," where Stevens is painting the traditional picture of paradise as a beautiful, fertile garden.

The passage on different weathers and seasons that concludes the second stanza is intended to illustrate the wealth and variety of this earth, the terrestrial and only paradise. One critic thinks that Stevens is here advocating "complete identification of the self with the natural landscape," a deliberate cultivation of the pathetic fallacy.[18] But Stevens is doing nothing of the sort. He is, in fact, noting the opposite of the pathetic fallacy: nature does not sympathize with man in Stevens' poetry; man sympathizes with nature. Stevens recognizes that the human soul has its weathers and seasons. In the final line of the second stanza, he says, "These are the measures destined for her soul." The word "measures"--

besides its connotations in music, poetry, and dance--implies dimensions or limits. This is Stevens' way of stating that the woman about whom his poem revolves (and, by implication, all humanity) is earthbound; our lives are circumscribed, and our moods to a considerable extent conditioned, by the weather and seasons of our planet.

Along with Stevens' belief in the communicative power of words and their subtle nuances of meaning goes an almost musical appreciation of their sound values.[19] His use of assonance in this passage is worth remarking. In lines 9 through 14, there is an unusual profusion of different vowel sounds--the long a of rain, oo of moods, o of snow, e of grievings, and again o of loneliness, oo of unsubdued and blooms, repeated o of emotions and roads, and, finally, new vowels, the aw of autumn and long i of nights. These long vowels correspond, of course, to stressed syllables, and where these occur at the beginnings of lines (as in lines 9 and 10), a trochee necessarily introduces the more or less regularly iambic line, giving particular force to the initial word.

The second stanza has been almost exclusively concerned with this earth. In the third, the poet moves to a contemplation of a series of marriages of heaven and earth and of "heavenly" incarnations.

> Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
> No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
> Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
> He moved among us, as a muttering king,
> Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
> Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
> With heaven, brought such requital to desire
> The very hinds discerned it, in a star.

The alliteration in this passage is remarkable: mother, mannered, motions, mythy, mind, moved, muttering, magnificent. No less remarkable is the word mythy, a characteristically brilliant piece of Stevens coinage.

This meditation embraces the absolute but numinous gods of the ancients (Jove) and moves toward the appearance of a more human god (Christ), thus showing the gradual rapprochement wrought by the human imagination between heaven and earth. Nevertheless, this increasingly intimate union remains to be consummated. Jove (Zeus) was notorious for his pursuit and rape of earthly maidens--Yeats celebrates one such episode in his "Leda and the Swan." Jove was, nonetheless, kingly, magnificent and, in the last analysis, inhuman, as mythy as the human imagination could make him. Not until the star announced to the shepherds (hinds) Jesus' birth to the Virgin Mary, was human desire for a human god appeased. There is a characteristically clever oxymoron in Stevens' juxtaposition of "commingling" with "virginal" in line 6. Religion would have it that the Holy Spirit impregnated the Virgin Mary, his ichor mingling with her blood to bring forth Jesus Christ. But, in fact, as always, our blood remained virginal; it did not commingle with any divine source, since divinity, if at all, exists within ourselves. Christ was yet another "supreme fiction."[20]

In the second part of this verse, Stevens asks whether our blood,[21] the blood which conjured up a god half-human, half-divine, shall fail. "Or shall it come to be/The blood of paradise?" The word "shall," used repetitively and emphatically,

albeit interrogatively, is effective. When the poet asks, "And shall the earth/Seem all of paradise that we shall know?" we should remember that the verbs "seem" and "be" can become synonymous in Stevens' vocabulary--as in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," where he says, "Let be be finale of seem." Lines 9 through 11 of the third stanza of "Sunday Morning" which, at first, seem tentative and questioning, are in fact no more so than the following ones, where Stevens switches to the simple and indicative futurity of

> The sky <u>will</u> 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.
> [Italics mine.]

The answer to the question whether our blood will fail is no, it will not--if it will cease seeking a divine source into which to pour itself. (Compare the image of frustrated rivers seeking seas they never find in Stanza VI, and that of a "savage source" or fountain of blood returning to the sky in Stanza VII.) Our blood will become the "blood of paradise"--it <u>is</u>, could we but realize this--because the earth is "all of paradise that we shall know."

Lines 12 through 15 refer to the sky, which has always seemed to separate humanity from a heavenly destiny, and thus to cover the earth with a pall of indifference. The lines may assume even greater impact if we consider the significance of the sky as a symbol in Stevens' poetry as a whole. It is the ultimate backdrop of life, the most anomalous, elusive, and baffling of blues.[22] R. P. Blackmur illustrates this well:

"To Mr. Stevens the sky, 'the basal slate,' 'the universal hue,' which surrounds us and is always upon us is the great ambiguity. . . . Mr. Stevens has a notion often intimated that the sky is the only permanent background for thought and knowledge; he would see things against the sky as a Christian would see things against the cross. The blue of the sky is the prevailing substance . . . and to Mr. Stevens it seems only necessary to look at the sky to share and to be shared in its blueness."[23] In the epilogue to his Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, Stevens speaks of "a war between the mind/And sky," a conflict between two fathomless elements forever confronting one another.

Both the idea of the sky as the essential background to human life, and the idea of it as nevertheless constantly conflicting with and baffling the human mind, are valid here. The latter is expressed in the reference to "this dividing and indifferent blue," and the former in line 12, "The sky will be much friendlier then than now." "A part of labor, and a part of pain" refer to the lot of man since his mythical Fall, when Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise to earn their bread in the sweat of their brows and to suffer all the ills of the flesh. But if we consider the sky as part of our earth, encircling this our paradise, it must become a part of all that we endure. This paradise will include more than the traditional imaginary ones; it will embrace labor and pain as well as love, and the sky will no longer be a curtain, "dividing" and "indifferent," separating man from some otherworldly destiny. On the contrary, the sky will be eternally involved in us, as we in it.

Stanza four is one of the most beautiful in the poem. In the opening lines, the woman speaks in her own voice for the first time. There is something slightly puzzling and touching about this passage. The puzzle is embodied in lines 4 and 5, where a shift in viewpoint seems to occur. The initial image of the birds testing the reality of fields at dawn by their twitterings is simple and lovely, "But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields/Return no more, where, then, is paradise?" As often in Stevens' poetry, the birds represent the passing generations of mankind.[24] If one sees them only as birds, the mind's eye, having watched the birds' flight, may come back to the static speaker and read, with a slight sense of shock, not that the birds do not return (that is easily anticipated) but that the fields do not. If one adopts the speaker's viewpoint throughout, the failure of warm fields as well as of birds to return may be intelligible, but it is a mistake, perhaps, to adopt only one point of view. What appears to be involved is one of those shifting, overlapping viewpoints Stevens is so fond of. If one follows the birds' flight, the failure of their fields to return can only be because the birds are unable to fly back to them. The first five lines can convey, by implication, a sensation of dying, of a failure of sight and hearing reminiscent of that evoked by Tennyson in "Tears, Idle Tears."[25]

In lines 6 through 11, Stevens beautifully disposes of the classical paradises in a series of allusions that remind one, in their somewhat nostalgic tone, of Milton's dismissal of the

pagan deities in his Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity.[26] J. V. Cunningham has suggested that this passage may have been inspired by Wordsworth's The Recluse,[27] while Robert Buttel suggests that the allusion to an "old chimera" may be intended as a rebuttal of the speech of the Attendant Spirit in Milton's Comus.[28] The "golden underground" in line 8 refers to Elysium, a happy otherworld provided by the gods for human heroes whom they favored. The Elysian fields or Isles of the Blest were placed by the Greeks at the western edge of the world, as islands or meadows in or bordering on the River Oceanus. The Latin poets, notably Virgil, transported Elysium to the underworld. The Celts, too, located their Happy Isles in an archipelago at the western edge of the world, whose islands were filled with music and birdsong. But there was another version of the Sîd Elysium placed underground.

The "isle melodious" of line 9 may be an allusion to these Fortunate Isles, but recalls also the isle of Prospero's exile in The Tempest.[29] The use of the archaic past participle "gat" to describe spirits returning home is perfectly in keeping here. Diffuse light is shed on the insubstantiality of these spirits for Stevens by considering some similar lines from his Esthétique du Mal:

> Phantoms, what have you left? What underground?
> What place in which to be is not enough
> To be?

In "Sunday Morning," Stevens is stating that to be in this world is enough. It is all.

The "visionary south" of line 10 sounds like yet another classical allusion. I believe the full significance of the term is only to be arrived at by considering what the south stands for in Stevens' verse as a whole. The body of Stevens' work forms a whole, and thus provides a commentary on single poems, even on single words and images, because certain themes, symbols, and images constantly recur in it. "Sunday Morning" is an early poem of Stevens, which appeared in his first volume, Harmonium. The poems in Harmonium are predominantly lush and tropical in color and imagery, and many of them were inspired by Floridian landscapes. The Caribbean land and seascapes in Harmonium stand in sharp contrast to the dour New England or North American scenes, in which winter seems to be the prevailing season--though there are seasonal variations on the theme of bare fact--to which Stevens turned in Ideas of Order and the later volumes. Florida signifies for Stevens a perpetual summer, and summer is (naturally for an inhabitant of the northern hemisphere) identified with the south. The south thus comes to stand for a fully imagined reality or a reality transfigured by imagination. As John Finch states of Stevens' southland, "It is such a place as one would have imagined had it not existed."[30]

The "cloudy palm/Remote on heaven's hill" may well remind one of such orientalized conceptions of heaven as Jan van Eyck's in the Retable of the Mystical Lamb at Ghent, or of Milton's luxuriant description of the Garden of Eden. These images are not cloudy enough, however, for they are picked out in glossy, particularized detail. Closer in spirit is Vaughan's "shady city

of palm trees" representing the New Jerusalem in "The Retreat." But for an image of the palm standing in all its sharp particularity against the nebulous immensity of time-space, one has to look forward to what was perhaps Stevens' last poem, "Of Mere Being":

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises . . .
> . . . . . .
> The palm stands on the edge of space.[31]

The reference to the palm standing "remote on heaven's hill" (l. 11) recalls the hill on which Milton places the Garden of Eden--which he, of course, was bound to distinguish from his heaven. Stevens confounds heaven with paradise.

Having dismissed his versions of the classical and Christian paradises, Stevens reverts to his own theme of the earth as paradise, and assures us that none of these traditional conceptions of another, and better, world has endured "as April's green endures." It seems that of all the things the poet might have chosen, "April's green" is the most transient. True; the point is that it recurs unfailingly with every spring, spring itself never failing to return. It is significant and appropriate that Stevens should choose April's green to illustrate his belief that nature is immortal--green standing for reality, as it always does in Stevens' poetry. Stevens states his theme of the eternal recurrence of nature even more succinctly and powerfully in "Peter Quince at the Clavier":

> Beauty is momentary in the mind--
> The fitful tracing of a portal;
> <u>But in the flesh it is immortal</u>. [Italics mine]

The stanza concludes by referring back to the woman's thoughts at its opening.

Lines 12 through 15 recall, in their reference to "the consummation of the swallow's wings," the final strophe of Keats's "Ode to Autumn." Here, however, the swallow is not departing but arriving. Instead of signalizing the onset of winter, he is the harbinger of summer. In lines 13 and 14, the possessive pronoun "her" may refer either to April or to the woman in the poem; if, as seems most likely, it refers to April's remembrance and desire, the month is being personified in characteristically Keatsian fashion. "June and evening" in line 14 are explained by the fact that the swallow is one of the few birds to migrate during daylight hours in June. The lines look forward to the swallow's return from the winter migration. The return of the swallow will consummate human desire for summer's rejuvenation. The esthetically exquisite shape of the swallow's wings held an evident fascination for Stevens.

In the fifth stanza, the woman expresses the human longing for immortality, for eternal happiness. The ever-recurring transience of nature is not enough for her--"But in contentment I still feel/The need of some imperishable bliss." The poet answers her with the stern paradox, "Death is the mother of beauty," a paradox because death is the slayer of life, the end of all natural things, and yet (as Stevens shows in the remainder of this stanza) this process of destruction is also a process of renewal.

"Without death, we would take no passionate pleasure in the world, we would not feel its sensuousness, for there is no necessity or compulsion to possess that which is always there and does not change," says Robert Pack.[32] Marie Borroff dismisses this argument as trite. She says, "Stevens is expressing here not the cliché that the transient things of earth become more precious, hence more beautiful, as we feel them to be transient, but the profounder idea that all the beauty we as human beings can know is born of the process of change which is one with the process of death."[33] This interpretation is certainly truer to Stevens. It is the theme of the poem "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," for instance. It binds together the concluding lines of the second stanza of "Sunday Morning" with Stanzas IV, V, and VI.

The heavy, regular beat of the rhythm in "Although she strews the leaves/Of sure obliteration on our paths" emphasizes the words and makes us give them pause. Death, the mother of beauty, is personified throughout this stanza. In lines 7-9,

> The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
> Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
> Whispered a little out of tenderness,

the use of vowels and consonants that seem to echo the meaning of the words--the blaring, long vowels of triumph, brassy, and phrase, followed by the short, soft vowels of whispered, little, and tenderness (suggesting the sighing of the willow)-- is most effective.

However, after line 10, a certain ambiguity creeps into the stanza. This appears to be caused by lax phrasing and

imagery. Cunningham elucidates lines 10-15 as meaning that death has "the fatal attractiveness of the willow in old poetry for the lovelorn maiden. Though she has lovers who bring her gifts--that is, the earth and all its beauty--she disregards the lovers, and, tasting of the gifts, strays impassioned toward death."[34] This paraphrase glides over several difficulties. One difficulty stems from the shift in tense from the present indicative in line 10 to the imperfect past in the following line: Death makes the willow "shiver in the sun" for maidens who, on the first reading, might seem to be dead and gone, because they "were wont to sit and gaze." [Italics mine.] The grass "relinquished to their feet" is perplexing; again, it might suggest that the girls are in their graves. But in lines 14-15, the maidens are obviously alive, though straying towards death; this means either that they never died, or that these are new maidens--that, in fact, we are surveying passing generations of girls. (The difficulty is similar to that posed in the first five lines of Stanza IV.) "Disregarded" echoes "relinquished" in its sense of oblivion and abandonment; but how is one to reconcile it with "impassioned"? Are we to understand that acceptance of death (abandonment to the idea of it) causes these girls--their ghostly appearance notwithstanding--to embrace life with redoubled passion? The boys' gifts of "plums and pears"--"the good, fat, guzzly fruit," fruity-sounding and palpably visual, to which Stevens was so partial--is surely not tribute to the dead or disregarded tribute to the hardly living; it is meant to represent a constant heaping up and dissolution of nature's plenty.

Stevens explains "disregarded plate" thus: "Plate is used in the sense of . . . 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 . . ."[35] The use of the word "plate" is not made wholly clear within the context, however, and may indeed seem jarring in a natural setting. This is one of those breaches of imagistic decorum that Stevens was to commit with increasing frequency in his later, longer poems.

The sensuous imagery of fruit and foliage is borne over into the magnificently ironic sixth stanza. "Is there no change of death in paradise?/Does ripe fruit never fall?" In the latter half of this stanza, the sustained evocation of the traditional garden paradise is an intentionally pale reflection of such poems as Marvell's "The Garden," Couched in gently taunting form, the first twelve lines of this stanza match the dismissal of the traditional paradises in the latter part of Stanza IV in the eloquence of their stately movement and phraseology. Lines 2 and 3 contain a conscious echo of Keats's "happy boughs! that cannot shed/Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu."[36] They further recall the "bough of summer" of Stanza II of "Sunday Morning," and perhaps the fabulous Golden Bough of classical mythology.

In the "rivers like our own that seek for seas/They never find," Buttel detects a phrase and feeling reminiscent of Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine,"[37] while I find those

"receding shores/That never touch with inarticulate pang" betray the same longing for union and hopelessness of it that Matthew Arnold expresses in "To Marguerite--Continued."[38] The irony of all conceptions of heaven is that they have all been so earthbound. Stevens mocks those who yearn for paradise, yet who can conceive of it in no other but earthly terms--"Alas, that they should wear our colors there." The garden full of eternal delights, because it is eternal, would be utterly tedious and cloying; lacking the variety of change, it would be merely an insipid copy of our own earthly paradise.

"Death is the mother of beauty" is a repetition of line 3 of Stanza V. The final lines of the sixth stanza--"Within whose burning bosom we devise/Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly"--are gnomic but forceful. The word "devise," not to be construed as "descry," means to form in the mind. The meaning of these lines is identical with that of the poem, "The Worms at Heaven's Gate." Out of the cleansing, all-consuming fires of death emerges new life.

The next stanza strikes one as too Whitmanesque, too obvious a flexing of poetic muscle. Viewed as a return to paganism,[39] it does not interrupt the poem's discursive flow, but the change in tone is intrusive, and brings the reader up short. The sun is a central symbol in Stevens' verse, the fount of life and nucleus of reality, so that this devotion to it must seem to the poet appropriate. (One could only wish that it were less laboriously boisterous.) With line 7, we return to the question asked in the third stanza, "Shall our blood fail?"

Stevens now emphatically asserts that it will not: "Their chant shall be the chant of paradise,/Out of their blood returning to the sky" (ll. 6-7). The effect of the repetition of such words as chant, shall, and voice is ritualistic, hieratic.

The remainder of the stanza is surpassingly beautiful. "The trees, like serafin" in line 10 remind us of the poem "Evening without Angels," but the "seraphim like lutanists/ Arranged above the trees" have here undergone an earthly metamorphosis into the trees themselves. The concluding lines, "And whence they came and whither they shall go/The dew upon their feet shall manifest" are as poignantly evocative as any in the whole body of English poetry. The dew is so appropriate an image because, being a distillation from heaven that falls upon the earth, it unites the two. Stevens himself affirms, "Life is as fugitive as dew upon the feet of men dancing in dew."[40]

The poem in its original, abbreviated form ended here, and it is hard to conceive of a more perfect "dying fall." But Stevens was not restating old saws, however lovely or pithy, about the evanescence of human life. He was affirming a relatively new truth, and a profoundly disturbing one. After all, to die is tolerable if death fulfills a purpose and translates us to some transcendent realm. For Stevens, however, life has no purpose but the joy one succeeds in investing it with or extracting from it here on earth. Death is the inescapable corollary of life. So Stevens concludes his poem with a recapitulation of its beginning:

> She hears, upon that water without sound,
> A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
> Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
> It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
> [VIII.1-4.]

This is the message that the woman's journey through time and space brings home to her: Christ was mortal; he did not open the gates of another world to us; there is no other world. Furthermore, "The death of one god is the death of all."[41]

> 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. [VIII.5-8.]

These words have the deliberate and certain ring of Milton, though the thought underlying them is directly opposed to Milton's theology. Nevertheless, the passage is reminiscent of passages in Paradise Lost.[42] As Pack says, "The juxtaposition here of 'unsponsored' and 'free' seems a touch of genius in which Stevens has concentrated whole volumes of theology into two words."[43] "We live in an old chaos" denies any purpose to life beyond what we can invest it with for ourselves. This "old chaos of the sun" is subject to time, to cyclical change--the alternation of day and night and the cycle of the seasons--but "island solitude" sufficiently expresses the isolation of our planet floating in the "wide water" of time-space. The syntax of lines 7 and 8 is clever and tricky: "inescapable" can be seen to refer both to the "old chaos"--this earth--and to its subjection to that "wide water," so that although our earth is "unsponsored" and "free," we are clearly imprisoned in time and space, and therefore in change.

Having stated his thesis in the first part of the stanza, it is characteristic that Stevens should proceed to illustrate it with a series of beautiful particulars drawn from nature. They remind one of a medieval tapestry or illuminated manuscript brought up to date. The images have a spontaneity and freshness that suit them to the description of the last discovered of the terrestrial paradises, the American wilderness.[44]

> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness . . .

The quail with their "spontaneous cries" underline the fortuitousness of nature.[45] Again, in line 12, Stevens speaks of "the isolation of the sky" in which

> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.
> [Italics mine.]

The force of the word "casual" is terrifying, with a terror quite different from, but just as arbitrary, as that produced by its anagram, causal. The "undulations" are "ambiguous" because neither the birds, who represent us, nor we, know to what we are going beyond the darkness that is death.[46]

The choice of pigeons in the final stanza (compare the cockatoo in the initial one) may be an invitation to recognize an ironic reference to the dove that symbolizes the Holy Spirit. The fact that the pigeons' wings are extended suggests a certain courage and trust in the fate to which they are borne by that wind which Stevens once called "the final mercy."[47] But compare

the feeling of Stevens' ending with the close of Gerard Manley Hopkins' sonnet "God's Grandeur": ". . . the Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." They are poles apart. There is nothing, nobody brooding over this "old chaos of the sun" or "island solitude" but the men who inhabit it.

Footnotes

[1]This statement can be illustrated by comparing the quality of Stanzas III, IV, and VI with that of Stanzas V and VII. The former group have more sustained power, though it must be conceded that Stanzas II and VIII, affirming the new religion of earth, are as fine as any in the poem. My statement agrees with J. V. Cunningham's--"much of the deep feeling of the poem is derived from the exposition in sustained and traditional rhetoric of the position which is being denied." Cunningham concludes therefore that the poem is "in this sense parasitic on what it rejects." See his "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens," reprinted in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, eds. Ashley Brown & Robert S. Haller (Philadelphia & New York, 1962), p. 136.
Stylistically, though full of echoes from the English masters--from the King James Bible through Milton and the Romantics to the Victorians--yet, as Robert Buttel says, "one of the triumphs of the poem is that the reader hardly thinks of influences when he reads it, so thoroughly did Stevens make the stylistic elements his own." Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium (Princeton, 1967), p. 241.

[2]For instance, Yvor Winters' "The Hedonist's Progress" in his In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1947), pp. 431-58. Concentrating on overt, rational statement is particularly a mistake with Stevens' poems, since, as he says, "Things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions (poems) very often have meanings that differ in nature from the meanings of things that have their origin in reason. They have imaginative or emotional meanings, and they communicate these meanings to people who are susceptible to imaginative or emotional meanings. They may communicate nothing at all to people who are open only to rational meanings." Cited by Samuel French Morse in "The Native Element," reprinted in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 207. (The remark was originally made in a letter to Max Herzberg.)

[3]As Irving Howe says in Another Way of Looking at a Blackbird," New Republic, CXXXVII (November 4, 1957), 19.

[4]Sound and Form in Modern Poetry: A Study of Prosody from Thomas Hardy to Robert Lowell (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 238.

[5]Ibid.

[6]"Wallace Stevens: Some Relations between Poetry and Painting," reprinted in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, pp. 239-40.

[7]Ibid., p. 240. My own analysis of the poem's evolution is an elaboration of Michel Benamou's far sketchier description.

[8]Also noted by Buttel, p. 157.

[9]Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected & edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 183.

[10]Harriet Monroe was the first to say that she found the shift of tone in Stanza VII jarring, and was therefore loath to end the poem on this note. (Ibid.) The only improvement one could make to "Sunday Morning" would, it seems to me, be to drop this stanza. This is, of course, a matter of taste, but the writer would be interested to know whether other readers of the poem do not find the omission of this stanza makes "Sunday Morning" even more impressive and unified as a poem.

[11]As Michel Benamou points out, "Some Relations between Poetry and Painting," p. 239.

[12]The cockatoo would appear to be inwoven. In Stevens' Letters, there appear extracts from a journal he kept as a young man. In one of these, he mentions a rug with the figure of a peacock woven into it, which decorated the floor of an apartment he rented in Yorkville. Letters, p. 38.

[13]As Robert Pack observes in his Wallace Stevens: An Approach to his Poetry and Thought (New Brunswick, N.J., 1958), p. 13. Stevens' alternative method is to move from some generalized statement to a series of particulars illustrative of it.

[14]Robert Pack (Wallace Stevens, p. 23) and Howard Baker, in his article "Wallace Stevens" (The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 88), agree that the wide water represents time; Yvor Winters (In Defense of Reason, p. 433) sees it as representing infinite space. It represents both.

[15]In Stevens' Adagia, he declares, "A journey in space equals a journey in time." Opus Posthumous, edited with introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 162.

[16]Compare "God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)." Ibid., p. 172.

[17]Ll. 65-66 of Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey.

[18]See Marie Borroff's "Wallace Stevens: The World and the Poet," her Introduction to Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), p. 10.

[19]"The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them." "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1965), p. 32.

[20]"This happy creature--It is he that invented the Gods. It is he that put into their mouths the only words they have ever spoken!" Adagia, O.P., p. 167.

[21]Blood is frequently identified with imagination in Stevens' poetry to indicate how instinctive, visceral, and necessitous it is. See, for example, "Poetry is a Destructive Force."

[22]Sometimes it seems no color at all, as in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"--"The basic slate, the universal hue"--or in the poem, "Landscape with Boat": ". . . the neutral centre, the ominous element,/The single-colored, colorless, primitive."

[23]"Examples of Wallace Stevens," reprinted in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, pp. 66 & 71.

[24]As in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," X, for example.

[25]
> Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
> The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
> To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
> The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
> So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

[26]See particularly Stanzas XX through XXV.

[27]The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 137.

[28]The Making of Harmonium, p. 223.

[29]See Caliban's speech (III.ii.144-49): ". . . the isle is full of noises,/Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not."

[30]"North and South in Stevens' America," Harvard Advocate, CXXVII, Wallace Stevens Number (December 1940), 25.

[31]O.P., pp. 117-18.

[32]Wallace Stevens, p. 28.

[33]Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 10.

[34]The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 135.

[35]Letters, p. 183.

[36]"Ode on a Grecian Urn," III.1-2.

[37]The Making of Harmonium, p. 234.

[38]In this poem, Matthew Arnold declares that "we mortal millions" are isolated or "enisled" in life's ocean, millions of separate islands:

> . . . a God their severance ruled!
> And bade betwixt their shores to be
> The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.

[39]As Stevens says it is in Letters, p. 250.

[40]Ibid. The final two lines of this stanza have a Biblical ring.

[41]Adagia, O.P., p. 165.

[42]See, for example, Book VII, ll. 218-23 & 339-53.

[43]Wallace Stevens, p. 32.

[44]A fresh breeze blows through these lines and, as Buttel says, "the wilderness seems to be native." The Making of Harmonium, p. 222.

[45]Stevens once remarked, on the subject of the fortuitousness of the best metaphor, "Poetry is a pheasant disappearing into the brush," and thereby illustrated the truth of his thesis. Adagia, O.P., p. 173.

[46]Downward-swooping birds usually suggest dying men in Stevens' poetry--in "Domination of Black" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" no less than in this final stanza of "Sunday Morning."

[47]"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," X.

CHAPTER III

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is one of Stevens' brilliant poems whose dazzling sensuous surface almost defies rational paraphrase. It is a mosaic of moods, a series of meditations on aging. Stevens says of the poem, "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."[1] There is little of the personal in the poem since it is characteristically and consciously cryptic; the ironic, mock-serious tone is highly characteristic of Stevens. The uncle's meditations are obscure because "what is given is never the line of reasoning itself, but the more or less metaphorical illustrations of the line of reasoning, frequently in the form of obscure illustrative parables."[2] Nor is it really a line of reasoning, or thought, that is pursued by the poem's protagonist; it is, rather a series of emotional reflections, carefully distanced so as to render them impersonal, the emotion undercut by constant irony.

The problem the poem poses for the critic was anticipated in Stevens' response to an early analysis by L. W. Payne. Stevens tells Payne, "Your analysis is much too close. I am sure that I never had in mind the many abstractions that appear

in your analysis."[3] The trouble is that the poem tends to dissolve when one tries to discover what the images represent. The speaker's moods elude the reader who would present them as thoughts. As in The Comedian as the Letter C, there is a disconcerting disparity between the poem's surface brilliance and the meaning that the imagery clothes, and sometimes, conceals.

The imagery of "Le Monocle" is its most striking feature. It is extraordinarily rich and varied, even for Stevens, and forms a thick, sometimes impenetrable, sometimes translucent impasto over the poem's precise, somewhat pedantic syntax. The imagery of "Le Monocle" is apt and highly suggestive, though not always consistent.[4] In accordance with the parabolic technique, it sometimes has an emblematic rather than a symbolic quality. An image used as an emblem can signify only one thing, and that often arbitrarily. It may be extremely difficult to ascertain what the emblematic image represents--as with the red bird of Stanza II or the blue and white pigeons of the final stanza--but such images do not have the indefinite suggestiveness of symbols. Though the apple of Stanza IV, an allusive image of desire as also of decay, might be said to waver on the borderline between allegory and symbolism, the elaborately piled coiffures of the third stanza or the "warty squashes" of the eighth stanza plainly have but one assigned meaning. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is a poem in which feelings have been translated into vivid visual images, and the poem may be read as a parable.

The greatest difficulty of "Le Monocle" is that of ascertaining its meaning because of the ambiguity arising from

the characteristic mode and tone of the piece. Like so many of Stevens' poems, this one is part dramatic, part meditative.[5] Most critics, myself included, view the poem as springing out of a definite dramatic situation.[6]

The opening lines are addressed by the aging speaker to his aging wife, mistress, lover (it scarcely matters which, but one opts for wife, because the relationship is obviously of long standing). The speaker (the uncle) remembers, with deep longing and regret, this woman as she was in her youth (St. I). He knows that both of them are declining towards death, and that death is final; she mistakenly believes that their love is immortal (II.10-11). Like the lady in "Sunday Morning," she feels the need of some imperishable bliss. (There are vestiges of such a need in him, but he turns to art, not religion, to give life meaning in the face of death.) The third stanza contains the speaker's attempt to allay his own fears (which the woman has incited) that art, like religion, is vanquished by brute reality--"not one curl in nature has survived."

In the following four stanzas, but for a brief reappearance at the end of Stanza V, the dramatic situation disappears, being submerged in the speaker's meditations. In a remarkably brilliant though grotesque evocation, the two mature protagonists emerge again (VIII.6-11), only to vanish once more until the brief and vivid personal anecdote described at the close of Stanza XI. This sketchy review of the underlying dramatic situation in the poem takes no account of those stanzas (IV, VI, VII, IX, X and XI)

which are pure meditation, or of the fact that the dramatic situation is clearly presented only in the first section, this being the only one in which action is not crowded out by reflection or "introspective . . . lecturing."

Some critics will not concede that the speaker is addressing a woman at all. Thus, Eugene Nassar says of the opening, "The 'you' addressed is not the wife of the narrator, the middle-aged uncle; the stanza is a love ode to the 'Interior Paramour,' to the Imagination."[7] The whole poem then becomes allegory. While "Le Monocle" obviously shades off into allegory, particularly in those stanzas that are purely reflective or explicitly parabolic (for example, Stanzas II and VII), it seems to me that the superiority of the "dramatic" as opposed to the simple allegorical reading is that one can have drama plus allegory. It is more exciting to overhear a man addressing a woman than it is to eavesdrop on one consorting with his own imagination! This is probably one reason why Stevens likes to hang his meditative poems about particular figures in specific settings--however hypothetical and shadowy the figures may be. The presence of the woman adds immediacy and poignancy and tension to what would otherwise seem self-centered reverie.

In addition to mode, another problematical feature of the poem is its tone. It begins with a mocking litany or eulogy surely directed at the speaker's beloved and also at the whole notion of romantic love.[8] This sets the tone for the entire poem, which is best described as mock-heroic, mock-didactic, deeply ironic.[9] The pervasive irony enables Stevens simultaneously

to embrace and to reject the ideas of romantic love, of the immortality of love, of life, and of art. He has to reject these ideas because "the faith of forty" knows that they are not true. At the same time, he has to accord them the utmost grandeur and persuasiveness of expression because the "rose rabbi" recognizes their indispensable validity and value as illusions. (See the "doleful heroics" of Stanza XI.) Love is neither all physical, nor all metaphysical; it is both.

Because of the uncle's persistent self-mockery, and the superficial resemblance between personae--both middle-aged, highly self-conscious, and over-deliberative--"Le Monocle" has been compared to T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."[10] Thé analogy is more instructive as contrast than as comparison.[11] Stevens' uncle is a thoughtful man growing old, trying to find some consolation for his awareness of physical and emotional depletion in the powers of poetry. Eliot's Prufrock is the victim of a peculiarly modern sort of ennui or accidie. Though only an "attendant lord," not "Prince Hamlet," he, too, has a faculty of "thinking so precisely on the event" that he has rendered himself wholly impotent. Stevens' protagonist, while "meticulous" and "full of high sentence," and even, perhaps, something of a clown, is not at all "obtuse." He is still full of a wry joie de vivre that balances the wry pain of middle age, and he completely (if not with wholehearted assent) accepts the natural order of which he recognizes himself to be an infinitesimal part. Prufrock,

on the other hand, is a figure of social satire, and his love song "stresses the impotence of the entire social outlook of its victim."[12]

The essential difference between Eliot's poem and Stevens' is that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a true dramatic monologue in the twentieth century stream-of-consciousness mode. The persona reveals himself; he seems not to be in control of his meditations, but groping toward some final realization about himself. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," despite William York Tindall's assertion that it is a dramatic monologue, is not.[13] The speaker is in control of his reflections because the poet is using him simply as a mouthpiece, and is constantly supplementing the speaker's remarks with his own commentary, and the speaker's vision with his own as he peers through the protagonist's monocle.

Probably the first question any reader asks himself about this poem is what the title means. He may dismiss it as cute or silly (as Donald Davie dismisses this and most of Stevens' titles),[14] but he surely will not be satisfied until he has played with the obvious pun and tried to discover some meaning in it. The title is obviously a humorous reflection on the kind of phrases found in old-style language textbooks, for example, "La plume de ma tante." Alfred Kreymborg informs us that Stevens' poem is indebted to Donald Evans' "En Monocle."[15] The uncle is the poem's protagonist and appears also to be its speaker, but he is something of a cipher, like the woman of "Sunday Morning" or the man of Esthétique du Mal. The uncle is the peg on

which the poet hangs his meditations. He represents, quite simply, a point of view.[16]

The monocle is significant. A monocle is usually a sign of affectation, and certainly the speaker in the poem is affected. This affectation is self-conscious and deliberate, however. A monocle may be worn not in order to strike an air of hauteur, but to correct sight that is deficient in only one eye. If worn as a corrective, a monocle will result in single, accurate vision; if worn as a cosmetic device, the resultant vision will be double--clear in the naked eye, blurred in the other (unless the lens is plain glass). In "Le Monocle," the man behind the monocle sees with, but also <u>through</u>, the necessarily distorting lens of imagination; the naked eye perceives reality. The "dark rabbi" (the realist) and the "rose rabbi" (the idealist) merge as one. Another way to put it would be to see two men behind the monocle: the poet's naked, acute vision supplements the speaker's partial myopia to create the poem's curious double perspective. "The poet was, after all, a man with a monocle: one eye naked to reality, one eye looking at the world imaginatively. The double view, he believed, would compose to a single inclusive vision, once he had come to terms with himself."[17] Another way of interpreting the monocle is as the poet's art, his means of distancing reality, of keeping it at one remove.[18]

The poem comprises twelve stanzas of eleven lines each. The meter is predominantly iambic pentameter. There is a most skillful use of alliteration and assonance, and an unusually high

proportion of end rhymes for Stevens--the last six lines of the first stanza, for example, or lines 3, 5, and 7 of Stanza II, and lines 6 and 8 of Stanza IV. Many of the lines are end-stopped, and the phrasing and syntax are frequently as carefully balanced as they are in Augustan verse.[19] The curtness of the phrasing and the regularity of the meter contrast with the luxuriant rhetoric and imagery; it is this sinewy substructure which is largely responsible for the epigrammatic, mock-sententious tone of the poem.

The poem appears to lack consistency. It is not only that this, like so many poems of Stevens, is a variation on a theme, some of the units of which seem transposable. (To demonstrate this, the reader might try the effect of reversing the second and third stanzas, for example. The result is no more satisfying logically, but it strikes me as more pointed than the published sequence, and it provides continuity of imagery, specifically of the water imagery that concludes both the first and third stanzas.) "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is really a variation on several themes, themes that are closely related but only loosely interwoven within the poem. The relations between these themes are intimate, but the poet leaves them implicit. I disagree with Ronald Sukenick that the poem concerns itself with a single topic--"love at middle-age," though certainly this is its main preoccupation.[20] "Le Monocle" is clearly concerned with the mutability of all things, not just the transience of love, but that of life and art as well.

Its meaning may be crudely abstracted thus: love passes; life passes; art, too passes--though torrents of song pour out in the discovery of this transience, and in its praise. The poem is an ironic elegy on the evanescence of love and beauty in nature and art, or--if one prefers to view it the other way round--a caustic celebration of the "faith of forty," which turns out to be the most tenuous and tentative of faiths, nothing more positive than the assertion that "fluttering things have so distinct a shade." (The particulars of our fleeting lives are vital and vivid.)

If one goes through the poem, stanza by stanza, trying to discover a logical progression, one is disappointed. But one should not therefore conclude that the poem has no structural principle at all, or that it is incoherent. The structural principle turns out to be that of nearly all Stevens' poems: the mind's oscillation between reality and imaginative evasions of it, "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice."[21] "Where shall I find/Bravura adequate to this great hymn?" The hymn is in celebration of life, which the speaker senses begins to end at forty, and the attempt is to find some faith that will sustain him in face of the very real pain of growing old. The mind presented in the poem is pensive, restless, moody, yet amused at itself. The poem's principle of composition is one of ironic or nervous juxtaposition. Once an emotional equilibrium has been struck and all relevant channels of thought and feeling have been explored, the poem will end.

To give a more or less rational paraphrase or thematic summary: the first stanza is concerned primarily with the transience of beauty, though the theme of art, as opposed to reality, is briefly presented in the ambiguous third and fourth lines. The second stanza presents the eternal mutability of nature in parable form. The third returns to the impermanence of art in its struggle with reality. (This is perhaps the only considerable poem of Stevens, with the exception of The Comedian, which can legitimately be interpreted as opposing art to nature. Though this is done more pointedly in "Anecdote of the Jar," the opposition there is not human, nor does it have such poignant overtones, as it does in "Le Monocle." Stevens' emphasis, as with the imagination and reality, is usually on the interdependence of art and nature.)

The fourth section ponders, succinctly and movingly, the ripening and decay of both the physical and the mental (apple and skull). The fifth returns to the theme of diminishing passion due to physical decay. After dwelling on impermanence, the speaker affirms that there is something permanent: "There is a substance in us that prevails." This substance is "le gout de l'azur," aspiration, the search for significance, the rage for order, the pursuit of permanence of the life-preserving force of imagination.[22] This is one of the poem's few positive and unqualified assertions: the imagination, momentarily in life (more enduringly in art) sustains us in face of physical decay and death. Stanza VII is a reversion to the religious theme of

"Sunday Morning." The two memorable lines that contain the kernel of its meaning are: "The honey of heaven may or may not come,/ But that of earth both comes and goes at once."

The eighth stanza, which might well have followed the passage on bald, introspective amorists in the sixth, reintroduces the middle-aged lovers who, like over-ripe fruit, are fast decaying. The ninth stanza looks back to the poem's opening: the uncle, transferring his ardor from physical to poetic lovemaking, is bent on composing a hymn in praise of the eternally recurrent natural cycle. Like the opening verse, this one is mock-serious: what is mocked is not so much the object of praise as the manner of praising. The tenth stanza pitches love between the purely physiological and the purely sentimental; perhaps it is the passage of time that is primarily responsible for our "doleful heroics." But if this is so, it is also responsible for the preciousness of the nuances of feeling, as the final stanza suggests. Indeed, the last stanza implies that an acute consciousness of the passage of time sharpens our appreciation of what is left of life and love--"until now I never knew/That fluttering things have so distinct a shade."

The poem's initial invocation is addressed seriously and yet mockingly to the uncle's spouse or sweetheart. It is a half-serious parody of the invocation to a muse (Urania) or goddess (Venus), a pseudo-litany in the style of the religious apostrophizing of the Virgin Mary. Stevens employs a similar

"periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion" in the opening verse of "To the One of Fictive Music":

> Sister and mother and diviner love,
> And of the sisterhood of the living dead
> Most near, most clear, and of the clearest bloom
> And of the fragrant mothers the most dear . . .[23]

The crucial lines, "There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,/Like the clashed edges of two words that kill," are susceptible of a double-edged interpretation. First of all, it is not clear who speaks the two words, the artist or his sweetheart. They have been seen as the enunciation of the poem's true subject, art's transmutation of reality.[24] Certainly the first four lines are put into the uncle's mouth, and he may be responding to words spoken by his beloved. The "two words" are not to be taken too literally; they may refer to disturbing words spoken by the woman to the man or vice versa, but I think it pedestrian to interpret them, as one critic does, as the two words "Then" and "Now,"[25] or to paraphrase these lines, as another critic does, as meaning "There is nothing so painful as an exchange of cutting phrases."[26] The speaker <u>may</u> be trying to fortify himself against some slight that the woman has inflicted on him--some derogation of his performance as a lover, perhaps--and this taunt <u>may</u> have prompted the rhetorical outburst of the opening lines, but this is to elaborate, perhaps unnecessarily, on the poem's sketchy situation. The two words may well be some variant of the "mortal no" uttered by the uncle and repudiated by his paramour. It is the opening four lines that we should focus on: is the uncle commenting on the futility or on the

power of words? Probably on both. Words are powerful, but they distort reality and mangle feeling; the double negatives emphasize their power (double negatives being equivalent to affirmatives), but they also undercut it. This comment on the power of language has, obviously, generalized significance: words are both powerful and powerless. The opening invocation, then, is not just to the woman but to all she represents as an inspiration to poetry. As Frank Doggett says, "The poet . . . addresses the beloved, mocking her as the mythical goddess of love. He deprecates her powers, for he has come to the time of life when love is not all."[27] This is to emphasize the mockery, as the latter part of the first stanza stresses the speaker's own sense of loss.

In the midst of his magnificent but mocking measures, the speaker wonders whether it is his paramour or himself that he is mocking. He recalls her past beauty, once worthy of much tribute. (It seems senseless to give this opening section a merely allegorical reading, for "her" would then have to refer to the speaker's imagination, which has obviously lost none of its pristine power and radiance.) Why does the uncle long to be "a thinking stone"? Stone and rock are for Stevens prime symbols of the "basic slate," the bedrock of reality. If one might be as rooted and substantial, as unmoved and enduring as stone, while simultaneously enjoying consciousness, one might bring the world "quite round," participating in an unflinching marriage of matter with spirit. Daniel Fuchs has compared the uncle's desire to be a thinking stone with Prufrock's regressive fantasy of

being "a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."[28] The image prompts in the reader the same happy surprise, but whereas Prufrock wants instinctive appetite and the ability to satisfy it, the uncle yearns for permanence. (His beloved believes in immortality; he does not; nevertheless, he still yearns for it.) In imagining himself as a thinking stone, it is as though the speaker were trying to avoid feeling, but also seeking to stabilize or fix his feelings as they now are. (He does not want to lose what he still has, but it is too painful to remember what is already beyond recall of the flesh.) The image also represents the poet's desire to get down to the hard substance of reality, which he notably does in Stanzas IV and VIII of "Le Monocle." (This desire is similarly reflected in "The Man on the Dump," who cries, "Stanza my stone!" A thinking stone may owe something to Pascal, one of Stevens' favorite philosophers. Pascal called man a reed, but a thinking reed ["un roseau pensant"][29]; Stevens' persona wishes instead that he might be reflective rock.)

Since the brilliance of "Le Monocle" inheres so completely in the suggestiveness of its language, it is worth remarking details. The word "foists," for example, has just the right connotation of something surreptitiously cast up by memory and forcing itself on the speaker's unwilling attention. The uncle does not want to remember his woman as she once was, for this causes an upwelling of uncontrollable passion and regret.[30] "The sea of spuming thought" may remind us of Yeats's "spume that plays/Upon a ghostly paradigm of things,"[31]

a brilliant description of the Platonic view of nature. Stevens' view of nature is the exact opposite of Plato's. For Stevens, it is thought and feeling that are ghostly, breaking aginst the rock of reality with the fragility of foam or bubbles (ll. 8-9). "Saltier" is another well chosen word, for it suggests tears but has also a sexual connotation.

The next verse is in the parabolic style beloved of Stevens, and particularly evident in this poem (compare Stanza VII). As Nasser says, "There is really no way of telling what a red bird is doing on a golden floor" except by reference to red birds throughout Stevens' poetry.[32] We know from the body of his work that red customarily stands for reality,[33] and that birds often represent men.[34] This is so in "Le Monocle," where the red bird is a reminder to the uncle of his own mortality and of the sensuous, though fleeting, joy of being alive.

This second stanza has a Shakespearean ring, reminding us of Sonnet LXXIII with its "bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang."[35] The setting of Stevens' stanza is ostensibly spring, not autumn as in Shakespeare's sonnet, yet the speaker is in the autumn of life, and "These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell." "Wind and wet and wing" is both a fine example of metonymy and of alliteration. These compressed, concrete details of the season create an emblematical landscape whose imagery is almost heraldic in its stylized simplicity of color and outline. A torrent of song will pour from the bird when he finds--what?--his "choir," his

appointed place in the sun, his appropriate rank among the choristers, his particular note in "the right chorale." Or perhaps, more basically, simply his mate and his death. The uncle describes himself as a "man of fortune" because he is about to relinquish the inherited wealth of vitality which was his birthright to other "heirs"--to succeeding generations. But he is a man of fortune in another sense: fortune is fickle and is about to deprive him of everything he has.

"Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?" means "shall I explain (literally, smoothe out) or explicate (literally, unfold) this complicated (much-crumpled) thing?" (Visually, the word "crumpled" may evoke the uncle's life as now age-wrinkled, wizened.) The parable is then elucidated, in much the same manner as in Stanza VII, though I think more satisfactorily.[36] The last two lines make it clear that the woman persists in believing their love immortal, assuring herself that she and her lover will know each other again in heaven.

The third stanza is masterly. As in The Comedian as the Letter C, and elsewhere in Stevens' poetry, elaborate coiffures are emblematic of all human art.[37] Sukenick remarks that hair is here used as a synecdoche for all physical beauty,[38] but the figure is not, properly speaking, a synecdoche, and hair is used to represent art, not natural beauty. (The woman with her hair down, roused from sleep, is opposed in her natural beauty to the strenuously cultivated beauty of art.)[39] There is both

humor and pathos in this stanza. "The old Chinese sages one sees in prints . . . prinking and studying the reflection of their hair and beards," affirms a critic, "are meditating on age or evanescence."[40] Perhaps, too, their tonsorial efforts are inspired by the desire to remain sexually attractive.[41] This was certainly the motive inspiring the elaborate coiffures of the courtesans in Utamaro's paintings,[42] and those of the beauties of Bath, whose hair was indeed their crowning glory. Note that the poet-uncle never concludes that such "tittivations" were in vain, even if "not one curl in nature has survived." Note, too, that the stanza is couched in the interrogative voice, except for the refusal to play "the flat historic scale." The speaker chooses as examples of human art ages whose styles of beauty were exquisite, though perhaps over-refined.[43] Whatever ruin time wreaks on beauty, the desire for beauty made permanent is unquenchable. Art is the only way in which man may attempt to satisfy this desire. When the uncle's disheveled lady appears on the scene, the "studious ghosts" of the mandarins, the bijin, and the beauties of Bath whom he has just evoked, vanish, and the attention of the artist is absorbed by the woman "dripping" in her hair.[44] Nassar, remaining faithful to his allegory of the "Interior Paramour," while missing the pathos of the middle-aged artist and his model, remarks, "The modern imagination is pristine in its purity and its poverty."[45] Art now has to cope with a more naked reality and evolve a new, more austere style to reflect it. The raw material of beauty,

however altered or tarnished, survives and asks for new transmutations. As in the first stanza, the burden of this passage is both dramatic and allegorical.

The next verse is also a fine one. Its symbolism, though far from original, is richly suggestive, and its syntax is as spare and yet pungent as seventeenth-century poetry:

> An apple serves as well as any skull
> To be the book in which to read a round.
> And is an excellent in that it is composed
> Of what, like skulls, comes rotting back to ground.

Stevens chooses as his memento mori "the luscious and impeccable fruit of life" which, in contrast to the fictitious everlasting "silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion" fruit of Stanza X,[46] falls of its own weight to earth.[47] There is, as Nassar suggests, a subtle pun on the word "impeccable."[48] It is no sin to taste of the apple of life and love. On the contrary, it is the only virtue, for the apple is symbol of the only perfection we shall ever know, one that "bears its fruit and dies." Being alive involves tasting and savoring this fruit, which for Eve was "peccant, and went untasted, but . . . the sweetness of belief in an absolute nourished man then."[49] The apple is described as simultaneously sweet and bitter because it is a composite symbol of life and death. While it went "untasted, in its heavenly, orchard air," Adam and Eve were without knowledge of good or evil--not yet truly alive, for they were not yet conscious of death.

Better to meditate on apple than skull, says Stevens. The apple will expound the "round" or cycle of existence as

well as the skull--better, perhaps, for to be instructed of too much mortality is to miss all the joy of living. The choice of the word "round" is clever: it has many meanings, including those of a circular dance or of a song in which singer after singer takes up and repeats the same melody--this second meaning reminds us of the choiring birds of Stanza II.

The final three lines of Stanza IV imply that the apple of life and love does not begin to taste of mortality until one has left impassioned youth behind and become aware of the imminence of death. With the realization that time is limited, that life is fleeting, one begins to read life or to make love, no longer for the sake of reading or of making love, but in order to pass the time. Nassar says that the apple (love/life) "is tasted and enjoyed in youth out of simple desire, without reflection or study. It is at forty . . . when the body, like the apple, decays, that the imaginative meditation on reality and the nature of love becomes necessary. This is the cycle of life for man, from tasting to thinking. . . . The world is only 'body,' and this final knowledge is a maddening, hardly tolerable lesson to learn."[50] Sukenick emphasizes middle-aged love as the kind of self-conscious study that Stevens depicts it to be in the following stanza. "One cannot understand love until after the heat of passion or of youth has passed and one can reflect on it merely 'to pass the time.'"[51] While serving one's apprenticeship to life and to love, one is too much impassioned, too much in love with life, to be able to contemplate death.

"The measure of the intensity of love/Is measure, also of the verve of earth." To paraphrase tritely, love does indeed make the world tick. "Verve" is another precisely chosen word; it means energy, vigor, or spirit, and originally applied particularly to artistic energy. There is, presumably, a correlation between a man's capacity for love and an artist's capacity for creation, both of which, in turn, depend on the "verve of earth," the enthusiasm for life. The remainder of the stanza records the diminishing verve in the speaker. (In effect, his ardor is not so much diminished as diverted or sublimated: he channels into poetry the energy he formerly expended on love.) The "furious star" in the western sky is presumably Venus, patroness of love. The light of this star has become, for the uncle, as feeble and intermittent as the firefly's spark. His pulse slows, while crickets, ephemeral as glow-worms, tick out drily the passing of one more year.[52] Assonance and alliteration are used most effectively in the concluding reminiscence, which underlines the real and fictive kinship of the woman to "all that dust."[53] Compared to all that dust, the human is as ephemeral and infinitesimal as the cricket.

The reference to "painting lakes" in Stanza VI signifies amorous dalliance. The diction betrays a certain impatience with those forty-year-old philanderers who "will be" (that is, persist in) sentimental amours. (There is a dialectical verb "to lake," meaning to play or sport, often in an amorous sense.) "The basic slate, the universal hue" appears to be the

unquenchable desire underlying the particular nuances of each flirtation. This is the "substance in us that prevails." Lines 5-10 contain a witty indictment of all sex experts, whether of the physiological or psychological kind. Our times have bred thousands of amorists, "breathless to attend each quirky turn" and to prescribe the ninety-nine or nine-hundred and ninety-nine physical or mental postures for achieving perfect bliss. The passion of youth, Stevens sensibly concludes, is "a theme for Hyacinth alone." (Hyacinth was a youth killed for love.[54]) The name hyacinth suggests one of those piercing but ephemeral blues with which the youthful imagination alone colors love. (It is to be contrasted with "The basic slate, the universal hue.") Romantic passion dies young; it proves difficult to sustain beyond the age of forty. The middle-aged amorist is, in a sense, exiled from passion, driven in upon himself and his memories, forever comparing notes.

The next stanza is puzzling. It seems to forsake the theme of mutability for the religious concerns of "Sunday Morning." The two themes coalesce, however, in lines 8-9. One has to turn to other poems of Stevens, poems that contain angels, mules, and horses, to discover what the mules and angels here signify. In "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," the title figure, the supreme realist, rides her donkey up a mountain--a symbol of the difficult ascent into the realm of reality. On the way up, she passes a man riding a horse "all will," a "figure of capable imagination. . . . Rushing from what was real" toward "the

ultimate elegance: the imagined land."[55] The youth rushing down the passes toward the land of his heart's desire and the old woman climbing upward to the final confrontation with ultimate truth establish, as they pass, the momentary equilibrium of imagination with reality. In "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," however, the real hero seems to be the quixotic youth, "a lover with phosphorescent hair,/Dressed poorly, arrogant of his streaming forces . . . " The poem's emphasis, probably because of its chronological sequence (ascent followed by descent), seems to be a parable of the necessity for imagination. It seems also to be a parable of two souls, the one old and about to leave the world, the other young and about to enter it. The provisions they carry with them are appropriate to their different destinations: Mrs. Uruguay has jettisoned all illusions--"Her no and no made yes impossible"--while the youth carries with him all those illusions necessary to living. The values of "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" are, to some extent, reversed in the seventh section of "Le Monocle." Riddel dismisses this section as "simply a parable of the imagination returning to reality."[56]

"The mules that angels ride" may well be those human dolts who mulishly persist in believing themselves to be of heavenly origin, and who plume themselves on a "starry connaissance." They are, therefore, "dainty of their way" in this world; many paths are forbidden them by the angels who continue to ride their backs. ("Descensions" is another

precisely chosen word: it means descents, but descents of a condescending sort; in conjunction with bells, which usually signify self-deception in Stevens' poetry,[57] line three conveys the sound of faraway, unearthly tintinnabulations.) Those sensualists for whom there is no heaven remain deaf to these supernatural sounds and, the world being all Caesar's and their own, enjoy themselves uproariously. While non-committal about the "honey of heaven," which "may or may not come," the speaker is quite positive about the "honey of earth" that "comes and goes at once." Sukenick is probably right in detecting a sexual pun here. His interpretation is persuasive: "The sense of the parable is that heavenly good ('honey') may come, but earthy [sic] good comes as certainly as it goes; its coming is contingent on its going."[58] Probably, as is implied in "Sunday Morning," our enjoyment of earthly good is contingent on its passing.

Nassar provided a thought-provoking but somewhat twisted interpretation of this stanza: "The parable seems to be a satire on two sorts of people. Religious people believe in a transcendant truth ('from beyond the sun') and wait for the consummation of the revelation. Others, the unimaginative people, live completely in a sensual sty. The religious will probably never have their consummation, and the unimaginative will never be able to catch the moment's beauty in a creative act."[59] Nassar's comment on the angelic muleteers is good, though it misses some subtleties, but he exaggerates the poet's contempt for the centurions, largely because he identifies the poet's vision with that of

the religious people, which is surely a mistake. Stevens' poetry contains no Apeneck Sweeneys rooting about their sensual sties; he was probably unable to conceive of anyone completely devoid of imagination, unless his bereavement were willed, as it is in "The Snow Man." In "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," Stevens proposes, albeit non-committally, that "It may be that the ignorant man, alone,/Has any chance to mate his life with life." Stevens does not despise the centurions any more than the religious people.

What are we to make of "A damsel heightened by eternal bloom"? In his Letters, Stevens refers to this figure as "a specifically divine revelation, not merely angelic transformations of ourselves."[60] Presumably, this eternally youthful maiden is a foil to the speaker's own aging inamorata. One cannot help finding the final two lines baffling, with their invitation to "suppose." What we are invited to suppose is so evasive and so ethereal that our speculations, however subtle, can scarcely be significant. Perhaps the poem as a whole might have been better without this digression on angels, mules, and centurions, ending as it does in mid-air.

It is good to descend to earth again, as we palpably do in the following stanza. The uncle ridicules himself as one of those "introspective exiles" from passion who, the bloom of love rubbed off, devote themselves to tedious study of the subject. The second line looks forward to the third, which describes so concisely the cycle of birth, growth, maturity, and decay. The uncle observes his own mind entering its wintry phase while

fresher ones submit to love's ancient law. The first five lines of this section are particularly characteristic of the meticulous, pedantic, mock-didactic tone of the poem as a whole. Samuel French Morse has noted the resemblance of the relatively regular, iambic pentameter, end-stopped and balanced lines to Pope's heroic couplets.[61] Why should "It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies" be described as a "trivial trope"? When the human dilemma is so boldly stated, all reflection seems trivial, superfluous. The process of fruition and decay is all-powerful, all-consuming. It is a necessary truth of life, of love, and of art.

The final lines in which the aging lovers are compared to two over-ripe squashes are so clear and so effective as to need no comment. The "warty squashes . . ./Distorted by hale fatness" evoke a vision that at first seems expressive of an acute horreur de vie. However, the image also represents the latter end of the necessary, therefore healthful, cycle of growth and decay. The "laughing sky" then recalls the third stanza of "Sunday Morning" with its promise that the sky will seem much friendlier to us once the earth has been accepted as our only paradise, and this life as our only life. It is by such splendidly apt and surprising images as Stevens has used here that he reveals himself to be a master of both eye and tongue.

R. P. Blackmur has written of Stanza IX that it "has nothing logically to do with the poem; it neither develops the

subject nor limits it, but is . . . a rhetorical interlude set in the poem's midst."[62] If one agrees with this, one must surely find the poem's opening apostrophe (to which Stanza IX obviously refers) also a "rhetorical interlude." I disagree with Blackmur that this disquisition on rhetoric has nothing to do with the subject of the poem, for the passion that the uncle formerly expended on love is now being poured into poetry. As in those sections of the Four Quartets where Eliot ponders the problems of literary style, Stevens is here meditating on language.

The "deadly thought of men accomplishing/Their curious fates in war" recalls "the clashed edges of two words that kill." This may be a general reference to the fight of all men against fate, or it may be a more specific allusion to soldiers' lives cut off before they have undergone the natural process of maturation and death just described. ("Le Monocle" was written towards the end of World War I.) Stevens may well be glancing at the alliance he customarily draws between soldier and poet, the poet fighting the war of mind (or imagination) against sky,[63] the soldier pitting himself bodily against fate. It is the soldier's sacrifice which enables the poet to stay home and inspires him to write poetry. War and poetry, two different ways of confronting reality, were intimately connected in Stevens' mind because of the pressures of the age in which he lived.

The "faith of forty" is ambiguously presented as "ward of Cupido," that is to say, both guardian and protégé of love.

It is guardian of love, because love must be kept alive even when physical passion is spent--the education of the human heart should not end with sexual decline; it is the protégé of more youthful passions, because these have fostered it. The "faith of forty" is the perspective the uncle has now reached, of which the whole poem is the full expression. The tone of this stanza is both mock-serious and intensely serious, as the uncle questions everything in raising his hymn in praise of the unhappy human condition. The transience of our lot is to be celebrated with words, when grosser instruments fail.

R. P. Blackmur opines that, though the stanza has nothing logically to do with the poem,

> Yet it is necessary to the poem because its rhetoric . . . expresses the feeling of the poet towards his poem, and that feeling, once expressed, becomes incorporated in the poem. . . . It is one of the advantages of a nondramatic, meditative style, that pure rhetoric may be introduced into a poem without injuring its substance. The structure of the poem . . . is a structure of loose ends, spliced only verbally, joined only by the sequence in which they appear.[64]

The injunction to celebrate "the faith of forty" is, I believe, the heart of the poem; this is what the poem does. The extreme tenuousness of the faith and the cutting irony with which it is celebrated, however, make this faith a very slippery thing indeed. While disagreeing with Blackmur that this stanza has nothing to do with what precedes and follows it, therefore, I do feel that the connections are left too vague and inexplicit. One of the poem's least sympathetic critics, Donald Davie, claims

of Stevens' poetry in general that its obscurity "derives from what he puts into the poem. Pound's and Eliot's obscurity derives from what they leave out."[65] By and large, this is true, but it seems to me that "Le Monocle" would have been a clearer and better poem if Stevens had made explicit some of the connections he leaves implicit, as, for example, the connection between failing body and burgeoning imagination, and the distinction--never really drawn, only hinted at--between sex and love. More important, Stevens seems not to have made up his mind whether the uncle's chief preoccupation is love or language, and whether it is necessary that poetry blossom in love's despite.

The "fops of fancy" are plainly those poets who dwell in an imaginary realm, taking no heed of the grit of reality. Stevens seems also to be derogating the vatic theory of inspiration that lies behind most romantic poetry.[66] The uncle allies himself to Crispin with his proclamation, "I am a yeoman, as such fellows go." The bathetic "as such fellows go" curtly dismisses the "fops of fancy" with whom the uncle is comparing himself. Lines 5 and 6 contain the same mockery of supernatural paradises the poet expresses in Stanza VI of "Sunday Morning." The tree that "stands gigantic, with a certain tip/To which all birds come sometime in their time" stands for the moment of perfection, the culmination of love and the height of happiness, to which all attain at some time in their lives. It is inaccurate and unhelpful, I think, to see the tree as a phallic

symbol, as both Nassar and Sukenick do.[67] Stevens is more likely to have had in mind Wordsworth's Ode on the Intimations of Immortality:

> --But there's a tree, of many, one
> A single field which I have looked upon,
> Both of them speak of something that is gone . . .

Stevens' tree, unlike Wordsworth's, glorifies mortality, while pointing to the immortality of eternal recurrence. The birds who return no more, though the tree still flourishes, represent the generations of man.[68]

In Stanza XI, man is seen as a ventriloquist's puppet, pinching forth sounds and gestures. It is not clear whether "that first, foremost law" against which his "doleful heroics" are pitched is sex, fate, or death.[69] Syntactically, either sex or fate would be correct, but it could equally well be death which prevents love from being all (sex and love are scarcely distinguished) and withholds the "wished-for words." (One does not want to be too literal-minded about these wished-for words, any more than one does about the "two words that kill," but they probably represent a declaration of eternal love.) In any case, it is the confrontation with death that calls forth "doleful heroics," and turns delight into frenzy. The concluding Imagist vignette, in which the romantic aura of the lily pond is shattered by the frog's belly notes, reminds one of the similar poetic self-parody in Esthétique du Mal, XI, in which the realist despises a poetically "well-made scene."[70] The frog represents a visceral reality that punctures poetic pretensions, as the first

law of existence shatters our romantic illusions. Since the poet regards birth, procreation, and death as part of a single process,[71] sex and death are different aspects of the same "first, foremost law." Death makes love essential but at the same time ensures that it is fleeting.

In the final stanza, the blue and white pigeons appear to represent love, vital and dead, respectively. They recall the pigeons of "Sunday Morning," who make "ambiguous undulations as they sink/Downward to darkness on extended wings." The blue pigeon represents love as it appears in the buoyant ardor of youth, the white pigeon, "grown tired of flight," represents a love that has died, "a fiction that no longer suffices."[72] The rabbi is a favorite figure of Stevens'.[73] The puzzle here is why the "dark rabbi" (a somber realist?) should be associated with the uncle in his youth, and the "rose rabbi," the deliberate romanticist,[74] with his middle-age. This contradicts what the uncle has previously affirmed--that the book of love is "too mad to read/Before one merely reads to pass the time."[75] Inconsistency of poet, persona, or both now presents us with a protagonist who has spent his youth in mystified but "lordly study," study in which man "proved a gobbet," that is, an unassimilable lump of raw matter, to his dainty mind. The nature of a "dark rabbi" is sufficiently elusive and mysterious, but the word "mincing," used to describe his youthful world, impeaches the uncle's authority for making the judgments he has made and for reaching the viewpoint he has reached. He has apparently not spent sufficient time in the hard school of experience.[76]

Crispin finds the world the same recalcitrant "turnip" at the end of his journey as he did at the beginning, and concludes by swallowing it, "without grace or grumble." But Crispin's development as a character, from realist to romanticist to a shrewd mixture of both is more continuous and consistent than that of the speaker in "Le Monocle." Our rabbinical uncle, Stevens would have us believe, began as a realist, though one, it would appear, who observed life from some distance. (What kind of a realist would own a "mincing" world?) The speaker concludes as a romanticist, but a romanticist with a difference--one who has consciously chosen to view the world through one roseate lens, but whose naked eye delights in the vivid shades of fluttering, fleeting things. No longer an ardent participant (if he ever was one), the speaker is now an earnest researcher into the substance that prevails, the origin and course of love. There is a sense in which the uncle has become more involved in life while becoming detached, since he now prizes the particular nuances of fleeting things more than it would appear he did as a callow and lordly youth.

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is a series of meditations clothed in the most magnificent rhetoric and imagery. I would suggest, however, that the sum of its parts is not perhaps as impressive as its brilliant local effects. Does it really leave one with a unified impression? Whether a principle of nervous juxtaposition or of verbal splicing such as has been claimed for the poem is capable of achieving unity of effect surely depends on the degree to which the poet, whether consciously or

subconsciously, has shaped the stream of his thought and emotions. It might well rest, too, on the poem's being consciously composed as a unit over a fairly limited period of time. My guess would be that "Le Monocle" was composed in a somewhat random fashion, stanza by stanza, at different periods, and that the separate units were then assembled, though not in the most telling order.[77] Certain stanzas--for example, Stanzas I, IV, and VIII--are really more impressive than the whole.

Footnotes

[1]Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 251. (Hereafter referred to as Letters.)

[2]Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York & London, 1967), p. 40.

[3]Letters, p. 251.

[4]A breakdown of the imagery reveals its variety: (I) stone, water; (II) bird, choir; (III) hair, water; (IV) fruit--apple, skull; (V) star, firefly, cricket, dust; (VI) blue; (VII) mules, angels, centurions; (VIII) fruit--gourds; (X) fountain, tree; (XI) marionettes; lilypond and frog, and (XII) pigeons and rabbis.

[5]Compare "Sunday Morning" and Esthétique du Mal, for instance.

[6]See Frank Doggett's Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore, 1966), p. 24; John J. Enck's Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments (Carbondale, 1964), pp. 31, 83; Richard Ellmann's "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," Kenyon Review, XIX (Winter 1957), 97; Robert Pack's Wallace Stevens: An Approach to his Poetry and Thought (New Brunswick, 1958), p. 10, and Ronald Sukenick's Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure, p. 41.

[7]Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 67. (This interpretation is characteristic of Nassar, who concentrates on the allegorical aspects of all Stevens' poems.)

[8]Stevens says that the "Mother of Heaven" is "merely somebody to swear by," and adds that she is not symbolic. Letters, p. 250.

[9]Sukenick beautifully describes the tone as one of "fastidious didacticism"--Musing the Obscure, p. 40.

[10]By Joseph Riddel in his The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 88; and by Henry W. Wells in his Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington, 1964), p. 81.

[11]I agree here with Daniel Fuchs's The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, 1964), p. 26, and with William York Tindall's Wallace Stevens (Minneapolis, 1961), p. 14.

[12]Wells, p. 102.

[13]Wallace Stevens, p. 14.

[14]"Essential Gaudiness: The Poems of Wallace Stevens," Twentieth Century, CLIII (June 1953), 455. So does Graham Hough, who thinks most of Stevens' titles a series of "laborious winks and nudges," generally meaningless and demonstrative of a "foolish tastelessness." "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Critical Quarterly, II (Autumn 1960), 207. This judgment is unnecessarily flat and harsh. Stevens' titles generally do make sense, if one is willing to exercise imagination and ingenuity.

[15]Our Singing Strength: An Outline of American Poetry (1620-1930) (New York, 1927), pp. 407-08. Donald Evans, whose slight verse was inspired by British fin-de-siècle estheticism and light French forms, led a band of "esthetes, satirists, dandies, poets, and dilettanti" in Greenwich Village during the twenties.

[16]Stevens explains the poem's title as meaning "merely a certain point of view" in Letters, p. 250.

[17]Samuel French Morse, "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater" in Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller's The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore, 1965), p. 91.

[18]Herbert Stern, Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty (Ann Arbor, 1966), p. 69 interprets it thus.

[19]Ronald Sukenick provides a fine prosodic analysis in his Musing the Obscure, pp. 39-40.

[20]Ibid., p. 38.

[21]"Of Modern Poetry," Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), p. 239. (Hereafter referred to as C.P.)

[22]See Nassar, p. 144, and Riddel, p. 91.

[23]C.P., p. 87.

[24]See R. M. Gay, Explicator, VI (February 1948), #27.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Sukenick, p. 41.

[27]Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 24.

[28]The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, p. 26.

[29]*Pensée* #347.

[30]Cf. *Esthétique du Mal*, IX.22-25. Springs and fountains usually embody in Stevens' verse, as they do in most romantic poetry, the streams and jets of spontaneous emotion.

[31]"Among School Children," VI.1-2.

[32]*An Anatomy of Figuration*, p. 17.

[33]See, for example, "Large Red Man Reading," *C.P.*, pp. 423-24; the "central, essential red" of "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers," *C.P.*, pp. 246-47; the "giant red" of "Repetitions of a Young Captain," III, *C.P.*, p. 307. Red has a somewhat different value, but still related to the visceral reality of experience in the red dreams of "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock" and "The Rock," III (*C.P.*, pp. 66 & 528). Even closer to "Le Monocle," Stanza II is the red bird in "On the Adequacy of Landscape" which represents the sharpest reality.

[34]Cf. *Esthétique du Mal*, IV, and "Sunday Morning," IV & VIII. See also Doggett, p. 2: "His [Stevens'] usual image of the self is that of a bird, like that of the sparrow of 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction' . . ."

[35]Compare the bird-chorister of "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself," *C.P.*, p. 534.

[36]Yvor Winters does not agree. He says of the beginning of the second stanza, "The first four lines are incomprehensible, except as description, and the claim of the fifth is unjustified." "Wallace Stevens or the Hedonist's Progress," *In Defense of Reason* (Denver, 1947), p. 457.
In *Letters*, Stevens declares himself unable (or unwilling), to explain line 5 (p. 251).

[37]Nassar provides a good analysis, with many illustrations, of the role hair plays in Stevens' poetry. See *An Anatomy of Figuration*, pp. 60-67.

[38]*Musing the Obscure*, p. 42.

[39]Nassar quotes Arthur Mizener to the effect that "in your hair" means with the hair hanging naturally and freely, which is confirmed by the poet--"the speaker was speaking to a woman whose hair was still down." *Letters*, p. 251. According to Mizener, virgins were married "in their hair," others with their hair "up." (*An Anatomy of Figuration*, fn. #9, p. 67.)

[40]Earl Roy Miner, Explicator, XIII, 5 (March 1955), #28.

[41]As suggested by Wells, p. 103.

[42]Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) was a Japanese color-print artist brought up in the Kano (Chinese-inspired) school of painting. His delicate landscapes and portraits of elegantly braided women soon became popular in the West.

[43]Earl Roy Miner refers to the "highly mannered societies of ancient China, feudal Japan, and Augustan England" which Stevens here sets side by side, and sees them as integrally related to the water imagery. "To the Taoist-inspired Chinese and Japanese painters and philosophers, water is a symbol of motion, flux, and change," says Miner. He then becomes overelaborate in alluding to the waters of Bath--scarcely a symbol of flux and change.

[44]"Dripping," of course, suggests hair flowing naturally and freely. Earl Roy Miner believes Stevens may have been inspired by a particular print of Utamaro's, a triptych of oyster-divers whose long black hair, instead of being elaborately braided like the courtesans' hair in most of Utamaro's paintings, hangs dripping down their backs.

[45]An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 67.

[46]Cf. "Sunday Morning," St. VI.

[47]An ironic reference to Newton's discovery of the Law of Gravity, perhaps.

[48]An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 142.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Musing the Obscure, p. 42.

[52]The crickets represent, in Nassar's words, "the dry sound and dry body of reality"--An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 143. Compare the similar use Stevens makes of crickets in Esthétique du Mal, IX, where "indifferent crickets chant/Through our indifferent crises."

[53]Sukenick paraphrases "When your first imagery/Found inklings" as "when you first imagined." But the imagery is more likely to belong to the uncle, since the woman apparently does not recognize her kinship to the dust. (Musing the Obscure, p. 43.)

[54]R. M. Gay points out that "hyacinthine" is a classical epithet applied to luxuriant, curly hair, to which we may compare the "bald amorists"--Explicator, VI, 4 (February 1948), #27.

[55]C.P., pp. 248-50.

[56]The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 91.

[57]See, for example, Esthétique du Mal, XI, "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," and "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home."

[58]Musing the Obscure, p. 43.

[59]An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 145.

[60]P. 464.

[61]"Wallace Stevens: Some Ideas About the Thing Itself," Boston University Studies, II (1956), pp. 59-60. Sukenick compares the style of "It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies," with Samuel Johnson's The Vanity of Human Wishes--"They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall." Musing the Obscure, p. 40.

[62]The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation (New York, 1935), pp. 91-92.

[63]As in the Epilogue to Notes toward a Supreme Fiction--C.P., pp. 407-08.

[64]The Double Agent, p. 92.

[65]"Essential Gaudiness," 456.

[66]The "mystic spouts" suggests the romantic image of the fountain of inspiration.

[67]An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 148, and Musing the Obscure, p. 45.

[68]As in the fourth stanza of "Sunday Morning."

[69]According to Sukenick, it is sex (Musing the Obscure, p. 45); according to Nassar, it is death (An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 148).

[70]In this case, a series of disasters are quite beautifully evoked by the poet, who then ridicules them, at the same time declaring necessary such sublimation of pain.

[71]So Robert Pack affirms in his Wallace Stevens, p. 11.

[72]See An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 91-92. The bird that can no longer fly always represents an outworn fiction, Nassar says, citing in evidence the falling bird in "Some Friends from Pascagoula," C.P., pp. 126-27. In addition, blue is the color of vivid imagination, white the color of an imagination that has burnt to ashes.

[73]"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 making use of it for human purposes." Thus Stevens in a letter to Renato Poggioli, Mattino Domenicale ed Altre Poesie (Torino, 1954), p. 185.

[74]Rose is the color of romance, par excellence, in Stevens' poetry. It is often distinguished from red, the color of raw reality, except in those rare marriages of imagination and reality when the two colors coalesce, or when, in a reality fully imagined, rose may become the appropriate color of life. (See "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," I and "Artificial Populations," ll. 7-8.) For the ordinary romantic meaning associated with the color rose, see the reference to "licentious violet and lascive rose" in "Montrachet-le-Jardin," and to "romantic tenements of rose and ice" in "Man and Bottle."

[75]In fact, in Letters (p. 251), Stevens explains, "One is a rose rabbi and pursues a philosophic ideal when one is young." Unless we take the dark and rose rabbis both to represent successive stages of youth, we must assume that Stevens either in the poem, or in memory, transposed the dark and rose rabbis. Stevens' attitude to poetry was that of the casual amateur. He explained these lines without having the text before him, saying that he had not looked at the poems in Harmonium for five years, since the reading of the proofs "gave me such a horror of it that I have hardly looked at it since it was published." (The letter in which he says this is dated March 1928.)

[76]William York Tindall's Wallace Stevens declares the final stanza to be "the triumph towards which the sequence moves and its justification" (p. 14). He also states, "Uncle is both rabbis; but, when young, he should have been rose, not dark. When young, instead of observing, he should have pursued." Presumably, Tindall finds the inconsistency in our uncle a delicious piece of self-revelation of which the poet has been aware all along. I doubt this. For example, how is one to reconcile the assertion of Stanza VI that for the romanticist at forty all love's nuances must merge into "the basic slate, the universal hue" with the final stanza's affirmation of the preciousness of nuance most acutely felt in middle age?

[77]One has to guess, because the Letters do not shed any light on the composition of this poem, nor is anyone else able to, so far as I can tell.

CHAPTER IV

The Comedian as the Letter C

A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable.

Henri Bergson

Poetry is the statement of a relation between man and the world.

Wallace Stevens

The Comedian as the Letter C occupies a crucial position in Stevens' poetic development, and has been seen as the culminating point of the early work.[1] The Comedian is the first long poem Stevens wrote. It was composed for the Blindman prize competition announced in Harriet Monroe's Poetry during the winter of 1921. The poem grew out of what Samuel French Morse has called "an unpromising bit of self-imitation," the last verse of "Anecdote of the Abnormal."[2] The Comedian's original title was "From the Journal of Crispin." Though it did not win the Blindman prize, Stevens found prolonged attention to one subject--again it is the relation of self to environment, of mind to world, or of imagination to reality--stimulating and rewarding.[3] The poem was first published in Harmonium in 1923. It heralded the long hiatus which was to intervene between Stevens' publication of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" in August, 1924 and that of "Autumn Refrain" in January, 1932.

Until Samuel French Morse publishes his critical biography of Stevens, we cannot be sure how much Stevens wrote between 1924 and 1932, but he published nothing.[4]

Stevens may well have written The Comedian to take stock of his poetic evolution up to the date of the poem's composition. Though Crispin is not to be wholly identified with Stevens, his story is used to reflect Stevens' own imaginative development. There is a correlation between Crispin's evolution and Stevens', though I believe the poem adumbrates stages the poet was to go through extending well into the thirties, long after the artistic impasse recorded at the end of the poem.

In Part I of The Comedian, Crispin is baptized into reality during his sea voyage, and is weaned away from the traditionalism and sentimentalism he embraced in Bordeaux. (This phase probably corresponds to Stevens' early, somewhat palely romantic phase, of which his Harvard poems are characteristic.) This stage of Crispin's journey spells the death of subjective romanticism, romanticism centered on the self rather than on nature. "The last distortion of romance/ Forsook the insatiable egotist." Crispin and his world are renewed; Crispin's encounter with naked reality throws him back on himself, forces him to become "an introspective voyager," to seek within himself a pressure of imagination that may withstand the pressure of reality--"the strict austerity/Of one vast, subjugating, final tone."

In Yucatan, in response to a nature more barbarous than any he has encountered before, Crispin experiences "a violence

for aggrandizement." This violence is not for aggrandizement of the self, however; indeed, by the end of his sojourn in the Caribbean (Stevens' lush, southern, tropical world), Crispin seems to have received the access of power he awaited after the stripping away of his old self in Part I. The storm at sea is followed by the thunderstorm in Yucatan, during which Crispin feels himself becoming "studious of a self possessing him,/That was not in him" when he was a citizen of custom-staled Bordeaux. This self is a force derived from the impersonal forces of nature, and Stevens provides a pithy, ironic self-description when he describes Crispin as a "connoisseur of elemental fate." Part II of Crispin's voyage represents Stevens' Floridian-Caribbean phase, best exemplified in Harmonium.

The stark realism of "Approaching Carolina," following hard on a brief return to facile romanticism (Crispin's imagination of America does not correspond to the reality), looks forward to Stevens' more austere verse in Ideas of Order (1936). This volume began with the poem "Farewell to Florida," the tone and imagery of which are close to the first two sections of "Approaching Carolina." As Herbert J. Stern says, "Both poems are concerned with the poet's determination to abandon an environment that attracts him because it provides in reality the opulence the imagination craves."[5] In the tropics, Stevens noted that reality assumes all the luxuriance of imagination. This is surely what he means by "The fabulous and its intrinsic verse/Came like two spirits parleying." The soil of the tropics in its fanciful florabundance relieves the poet of the necessity

of using his imagination. This is one reason why, in the end, it becomes repugnant to him. Another reason is that it is "too juicily opulent" a reality for the imagination to cope with, as the reactions of both Crispin and the "Maya sonneteers" reveal. Instead of two spirits parleying, Crispin and his creator seek a bedrock reality, from which the imagination may strike fire, as from flint. So Crispin sets sail northward.

In "Approaching Carolina," Crispin lights on what is Stevens' characteristic poetic procedure, the unending oscillation between reality and imagination.

> Thus he conceived his voyaging to be
> An up and down between two elements,
> A fluctuating between sun and moon . . . (III.47-49)

This is the key not only to Stevens' poetic theory but also to his practice. It is the organizing principle of this poem, as of so many others. Crispin rebounds from one extreme to its opposite. He sallies forth into realism in "The World Without Imagination" only to find his imagination starved, so that he instinctively lapses back into a modified romanticism, from which again he reacts by launching into a new realism, and so on.[6]

In Part IV of The Comedian, Crispin reverses his initial proposition that man is "the intelligence of his soil," an affirmation of the power of imagination, for "his soil is man's intelligence," an affirmation of reality, of the powerful conditioning of imagination by environment. The local colorist foray in "The Idea of a Colony" is an imaginative flight, having no analogy to any sustained period of Stevens' career. In this section, too, Crispin begins serving his apprenticeship to the

fortuitous, rejecting excursions into a utopian future as he does his "backward flights." The failure to assert an imaginative imperium in the projected hemispheric poetic colony is followed by a harmony of imagination and reality, of self and environment, achieved through Crispin's acclimatization to his new homeland. His imagination and its soil now share sovereignty--

> . . . the suzerain soil
> Abashed him by carouse to humble yet
> Attach. It seemed haphazard denouement. (V.20-22)

In any case, Crispin resolutely resists the temptation to make his fate an example of all fate:

> Should he lay by the personal and make
> Of his own fate an instance of all fate?
> What is one man among so many men?

The movement in this section, "A Nice Shady Home" (meaning a home full of nuance and delight in the particular), as in the final section, is from Popean realism--"What is is what should be"--to a mild fatalism. In "Daughters with Curls," fatalistic Crispin swallows the world "Without grace or grumble." His tale comes to a benign close, and the rest is silence.

In commenting on The Comedian in his Letters, Stevens remarked, "I suppose that the way of all mind is from romanticism to realism, to fatalism . . . unless the cycle recommences and . . . goes from indifferentism back to romanticism all over again."[7] But another comment of Stevens sheds more light on his own poetic development: "About the time when I, personally, began to feel round for a new romanticism, I might naturally have 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. . . . Instead of seeking therefore for a 'relentless contact,' I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal . . ."[8] In fact, this attempt to achieve the normal was the most relentless contact Stevens could possibly have made himself seek, though it is a moot question whether he ever really made such contact with the human norm. It seems, however, that he is referring here to his poetry of the thirties (the letter from which this quote is taken was written in January, 1940), when he endeavored, in such poems as The Man with the Blue Guitar and Owl's Clover, to confront the human. Society was, for Stevens the poet, an alien element. In the concluding part of The Comedian, he refers to "The return to social nature," but is unsure whether to call this an advance or a retreat. Crispin gives up his grandiose scheme for a poetic colony, and retires to his private cabin and the delights of conjugal and filial relationships. It was apparently such a "return to social nature" that silenced Stevens' poetry for six to eight years.

The Comedian is a highly original poem. It is unlike any other poem in the annals of English or American poetry. It has been compared with many other works; none of the comparisons seemsparticularly apt or helpful except, perhaps, that with Wordsworth's The Prelude.[9] For The Comedian is a poem about the growth of a poet's mind. However, it differs from Wordsworth's

Prelude in using the voyage as a fictive vehicle, in being a strongly fictionalized and slightly allegorized narrative poem, as Wordsworth's poetic autobiography is not. Hence Joseph Riddel calls The Comedian an example of the favorite American genre of the symbolic voyage,[10] but the overtones of the voyage itself are not particularly symbolic--no interest attaches to it as the story of a goal sought for and achieved. In fact, Crispin's journey is essentially goalless. He is continually seeking rapport with a series of changing environments.

The Comedian belongs only peripherally to the genres of spiritual autobiography, didactic allegory, or conte philosophique. It is really a fable of the forging, or better, of the fluctuations, of a poetic sensibility.

It seems to me that the heart of the poem is the desire to reach a "blissful liaison" with one's environment, which for Stevens, as for Crispin, is "chief motive, first delight."[11] The Comedian is a poem in which a man confronts nature in its naked reality, a confrontation that is both disturbing and frightening because nature is alien to man, does not acknowledge, and frequently fails to accommodate, the most vital part of man for Stevens, his imagination.

The two propositions between which the poem swings are that "man is the intelligence of his soil,/The sovereign ghost," that is, the spiritual ruler of his environment (which may imply that he dominates it physically as well--only a tamed landscape breeds this feeling of sovereignty, Stevens suggests); and the reverse, that "his soil is man's intelligence," that is, man is

determined by his environment, being the physical and imaginative product of it. Both ideas represent different attitudes to the natural world, the first giving priority to man and his imagination, the second to brute reality.[12] The first is a romantic point of view, the second a naturalistic one. Neither alone is an adequate response, because the one is too anthropomorphic, too domineering and divorced from nature, the other too subservient to it.

Another way of looking at The Comedian, closely analogous to that of man confronting nature, is that of the artist confronting his material. However, I think it is more accurate and fruitful to see Crispin as a man trying to reach some honest and vital rapport with the world than it is to view him solely as an artist wrestling with recalcitrant subject matter. The rapport is the subject of the poetry, and in Crispin, as in Stevens, poet and man are not differentiated. Hence I disagree with Yvor Winters' reading of the poem,[13] agreeing with Ronald Sukenick that "Crispin's aim is not merely to achieve accurate description of reality in poetry, but, rather, through accurate description of reality to establish satisfactory rapport with it."[14] This is that "blissful liaison" that Stevens also seeks throughout his poetry.

It is significant that Stevens should have chosen as his protagonist an emigrant to Carolina from seventeenth or eighteenth century France. (Stevens' earliest poetic sympathies and influences were French.) Presumably, Crispin voyages from Yucatan to Carolina because this is the route a

ship would take leaving from Bordeaux. (Bordeaux may have been chosen as Crispin's point of departure, not only for its ambience of domestication, cultivation, and good-living, but because, by contrast with Crispin's full immersion in reality at sea, Bordeaux means "at the water's edge.") Stevens' personal associations with Bordeaux, Yucatan, and Carolina are more important than any historical ones for an understanding of the poem.

Crispin is the scheming valet of French comedy, who made his debut in a play by Scarron in 1654;[15] he became so popular and had so many successors that his name, crispin, became a common noun for valet in French.[16] Further suggested sources for Stevens' comedian are to be found in Ben Jonson's plays, The Poetaster[17] and Volpone.[18] Stevens apparently knew well and relished the work of Ben Jonson. Jonson's poetaster in the first play revels in the most recondite vocabulary, and his name is Crispinus. He is a pretentious, would-be poet. In Volpone, the figure of Sir Politic Would-Be recalls Crispin; Sir Politic Would-Be misses reality because he is so obsessed with jotting down minutiae and commonplaces. His first words in the play are "Sir, to a wise man, all the world's his soil." The figure of Crispin, particularly at the beginning of the poem, suggests the irrepressible, scheming manservant in comedies such as Beaumarchais' Figaro, a petty bourgeois who here manipulates not his master but his milieu at large. But Crispin, once he has put out to sea, finds himself quite out of his depth, deprived of his accustomed props and roles, imaginatively

destitute, and thrown into dismay at the incommensurability between his own puny personality and that untamed reality represented by the ocean.

That the figure of Crispin as an emigrant to the New World is to be interpreted metaphorically, not literally, is made clear by Stevens' remark to Renato Poggioli that "the central figure is an every-day man who lives a life without the slightest adventure [emigration is not an adventure?] except that he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do. This point makes it necessary for a translator to try to reproduce the every-day plainness of the central figure and the plush . . . of the stage."[19] Crispin's stage is the world, and what Stevens is pointing to here is the contrast between his protagonist's puny, relatively prosaic figure and the magnificently rich and varied background to which he has to adapt himself. Stevens goes on to announce that the poem is an "anti-mythological" one, which it definitely is. On this account, Roy Harvey Pearce has gone so far as to suggest that Stevens' poem was written as an antidote to T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land, an attractive notion but one for which there seems to be no support.[20]

Stevens has made it clear that the title of the poem was chosen to underline the poet's conscious play on the letter C: "all its shades may be said to have a comic aspect . . . the letter C is a comedian."[21] So frequently does Stevens insist on the poem's being a comic symphony on the sounds of the letter C that the critic must entertain seriously such

comments as this: "As Crispin moves through the poem, the sounds of the Letter C accompany him. . . . The sounds of the Letter C include all related and derivative sounds. For instance, X, TS, and Z. . . . Sometimes the sounds squeak all over the place, as, for example, in the line 'Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed' . . . about as full of the sounds of C as any word[s] that I can think of."[22] Again, Stevens insists that one must be aware, while reading the poem, of "all this whistling and mocking and stressing and . . . orchestrating, going on in the background . . . "[23] The Comedian is, then, a comic tone poem, and one is asked to pay as much attention to the sound of it as to its meaning. The use of alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia in the poem is both marked and pervasive. Though the most recherché words are used, they are used with extreme accuracy--for example, coign, gasconade, pannicles, divagation, sequestering, ructive, prismy, phylactery, mulctings; one feels, however, that many words are chosen solely for the sake of obvious alliteration--gelatines and jupes; gaudy, gusty panoply; premises propounding . . . projected; exchequering . . . fiscs, and dome . . . halidom. In some cases, the effect is amusing, but there is so much of this sort of things that it soon cloys. Too often one senses that sound dictates word choice in The Comedian. It is difficult to sustain such virtuosity of sound together with taut concentration on meaning over such a long poem, though possible in a short lyric such as "Bantams in Pine-Woods." If the reader concentrates strictly on sense, much of the humor of The Comedian is lost.

The tone of the poem is characteristically ironic, mock-didactic, and self-deprecating. The poem has a sententiousness, a neat balancing of proposition against proposition, of thesis against antithesis, a crispness of phrasing and metrical emphasis that recall nothing so much as Neoclassic poetry. But the poem's far-ranging vocabulary, full of archaisms and coinages, reminds one rather of the linguistic gusto of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature.

Crispin himself is a cipher. He is described as minuscule, and the impression he makes is that of a marionette whose clown's motley is stripped from him piece by piece as his mind, too, is stripped of protective devices. Other suggestions have been offered as to the meaning of the poem's title, and the reason for Stevens' concentration on the letter C. Thus, John J. Enck suggests the inspiration for the poem may have sprung from the current Larousse illustration of the Letter C.[24] Herbert J. Stern believes the Letter C to be emblematic of a voyage which almost, but not quite, ends where it began.[25] Again, some critics have been tempted to see behind the cipher C a reference to the diminutive stature of man in the modern world. Thus, Crispin is reduced to a lower-case letter because modern man feels himself to be a mere cipher in relation to his environment, a number among millions of other numbers, scarcely able to influence his surroundings in the most rudimentary particulars.[26] It is easy, however, to carry the idea of the modern alienated consciousness too far, for this is only a small part of the poem's concern.

A British critic finds in the poem "that characteristically American feeling that nature is what it is, independent of man and indifferent to him; a feeling decidedly removed from the typical European anthropomorphism and empathy."[27] An American critic describes the poem (inaccurately) as being about "what we have made of our landscape and it of us."[28] The feeling of nature's indifference, not to say hostility, is the legacy of confronting unreclaimed wilderness. Beginning as a manipulator of a manicured landscape, Crispin undergoes, as it were, a symbolic baptism at sea, and is forced to recognize that nature is untamable and alien. Crispin's awakening has temporal and geographical significance. "That century of wind" blown away "in a single puff" represents the transition from eighteenth century complacency and certainty to nineteenth century anxiety and doubt. It also reflects the necessary change of outlook that the European undergoes on reaching a "matinal continent." Hitting on an emigrant's voyage to the New World as the vehicle for a difficult voyage of the poetic sensibility through different milieux productive of different states of mind was a brilliant stroke of invention on Stevens' part.

The poem's point of view is the third person point of view Stevens customarily employs. The shifting perspective of the protagonist is contained within and supplemented by the narrator's point of view. Though Crispin does not speak himself, his thoughts are given and his discoveries incorporated in Popean epigrams.[29] The origin of the dual point of view of the poem is indicated by its original title, "From the Journal

of Crispin." The poet does not comment on Crispin directly; his attitude toward his creature is indicated in the poem's tone, which is one of consistent irony. It is plain that Stevens does not take Crispin as seriously as Crispin takes himself at any stage of his development--except, perhaps, his last. As Samuel French Morse points out, the double viewpoint has the advantage that "the reader sees Crispin from a larger perspective than that from which Crispin sees himself, but at the same time obliquely through Crispin's own eyes--that is, with a certain amount of intimate detachment."[30]

Though it would be tedious to give a line-by-line exegesis of a 573-line poem, The Comedian contains much local detail that needs explication. Having outlined the drift of each section in tracing Crispin's evolution, it is necessary to try to explain individual lines and images.

When Crispin sets out from Bordeaux, his view of man (as of himself) is that he is the finest flower of his soil, its spiritual ruler and physical dominator. Crispin's opening proposition is portentous enough; his sententiae, suitably garnished with Latin, are set down as though in his commonplace book. But Crispin is ascribed a series of belittling titles, such as "Socrates of snails,"[31] "musician of pears," "wig of things,"[32] "nincompated pedagogue,"[33] "preceptor to the sea," "lutanist of fleas," "imperative hum of haw,"[34] "inquisitorial botanist," and "general lexicographer of mute and maidenly greenhorns." Crispin is cultivator of his soil and a householder preoccupied with "salad beds" and "honest quilts."

He has tamed and domesticated all the most minute and susceptible, the least threatening and volatile of the flora and fauna in his Bordeaux garden. He has shielded himself against the encroachments of indomitable nature by the routine protective coverings of the petty bourgeois ("honest quilts"). Crispin is described as a barber--a play on crispus, Latin for curled.[35] Crispin, like the Man with the Blue Guitar, is "a shearsman of sorts." He tailors reality to his own needs--until it tailors him.

"Jupes" are skirts, though the word can also mean bodices. The Crispin of French comedy certainly specializes in women, though why in gelatines (except for the sake of alliteration) is difficult to see. Crispin is a sort of major domo, equally at home in kitchen and bedroom. When Crispin forsakes the domestic, civilized milieu of Bordeaux, he confronts a new, inscrutable reality in the sea. "Silentious" is a coinage; it seems to mean recommending or enjoining silence. The dolphins guard the secrets of their element. These irrepressible dolphins dibbling in waves like mustachios have reminded one critic of Alice in Wonderland.[36] Certainly, the opening passage is an imaginative linguistic frolic that it will not do to take too seriously. For some of the details--the switch from apricots to porpoises, for example--Stevens appears to have been indebted to Jonson's Volpone.[37] The mysterious flotsam and jetsam of the ocean, representing inexorable reality, replace the serviceable, comestible products of the well tilled soil of the Old World. Crispin tries to reduce the difficult experience he has to assimilate, the tempestuous, unaccommodating ocean, to the same

easily digestible paté he made of life onshore.[38] The meaning of Crispin's assertion--"One eats one paté, even of salt," with the absurd "quotha" stuck on the end--is that the world is the same, whether by land or sea. This is not so, however, as Crispin soon discovers.

It is not the leaving of his old homeland Crispin regrets, but the loss of his former identity. His ego is obliterated beyond restoring. "What counted was mythology of self,/Blotched out beyond unblotching." Crispin's baptism into reality is temporal as well as spatial. In a single puff, the anthropomorphic vision of the universe is blown away; the mythology of self is obliterated beyond hope of recall. The description of Crispin that follows is a conventional picture of the harlequin, jester, or clown under various guises, all of whom are now reduced to a skinny sailor peering anxiously at the sea, trying vainly to discover in it his own resemblance. Unlike the singer on the shore in "The Idea of Order at Key West,"[39] Crispin can find no song in face of the sea, can reach no rapport with the welter of appearances it presents, so that its "multitudinous tones" remain meaningless to him. Crispin is reduced to a cipher of his former self, "merest minuscule" who is "washed away by magnitude."

The poem is anti-mythological. Unusually for Stevens, however, it uses personifications drawn from classic mythology (Triton for the sea, Vulcan for the thunderstorm), but does so only to dismiss these as outworn fictions. The second verse paragraph of the first part rejects a stale romanticism.

Crispin is unable to subsume the sea in the figure of Triton because Triton himself has been dissolved. (Since the death of God, nothing in the universe can honestly be viewed anthropomorphically any longer.) So Triton is dissolved in those shifting veils or transparencies in which the human imagination interweaves itself with reality. Triton is left "incomplicate"--one of Stevens' favorite words--with that which made him Triton in the first place, namely the man-centered view of the universe. The poet, through the pejorative connotations of such words as "clopping" and "grovelling," paints a derisive picture of the moonlit mythology of a romance now dead, which evaded the harsh realities represented by the sun, paying homage to the moon instead, seeing in the stars assemblies of gods. Much meaning is compressed into a few lines here, and the imagery and syntax are among the most beautiful in the poem. Of Triton nothing remains

> Except in faint, memorial gesturings,
> That were like arms and shoulders in the waves
> Here, something in the rise and fall of wind
> That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,
> A sunken voice, both of remembering
> And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain.

The echo of the "hallucinating horn" reminds one of Wordsworth's sonnet in which he regrets the passing of that--for him--vital romantic insight that saw Proteus rising from the sea and Triton blowing his wreathed horn.[40] Stevens' own evocation of past faded mythologies is full of nostalgia, it seems.

As Triton has been dissolved, so is Crispin. The sea is that solvent reality which causes the dissolution of his old

self. Lost in the bewildering, overwhelming turbulence of the ocean, Crispin ceases to be his former jaunty self. The salt and dead brine that hang on his spirit dissolve the encrustation of his old beliefs. Crispin now sees the sun in its naked force and splendor; it no longer beams complacently on parasols (literally, shields against the sun, and metaphorically, in many of Stevens' poems, feeble fictions), nor does it gleam fitfully on religious trophies. The sound of the trumpet, of which Triton's horn was but a faint echo, is the sound of elemental force, to be heard again in the thunderstorm in Yucatan. Against such thunderous proclamations, Crispin's articulation of his discoveries seems that of a mere pipsqueak. Overcome by the power of the real world outside him, a nature that is unaccommodating and inhuman, Crispin is thrown back on his own resources and becomes an "introspective voyager." Inevitably, he is driven to seek some counterforce within himself.

In the fourth verse paragraph, the sea is recognized to be the veritable thing-in-itself, that brute reality which, plainly visible and audible as it is, has nothing recognizably human to say to the man who confronts it. Triton is negligible--a mere memory of man's attempt to assimilate the sea to his own needs. Crispin confronts a chthonic monster belching forth unintelligible sounds out of a hoary darkness. "Hoary darks" is a most effective example of oxymoron, since hoary suggests white with age, ancient beyond reckoning, and at the same time,

something dark, mysterious. (The "hilarious dark" of Part VI of The Comedian is a comparably effective example of synesthesia.)

Crispin, at this stage, is completely bereft of imagination, hence the title of the opening section, "The World Without Imagination." Insatiable egotist and sentimental romanticist that he used to be, every illusion has now been stripped from him. The sea has separated Crispin from his former self as surely as it has separated him from his former home. (His previous environment was his former identity, though this is a truth that he has yet to realize.) Crispin is made new, but feels helpless before "one vast, subjugating, final tone." The ocean offers no aid in confronting the strange, masterful new reality it represents. Crispin finds that his imagination can no longer take refuge in sentimental poems in praise of the fruits of the earth. His "stale lives" are the old fictions and mythologies by which he had lived heretofore shuttered from reality, those ruses by which he avoided a naked confrontation of the monster. Continuing the image of dead brine that melts in him like a dew, Crispin is described as no longer drenched, or steeped, in such stale fictions. Finally, that there is health in this "swift destruction" of illusion is made clear in the phrase, "something given to make whole." Decreation necessarily precedes creativity. Out of the shattering of his former false modes of thought and feeling emerges a new, truer relationship with reality.

Crispin was originally supposed to call at Havana, but he never does so. When he sets foot on the peninsula of Yucatan

with its lush, tropical vegetation, Crispin has left jejune romanticism far behind. He now exhibits an outlook on life which Hi Simons describes as "realism . . . consisting merely in recognizing the stark realities of life."[41] This attitude has been inculcated in him by the sea voyage in which all his illusions foundered. After the austere, naked reality presented by the ocean, Crispin faces a landscape more densely fertile than anything he could have imagined. (The contrast is like that polar opposition between Stevens' northern, wintry poems and his southern, summery ones.) There is always a time-lag in Crispin's responses, those reactions engendered by his previous environment carrying over temporarily into his new one, until this new one prompts its own response. Thus, Crispin still feels imaginatively destitute amid all this luxuriance; beneath Yucatan's abundance he searches for "beautiful barenesses as yet unseen."

Stevens has thrown some direct light on this stage of Crispin's evolution. "In the presence of extraordinary actuality," Stevens says, "consciousness takes the place of imagination."[42] The greatest temptation for the artist in an exotic landscape, one might think, would be simply to transcribe from nature, a temptation hardly to be resisted when nature proves herself such a consummate artist. But in fact the inhabitants of this land write poems wholly out of sympathy with their landscape. The Maya sonneteers, debilitated romantic transcendentalists, are repelled by the brilliantly colored barbarism of Yucatan.[43] Instead of celebrating hawk, falcon, toucan, jay, or tanager,

they address themselves to the somber night-bird. (One is tempted to see the night-bird as a fabulous or legendary bird, quetzal or phoenix, or, even more likely, as the principal night-bird, the owl. The critical consensus, however, seems to favor the nightingale, a bird presumably foreign to Yucatan, and a symbol of outmoded romanticism, later described as "a passionately niggling nightingale.")[44] The night-bird surely carries connotations of death. The indigenes of Yucatan, in their revulsion against the overpowering brilliance and lushness of their surroundings, seem to demonstrate the curious compensatory workings of the imagination. Though his visit to the tropics is to Crispin what his vacations at Long Key, Key West, and Pirates' Cove were to Stevens--much-needed excursions into the exotic--the inhabitants of such a country find it too juicily opulent, too explosively vivid. They cleave instead to poetic commonplaces imported from tamer climes. Or they yearn after the palely ineffable in the midst of the extraordinary beauties and satisfactions of their environment. The Mayans are as out of harmony with their surroundings as Crispin was at the outset of his sea voyage.

Crispin, however, is a faithful annotator, with a ready responsiveness to various settings. Still too imaginatively destitute to subscribe to commonplaces, whether exotic or transcendental (such as those to which the alienated natives aspire), Crispin adjusts his spirit to its new soil. "Into a savage color he went on." Crispin seems to have expanded to

fill this much larger, more exciting demesne (estate) than the one he tended in Bordeaux. (The riotous fertility of the tropics forms a strong contrast to the carefully pruned vines of Bordeaux, as the vivid landscape of Florida was the antipole of grey Hartford.) "Made vivid by the sea," Crispin's mind is "desperately clear." He is imaginatively a free man, but aware, even in this "land of snakes," of the abiding poverty within him that even the seductive luxuriance of the tropics fails wholly to appease. Being robbed of his former illusions has expanded his sensibility but has left an inner vacuum. Crispin feels empty and finds that his appetite has become difficult and strange. Though he now eschews stale sentimentalities--"stupor, such as music makes/ For sleepers halfway waking"--Crispin has a "violence . . . for aggrandizement." He feels the palpable pressure of this Fauve landscape and wants to celebrate it with equal vigor. (Perhaps this passion for aggrandizement is the insatiable egotism of the imaginative man.) Crispin rattles inwardly. He could account himself a king of infinite space, though bounded within the nutshell of his skull, if, like Hamlet, he had good dreams, but he has no dreams at all, either good or bad. Finally, lustily responding to the violence of his surroundings, Crispin finds that he can appease his passion for self-expression only by composing poems dipped, as it were, in the blood roused by this landscape, poems expressive of a new aesthetic

> . . . tough, diverse, untamed,
> Incredible to prudes, the mint of dirt,
> Green barbarism turning paradigm.

This phase of Crispin's career parallels that of the so-called hedonistic, southern poems of Stevens, of which there are very few, however, that are untinged by an early preoccupation with the "beautiful barenesses" skulking beneath the jungle finery of the southern landscape. Crispin, like Stevens, seeks the elemental beneath the exotic, the ascetic beneath the sensual. Both are searchers for the "fecund minimum," a reality neither overwhelmingly fertile nor oppressively barren, but one best calculated to release the fertilizing streams of imagination. Meanwhile, Crispin finds himself in Yucatan, throbbing with "elemental potencies and pangs," piercing to the skeletal form that lurks beneath superabundant bloom. The yucca, a cactus with tall, spiky white flowers, is described as having "cadaverous bloom," the adjective evoking an image of flowers corpse-like and leprous in moonlight, and at the same time suggesting the anatomization the plant undergoes in Crispin's mind.

The lines, "The fabulous and its intrinsic verse/Came like two spirits parleying," are susceptible of two similar interpretations. The jungle landscape is so exotic, so luxuriant, that the body of it is indistinguishable from its imaginative rendering. Such a reality supersedes any vividly imaginative rendering of it, since reality, if vivid and curious enough, beggars imagination.[45] The other interpretation would identify the two spirits parleying as the fabulous reality which almost instantly breeds the necessary style with which to capture it.

(The "Atlantic coign" refers to the shape of the projecting peninsula of Yucatan.) Throughout this section, Crispin in his character as annotator (rather than artist) is very much to the fore. He appears to be transcribing direct from reality, as, touring the country, he takes scrupulous notes on what he sees. Crispin is presumably already beginning to find his new milieu too opulent and overpowering when the thunderstorm occurs. The curt, "So much for that," and "Yet let that trifle pass" suggest, as Francis Murphy says, that "no poet can keep up this kind of thing."[46] (That is why, presumably, the natives have settled for something imported and of a soberer kind on which to exercise their imaginations.)

On an inspection tour of town hall and cathedral, Crispin sees their facades swallowed up in the encoraching darkness, and faces yet another exhibition of naked force, such as he previously experienced at sea. He takes refuge in the cathedral with the rest. One is tempted to see this as a relapse, since the church is, for Stevens, an antiquated last refuge against the terror of reality. Nevertheless, the burden of the passage seems to be that demonstrations of nature's elemental power are awe-inspiring, that they should be respected as such even by "annotators," even in cathedrals, and even on one's knees--provided one is paying homage to the naked force itself, like a god among us. The description of Crispin as a "connoisseur of elemental fate" is serious as well as ironic, for Crispin is now able to recognize and appreciate the thunderous proclamations of nature. These messages were neither so direct nor so forceful in his

urban past, but these unmodulated eruptions out of the heart of chaos make him long for a similar force of utterance, the unflinching insight that will make it possible for him to reproduce in human speech the impression they make on him.

With the breath of wind wafted from the peaks of the Andes,[47] Crispin is inspired to pass beyond that disencumbrance of beliefs already effected by the sea voyage. His mind undergoes a second renewal and release during this second tempest, and receives an accession of power, becoming "more than free, elate, intent, profound/And studious of a self possessing him" that is obviously a grander, more elemental self than any accessible to him in Bordeaux. It is illuminating to compare this part of The Comedian with Stevens' "Farewell to Florida," in which the speaker shakes off the seductive allurements of the southern landscape as the snake sheds its skin.[48] The self that enters Crispin now, of which he is studious, supersedes that complete loss of self he underwent at sea. It seems to be part of that elemental nature that both sea and storm represent. Crispin's evolution during this second part of The Comedian is from primitive exoticism to a conception of the sublime in nature which leads to an access of imaginative force.

Yucatan has been only a way-station on Crispin's journey to his new home. Carolina in Part III of The Comedian stands for the whole North American continent. Stevens once described Carolina as "beautifully and sedately the early and undefiled American thing." [49] As Crispin approaches Carolina,

he sees it first as he has imagined it, by moonlight (in verse paragraphs one and two), and then as it really is (verse paragraph four).[50] Stevens here juxtaposes the poetic and the prose visions of a "matinal continent." The guise in which Crispin sees Carolina during his temporary relapse into romanticism--"Wrong as a divagation to Peking"--is not at all that she presents to his gaze as his vessel inches upriver. The imaginative description of Carolina bears a striking resemblance to Stevens' depiction of North America in "Farewell to Florida." And the reason for the journey northward is presumably the same. As Francis Murphy says, Stevens realized that "the true realist confronts the problem of everyday reality."[51] But before Crispin can confront "the essential prose," his imaginative version of America has to be purged. Thus it is that the lapse into romanticism is succeeded by the onset of realism--no longer realism of the purple type elicited by the tropics, but the rank, homespun variety that appeals to naturalists. Crispin, having exhausted the possibilities of the southern landscape, discovers that "For him cold's glacial beauty is his fate,"[52] but finally settles on a temperate zone, "Prickly and obdurate, dense, harmonious."

It cannot be sufficiently stressed that Crispin's fluctuations between highly imaginative and strongly objective visions of reality reflect, for Stevens, the plight of all sensitive observers. Stevens would affirm that every poet's life, if not every man's, is "An up and down between two elements,/

A fluctuating between sun and moon." Crispin's "backward lapses" are conscious and necessary; in the long run, however, his is a voyage out of "goblinry"--out of a neat feudal checkerwork of "fold, fallow, and plough"--into the untamed blazon colors of reality, crimson and gold. Crispin does seem to make progress in the poem. In spite of his romantic relapse at the beginning of Part III, he now strikes one as an enlightened romantic. True, he allows his imagination free play as it hovers "above" an entire continent, but then he denies himself the indulgence of expressing anything less than "the relentless contact he desired." He ignores those sea masks that seem to have been tempered too much by his own ear, and dismisses those thoughts that, like hussies, clamor for his attention, pretending to be the "sequestered"--the set-apart, almost unattainable--reality he seeks.

Crispin's initial vision of his new continent, though later dismissed as too facile and delicate, provides the necessary antidote to a mind now weary of the lush barbarism of the south with its "meat-eating sun." The America of Crispin's imaginings is beautifully evoked--"In endless ledges, glittering, submerged/And cold in a boreal mistiness of the moon." Shadowy as it is, the vision is exquisite and intense, sharply etched, and cold and fragile in the Mallarméan manner--one can almost hear the drip of icicles on snow in Crispin's imagined wilderness.

"The book of moonlight" is presumably, as Simons says, the history of romanticism.[53] This has not yet been written in the sense that it can never be completed. (Stevens implies that we shall never cease to be romantics at heart.) What is the meaning of that "wakefulness or meditating sleep,/In which the sulky strophes" eventually bear up Crispin's songs? On the one hand, Crispin's strophes are "sulky"--they do not seem to come as facilely to hand as they were wont to do in Bordeaux--and they are also described as "deep." On the other hand, Crispin appears to have sunk into a kind of meditative trance which suggests that he once again courts stupor rather than aggrandizement. (Compare the curious passage on dreams in Part IV, where dreams are abjured as harking back to the unsatisfied longings of the past.) One cannot be sure of Stevens' attitude to Crispin's various stages of development in Part III; probably he regards the initial retreat into romanticism as a necessary stage in Crispin's development. While Part III is crucial in its tracing of the protagonist's progress, Crispin's backings and fillings between an imaginative and a realistic transcription of what he perceives, together with alterations in what he sees, make his evolution here very difficult to follow.

In the second verse paragraph, Crispin postulates the vulgar as his theme, and tries to resist the seductions of imagination, regarding them now as regressive. Carolina, when he comes to see it as it actually is, appears at first "circumspect," that is to say, non-committal to this "poetic hero without palms." The bald "He came" stirs up ironic

echoes of Caesar's "Veni, vidi, vici," but Crispin's continent ends by conquering him. It is spring, and the spring is like a seductive dancer "contending featly in its veils." To Crispin, once a gaudily clad puppet himself, spring seems a "gemmy marionette" he must thrust aside in his search for a "sinewy nakedness." In Carolina, Crispin "savored rankness like a sensualist," as in Yucatan he had savored fertility. His new land is both dense (as Yucatan was) and harmonious (as Yucatan was not), and yet, not over-civil and refined (like Bordeaux).[54] In its newness and rawness, it draws Crispin's attention to humble objects he has never noticed before, making him realize "how much/Of what he saw he never saw at all." Crispin, feeling himself no longer an inhibited instrument, is concerned with making poetry out of prose. Again, it is a moot point whether Stevens applauds Crispin's self-denial, and whether he finds his description of the quotidian any more satisfactory a poetic solution than his transcription of the exotic.[55] Most critics, whether or not they believe Crispin gives up poetry, believe that Crispin never during the course of the poem achieves a satisfactory equilibrium between imagination and reality.[56] It seems clear that Stevens is meditating in the poem on the various stages his own poetry has gone through and, this being the case, it is not so much a question of Stevens' approving or disapproving of Crispin's evolution, as of his having passed through these necessary stages himself to reach a perspective from which he is able to look back and evaluate them.

I believe that with The Comedian as the Letter C Stevens had written himself to a temporary full stop.[57] He had long since realized that "the marshy ground around the dock,/The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence," etc. are not fit objects--although as the furniture of the modern world they are, for Stevens, the only fit subject--for poetry, unless they undergo transformation in the poet's imagination. "The eye's plain version is a thing apart,/The vulgate of experience,"[58] and it is essential to see the object clearly before one can render its full intensity. But the eye's plain version, unless the light of the imagination plays over it, is not enough. Clearsightedness is as far as Crispin has progressed in the third section. He is newly aware of "how much/. . . he never saw at all." Stevens calls the plain data of life "Curriculum for the marvelous sophomore" (wise fool),[59] and these data constitute the basic and indispensable raw material of life and poetry, but Crispin's gripping of "the essential prose" is only a temporary, incomplete accommodation with reality. At this stage of his poetic evolution, with strong memories of, and incipient leanings toward outworn ways of looking at and describing the world, Crispin finds prosaic objectivity "The one integrity for him." He hopes that this prose will "wear a poem's guise at last," but this cannot happen until his imagination has struck fire from the hard grey flint of reality.

It is time for Crispin to reverse his initial proposition in Part IV. Having been disabused of false

preconceptions, being able now to look at his new continent in all its pristine reality, Crispin realizes that man, far from being dominator and determiner of his milieu, is dominated and determined by it. His outlook on life, his very soul, is the product of his environment. This discovery is "worth crossing seas to find." Crispin plans a colony, or rather speculates on the desirability of establishing one, presumably in order to ratify his new insight. Having cleansed his mind of "stale intelligence," and rid himself of the illusion that man controls his world, Crispin nevertheless hankers after some form of control, some new imperium of imagination. In projecting a Jeffersonian colony predicated on the assumption that "The soul . . . is composed/Of the external world,"[60] Crispin sees the possibility of a new human society based on the modest commonsense of his new outlook. Crispin's colony is to be founded on the very premise that "his soil is man's intelligence," allowing for the efflorescence of different intelligences rooted in different soils.[61]

Unfortunately, as William York Tindall observes, in spite of Crispin's new rude aesthetic, the style in which it is described remains as ornate and rhetorical as ever.[62] Though Stevens' "appointed power," except, perhaps, in the passage beginning, "The natives of the rain are rainy men,"[63] remains "unwielded from disdain," the rich man never really goes bare, and the florist studiously avoids asking aid from cabbages. "The torment of fastidious thought" slackening in Crispin's mind may refer to his former self-denial in the interests of

relentless contact with reality, or it may refer to romantic evasiveness (compare "the difficulty of rebellious thought/ When the sky is blue" in Part V). The exquisite passage on rainy poetry is simply an elaboration of the central idea of this section, that "his soil is man's intelligence." Men who live in a misty climate write misty poetry; barbarous redskins should not be expected to produce the kind of mellow gold and silken poetry that is the product of luxurious, sophisticated climates or incurably transcendental imaginings.[64] (In effect, as the poem itself suggests, rainy men do not necessarily produce rainy poetry, but may, like the Maya soneteers and Stevens himself, feel called upon to produce a poetry counter to the chief characteristics of their time and place. Irish poets have lamented that for centuries English poetry assiduously cultivated an Italianate high gloss quite alien to its cloudy skies and the pastel coloring of its vegetation.[65]) Crispin's principle, though oversimplified and in spite of its overelaborate application, is reasonably plain. Crispin is now compelled to forego the exotic (Turk, Esquimau, lute, marimba, magnolia, rose), leaving these romantic properties to those for whom they are authentic features of the environment.

Crispin's poetic colony is projected on a hemispheric scale which embraces both Americas.[66] It incorporates as many different people as there are different places, since each population is the product of its own peculiar soil. The natives of Georgia and Florida will write poetry redolent of their own atmospheres (pervaded by pines and pineapples, respectively),

while "Sepulchral senors bibbling pale mescal"--delightful, this--will "scan" (a pun on surveying and rendering into poetry) their intricate sierras, ignoring meanwhile the mythic intricacies of Aztec calendars.[67]

Stevens has much fun with Crispin's "local-colorist" program, as Simons calls it,[68] since he himself is far from "indifferent to smart detail." Crispin proposes fruit and flower ceremonies to replace outmoded religious festivals; he will celebrate only the juicy realities of a secular world, but will celebrate them with colorful ritual. These fey projections into the future, however, soon strike their author as analogous to his former romantic backward flights; they betray the impulse toward liberation, toward an unflinching encounter with present reality, which drove him to emigrate in the first place. Crispin is, at heart, anti-ritualistic, as he is anti-mythological. So he dismisses such poetic pretensions as "fantasies of what poetry might be or ought to be . . . not a straightforward facing of reality."[69] Crispin can no longer be satisfied with counterfeit presentments of reality which falsify the "racking masquerade" of life. Life is "racking" because it demands so many painful adjustments, and it is "masquerade" because it compels one to play so many different roles. But it is fatal for the roles to be prescribed in advance, preordained. Crispin prefers the actual pages of experience to any fixed interpretation of them. He has become a faithful follower of the fortuitous, content to serve his apprenticeship to haphazard fate. He is now described

as "serenely sly"; he has always been shrewd, and the straightforward realism of his new vision, the observations it enables him to make, have given him a measure of serenity.

The peculiar passage on "the monotonous babbling in our dreams," the dreams of "dreamers buried in our sleep" concludes that "all dreams are vexing. Let them be expunged." This is one of several expressions of Stevens' mistrust of the subconscious. Crispin foregoes dreaming altogether, because dreams express the desires of those who have shut their eyes to reality. Thus, The Man with the Blue Guitar says, "Day is desire and night is sleep"[70]--or should be. Dreams, unless they are day's dreams, dreamed with the eyes wide open, are not "the oncoming fantasies of better birth," they do not presage diviner realities, but are that "trash of sleep"[71] or litter of unfulfilled longings incommensurate with reality that continue to haunt us while we sleep. The passage also strikes a blow at romantic ideals of apotheosis.

In his colony, Crispin wants every creature to do what is natural and becoming to it--the rabbit will run, the cock crow, and the poets of various locales express the genius of their individual places. Crispin himself will not cheat reality, "flaunting skyey sheets" or totally imaginary pages that contain a pasticcio (farrago or confected mish-mash) of reality made insipid by imitative or imaginative evasions.

In "A Nice Shady Home," Crispin dwells as a hermit after he has given up the bold project of colonization. Imagination, having deserted him during his excursion into "grandiose

objectivism,"[72] returns to Crispin once more. He ceases to be a prickling (difficult) realist, abandoning his concern for what was, should or ought to be for what actually is. Had Crispin continued to question reality instead of accepting it, he might, says Stevens, have come to "jig his chits upon a cloudy knee." That is to say, he might have written poems wholly abstracted from reality. The "polar planterdom" is that completely imaginary colony that Crispin might have peopled with shadowy abstractions. The word "chits" is a precisely chosen pun, as Joseph Riddel points out:[73] the original meaning is sprout or shoot, hence offspring, but there is a derivative in British colloquial use meaning voucher for debts incurred. Crispin's chits may be interpreted as both his daughters and his poems. As "questioners" and "sure answerers," they are the poet's I.O.U's drawn on the world's account, whereby the poet tries to give back to reality all it has given him.

Crispin now dwells "in the land," his eye no longer merely hovering contemplatively above it, as it did when he first saw Carolina. But his gaze becomes introverted again as he slides "from his continent by slow recess/To things within his actual eye." He has abandoned his imaginary continent for the real one, but there is a hint that the land has driven him in on himself by its recalcitrance, just as the sea did. More important, this represents a shifting from a generalized to a particular vision, as well as a lapse back into imagination. In the continuous dialectic between a predominantly realistic and a predominantly imaginative version of reality, Crispin is

liable to slide back into subjectivity, but his way of looking at America now is an improvement on his original fictitious representation of it. No longer an imperialistic visionary, Crispin has ceased projecting visions on the continental scale and concentrates instead on his own corner of his new homeland. Nor is his vision of something his imagination has created without reference to the object (his Arctic vision of North America); he first observes, then meditates on what he has seen with "that inward eye/Which is the bliss of solitude."[74] As Stevens observes, "The romantic exists in precision as well as in imprecision."[75] Crispin's poetic evolution, up to the time of his lapsing into silence, achieves progressively closer syntheses between subjective and objective ways of looking at the world.

Crispin is aware of "the difficulty of rebellious thought/ When the sky is blue." The blue somehow infects his will. Blue stands for the imagination, as it usually does in Stevens' poetry; the imagination here infects the poet's will to see things as they are in their nakedness.[76]

The soil, which Crispin had originally believed man rules, and which he then had to acknowledge ruled man, has now become "suzerain," that is to say, while it is still man's governor, commanding his loyalty, yet it allows him to govern his own internal affairs. (There is scope for imagination, provided that it does not run directly counter to reality.) Crispin's new environment ingratiates him to put down roots, and at the same time saps his zeal for lofty enterprises by the profusion of humble tasks and pleasures it daily proffers.

"The quotidian saps philosophers." Crispin concludes that he is, though still a hunter of a "matinal continent"--a striver after a virginal way of seeing--nevertheless a realist who can stop short before the "good, fat, guzzly fruit" of life and find his pleasure in the object sufficient. Crispin at this point begins to feel a disaffection from words which merely "entangle and confuse." Crispin discovers that the plum, whatever transfigurations it may undergo in the eyes and minds of those who gaze up at it, survives its poems. Reality, constantly renewing itself and forever fresh, is superior to those "fresh transfigurings" with which the human imagination clothes it, since these "ground obliquities" are constantly growing false or stale. Thus, Crispin fastens on the "surviving form," the thing-in-itself, as being, for him, the most permanent, pleasing, and valid.

Crispin wholly accepts the world he lives in. His is not a cowed but a joyous acceptance now. Hence, it would be tasteless to "bray this in profoundest brass," or to make a "tragedian's testament" out of Crispin's "final, humble, but essentially comic accord with reality."[77]

Crispin, who had once planned "Loquacious columns by the ructive sea"--an exquisitely comic evocation of anthropomorphic Greek civilization--confines himself to a cabin and turns once more to the cultivation of his "salad beds." He refuses to "aroint," to banish or bid farewell to his past dreams with "fugal requiems,"[78] or to beat the drums for dead faiths. To celebrate what one no longer believes in

is to lose one's vitality. Crispin would not declare that his own fate is the fate of everyman; he is too modest for that, and is conscious that his own story is just an anecdote. Stevens insists on the relativity of things. So racking is life's masquerade that there is no one who can honestly afford to despise "honest quilts" (fictive coverings); we are all muffled up to the eyebrows in our protective covers, for the determination to grapple with reality does not prevent imagination from clothing our vision of it. Nevertheless, for the realist, "what is is what should be." This echoes Pope's "whatever is, is right," but is not at all the same thing as Pangloss' version of Leibnitz, that "this is the best of all possible worlds." Were that true, there would be no need of a supreme fiction. Whatever is is what we start from and return to, and is both necessary and right. But between the beginning and the end, man's imagination, a transforming power, describes its own parabola--as Crispin's evolution demonstrates.

Like a gambler, Crispin approaches his "haphazard denouement." The pack now turns up his cabin and his "prismy blonde." "Prismy" means radiant, giving off different colored lights like a prism. But this blonde would seem to be a real one, as well as the "interior paramour" Eugene Nassar is fond of interpreting all Stevens' female figures to represent. Nassar comments:

> Crispin at last makes the only possible accommodation between reality on the one hand and desire on the other. He will set

> up house in a cabin (the mind), tend to his little garden (his poems). His duenna is the Will that guards his Imagination (this prismy blonde) . . . . The night is obscure, fearsome, inscrutable; each man is locked in the room which is his own mind; the curtains (imaginative weavings) give form to the room and to the wind blowing through them. The sound of crickets in the wind outside do [sic] not drown out the inside music he makes. They are servants (custodians) of the real, he is magister of a single room (compare 'The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour').[79]

Nassar here offers an example of a besetting temptation for the critic of Stevens. Stevens' poems often lend themselves to an interpretation one might legitimately call allegorical, but one should beware of letting allegory override all other meanings. Crispin's marriage is an event within the narrative and should be taken as such, as well as for its metaphorical suggestions. An interpretation such as Nassar's drains all the juice and joy out of Crispin's lovemaking, covering it with a cloudy pomp which would appear alien to the poet's intentions here.

One is likely to see that "long soothsaying silence" as the silence that descended on Stevens between 1924 and 1932, when, refusing (as he had from the beginning of his poetic career) to "company vastest things defunct/With a blubber of tom-toms harrowing the sky," and finally unwilling to continue writing pretty pieces in praise of plums, he prepared himself to face an unaccommodating urban landscape and to try to discover a new way of describing it.

Crispin now finds his fate far less difficult, more appropriate and congenial than he could have imagined previously.

He is a "grub," a burrower into the reality of his soil, who has, nonetheless, a "fig in sight," and who, unlike Candide,[80] enjoys his Cunégonde before she has grown old and crabbed and ugly. Bedroom and breakfast scenes are here superimposed on each other. The reader should not reject out of hand the allegorical overtones in this passage, since an allegorical reading will enrich a poem that is plainly a parable of the poetic predicament, but the allegorical meaning is secondary to the narrative itself. The lovemaking that "anneals" or fuses together the protagonist and his "prismy blonde" may also profitably be seen as a fusion of reality with imagination, productive of poems that are true offspring "both of Crispin and his clay." The word "saps" involves a pun on the verb and the noun; while the physical sap is rising in Crispin, the Pierian spring is dry. ("Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" describes the reverse situation.) This precious sensual interlude, in which the daily round is replete with "breakfast ribands, fruits laid in their leaves," tomtit, cassia, and a rose teased out of its Victorian trappings,[81] shows us Crispin as hedonist reveling in sensuous and sensual pleasures. Those "cracked shutters" are presumably Venetian blinds giving on the outside world, no "magic casements, opening on the foam/Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn," but on wallowings as elemental as those of the ocean that Crispin originally confronted with such dismay. "Rumpling bottomness" suggest the "hoary darks" of Part I and the "hilarious dark" of Part VI.[82] Nature gives to her loyal servants "a humped

return/Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed"--in plainer English, nature pours out a rich, but mixed, return from her treasury of good and evil, pain and pleasure inseparably blended.[83]

The sixth section, "And Daughters with Curls," inevitably prompts the question, are these daughters real children of Crispin or are they his poems? Let us have it both ways, if we may. The much tormented question of whether Crispin gives up poetry for life, as Yvor Winters and other critics have affirmed,[84] or whether he continues to write, but less grandiose poems than he originally planned,[85] does not seem one of great moment. (Crispin's creator, after a pause, continued to write poetry.) The story of Crispin is, throughout, that of a man who is also a poet; one assumes that his daughters are real daughters and that, at the same time, they may represent poems.[86] The elusive description of the daughters has encouraged Frank Kermode to see them as the four seasons[87]--a strong temptation when one considers that there are four of them and that Stevens was indeed obsessed by the four seasons. But what are we to make of such slippery creatures? The descriptions of them are insufficiently fleshed or "realized" for us to know just what they represent. The "goldenest demoiselle" might equally well be spring or summer. But why should she remind her father of a "vermeil Capuchin"?[88] The second sister, "not yet awake," and shy to embrace imagination in its full power could well represent spring, but why should Stevens present the seasons in reverse order?

The "creeper . . . under leaves" might be autumn, and the "fourth, pent now, a digit curious" reminds one of the "hierophant Omega" of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, and as such could well be winter. If such speculations seem Scholastic in their intricacy, Nassar's attempt to identify the daughters as different kinds of poem are even more hair-splitting.[89]

Stevens crams into his coda as much alliteration and assonance as possible, and, in particular, as many variations on the letter c as he can. He held up with pride, on that account, the line, "Bubbling felicity in cantilene."[90] Having foregone a tragic chorus, Crispin now feels entitled to "bell boldly" his "last deduction," to "Thrum with a proud douceur/His grand pronunciamento and devise."

Crispin is not certain whether his "return to social nature," projected on a hemispheric scale in Section IV but now scaled down to his family in its cabin, represents an advance or a decline. As a man, it has certainly enriched his life, while it has impoverished him as a poet. Crispin's cabin is described as a phylactery because it reminds him of his obligation to keep the natural law.[91] Crispin's former pretensions to found an imaginative colony have been stopped by his own prolific paternity. Whether flesh and blood or poems, or both, his offspring have illuminated his world and made it happy.

Now Crispin points the moral of his story which has been a "disguised pronunciamento," "not doctrinal/In form though in design." The world which at first appeared to him

as uncompromisingly lumpish as a turnip reappears in much the same guise. As realist, Crispin has tried to pare it down to prose, but, since the imagination is incurably romantic, he sees it "reproduced in purple." We are to mark this anecdote or disguised pronouncement on the nature of things. It is "autumn's compendium" presumably because it represents Crispin's mature, enlightened judgment. If Crispin's tale seems false, if he himself appears to have begun as a boastful realist, and to have concluded as a faded, sickly, specious gilder of "plain and fancy things," what, his creator asks, does this matter? Even if what Crispin has proved proves to be nothing, the story draws benignly to its close because Crispin, no matter how, has found his "blissful liaison" with his environment. Crispin is happy in his conclusion. So may every man's tale--his relation to his world--be cut off.

It remains only to evaluate this poem. While Stevens was writing The Comedian, he remarked, "I find that this prolonged attention to a single subject has the same result that prolonged attention to a senora has . . . . All manner of favors drop from it."[92] For the reader, few favors drop from The Comedian--at least until he has read it a good many times. It seems to him a long, tediously scintillating jaunt which, to make up for its fairly staid meter (unusually regular iambic pentameter for Stevens) indulges in every kind of linguistic quirk and flourish--in obtrusive assonance and alliteration, archaisms, coinages, bathos, hyperbole, quaint colloquialisms,

esoteric images, ellipsis, oxymoron, paradox, and every device, pert or precious. In this poem, Stevens is surely parodying his own euphuistic style, and there are passages in which this is both amusing and suitable, as deflating Crispin's pretensions. But to sustain such a self-consciously rococo style in a poem of over five hundred lines, while a feat, can only produce the most cloying effect. The concentration on amusing or startling sound effects (often at the expense of meaning) makes one finally want to ask the poet what he asks himself in "Academic Discourse at Havana":

> Is the function of the poet here mere sound,
> . . . . . .
> To stuff the ear?[93]

The Comedian as the Letter C is Stevens at his most repetitious and prolix. As with many of his poems, the elaborate style cloaks a skeletal meaning. Graham Hough rightly remarks that the poem could have been cut by half and have lost nothing but "some amplitude of illustration."[94] The poem would have been more interesting and impressive if the volatility of Crispin's moods in response to his changing environments had been caught by variations in style. In particular, one regrets the fact that Crispin's vaunted switch in allegiance from purple poetry to "essential prose" is not accompanied by a corresponding change in style.

While it is easy to applaud Stevens' inventiveness in using an emigrant's voyage to the New World as a vehicle to trace the evolution of his own sensibility, one feels that the voyage is not well blocked out. The route Crispin takes from

Bordeaux to Yucatan and then to Carolina continues to be a matter for puzzlement. Why these three places? To discover any answer, one must consult the poet's biography and inform oneself what France, the Caribbean, and Carolina meant to Stevens. First, tame sophistication; second, savage luxuriance, and third, a mean between the two. But one continues to be puzzled by, for instance, the Maya sonneteers, and by Crispin's lapse into romanticism on approaching Carolina. Even Crispin himself becomes comprehensible only after studying footnotes. Names are invoked, but what they represent is not really embodied in the poem, so that they seem neither fully fleshed nor wholly justified.

Stevens' dilemma at the time of writing The Comedian was, I think, one of style rather than vision. He was determined to take the barren quotidian for his subject, but relied on a fussy, gaudy, precious style to transform it,[95] believing that gaiety of diction was the essential condiment to the grimness of his subject matter. The Comedian is Stevens at his most verbose, self-indulgent, and stylistically excessive; what is intended as the sauce to make us swallow the poem "without grace or grumble" makes it instead highly indigestible. One is irked by the disproportion of manner to matter.

Some indication of why the poem represents a particular development in style and subject beyond which Stevens could not go is provided by the poet himself in a letter to William Carlos Williams: "Given a fixed point of view, realistic, imagistic, or what you will, everything adjusts itself to that point of

view; and the process of adjustment is a world in flux, as it should be for a poet. But to fidget with different points of view always leads to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility."[96] Through Crispin in The Comedian, Stevens was fidgeting with different points of view, or at any rate with opposite versions of the same basic proposition. Crispin himself changes his point of view half a dozen times and makes as many different beginnings, and there is some justification for thinking that as a poet he ends in sterility. Had Stevens not come to realize the absolute necessity for imagination in combating the intransigence of the North American landscape, he would have done likewise. But fanciful diction is no substitute for real imaginative vision. There are some exquisite passages in The Comedian--the passage on Triton in Part I; the moonlit approach to North America, and the naturalistic trip upriver in Part III; the local-colorist colony in Part IV, and Crispin's homage to the plum (the object which survives its poems) in Part V. Part VI, more precious and fussy than any of the others, represents a considerable falling away in quality. The poem as a whole hardly makes a unified impression, nor does its development seem inevitable. It is more readily comprehensible as a fluctuation between two elements than as a straightforward evolution from romanticism to realism.

Is man the intelligence of his soil or is his soil man's intelligence? The Comedian denies the first extravagant claim, and undercuts the validity of the second. The Mayans' intelligence is bent against expressing their soil in their

poems; nor, ultimately, is Crispin's intelligence--especially if we avail ourselves of the advantages of hindsight and look at The Comedian from the vantage point of later poems of Stevens--expressive of his soil. For both Crispin and Stevens react against their environment. The quotidian that Stevens chose as his true subject, the "dreadful sundry" of the modern world amid which he chose to live, happily whittled down the pretentiousness of his early style, as exemplified in The Comedian, but continued to encourage that "violence for aggrandizement" which a callow or brutal reality can hardly fail to inspire.

Footnotes

[1]R. P. Blackmur calls it the "longest and most important poem" in Harmonium. Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (New York, 1952), p. 243. Samuel French Morse calls The Comedian "the ideological culmination of his early work, and the cornerstone of all his later poetry and prose . . .," "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater," reprinted in The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, eds. Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore, 1965), p. 83. Joseph Riddel describes The Comedian as a "compendium" of the themes of Harmonium--The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 93. Hi Simons, like Morse, views the poem as the culminant work of Stevens' first period--"'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," Southern Review, V (Winter 1940), 453.

[2]"Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater," p. 74. For "Anecdote of the Abnormal," see Opus Posthumous, ed. with intro. by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), pp. 23-24. Hereafter referred to as O.P.

[3]As he tells Harriet Monroe in a letter dated September 23, 1922, Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 229. This letter makes it clear that the poem in its present form took shape during the summer of 1922. Stevens' Letters will hereafter be referred to as Letters.

[4]Letters, p. 242 states that Stevens "seems to have discontinued writing for the next five or six years" following August, 1924.

[5]Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty (Ann Arbor, 1966), p. 151.

[6]As I see it, Part III describes both the lapse into romanticism and Crispin's most crudely realistic phase.
Hi Simons provides a more detailed breakdown of the various stages Crispin passes through. These are: (1) "juvenile romantic subjectivism" of which the sea disabuses him; (2) "realism . . . consisting merely in recognizing the stark realities of life"; (3) "exotic realism"--in Yucatan; (4) "grandiose objectivism"--Crispin's local-colorist program; (5) "disciplined realism"--Crispin's final acceptance of his environment on his own terms, and, finally, "indulgent fatalism and skepticism." "'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," 454.

[7]Letters, p. 350.

[8]Ibid., p. 352. Stevens makes it quite clear here that it is the human norm he seeks.

[9]The Comedian has been compared to or contrasted with works as diverse as Pilgrim's Progress (by William Van O'Connor in his The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens [Chicago, 1950], p. 25); The Prelude (by J. V. Cunningham in "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens," reprinted in Modern Literary Criticism [New York, 1958], p. 356); The Marriage of Figaro (by John J. Enck in his Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments [Carbondale, 1964], pp. 85 & 89); Candide (by various critics, and see the poem itself, Part VI), and Peer Gynt (by Guy Davenport in "Spinoza's Tulips: A Commentary on The Comedian as the Letter C," Perspective, VII [Autumn 1954], 147-54).

[10]The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 93.

[11]J. V. Cunningham agrees with this--"Tradition and Modernity," p. 359.

[12]In Letters (p. 294), Stevens declares, "A most attractive idea to me is the idea that we are all the merest biological mechanisms." (Stevens has just compared The Comedian, a poem in which the protagonist is utterly dependent on chance, with "The Idea of Order at Key West," in which "life has ceased to be a matter of chance." (Letters, p. 293.)

[13]See "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress," In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1947), pp. 442-43.

[14]Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York & London, 1967), p. 47.

[15]Ecolier de Salamanque (cited by Davenport, "Spinoza's Tulips," 150).

[16]As Sukenick points out in Musing the Obscure, p. 47. Davenport is most informative on Crispin's ancestry. He quotes Larousse's definition of the figure of Crispin in seventeenth-century French comedy--"un valet, goguenard, peureux, fanfaron, fripon," vêtu d'un "petit chapeau et vêtements noirs . . . apte à tous les métiers." Davenport lists the following plays in which the scheming valet appears: La Thuillerie's Crispin précepteur (1679); Hauteroche's Crispin musicien (1674); Poisson's Le fou raisonnable (1664); Champmesle's Crispin chevalier (1671), and Montfleury's Crispin gentilhomme (1677). William Van O'Connor suggests another possible source for the figure of Crispin in Regnard's play, Le Légataire universel (1708). The titles of these dramas explain some of the epithets ascribed to Crispin at the poem's opening. Riddel points out that Stevens must have had a considerable interest in the figure of the clown; he owned Maurice Sands' Masques et Bouffons (Paris, 1862).

[17]See Samuel French Morse's detailed footnote #16, "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater," pp. 74-75.

[18]This has been pointed out by Robert Buttel in his Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium (Princeton, 1967), p. 195.

[19]Mattino Domenicale ed altre Poesie (Torino, 1954) p. 169, and Letters, p. 778. It is Stevens' extraordinary "plush" style that makes Crispin look anything but "an every-day man."

[20]The assertion is made in The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, 1961), p. 388.

[21]Letters, p. 294.

[22]Ibid., pp. 351-52. See also p. 778.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments, p. 85.

[25]Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty, p. 140. The only sense in which Crispin can be said to end as he began is by his return to a domesticated landscape.

[26]Daniel Fuchs irrelevantly compares Stevens' Crispin to Kafka's K--The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, 1963), p. 60. Robert Pack--Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought (New Brunswick, 1958), p. 148--assumes "that the individual in the modern world is too small to shake . . .the pillars of society, and therefore he cannot be tragic." This is intended to account for the fact that Crispin is a comic cipher and something of an "abstraction."

[27]Graham Hough, "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Critical Quarterly, II (Autumn 1960), 206.

[28]Guy Davenport, "Spinoza's Tulips," 151 & 154.

[29]The most obvious is "For realist, what is is what should be" which recalls Pope's declaration in the Essay on Man, "Whatever is, is right."

[30]"Wallace Stevens: Some Ideas About the Thing Itself," Boston University Studies, II (1956), 57.

[31]Sukenick points out that The Comedian resembles a Platonic dialogue in its testing, modification, and rejection of successive propositions about man's relation to the world; it "proceeds from formulation to reformulation like a Platonic dialogue, to its resolution." Musing the Obscure, p. 49.

[32]Eugene Nassar, in his Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 60, suggests "wig" is a synecdoche indicating Crispin's aspirations as a lawgiver to his town. This epithet may also be an allusion to Regnard's Universal Legatee, a legal satire.

[33]Davenport ("Spinoxa's Tulips," 150) suggests that these descriptions of Crispin are specific allusions to seventeenth century French comedies (see footnote #16). Thus, "musician of pears" is taken to be a reference to Crispin musicien, "nincompated pedagogue" to Crispin précepteur, or Le fou raisonnable.

[34]I interpret this as designating ignorance masquerading as knowledge and betraying itself through indecision.

[35]Davenport was first to point this out--"Spinoza's Tulips," 150. Hair in Stevens' poetry usually connotes artifice. (See Section VI of The Comedian--"And Daughters with Curls"--and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," III.)

[36]Francis Murphy, "The Comedian as the Letter C," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, III (Spring-Summer 1962), 82.

[37]Robert Buttel points out that Sir Politic Would-Be in Volpone "claims knowledge of information being sent in cabbages, oranges, muskmelons, apricots, lemons, and pomecitrons. He is avid for news of porpoises recently seen in the Thames." The Making of Harmonium, p. 196.

[38]Paté may also be a pun on pate, as Nassar suggests--An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 45 & 154.

[39]Stevens specifically compares the two poems--Letters, p. 293.

[40]"The World is Too Much With Us."

[41]"'The Comedian as the Letter C: Its Sense and Significance,'" 454.

[42]Adagia, O.P., p. 165.

[43]Letters (pp. 614 & 543) contains Stevens' denigrations of Mayan art and culture which he finds essentially hideous--"almost brute art." Stevens deplores the vogue Mayan culture enjoys because the Mayans are considered aboriginal Americans.

[44]See Fuchs, p. 38; Murphy, p. 85.

[45]In Yucatan the "soil not only dominates but overwhelms the intelligence" says Riddel, p. 97.

[46]"The Comedian as the Letter C," 87.

[47]The mountain is a prime symbol of reality in Stevens' poetry. Michel Benamou notes in Stevens the same preoccupation with mountain air as a purer, more rarefied medium than ordinary air as is to be found in the words of Nietzsche. "Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination," reprinted in The Act of the Mind, p. 104.

[48]Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), pp. 117-18. Hereafter referred to as C.P.

[49]Letters, pp. 228-29.

[50]Inasmuch as Crispin tosses between "a Carolina of old time" and the present Carolina, it seems Stevens' dual focus includes a contrast between antebellum America and the modern United States (if Carolina be taken as a synecdoche for the whole continent).

[51]"The Comedian as the Letter C," 87.

[52]The line comes from "In a Bad Time," C.P., p. 426.

[53]"'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," 458.

[54]Joseph Riddel sees Carolina as "a provincial compromise between two extremes. . . . Bordeaux and Yucatan form the poles of Crispin's world (form and vitality) . . .," The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 97.

[55]Elsewhere, Stevens expresses contempt for dogged sticking to the facts and nothing but the facts: "Realism is a corruption of reality" he says in Adagia, O.P., p. 166. Stevens does not really believe in direct transcriptions from reality--neither in their possibility nor their desirability--whether that reality be prosaic or exotic.

[56]For instance, Samuel French Morse ("Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater," p. 85), and Fuchs, p. 55.

[57]Herbert J. Stern even goes so far as to say that at the time he wrote it The Comedian must have appeared to Stevens to be "a last poetic testament"--Art of Uncertainty, p. 144.

[58]An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, C.P., p. 465.

[59]In Adagia, O.P., p. 169, Stevens says, "Man is the eternal sophomore."

[60]See "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand," C.P., p. 51.

[61]I think it perhaps supersubtle to deduce, as Nassar does, that Crispin overestimates "the ability of each perceiving mind to know the one and the same reality," and that it is for this reason that his project for a colony founders--An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 160. That is not what is involved here.

[62]Wallace Stevens (Minneapolis, 1961), p. 27.

[63]This passage is similar to the sixth stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle."

[64]"On what strange froth does the gross Indian dote" seems to be an allusion to Pope's poor Indian in the Essay on Man: "Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutored mind/Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind."

[65]See Robert Farren, The Course of Irish Verse in English (New York, 1947), p. 72, where Austin Clarke deprecates English poetry for singing "of a rain-drenched, hazy, greyish corner of creation as though suns drenched it and lent it Italianate light, while the movement called the Celtic Twilight washed its verse in the region's rainfalls, dimmed it with its mists, and made its rhymes weatherwise. For that . . . it has been dubbed romantic, when properly its realism should have been admired."

[66]"A whistling south below the south" may be a poetic way of referring to the windy southernmost tip of South America, Tierra del Fuego, or it may refer to Stevens' visionary south, extending the colony to the outermost limits of imagination, on the borders of transcendentalism.

[67]In doing so, the Central American poets will presumably be abandoning their past (Stevens found Aztec art hideous and alien) for the celebration of their present landscape.

[68]"'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," 454.

[69]Ibid., 460.

[70]C.P., p. 167.

[71]The line appears in "Chocorua to its Neighbor," C.P., p. 300.

[72]Simons' phrase--"'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," 454.

[73]The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 101.

[74]Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud."

[75]Adagia, O.P., p. 171.

[76]Fuchs gives an opposite interpretation, maintaining that blue stands for "the given in life--its peace and limitation"--The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, p. 54. However, the symbolic signification that Stevens assigns to blue is consistent: it connotes imaginative release, not realistic limitation. In effect, the description of Crispin's current state of mind is extremely equivocal, but it is clear that he is forsaking an imaginative for a realistic outlook by the end of the first verse paragraph of Part V.

[77]Blackmur says Crispin is a comedian "because he deals finally with the quotidian (the old distinction between comedy and tragedy was between everyday and heroic subject matter) . . .," Language as Gesture, p. 247. Pack arrives negatively at a comic definition of Crispin's fate, for the comedian, as an abstract representation of modern man, he says, cannot be tragic--Wallace Stevens, p. 148.

Samuel French Morse in "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater" (p. 74) maintains that Crispin owes much to Bergson's specifications for the comic in "Laughter." In that essay, Bergson finds the infallible prescription for laughter to lie in automatism, in people behaving like things or failing to respond to their surroundings. Crispin, however, responds to his environment with a vengeance: he is highly adaptable. But perhaps his adaptability itself is rather automatic. Certainly, Stevens depicts him as a puppet in his extreme and jerky responses to new environments. Bergson also declares one of the archetypes of comedy to be the "robber robbed," or the man who after great exertions, winds up where he began. One can discern in Parts IV and VI of The Comedian traces of these comic motifs.

[78]There is some indecision as to whether the verb should be to "aroint" or to "anoint." (My edition of the Selected Poems has "anointing"; the Collected Poems reads "arointing.") If Crispin should refuse to prepare his dreams for an immortality, which, fugitive as they have proven, they could not merit--all of which may be suggested by "anointing"--this seems to make sense, as good sense as "arointing."

[79]An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 168-69. The crickets here have the same significance as they do in "Le Monocle" (St. V) and in Esthétique du Mal, IX. They are a kind of universal clock, their march being "motionless" because a generation of crickets soon passes away and is replaced by another. The most fragile and ephemeral of "custodians," they mark the cycle of eternal recurrence.

[80]I find the invited comparision with Candide unhelpful, but Sukenick compares Crispin and Candide on the basis that both learn from experience that their initial attitudes to life are highly fallible--Musing the Obscure, p. 48.

[81]Thus Nasser explains the image, An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 169. The rose may be teased out of its Victorian trappings, but the whole passage breathes an air of twenties' exoticism.

[82]Though there is no more doubt about "rapey gouts" than there is about "concupiscent curds" in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," one may well boggle at Sukenick's interpretation of "rumpling bottomness" as a "pun referring to the newly-weds as they rumple their sheets with their bottoms"--Musing the Obscure, p. 58. Yet he may be right--this passage is full of sexual innuendo; for example, "a humped return" certainly suggests "the beast with two backs."

[83]Several critics have seen nature as giving a stingy return, which is patent nonsense--see Fuchs, p. 55 & Riddel, p. 99.

[84]In Defense of Reason, p. 443. See also Fuchs, p. 55. Stern believes that Crispin's essential discovery, that of "an external reality beyond art's power to order," makes art impossible--Art of Uncertainty, p. 140.

[85]This is the opinion of Murphy, p. 93, of Nassar, p. 170, and of Sukenick, p. 59. Cunningham sees Crispin's farewell to poetry as The Comedian itself (Modern Literary Criticism, p. 360).

[86]Hough (p. 210) and Sukenick (p. 59) argue for the daughters as progeny, Nassar (p. 170ff) opts for the daughters as poems.

[87]Wallace Stevens (New York, 1961), p. 48.

[88]The Capuchins are the only bearded order of Catholic monks. They are renowned for good works of a worldly rather than a pious sort.

[89]"The four daughters represent for Stevens something like four different kinds of poem, from the most ambitious and conscientious to the most trivially descriptive." Nassar then proceeds to differentiate the four kinds of poem, but I confess the passage is virtually unintelligible to me. An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 170ff.

[90]In a letter to Hi Simons--Letters, pp. 351-52.

[91]This is Fuchs's explanation in The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, p. 58.

[92]Letters, p. 229. Stevens added, "I expect that after a while Crispin . . . will become rudimentary and abhorrent."

[93]C.P., p. 144.

[94]"The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," 210.

[95]See Stevens' remark (Letters, p. 287)--"I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little off the normal."

[96]Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (New York, 1954), p. 12.

CHAPTER V

The Man with the Blue Guitar

The Man with the Blue Guitar (1937) is a series of thirty-three improvisations on the subject of poetry. Stevens tells us this in Section XXII: "Poetry is the subject of the poem." Poetry, however, requires a liberal definition. Poetry is a synecdoche for all the arts; the poet is any ardent observer-transformer of "things as they are," so that poetry in its largest sense means the recreation of the universe by the imagination, which imbues objective reality with color, value, and significance.[1] Stevens' own statement of his intention in this poem appears in his notes to his Italian translator, Renato Poggioli: "The general intention of the Blue Guitar was to say a few things that I felt impelled to say 1. about reality; 2. about the imagination; 3. their interrelations; and 4. principally, my attitude toward each of these things. This is the general scope of the poem, which is confined to the area of poetry and makes no pretense of going beyond that area."[2]

The poem raises in its sharpest form the issue of unity, as so many of Stevens' later and longer poems do. Many of his poems are variations on the theme of the interdependence of reality and the imagination. Does any integrating conception

of structure or of over-all effect underlie the organization of Stevens' The Man with the Blue Guitar? No, the arrangement of the sections is somewhat haphazard--they seem to "occur as they occur." That the final ordering of the stanzas is not the only possible one, nor necessarily the best, can be seen by referring to the poem's history of publication. The Man with the Blue Guitar, like "Sunday Morning," first appeared in Poetry in an abbreviated version. Twelve sections were printed in the following order: II, IX, XV, XVII, XVIII, XXIV, XXVII, XXVIII, XXIX, XXX, XXXI, and XXXIII.[3] The reader can probably imagine for himself several different ways of arranging the sections of this poem without substantial loss, perhaps with substantial gain.[4]

In a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens said of his arrangement of the stanzas of The Man with the Blue Guitar, "I kept them in their original order for my own purposes, because one really leads into another, even when the relationship is only one of contrast."[5] Again, Stevens asserts, "This poem consists of a series of antitheses,"[6] referring, no doubt, to the poem's continual oscillation between the two poles of reality and imagination. It remains to be seen whether each strophe (this seems to be the best word to describe the units of the poem, since it means literally "a turn") does lead into the next; and whether, indeed, the organizing principle is one of successive contrasts or whether, on closer study, the reader's initial impression that the poem lacks organization is correct. In order to determine this, I shall first examine the over-all

pattern of the poem to see how it blocks out its main preoccupations. After that, I shall discuss further problems this particular poem poses. And finally, I shall provide a detailed exegesis and evaluation of the poem.

The questions to be answered are 1. Is this one poem or thirty-three different ones?[7] If it is thirty-three different ones, how, if at all, are they related? (This is not quite the same as asking what the organizational principle of the poem is. Stevens suggests that it is that of free association.) 2. If there is a unifying principle, is it (a) argumentative, (b) pictorial, or (c) emotional?

In this investigation, it seems necessary to penetrate beyond the assumption that "to assume consciousness is at once to assume form."[8] For all the poem's improvisatory air, as of a man striking extempore chords on a guitar, we know that Stevens worked hard on The Man with Blue Guitar.[9] He wrote and rewrote individual sections and scrapped many.[10] Should he have deleted more? Should he have rearranged those parts he kept to achieve greater concentration? It seems to this reader that the poem could benefit from further omissions and from reorganization.

Even if we accept, as Stevens appears to have done, Croce's somewhat mustic belief that intuition is equivalent to expression, that one has only to conceive an idea to be able to express it--and express it intuitively in the most cogent way--should we also believe that the knowledge of how best to organize a series of such expressions is intuitive? Surely it

is not, except for those short periods when the imagination is working at incandescent heat. Such periods are difficult to sustain; we can hardly blame Stevens for failing to sustain them over thirty-three strophes of between ten and fourteen lines each. The Man with the Blue Guitar is a poem about flux, about the imagination's excursions in and about the world. As such, a fluctuating form, recapturing the sinuous flow of thought, might well be considered the most effective way of rendering the subject. But is the ebb and flow of meaning in this poem the most effective?

A thematic survey of the whole poem reveals that the six opening strophes possess unity. First we have the colloquy of poet and audience. (It is important to note that there is a consensus between them as to what the poet's subject should be, though an undercurrent of dissent evolves as to how he should handle it.) The poet admits his inability to depict man as he is; he admits the imperative need for abstraction, but an abstraction that should be as close to reality as possible. Man is the proper subject for poetry.

Sections VII through IX constitute a metaphysical variation on the "reality-imagination" theme: sun and moon are engaged in the same combat as the blue guitar striving to engage a green reality. Stevens said that Sections VIII and IX were counter-portraits or "companion pieces."[11] As well as demonstrating the time-lag between experience and response, these sections adumbrate another preoccupation of the poem--poetry in a world without belief. Stanza X appears to stand on

its own, except insofar as it exemplifies the factitious faiths of the modern world. It provides an excellent example of the difficulties of interpreting Stevens' late poems. (Considerable attention will be devoted to it later in this chapter.)

Section XI on the theme of mutability, the metamorphoses of reality, also seems to stand alone. The theme of mutability will be taken up again in two further companion pieces, Sections XXV and XXVI--first reality's metamorphoses, then the imagination's[12]--but in a different tone and manner. Again, Section XII on the identity of the subjective with the collective imagination is unintegrated with the preceding or following sections. Stanzas XIII and XIV cohere, however, since both are concerned with the transfiguring role played by the imagination. The desolation of modern life and the modern poet's dilemma in XV and XVI will not be taken up again at length until the final strophes on Oxidia, the modern industrial city (XXX-XXXIII).

Sections XVII-XIX plainly hang together, comprising variations on the theme of imagination and reality as soul and body. Sections XX and XXI examine in a metaphysical manner what there is left to believe in--one's self and the world. Poem XXII, the thematic nucleus of the entire series, proclaims poetry as unifier and reconciler of reality and imagination. Sections XXIII and XXIV are labored extensions of the same theme. Poem XXV is a brilliantly comic version of the solemn, vatic celebration of nature's metamorphoses in XI. The twenty-seventh strophe is on the same subject (though more in the spirit of the

eleventh), while XXVIII announces the final triumph of imagination, in harmony with reality. XXIX and the succeeding strophes introduce much new material: a disquisition on religion (XXIX), and a particularized vision of the repugnant world modern poetry has to celebrate in Oxidia (XXX-XXXII). The final section ends on a slightly unexpected note. The past is outmoded and the present indomitably ugly, yet imagination must evade the one and transcend the other. This it can do only momentarily. The poem is a series of statements and recapitulations.

The basic metrical unit of this poem is the unrhymed couplet. Each strophe contains from five to seven of these. In some cases, they are rhymed; in many sections, the second or third and the last rhyme. There is also some internal rhyme within lines and between couplets. The dominant meter is iambic tetrameter. As always, Stevens revels in coinages, in colloquialisms and archaisms, in alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia. The poem suggests the sounds of the guitar in such words as tick, tock, buzzing, chattering, twang, tom-tom, and strum.

The Man with the Blue Guitar represents a watershed in Stevens' poetry, for it is the gateway to a new style and a new kind of poetry. It is, like The Comedian, a long poem; however, the rococo mannerism of that piece has been superseded by a plain style resembling prose but for certain stylistic intricacies. One of these is a deliberately baffling use of syntax. It is easy to grow restive under the extraordinarily ambiguous syntax of the late Stevens. Mac Hammond has conducted

a study of this and found that Stevens uses almost all the rhetorical devices in the primer in The Man with the Blue Guitar.[13] Occasionally, these tricks pay off as a way of expressing the seemingly inexpressible. More often they impress one as a sort of poetic chop-logic. (Compare, for instance, Stanzas VI and XX, as examples of successful and unsuccessful syntax, respectively.)

In Harvey Gross's interesting study, Sound and Form in Modern Poetry, he comments on Stevens' mastery of rhetoric, adding, "Rhetoric can only be sustained by consummate rhythmic control. . . . rhythm will rescue for cognition what may never receive articulate verbal expression."[14] Stevens sometimes conveys the impression, both in his theory and his practice of poetry, that sound is, for him, prior to sense. There is a gulf separating the luxuriant verbal tricks of The Comedian from the stripped, relatively workaday couplets of The Man with the Blue Guitar. However, in the latter, certain rhetorical devices obtrude themselves on one's attention. One such is repetition, used apparently for its own sake, as in IV:

> A million people on one string?
> And all their manner in the thing,
>
> And all their manner right and wrong,
> And all their manner weak and strong?

The effect here is extremely prosaic, as one feels it was intended to be. Sometimes, repetition is used with cumulative qualification to whittle down a statement, as in Section XX. Or, again, single words are repeated, usually at the beginnings and ends of lines, as in XXI. Again, synonyms are piled up: employer and employee

in XXXI "contend, combat, compose." In XVI, syntax seems deliberately to obstruct meaning. Often there is nothing recognizable as a statement in an entire strophe, just aggregations of nouns, adjectives, or infinitives, but no declarative verbs. (Thus, in Sections XVIII, XXI, and XXIII there is nothing recognizable as a main clause.) Finally, there are sections where the syntax is so tricky that it seems as though the poet were trying to perplex either his reader, himself, or both. For example, the meaning of XXIX, which I paraphrase, seems to be this: these tastings in the vaults oppose the outworn faiths of the past to the celebration outside the cathedral of a wedding with reality. That is to say, there is "nuptial song" within and festival without the cathedral, or there is a wedding both inside and out of mind with reality, but within the comforting bounds of faith, the balance is in favor of imagination; beyond, it is in favor of reality. (The meaning depends partially on reading the pivotal "and" in line 4 as "to." The past and the festival are opposites, not the same thing.)[15]

The Man with the Blue Guitar provides a good case study of Stevens' use of imagery in the later, longer poems. To attempt to describe Stevens' imagery--especially that of his long poems--is a difficult task, for it is like that of no other poet. It is extraordinarily heterogeneous, disjointed, tenuous, and elusive. The imagery of The Man with the Blue Guitar is no exception. It suffers from diffuseness because of its heterogeneity. It is not only that the transitions between

images are omitted (as in T. S. Eliot), but that these transitions are too quickly effected. The difficulties posed by heterogeneity and rapidity of succession are compounded by artificiality and tenuousness of meaning. Stevens' long poems of his middle and late period are often cluttered museums or attics, junkpiles of the esoteric and bizarre. In his effort to convey what J. Hillis Miller calls "the spatial representation of a temporal sequence of metamorphoses,"[16] he sacrifices depth; to seize the passing moment with all the objects swimming in its flux, Stevens' poetry becomes an impressionistic gliding over surfaces, a rapid passage down a galerie des glaces, reflections flashing momentarily in the mind's mirror before they are gone. This poet revels in mixed metaphors which are not really metaphors, since, as Hillis Miller points out, they are actually strings of similes or series of analogies.[17] Stevens does not "believe" in metaphor; metaphor is a means of begetting fictive resemblances in the mind. So he says that a seems like b which seems like c, or uses the even more characteristic formula, x is 'as if' y. Examples of these gambits are to be found in The Man with the Blue Guitar, Sections XXIII, XXIV, and XXIX, and throughout Notes toward a Supreme Fiction and An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.

Most important and characteristic of the late poetry in general is the realization that few of Stevens' images are sufficiently rooted in one's natural sense of the significance of an object, its power to evoke an aura of suggestive meaning. Nor is any image dwelt upon sufficiently, or sufficiently integrated with the others to create a sense of unity, impact,

and compression such as one habitually finds, for example, in the imagery of Wordsworth, Keats, or Yeats. No image in Stevens comes trailing its own natural "clouds of glory." (By natural is meant either natural to the human mind in its unselfconscious moments, or naturally emanating from our sense perceptions of the outside world--it amounts to the same thing.) The power to represent that external world, "things as they are," seems steadily to dwindle in The Man with the Blue Guitar, in the greater part of the Notes, and in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. The world Stevens presents is more and more that of the "light-bound space of the mind."[18]

Stevens' greatest poetic challenge and difficulty is that he is trying to express a perception of the world that has not been expressed in poetry before. If it is true, as J. Hillis Miller says, that Stevens is trying to write a poetry which sustains itself solely on the mind's intercourse with objects,[19] then this is a radically new kind of poetry. It is, perhaps, the poetic equivalent of fictional chosisme, as we find this in, for example, the novels of Robbe-Grillet. This is a world of surface shapes, patterns, and colors, of relationships made by the eye, almost without the mind's intrusion. In fact, however, Stevens is not able to live in such a world of unadulterated reality beyond belief, writing poetry without significance beyond itself, though he tries hard to do so.

Stevens' early poems hover between Imagism and Symbolism; much of the later verse occupies the borderland between Symbolism and Surrealism. For instance, Section XIII of The Man with the

Blue Guitar uses a combination of symbolic and surrealist imagery. And if the criticism of Stevens' more natural imagery is that it is often insufficiently natural, that of his surrealist imagery is that it is sometimes too willed, not sufficiently unnatural in the sense of irrational. But again, what Stevens is often trying to express is essentially nothingness. And considering the difficulty of this task, he does a remarkably fine job. For example, what is that "heraldic center of the world" in Section XIII of The Man with the Blue Guitar? It is pure imagination, the conceptual power lying at the center of the phenomenal world. And how does one embody that? Stevens uses the stylized, emblematic imagery of heraldry. "Blue sleek with a hundred chins" is pure Arabian Nights fantasy; the subjective wooer of the world is personified as a corpulent Bluebeard.

Stevens is one of those pioneer poets who have no poetic stock-in-trade, no counters of value and significance, to fall back on; whose vision has outstripped that of his contemporaries in rejecting traditional beliefs. What does a poet do in such a predicament? How is he to communicate his vision to those who do not yet share it, who cling to the old values? Either he must reverse a traditional mythology to make his own (as Blake did when he turned Christianity upside down), or he must (like Yeats) forge his own mythology out of his own materials. Stevens never took the time or made the enormous effort required to forge a new mythology. The closest he came to this was in somewhat casually evolving a tenuous symbolism, founded on the natural world but at a considerable remove from it.

Stevens' symbols are usually grounded in nature. The sky is blue; vegetation is green. From these are evolved the symbolic values of blue (standing for imagination) and green (standing for reality). It is hard to know whether to call such a use of color emblematic or symbolic. Perhaps the first adjective may be more appropriate. While symbols are both concrete and abstract and, being both material and spiritual, have the power to evoke physical as well as mental reactions, emblems are like badges or insignia, more superficial, abstract, allegorical, and didactic than symbols. They depend for any impact they make on rational recognition of what they signify, not on stirring one's consciousness to its roots, as symbols do. Stevens' emblems often have the great disadvantage of being private; they have no conventionally assigned significance, though they sometimes have an appropriateness that makes their meaning accessible.

Stevens' symbolism is relatively easy to grasp, except in particular instances, and some of these occur in The Man with the Blue Guitar. For example, there is the danger of reading symbolic values into a context intended to be straightforwardly descriptive--as with the "reddest columns" of Section X, which are, according to Stevens' gloss, red because they reflect fireworks on a red-letter day.[20] The baroque chandelier and candle of Section XIV represent the multifaceted illuminations of science and the single light source of artistic imagination, the poet tells us.[21] (The first image might be called an emblem, since it is insufficiently developed within the context to be symbolic, while the second, because of reverberations within

this context and from other poems of Stevens, may be called a symbol. The "wind-gloss" and the "sea of ex" of XVIII are both emblematic and both depend upon a pun; one is hard put to it to explain why the first is effective, the second not.)

There are two other problems in interpreting Stevens' symbology: two quite different objects may represent the same concept (as both rock and sea represent objective reality in Sections XI and XXVII of The Man with the Blue Guitar; or, what is more disturbing, one object may be susceptible of two contrary meanings. Thus, the sun usually symbolizes objective reality, together with rock and sea (in the last, the emphasis is on reality's metamorphoses), but the sun may stand for the world invented by the imgination, as it does to some degree in Section VII of The Man with the Blue Guitar.[22] Obviously, symbols that can be so manipulated as to mean opposite things at different times cannot be regarded as having any essential, exclusive meaning of their own.

The imagery of The Man with the Blue Guitar is sometimes inaccessible, or would be but for the poet's explanation of it.[23] To say that a poet's imagery is inaccessible is to say that the private has not been made sufficiently public or explicit, or that a peculiar use of connotation is not clarified by the context. Most of Stevens' images only become significant in the light of the context of his entire work. Though there are reverberations of meaning between poems and in recurring images, there are fewer within poems.[24] Theoretically, this is because

Stevens' poetry is bent on capturing passing impressions on the wing and presenting them without any subsequently applied lacquer of thought; practically, it is because the poet would frequently take neither the time nor trouble to polish or perfect his poems. One has to decide what an image means in any particular context by a careful examination of that context and of other similar or identical images and contexts.

Whether one calls Stevens' images symbolic or emblematic is relatively unimportant compared with evaluating their effectiveness. In The Man with the Blue Guitar, there is an unintegrated profusion of images whose impact is marginal because they seem both arbitrary and superfluous. Thus, in IV, feelings buzz like flies in autumn air: why autumn, one wonders--because they are soon to be extinguished? The "torches wisping in the underground" and "the structure of vaults upon a point of light," much as one admires them as local effects, do not really seem justified by the context because they remain undeveloped. Yet these are two of the finest images in the poem. It is as though Stevens had lost the power of sustained imagery that his early poetry possessed.

On the credit side, the "hero's head" of II creates a vivid sensuous impression, which is what any image should do; it is suggestive and allusive, without being elusive; it is a symbol of man's potential. The blue guitar itself, through constant repetition and gathering associations (some of them courtesy of Picasso), is an effective though attenuated image of the imagination at play. The "rough beast" of imagination

which appears briefly in XVII and again in XIX as "the lion in the lute" facing "the lion locked in stone" is a more concrete, powerful, yet mysteriously suggestive image. But how effective are the miscellany of objects in X, XV, XVI, XVIII, XXI, XXIII, XXIV, XXVI, XXVIII, XXIX, XXX, XXXI, and XXXIII? Because, after the opening dialogue, most of the poem takes place in the guitarist-poet's mind, curious juxtapositions occur: a German chandelier hangs by the seashore; the north wind blows a horn, the worm a straw; photographs and dead leaves are flung pell-mell among watery weeds, and we rush rapidly past a Franciscan don and a strutting puppet to an electric linesman regarding cables and smokestacks. Finally, a screeching pheasant and a jay appear, representing poetry in a setting that is naturalistically inappropriate to them. While X is all cacophony, tinsel, and bunting (perhaps all to the good, since it is intended to portray this), XXVIII epitomizes the imagery of the whole poem in constituting one of Stevens' surreal aspics. XXIX, XXX, and XXXI (with the exception of lines 13-14) are imagistically a mess of pottage. As always, the unhappiest, most contrived and meretricious effects occur when imagery, as well as style, are inappropriate to what is being described. This is particularly the case in the concluding strophes, where the modern industrial city and suburbs are described in the most effete and precious terms. We are unable to believe that a scene described in such Yellow Book parlance can be stony, dirty, ugly, and unaccommodating to the imagination, as it is proclaimed to be. As often in Stevens, sound tyrannizes over good sense; the

demands of alliteration and assonance seem to dictate images. This explains "dew-dapper clapper-traps," a "cute" local effect; "amber-ember pod" is merely clever; it works at low imaginative pressure to suggest the stirring up of fire out of ashes, but "jocular procreations" is not really effective at all.

A detailed exegesis of the poem, one of the few on which we have Stevens' own detailed comments, should shed more light on the problems already discussed, as well as interpret this series of meditations. The guitarist, who represents the poet, just as his guitar represents the imagination, is called a "shearsman" because he tailors reality, and because he shears through appearances to their inner core. Stevens says, "This refers to the posture of the speaker, squatting like a tailor . . . as he works on his cloth."[25] The guitar is blue, the color of imagination, and probably also to suggest a blues guitar. Its subject is green day, objective reality, "things as they are"; but "things as they are" are inevitably altered by the perceiving and playing instrument, as both musician and audience realize. The audience demands that the poet-musician celebrate man both as he is and as something beyond himself. "A tune beyond us" means a sublimated rendition of us and one that is beyond our scope or capacity. This necessitates abstraction, as we see in Section II. (In VI, the imagination's versions of reality are seen to be removed beyond the ravages of time and the dilapidations of space by their placement in the mind.)

Section II is usually read as an indictment of Stevens by Stevens. His remarks about it make it clear that it was

intended as a comment on the artist in general, but it has particular application to Stevens. The poet laments that he is not able to "bring a world quite round," which is to say that his poetic world lacks solidity and completeness; nor is it inhabited by recognizable men. Stevens' comments imply that a degree of abstraction is endemic to poetry in general--to modern poetry particularly, perhaps--for he says, "One strives to create man number one," meaning "the complete realization, [sic] of the idea of man, yet one never gets more than a hero's head for one's efforts. It is never possible for the artist to do more than approach 'almost to man.'"[26] And Stevens seems equally divided between the necessity and the impossibility of creating a poetic image of modern man. "We cannot think of him as originating in Oxidia"--the contemporary industrial city. "We go back to an ancestor who is abstract and being abstract . . . unreal . . ."[27] The "hero's head, large eye/And bearded bronze" recall Greek heroic sculpture. Stevens recognizes that "the major abstraction is the idea of man,"[28] but his landscapes are rarely peopled, and when they are, by abstractions. The second strophe is both appealing and effective as a poem.

Section III examines a typically modern way of studying man, by anatomizing him psychologically. Stevens glosses "man number one" as "man in C major . . . at his happiest normal"[29]: the human norm is the poet's proper subject. But man here has become a scientific abstraction, the parts of his brain exposed as in a colored anatomical chart, while a hopeless attempt is

made to pick its acrid (bitter, primary) colors out, to analyze it into its component parts. This is not the way of poetry. Stevens indicates in a letter to Hi Simons that what he is attacking here is "excess realism in life."[30] "We murder to dissect," as Wordsworth said. Here vitality is sacrificed to mortuary science. The previous strophe exposed the inadequacy of Stevens' kind of poetry; this one exposes the inadequacy of science, more particularly that of the human mind. (As Stevens observes in The Necessary Angel, even for Freud man remains essentially unknowable.[31]) Stevens explains the image of the dead bird spreadeagled across a door as deriving from his own observations of a custom of Pennsylvania Dutch and New England farmers who nail up birds such as hawks and eagles either to scare off other members of the same species or to exhibit them as unusual trophies.[32]

The strong verbs drive, nail, strike, and bang lead up to the violent music that concludes, "jangling the metal of the strings." Metal could well be read mettle also, as the imagination becomes ferocious in its effort to "strike his living hi and ho," to "turn it true." Stevens explains that "this means to express man in the liveliness of lively experience."[33] But how do we make the transition from a killing anatomy to a lively record? Could the whole strophe be intended to show the different savageries of abstraction, whether scientific or poetic?

Stevens says that Section IV refers back to the opening strophe, and adds, "In this poem, reality changes into the

imagination (under one's very eyes) as one experiences it, by reason of one's feelings about it."[34] Two interpretations of life (of things as they are) are involved--an objective one at the start, a subjective one at the close.[35] Reality is transformed by feelings, irrational, surreptitious, but all-pervasive (ll. 7-8). As "Peter Quince at the Clavier" has it, "Music is feeling . . . not sound." It may be that the second couplet contains a sly, disguised denigration of the naturalist literary mode of the thirties. People cannot be standardized, nor the variety and subtlety of their manner captured on one string,[36] however delicately and difficultly the melody picks its way on the guitar.

In the dialogue between poet and audience, the audience in V adjures the poet to renounce the grand poetic manner of the past with its prophecies of hell--"torches wisping in the underground"--and heaven. "The structure of vaults upon a point of light" recalls Santayana's description of Gothic architecture.[37] The kind of poetry this evokes is Dantesque metaphysical verse, which is irrelevant to a flat, bare, objective world deprived of belief in any other and stripped of all shadow or nuance. The form of the strophe follows that of complaint and reply, as in the first strophe, except that here the audience seems to be speaking throughout. Poetry in a dull, materialistic world from which God has withdrawn must concern itself with man, and yet, while confining itself to the things of this world, it "must take the place/Of empty heaven and its hymns." The poet agrees with his audience about the proper

subject of poetry. He agrees, too, that day is the time for dreaming, for life, and for poetry, since night ushers in sleep, oblivion, and death.[38]

Section VI looks back, as Stevens says, to the first strophe, and is both repetition and further qualification of it. "Things imagined . . . become things as they are"[39] when liberated from the accidents of time and place and recomposed in the mind. (Only the place must be changed--not the essential character of the thing depicted--ll. 5-8.) The object truthfully perceived and abstracted in the mind is made final by being placed there, outside time and space, beyond change. But the finality achieved by art is only momentary (line 9) because there are no final resolutions as between reality and imagination--"It is the chord that falsifies" in XI.5. In our own age the validity of the thought of God has evaporated like dew steaming in the sun (ll. 10-11). So, like Matthew Arnold, Stevens envisions poetry as having to take the place of religion. Stevens explains "a composing of senses of the guitar" as "an assembly of all possible senses, the totality of understanding."[40] The artist seeks a temporary but full "agreement with reality"[41] such that this world will seem to us enough, will bring composure and satisfaction to our imagination and senses. For after assimilating our flat, sterile, denuded world--and it does this the better the more faithfully and accurately it describes it--the imagination is able to emancipate us from it. As Stevens says in "Description without Place," "Description is revelation."

Section VII is extremely difficult to understand. The tone of the poem is oracular and apocalyptic. Stevens apparently realized how impenetrable this passage was, and either would not or could not elucidate it. He says of the stanza, "While this has a double entendre [what this is is not specified], still its real form is on the page. You do not pierce an actor's make-up: you go to see and enjoy the make-up; you do not bother about the face beneath. The poem is the poem, not its paraphrase."[42] This is one of many such refusals, or inabilities, to explain on Stevens' part. Unfortunately, the "make-up," while utterly baffling, is not particularly enjoyable.

The poem treats the realms of objective reality, customarily represented in Stevens' verse by the sun, and of human imagination, habitually represented by the moon. The poet appears to try switching the two principles and, in the process, seems to imply that they must forever remain antithetical, though the human mind must forever try to reconcile them. One of the difficulties in interpreting this stanza is that the sun is used to stand for both the objective and the invented world (the world realized in the mind).[43] The sun is at first said to share our works, while the moon does not. Since the moon usually represents the imaginative principle in Stevens' poetry, it is surprising to hear that it has no part in our works. One wonders what kind of works are meant: art works, or public works projects? Throughout the stanza, it is impossible to tell what is in the conditional and what in the declarative mood, so that it is very hard indeed to figure out the meaning of this

passage. The poet speculates on an order (presumably antithetical to his own) in which the objective world might offer him the sense of apartness, evasion, and relief which he now finds in the imagination. (Lines 8-11.) His imagination grows cold at the thought. In the poet's own words, "I have a sense of isolation in the presence of the moon as in the presence of the sea. If I could experience the same sense . . . in the presence of the sun, my imagination grows cold at the thought of such complete detachment. I do not desire to exist apart from our works, and the imagination does not."[44] Perhaps Stevens is merely reasserting that art must be realistic, not purely imaginative: it must begin with the real world as its base.[45] Or perhaps he is saying the imagination must cleave not only to reality, but specifically to the human. If we divorce ourselves from the sun (reality)--lines 5-7--we become creeping, mindless insects; if we live too much in the sun, presumably, we become inhuman. (The three final tercets are particularly difficult to interpret, but I take them to signify that the imagination, too, is a principle of reality. "Things as they are" here are things as we feel they are.)

The next section describes the morning after a night storm. This storm carries suggestions of the crisis of belief, the dynamiting of all the gods and devils.[46] The atmosphere we live in is still saturated by the vestiges of this storm. But perhaps this reading is too allegorical for a poem which was probably suggested to the poet by the weather about him as he wrote, like several parts of his Notes toward a Supreme Fiction. In general, the strophe illustrates the poet's reason controlling

the irrational chaos of phenomena, and the adjustment of the imagination to such a tumultuous reality. Stevens says, "Although the poet is relaxed, yet his words are full of the storm but not part of it. Consequently, they control it and bring it to bear: make use of it . . . . reason . . . puts it in the confines of focus and makes it possible to see that chaos is not without its limits, that if night was all storm, day is not."[47] Whereas the first four couplets describe the storm most effectively, the last two suggest the poet's imposition of order. They may well remind us of the singer's portioning out of the night, her establishment of its boundaries and limits through her song in "The Idea of Order at Key West," where the singer of course represents the human imagination. In a perceptive self-comment on his last line in Stanza VIII, which sums up his poetic technique in general, Stevens says, "I twang things out and don't try for more."[48]

Stevens is also tackling here the problem of the pastness of perception generally, and the time-lag between experience and response.[49] He asserts that Sections VIII and IX "demonstrate the law of opposites. In VIII, where apparently the whole setting is propitious to the imagination, the imagination comes to nothing. What is really propitious (the florid, the tumultuously bright) antagonizes it. Thus, one's chords remain manqué; still there they are." (This comment seems unnecessarily self-deprecating, since VIII is impressive as poetry.) Struck in the midst of chaos, these notes are a means of describing and ordering it to some extent. In IX, the storm having further

abated, but the air remaining overcast, "the imagination being confronted with a kind of universal dullness . . . seizes on it and makes use of it, dominates it, takes its place, becomes the world in which we live."[50] There is a reciprocal flow in the relations between reality and imagination, whereby one rushes in to fill the breach caused by the temporary withdrawal of the other.

In Section IX, we get a view of the guitarist bent over his instrument, both shadowy forms seen from an immense height. One should recall that the guitar symbolizes the imagination, "described but difficult," and sense, as in Section III, that this can never quite be captured, whether in analysis or description. The maker is scarcely distinguishable from the thing to be made. The poet is still conning those past perceptions from which he will evolve his poem. The storm lingers in the "overcast blue" of the air, an atmosphere in which imagination becomes increasingly intense and brooding as the weather clears. The "arrowy, still strings" suggest taut suspense: "the bow is bent: make from the shaft."

Finally, we get a picture of the poet-musician as actor, his stage the world, his moods evolved out of the world's weather. It is a view similar to that in "Of Modern Poetry":

> The actor is
> A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
> An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses.[51]

Section IX, Stevens affirms, is an illustration of the text that "the imagination is not a free agent. It is not a faculty that

functions spontaneously without reference to its environment. . . . The imagination depends on reality."[52] The poet's song expresses half his world, half himself, he himself being the weather of his world, as his moods reflect his environment.

Section X may be used as a test case of the difficulties of interpreting Stevens' late poems. The opening command, "Raise reddest columns," appears to be an injunction to celebrate with the maximum of realism--red usually symbolizing prime reality in Stevens' verse--"The approach of him whom none believes,/Whom all believe that all believe."[53] Those for whom Stevens' gloss was not available might well believe that the hero being celebrated here was the ultimate reality, Death. One is encouraged to believe that this stanza concerns death by the second couplet, in which newspapers, which for Stevens represent mundane ephemera, are described as "the wills/Of the dead, majestic in their seals." The pagan riding in a burnished chariot seems, then, to be the Juggernaut of mortality, whom the poet addresses, reasonably enough (though uncharacteristically for this poet), as his enemy. This reading might make of line 7 an accolade for realists, those who believe in the reality of death being upheld over those who merely pay death lipservice. Certainly, "petty misery" would be very difficult to explain in the light of such an interpretation, and the last two lines--the syntax again characteristically ambiguous--could be considered to signify either the end of death (again, an un-Stevensian idea) or the end wrought by death, whose touch "topples men and rock." Indeed, several critics have interpreted the figure whose approach

is celebrated in X as a supernatural being, on the analogy of the "reddest lord" who represents Christ in Esthétique du Mal, III.[54]

Stevens' explication, however, makes it clear that this section parodies the celebration of the contemporary hero, a politican, soldier, or president who holds no faith and is incapable of inspiring any, in whom everyone merely pretends to believe, but who is really a man of straw. Stevens' explication reads as follows:

> If we are to think of a supreme fiction, instead of creating one, as the Greeks did, for example in the form of a mythology, we might choose to create it in the image of a man: an agreed-on superman. He would not be the typical hero taking part in parades (columns red with red-fire, bells tolling, tin cans, confetti) in whom no one believes as a truly great man, but in whom everyone pretends to believe, someone completely outside of the intimacies of profound faith, a politician, a soldier, Harry Truman as god. . . . This second-rate creature is the adversary. I address him with hostility, hoo-ing the slick trombones. . . . I deride and challenge him. . . . The pejorative sense of slick is obvious.[55]

(Stevens had previously explained "hoo-ing the slick trombones" as "making Bing Crosby,"[56] participating in the sleazy sentiment of the factitious ceremony that induces a petty misery in the hearts of men--which misery, according to the poet, finally topples specious heroes.) The tone of this strophe is then seen to be sardonic; it is a fairly topical piece of satire. The poet mocks the public hero from the rostrum of the vacuous faith that he denies outright, and that the hero betrays through

hypocrisy, for he does not really believe in it, and nor does anyone else. Such a faith is a mockery and a betrayal of both the living and the dead. The poem is seen to be less esoteric than it at first appeared.[57]

Section XI is beautiful. It reads like a Renaissance elegy on mutability.[58] Matter undergoes its inexorable metamorphoses, just as mind does. The imagery here looks forward to Stevens' late poem "The Rock," in which rock represents the immitigable basal substance wrought upon by time. It is never eroded, for "time grows upon the rock." Flesh and the fleece of vegetation become stone--"the ivy on the stones/Becomes the stones." Meanwhile from the forever ebbing and flowing tide of life, the eternal interchange between matter and spirit, imagination has caught and crystallized momentary perceptions like flies in amber, "wingless and withered, but living alive." (In XXVII, the sea, Stevens' other prime symbol of reality beside rock, representing reality's endless flux, is used to suggest again the eternal give and take, ebb and flow, of the human and the inhuman, as in the first part of this eleventh strophe.)

Lines 5 and 10 are crucial to an interpretation of this section. For Stevens there are no final resolutions in the continual interchange between mind and matter; hence, "It is the chord that falsifies," in seeming to create a resolution. However, both matter and mind have a common origin in the womb of time-space: "The discord merely magnifies" the

separation between inanimate and animate. Stevens' own explanation of this stanza reads as follows:

> The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord. They then cease to exist separately. On the other hand, discord exaggerates the separation between its elements. These propositions are stated in a variety of terms: ivy on stone, people in cities, men in masses. [The urbanized masses are deprived of a proper sense of balance and harmony with nature and among themselves.] The point of the poem is stated in the last distich, in which one looks forward to an era when. . . . there will exist the supreme balance between

life and the world, or between imagination and reality, which Stevens says are symbolized by time and the rock, respectively.[59]

The poet calls Section XII a "series of antitheses" concerned primarily with society, "the orchestra."[60] The "high hall" is the world, in which the "shuffling men" play and dance. The height of the hall is their own--it depends on the stature of their own imaginations in envisioning it. "Tom-tom" suggest a drumming or pulsing throb like the breathing of an animal. Poetry throughout this poem (as in several others of Stevens, notably "Poetry is a Destructive Force") is represented as a savage beast. Here its breathing is as yet timid, cowed by the deadened and deadening clamors of the shuffling multitude.[61]

He that "lies awake at night," for whom night is not sleep but desire (see V.5) is the poet, he who, in another poem, "at midnight touches the guitar."[62] When the poet asks, "Where/ Do I begin and end?" he is asking at what point his being merges

both with that of the multitude, whose spokesman he must be, and with the objective reality his song must celebrate.

Stevens' idea of the "subman" or collective subconscious, a sort of Anima Mundi on whom we all draw through our imaginations, is involved here. In The Necessary Angel, Stevens says that the poet may come "to feel that his imagination is not wholly his own, but that it may be part of a much larger, much more potent imagination, which it is his affair to try to get at."[63] And so the poet picks up (this verb, several times repeated in the poem, captures well Stevens' sense of the fortuitousness of poetry)

> That which momentously declares
> Itself not to be I and yet
> Must be.

This other voice is also the voice of "the lion locked in stone" speaking through the "lion in the lute." As the poet discovers in Section XXXII, "The blue guitar surprises you" when nothing stands between one and the visible world. At such moments, when sight is renewed and the veils of past vision stripped off, fresh perception expresses itself in an original voice that comes closest to the untutored vision of "the ignorant man" who alone can "mate his life with life."[64]

Now the guitarist shifts into a new key, as it were, and "deals with the intensity of the imagination unmodified by contacts with reality, if such a thing is possible." Thus Stevens explains Section XIII: "The poem has to do with pure imagination."[65] The "pale intrusions" are remnants of matter, experience, or thought obtruding themselves into the blue sky of imagination. Sukenick explains "blue buds or pitchy blooms" as promising

concentrations or diffusions of imagination.[66] The "unspotted imbecile revery" exemplifies imagination at its most self-sufficient--"unspotted" recalls the "immaculate . . . good" the poet invoked in VII. Unadulterated imagination is irrational, like a dreaming beast. In "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract, Stevens asserts, "To be blue/There must be no questions," and concludes that it is "enough to be/Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense."[67] The imagination is here presented as that "middling beast"[68] breathing "his bronzen breath at the azury centre of time."[69] Man's consciousness, abstracted from reality, constitutes the "heraldic center of the world," since it composes the world, always remaining for itself the central point of reference. (Compare Section XXV.) Stevens himself explains "the amorist Adjective" as representing the imagination at its most intense and incandescent.[70] The ardor of description which irradiates the objective world is personified as an obese lover. "Blue sleek with a hundred chins" recalls the "bullioned blue, blue abulge" of "Two Illustrations That the World is What You Make of It."[71] Stevens describes this state of pure imagination as "a state of mind . . . like weather after it has cleared."[72]

What the imagination loves and embraces is the external world from which it derives all its inspiration. Stevens calls Section XIV "rather a catholic view" of imagination and reason vying with one another to illuminate the universe. The poet comments, "I don't know that one is ever going to get at the secret of the world through the sciences. One after another

their discoveries irradiate us and create the view of life that we are now taking, but, after all . . . . the secret of the world is as great as it ever was."[73] The oversized, baroque, but ultimately partial and fragmentary illumination provided by the sciences is set over against that candle which is enough "to light the world."[74]

The beams of the imagination light up the night sky like the crisscrossing beams of searchlights. These lights are both "star and orb"--the light source and the path by which it travels. Because they illumine the primeval darkness out of which life emerges, they are the riches of day's (life's) atmosphere. Even at noon, when the pressure of outer reality against inner is heaviest, when daylight is most intense, the human consciousness lights up the essential darkness and emptiness of time and space. (The poem presents an image of composite time--neither day nor night, dawn nor dusk, but all at once.) Still the universe remains baffling and mysterious: its sea is many colors and its banks are muffled in mist. The chiaroscuro in which we sit playing our instruments is that perpetual twilight of subjective light infiltrating objective darkness. The still life with which this stanza closes recalls Stevens' "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour":

> Light the first light of evening, as in a room
> In which we rest and, for small reason, think
> The world imagined is the ultimate good.
> . . . . . .
> We say God and the imagination are one . . .
> How high that highest candle lights the dark.[75]

The reference to a painting of Picasso's using Picasso's own description of a painting as a "hoard of destructions,"[76] is not, Stevens says, to any particular painting of this master, though it suggests one of the Cubist studies of guitarists, and even more, in Section XV, the deformations of Guernica. The poet has to celebrate a modern reality of decreation--"Things as they are have been destroyed." The old fictive realities, the old ways of realizing facts and endowing them with significance, are no longer valid. "Many ingenious lovely things are gone," says Yeats in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

Let us bear in mind Yeats's phrase while considering this strophe. Stevens provides no assistance in interpreting it beyond assigning the phrase "hoard of destructions" to Picasso. Critics have wondered whether the poet had in mind Picasso's Guernica in writing the opening lines. Maybe he had, but the naked egg, the harvest, and the moon are not to be explained by reference to that painting. Sukenick suggests that the naked egg "refers, perhaps, to a condition of pure potentiality."[77] (I visualize instead a balding poet, growing shapeless.) The only other aid Stevens offers is to tell us that whereas line 5 refers to the popular song with the refrain, "Goodbye, goodbye, harvest moon," "in line 6 the words harvest and moon refer to the actual harvest and the actual moon."[78] Besides proffering the pat suggestion that Stevens may have composed the poem while gazing at a harvest moon, I would suggest that the harvest is symbolically an artistic one. The poet, haunted by the current catchy but trite lyrics, suddenly

realizes with a shock that "Things as they are have been destroyed," that a whole old imaginative order is dead while he is jingling the cheap, false coin that is now current. I can see no other interpretation of lines 5-6. Either the poet fails to realize the "ingenious lovely things" that have vanished overnight, or he has only just realized the flotsam and jetsam washed up in a world deprived of imagination.[79]

I cannot agree with Sukenick's interpretation of the final lines: "Is the spot on the floor the spilt wine that is wasted or the spilt blood that has killed him? If either are his, the implication is that he is past revival."[80] On the contrary, it appears to me that the blood or wine have to be the poet's for his poetry to possess any vitality or power. (Perhaps there is a suggestion here of wine and blood as sacramental and sacrificial. The poet has to expend some of his life's blood, perhaps, to reassure himself that he is not dead, as the society which has unleashed a "blood-dimmed tide" is dead, that he is still capable of perceiving and expressing reality in a vital way, without benefit of cheap lyrics or stale moonlight. Wine and blood are both red, the color of reality; the allusion to wine--see the table laid with fruit and wine in the preceding strophe--is a means of passing visually from still life to real life.)

The uncompromising pressures of the contemporary world continue to be the subject of the next section. The stuttering syntax with its frequent repetition of "but," is designed as "a stubborn and constantly repeated rejection of the image of

the earth as a mother," says Stevens.[81] To live in this obdurate world is to wage a continual war against external pressures so great that they threaten to deaden, if not to extinguish, consciousness. The modern state is one in which it is hard to be fully alive, and very difficult to write poetry.[82] Thus Stevens explains the chopping of a "sullen psaltery." Juxtaposing the spiritual with the material, he appears to mock contemporary ideas of progress: the best we can do is to improve the drainage of the Promised City, to light it up with neon haloes (ll. 9-10). Those lovers of life who are bitter at heart are realists with imagination, the poets whose oblation is the honey they distill from gall.[83] The poet must live in the spirit of Samson's riddle: only out of strength cometh forth sweetness.

Sections XVII through XIX should be considered together, since they form a single disquisition on the nature of poetry. Stevens provides a substantial gloss. First, "anima = animal = soul. [Sic.]" The soul is paradoxically presented as an animal, a beast with claws and fangs, a lion, despite the fact that it is essentially formless and has no shape. "The body has a shape, the soul does not. The soul is the animal of the body. Art deceives itself in thinking it can give final shape to the soul."[84] Yet in order to write poetry about the soul, one has to give it concrete form. (The problem has dogged artists since the Italian Primitives painted souls that looked like filleted fish flying about the firmament.) Stevens represents both soul and poetry by means of the monster. The "desert

days" which this Sphinxlike evangelist must articulate are the present objective reality, reality reduced to its bare minimum, the imagination having been almost successfully exiled. The blue guitar itself is only another way of representing the power of intelligence blowing through the mind, as the north wind (representing the desolating passage of time) whistles through the world, announcing the common doom. The "worm composing on a straw" is both a Blakean image of the poet playing his scrannel pipes and literally the emblem of universal decomposition. Stevens asks, "What would the form of the spirit be, if the form of the north wind is no more than that of a worm composing in a straw, to judge from the fact that, even at its deadliest, it blows with little or no sound?"[85]

Section XVIII calls for a fiction faithful to fact, a realized dream which can claim the imagination's allegiance even "in face of the object." Occasionally, after prolonged effort to capture "things as they are," says the poet, style becomes transparent and the imagination is able to seize its object in an act of seemingly immediate apprehension. The "wind gloss" is, like the composing of the worm, a pun. Both are effective. The "wind gloss" means the closest possible transcription from nature, as though the wind itself were describing and explaining reality even as it caresses objects in its passage. When the sensibilities are in closest touch with the world, it is renewed. Stevens explains that "a sea of Ex means a purely negative sea. The realm of has-been without interest or provocativeness."[86] In the Letters, he remarks further: "The imagination takes us out of

reality into a pure irreality. One has this sense of irreality often in the presence of morning light on cliffs which then rise from a sea that has ceased to be real and is therefore a sea of Ex."[87] As well as the stale or unreal past, "x" may represent the unknown. As an image, it is too arbitrary to be effective, one of those too consciously contrived images that are not naturally rooted in one's consciousness. This can be seen by comparing it with the "worm composing on a straw"; this image is natural, and is pregnant with meaning. Even the "wind gloss," though it requires some cogitation, is clever and appropriate and therefore has some evocative power. "A sea of ex" does not.

The next strophe constitutes a prayer that the imagination of the poet may be equal to assimilating reality into human terms, becoming its voice.[88] In several of Stevens' poems about poetry, two voices blend in one as the poet becomes inspired. (See Section XII.8-10) The two voices mingling are those of reality and imagination, "the two together as one,"[89] as the monster reality is tamed by the imagination. But the imagination itself is represented as a powerful animal which can and should overleap reality (ll. 3-4). Finally, to paraphrase line 10 with a phrase drawn from The Comedian as the Letter C, the poet should be "the intelligence of his soil," the voice of his own place and time, the subjective submerged in yet in control of its animal. In embodying the opposed principles of reality and imagination in the form of lions facing one another, "the lion in the lute/Before the lion locked in stone," Stevens recalls in a powerful and concentrated image a view of poetry he expressed in A Necessary Angel. There he declares that poetry is "the movement of a self in the rock."[90]

This is a revelatory view of poetry; poetry discovers forms that disengage themselves from reality under the intrepid, searching, disinterested hand and eye of the acute artist. One is reminded of those half-finished statues of Michelangelo which look as though they were still struggling to free themselves from the rock.[91]

Section XX uses air in two, possibly even in three, senses.[92] It means the sustaining element of life--air, man's only friend. It means the background of empty space against which the guitarist's tune is played, and possibly, too, it refers to the melody played on the guitar. The initial question is that posed by Berkleyan Idealism or total solipsism: what is there in life besides one's experience of it? Does the world exist at all independently of this? (Stevens could not agree with Berkeley's conclusion that it does not, but he conceded a "breach in reality," whereby one could never be in direct contact with objects, so that all perception is irremediably subjective.[93]) This section is not concerned to explore this idea further, but to emphasize that there is nothing left to believe in but the air we breathe. (As in Sections XII and XXIII, there is a suggestion that the anima or soul is like an animal breathing.) Stevens explicates this part of the poem thus: "I apostrophize the air and call it friend, my only friend. But it is only air. What I need is a true belief, a true brother, friendlier than the air. The imagination

(poor pale guitar) is not that. But the air, the mere joie de vivre, may be. This stands for the search for a belief."[94]

In this and Section XXI, Stevens is elaborating on the theme adumbrated in V--"Poetry . . . must take the place/Of empty heaven and its hymns." Poetry must be composed out of empty but life-giving air. Stevens remarks that "in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are . . . a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith."[95] For the poet, of course, the imagination may often seem as great a power as faith, and well able to substitute for that "gold self aloft" (God). But Stevens' gloss on Section XX suggests that there are many moods in which the poet does not find the imagination an adequate compensation for the loss of faith. The magnified shadow addressed as "lord of the body" in XXI.3 appears to be the human imagination. Chocorua (l. 6) is a mountain in New Hampshire which impressed Stevens greatly on a hunting trip. Like all mountains, it represents in Stevens' verse the aspiring spirit, the magnification of the human or the inhuman, and its transfiguration. Without this, the earth is mere dirt (l. 12). Of the concluding couplets of XXI, Stevens says: "The anthropomorphic can only in the end yield to anthropos: God must in the end, in the life of the mind, yield to man."[96]

Section XXII might well be considered the hub of The Man with the Blue Guitar, the subject of which is poetry created out

of an entente cordiale between imagination and reality. Poems begin in intent observation of the world, create an image of it, and return to compare their realization of the object with its original in the actual world. Between the issuing of the poem from reality and its return to it lies "an absence in reality," in which reality is used in both Stevens' senses of the word--the brute reality of the objective, and the mastered reality of the objective as transformed by being abstracted in the mind. It is not simply that there is, as Stevens says elsewhere, a "dumbfoundering abyss/Between us and the object,"[97] but that this absence from it is essential to its realization in and by the imagination. Consciousness implies, indeed necessitates, separation from whatever it is one is conscious of; to merge completely with the object contemplated would be to lose one's consciousness of it.

The latter half of the strophe is concerned to discover whether imagination is ever really separate from reality, and concludes that it is not. "Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality," Stevens avers. The imagination "does not create except as it transforms. There is nothing that exists exclusively by reason of the imagination, or that does not exist in some form in reality." Thus, Stevens concludes, "reality = the imagination [sic]," and vice versa. "Imagination gives, but gives in relation."[98] In the universal intercourse of mind and matter, mind must reshape and color reality however closely it adheres to it. Thus, we arrive at the imagination's

"true appearances," its subjective renditions of reality--"sun's green/Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks." This may seem a strange way of presenting the mind's projective powers, its extraordinary transmutations of reality.

Newton P. Stallknecht calls Section XXII an illustration of Plato's text in the Theaetetus that "we see through our eyes, not with them."[99] The eye is always searching beyond appearances for the significance that is its meat and drink. So Stevens affirms it is the destiny of images to become metaphors, for imitation to yield to revelation.[100]

The "few final solutions" in XXIII are not final chords, but further improvisations. The poet keeps on playing from year to year variations on the eternal theme of the interdependence of imagination and reality or poetry and truth (Dichtung und Wahrheit). The fictions of poetry must keep changing even as the world keeps changing and renewing itself season by season. The undertaker here seems to be the voice of mortality, the skeletal reality of winter invoking summer (ll. 6-7). He smells of drink because he is a native of this world, drenched by the dew and weather of the earth, and perhaps because he intoxicates himself with memories of summer, the full flower of reality.[101] The voice who answers him, the ethereal voice of air, represents the spirit. As these voices mingle in their duet, they become "serene and final."

In his Adagia, Stevens defines poetry as "the scholar's art,"[102] since the poet is the scholiast of the real. Hence his poems are like missals of mud (reality), manuals of devotional

exercises or ritualistic celebrations of the earth. In several of his poems, Stevens presents a figure who reads the universe like a book, "The scholar to whom his book is true."[103] The book is the world; the reader or scholar is any ardent observer-participant, even as Stevens says the prestidigitator of Section XXV is "any observer."[104] The poet is the prototype of such observers, whose phrases are seizures of reality (hawks of life), and whose learned observations (latined phrases) are interpretative texts for "brooding sight." Stevens explains: "I desire my poem to mean as much, and as deeply, as a missal. While I am writing what appears to be trifles, I intend these trifles . . . for an understanding of the world."[105] The poet's freshly perceived and newly captured transcriptions from reality are enough to make one flinch for joy.

Section XXV presents the observer as a kind of performing seal. But the observer is also, in Stevens' words, "a great personnage [sic], as his vestments show."[106] He is "the eternal observer--man,"[107] (l. 11), aware as other creatures are not aware "of the pleasures of merely circulating." This is a highly successful and amusing stanza, with its jazzy rhythms and refrains of "ai-yi-yi," and colloquialisms such as "this-a-way" and "that-a-way." Stevens explains these as Pennsylvania Dutch idioms.[108] Everything reproduces itself, from cats to galaxies, in the eternal cycle of recurrence.[109] However, the central point of reference, the human imagination, remains "at the still point of the turning world," watching the eternal parade of past, present, and future. In a letter

to Hi Simons, Stevens explains the "fat thumb" as representing the response of the uninitiated crowd to the spectacle of life as presented to it by the mage. "The fat thumb etc. = stupid people at the spectacle of life, which they enjoy but do not understand." (This involves a disconcerting metonymy, since it is now not the poet but the people who are strumming the guitar.)[110]

The two succeeding strophes use the sea to represent first the flux of the mind--"that ocean where each kind/Does straight its own resemblance find"[111]--and then the constant metamorphoses of reality (XXVII). For the imagination, the world is a shore from which it sails repeatedly only to return. Hence it is "the relic of farewells," and echoes with continual valedictions. (Compare XXII.3-6.) Stevens explains "a bar in space" as "a sand-bar in a sea of space,"[112] the earth figured as a promontory jutting out into the wide water of space-time. But "bar" is also a musical pun, reminding us of the guitarist's tune. The "sand heaped in the clouds" images the way in which reality is banked against imagination, and the "murderous alphabet" represents "the clashed edges of words" by which we seek to reduce it to order. A similar image of the mind's organization of matter appears in "Connoisseur of Chaos":

> And yet relation appears,
> A small relation expanding like the shade
> Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of
> a hill.[113]

Stevens provides a full explanation of this stanza:

> Our imagination of . . . the world so completely transformed it that, looking back at it, it was a true land's end, a relic of farewells. But this transformation having been effected, the imagination with its typical nostalgia for reality tried to go back to recover the world. It was not so much a remote land's end as something that changed its identity, denied its familiar intelligence (fought against its thoughts and dreams, as if these were an alphabet with which it could not spell out its riddle). With every transformation, with the fluctuations between reality and imagination . . . a mountainous music always seemed to be passing away.[114]

This gloss, like so many of Stevens', seems disproportionate; it says far more than the poem itself is capable of suggesting, because the poem is written in a sketchy shorthand which the poet has been unwilling to unravel for himself or his audience.

Reality in all its transmutations, its metamorphoses prior to the mind's, is the subject of Section XXVII, some of the details of which recall Valéry's Le Cimetière Marin.[115] The sea gives rise to the north wind, which in turn covers the roofs with snow, while icicles hang from the eaves. The sea, the utmost potentiality underlying the utmost destitution, mocks all finalities, all attempts at fixities and definites. Geographers and philosophers, those who try to chart and fix the boundaries of matter and mind, are bid mark that which utterly defies them. The demon is apparently man, who should wait on the transformations of reality rather than try to steal an imaginative march on them, for Stevens says, "I had in mind something like this: Why traverse

land and sea, when, if you remain fixed, stay put, land and sea will come to you. See what winter brings. See what summer brings. Winter really ridicules the wanderer. It says: Why do you voyage around your room? Here I am."[116] The theatrical image of man bent on escape, touring "to shift the shifting scene," instead of awaiting the imaginative cues reality will give him of its own accord is, then, similar in import to the opening of Eliot's The Waste Land, with its presentation of a shiftless, rootless, cosmopolite society bent on evading the natural cycle.

The guitarist declares himself "a native of this world," which is his only home. In an apostrophe to Christ--that "too human god" of Esthétique du Mal--he asserts that no heavenly mind thinks through him. His thoughts are his own and indigenous to his dwelling place. And the poet declares that the eternal flux of which we are a conscious part could not itself be a mind. It is pictured as a wave flowing through "watery grasses," individual moments in which can be fixed like snapshots in the human imagination (ll. 7-10--cf. XI.9). But, even for the connoisseur of chaos, "the squirming facts exceed the squamous mind."[117] The artist imbibes strength from the knowledge that the earth is his only home; its atmosphere becomes the breath by which he lives and in which he moves and has his being. Finally, he is able to affirm, "things are as I think they are/ And say they are on the blue guitar."

Section XXIX compares the truths of art to those of religion. The meaning depends on the syntax--literally upon where you insert pauses in the lines--as has already been shown.

"Degustations in the vaults" are religious draughts for oblivion,[118] while the "lean Review" may well be the poet's accord with reality in all its potential, but stripped of transcendence, as achieved in the previous stanza. (In Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, I.viii, Stevens uses a similar image of a "leaner being" and glosses it as man realizing his fullest potential, described as leaner because it is abstract.[119]) The outworn faith propagated in the cathedral is compared to the "wedding with reality" being celebrated outside. Nevertheless, all versions of reality, however like it, are seen to be ultimately strange and off-center (ll. 11-12). The search for "the centre," for a final equilibrium between reality and human consciousness, goes on forever. On the one hand, Stevens declares that "the wonder and mystery of art . . . is the revelation of something 'wholly other' by which the inexpressible loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched." And on the other, that "there is a unity rooted in the individuality of objects . . ."[120] Stevens admitted he was uncertain of what he meant to convey by his "Franciscan don," beyond evoking the mental image of a worldly priest.[121] Nor is it clear whether the "fertile glass" means religious faith, or the air of this world.

The three final strophes comprise an epilogue on poetry in the modern world. The particular man Stevens evolves is an inhabitant of Oxidia, the "industrial suburb, stained and grim." He is man facing his particular job, Stevens says, in this case, "an electric linesman," an employee of "the Oxidia Electric Light and Power Company."[122] (We have come a long way from the

hero's head of Section II.) Oxidia (deriving from oxide, and perhaps from accedie) with its pouring smokestacks--thus Stevens explains "dew-dapper clapper-traps," which also suggest the cacophony of mechanization--is, as the poet declares, "the antipodes of Olympia," the haunt of the gods.[123] But "if Oxidia is the only possible Olympia, in any real sense, then Oxidia is . . . . both the seed and the amber-ember pod from which the seed of Olympia drops. . . . if the only paradise must be here and now, Oxidia is Olympia."[124]

In the opening couplets of Section XXX, man is presented as a strutting puppet, in theatrical terms that remind us of Crispin in The Comedian and of Section IX of The Man with the Blue Guitar. I interpret line10 as meaning that Oxidia has paid its installments to Caesar, to the world, but has neglected the demands of the spirit. Oxidia, the soot and cinders of the modern world, is the only paradise, but only the human imagination can make it seem so. Out of the grimy husk of Oxidia must emerge the glowing kernel of an imagination which can make of man's only home a modern Olympia. The gods no longer dwell with man, of course, and so he has to rely on his own grandeur of spirit.

The pheasant in XXXI, a shy bird with gorgeous plumage, represents poetry.[125] While employer and employee, shut away from the splendors of nature, argue over wages and working conditions, sun, spring, and sap continue to rise. There are no larks any longer at heaven's gate, and the sky has become a museum since the gods vanished from it. In this post-crisis

world, even natural sights and sounds, the raw materials of mythology, go unheeded. Morning is, in the words of the seventh strophe, "deluged still by night," and the imagination emerges blunted and stunned, yet determined to play "The rhapsody of things as they are."[126]

Section XXXII constitutes a remarkably phrased call for description without cliché:

> Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand
>
> Between you and the shapes you take
> When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

The "madness of space" conjures up the rushing, irrational stream of life through space and time. We ourselves are "jocular procreations," our human comedy an absurd lantern show projected against what Frank Doggett calls "the environing and interior void . . . in which all being moves . . ."[127] Unflinching abandonment to reality produces amazing revelations, even of oneself. Once stale definitions and dilapidated forms are discarded, the revelations of the blue guitar surprise one.[128]

Sukenick interprets "that generation's dream" (XXXIII) as "the dream of the creative generation of 1910-20," debased in the murky political light of the thirties.[129] Though there is a topical undercurrent in The Man with the Blue Guitar--it is concerned like Owl's Clover to justify poetry in a time of massive anxiety and conflict--the dream is surely that of any past generation. This is not to deny the particular application. "The only dream they knew" could well refer to the thirties' misguided pursuit of some material millennium (see XVI.9-10)--

"Time in its final block." Time, of course, has no final block, nor does man live by bread alone. The two dreams wrangling as ceaselessly and contentiously as employer and employee are those of past and present generations. The sustaining fictions of the true poet must provide "the bread of faithful speech" for his own generation.[130] In the modern world, impoverished because almost destitute of the imagination's mercies, bread is a stone, the bedrock reality that invites oblivion except in those moments "when we choose to play/The imagined pine, the imagined jay."

The poem ends abruptly, as it began, with one of Stevens' favorite images of a gay bird in a dark tree. In one of Stevens' last poems, "Of Mere Being," the "fire-fangled" bird in the palm tree standing on the edge of space epitomizes the irrational joy of merely existing.[131] This joy is always recoverable, even in grimy Oxidia. Yet for the mass of humanity the task of recapturing it seems too great; most of us forget it by day, and sleep by night. Only the poet, awake at midnight strumming his blue guitar, is able occasionally to capture the grim reality of Oxidia and transfigure it in his imagination.

One is left questioning whether Stevens has really done this, whether he has captured and then made poetry of the reality of modern life and modern man. The answer is no, he has not. The Man with the Blue Guitar contains no inspired, nor even any recognizable, realization of the modern world or of modern man. Only the last three strophes even consider the subject,

and they do so cleverly but perfunctorily, in an irritatingly precious and unsuitable style. "Dew-dapper clapper-traps" will never persuade us we are facing "things as they are"; the version of the modern industrial city Stevens presents is no more authentic than that of New Haven in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. "A tune beyond us" we certainly get, yet nothing recognizable as ourselves or the world we live in. And, of course, there would be no point in asking for more naturalism did the poet not purport to be offering it. The Man with the Blue Guitar leaves a great deal to be desired as poetry. It sounds like a composite of the philosophies of Bergson and Santayana transposed for guitar. Randall Jarrell once rightly remarked that Stevens sometimes sounds like G. E. Moore at the spinet.[132] For whom, one wonders, could such tinklings offer "the bread of faithful speech"? Yet one has to acknowledge that Stevens' poetic fictions are never fraudulent, though they are rarely nourishing.

The truth is, of course, that this poem is not really about modern man or life in the modern world but about the writing of poetry. It is the first of the three long poems dealt with in this study to concern itself with the ceaseless fluctuations and encounters of mind with matter or imagination with reality. This was an obsessive theme for Stevens, one which he tackled with greater concentration, condensation (despite their increased length), and persuasive power in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction and An Ordinary Evening in New

Haven. The subjects of modern man, society, and politics which Stevens felt constrained to handle during the thirties (as the result of sharp criticism) remained always repugnant to his imagination. His poetry never could, for all his urging, "face the men of the time and . . . meet/The women of the time."[133] The Man with the Blue Guitar makes, for the most part, very labored reading. It is no surprise to learn that, with so uncongenial a proposed topic, the writing of it gave Stevens considerable trouble. Yet it did not give him enough; one could wish that, having decided to tackle such a theme, he had taken further pains with it.

Stevens has a grand manner--the "hero's head, large eye/ And bearded bronze"--but he abjures this, for the most part, as unsuitable to The Man with the Blue Guitar. At the end of the poem, he relapses into preciosities reminiscent of The Comedian, a disturbing breach of stylistic decorum, considering what he is describing. "Dew-dapper clapper-traps" makes smokestacks into gew-gaws, museum pieces, not in the least evocative of the grind of life in Oxidia. In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Stevens writes: "You will find occasional references in my poems to the normal. With me, how to write of the normal in a normal way is a problem which I have long since given up trying to solve, because I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little way off the normal."[134]

The Man with the Blue Guitar is written in several styles and is extremely uneven in quality. Though some sections are both intelligible and even beautiful, others are contrived,

abstruse, and ineffective. The initial dialogue between poet and audience is both pointed and suggestive, but the poem does not sustain its original tone or its original promise. I would cite Sections I-III, V and VI, VIII and IX, XI, XVII, XIX, XXII, XXV, and XXXII as the most expressive and effective stanzas. XIV, XXVII, and XXI are partially successful. The rest seem to me to be failures. The reasons for their failure have already been suggested in the discussion of the imagery of Stevens' later, longer works. This imagery is too heterogeneous and diffuse, too willed and arbitrary, too private and esoteric to stir most readers' feelings or understanding. Throughout the poem, transitions are not made, or are left unclear, meanings remain inaccessible because insufficiently elucidated by the context, or because the images and symbols used to convey them are not sufficiently suggestive. Section VII provides a perfect example of the gratuitous difficulties of Stevens interpretation. This is like playing a game in code, the code being derived from a study of his over-all work. Sun and moon are mere counters. One has discovered that one stands for reality, the other for imagination, but each remains just a counter, with no persuasive power of its own. It is there for the sake of what it signifies, not for its own sake. When one has finished decoding and found out what the passage appears to signify, one wonders whether, after all, it was worth it. For when one finally discovers what has been said, it seems sometimes to be either so obvious (as in XVI and XX) as not to need saying, or so hypothetical and

nebulous as not to be worth saying on that account (XXI). More often, the meaning escapes altogether, for the poet has not wrestled to communicate it.

Without Stevens' own remarks, the task of interpreting this poem would be much more thankless and difficult than it is. Consulting the poet's own commentary, however, reveals some discrepancies between what is implied in the poetry and what is arbitrarily stated in the prose. Stevens' own explanations of lines do not always appear validated by the text. I have selected only those explanations that seemed most apposite and specific, leaving out those that appeared most pompous, irrelevant, excessive, or farfetched. Yet there must have been many occasions throughout this exegesis on which the reader felt, with the writer, that Stevens' explanation of a strophe simply did not jibe with what was there in the poem itself. Thus, the explanations of Sections IV, VII, X, XI, XIII, XIV, XVII, XVIII, XXVI, XXVII, and XXIX offered by the poet reveal a disproportion between what these strophes are themselves capable of suggesting or signifying and what the poet avers they mean. For example, Stevens explains VI thus: "Things imagined (the senses of the guitar) become things as they are. This is pretty much the same thing as to say that in the United States everyone sooner or later becomes an American."[135] Which lines in this strophe corroborate such a reading? Again Stevens says of his "sea of ex," "So long as this sort of thing clearly expresses an idea or impression, it is intelligible language."[136] But it does not clearly discuss an idea or impression, nor is it wholly intelligible therefore. One should always bear in mind that Stevens originally never intended to

publish his poems, but only to circulate them among an intimate circle of family and friends. While paraphrasing Section XXIV of The Man with the Blue Guitar, he remarks that "there is a kind of secrecy between the poet and his poem which, once violated, affects the integrity of the poet."[137] Stevens is an amateur who writes for the pleasure of self-expression, and usually for an audience of one, himself. His invective against paraphrase is well-taken, but sounds an anxious personal note: "Things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions very often take on a form that is ambiguous or uncertain. It is not possible to attach a single, rational meaning to such things without destroying the imaginative or emotional ambiguity or uncertainty that is inherent in them and that is why poets do not like to explain."[138] One is grateful that, for once, Stevens has explained, in detail. Nevertheless, one is alarmed that great tracts of the poem should be inaccessible to the reader who does not possess the poet's footnotes. And one is even more alarmed that parts should remain inaccessible even to the reader who has diligently studied both poem and notes!

It appears that The Man with the Blue Guitar, despite Stevens' characteristic assertions that it depends on the law of opposites or contrasts, has little, if any, unity. Perhaps the concept of unity for such a poem is a shibboleth. One resists such a conclusion, however, when one believes that the poem could be improved by cutting and reorganization. The thought, and the imagery and syntax by which this is carried,

as well as the over-all structure of The Man with the Blue Guitar, all these are too random and unfocused to create any unified effect. In a shorter poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens handles the same theme in a masterly manner. The shorter form achieves a concentration and focus denied to the repetitive, meandering, mazy motions of The Man with the Blue Guitar.

The poem may represent "the order of a man thinking,"[139] or be a fair representation of one strumming a guitar. But do the advantages of such a casual sequence outweigh the disadvantages? I think not. There are awkward transitions between strophes--between III and IV, for instance, or IX and X, XI and XII, XII and XIII--the examples are too numerous to cite. The poem as a whole is diffuse and distended. It could be made more cohesive by the omission of several weak or obtrusive stanzas and the reorganization of others to create thematic units. I would suggest the omission of Sections IV, X, XII, XVII, XX, XXI, XXIX, and XXXIII. A better arrangement of the remaining strophes would be, I think, I, II, III, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, XIV, XV, XVI, XIX, XXII, XVIII, XIII, XI, XXVII, XXV, XXVI, XXVIII, XXX, XXXI, and XXXII. (This would mean sacrificing a few of the passages I find successful.) The rationale behind this organization is, admittedly, topical, and is aimed at achieving greater thematic unity and avoiding awkward modulations. The arrangement by topic is as follows:

I-III: man as the proper subject of poetry;

V-VI: the role of poetry in the modern world; how it can portray "things as they are" yet transcend them;

VII: a metaphysical view of the interpenetration of reality and imagination;

VIII-IX: the imagination responding to the crisis of belief and adjusting itself to its world;

XIV: the imagination as still the best way of ordering chaos;

XV-XVI: the denuded, obdurate reality of the modern world;

XIX: the poet confronts nature--a pressure within responding to a pressure without;

XXII: poetry as the subject of the poem (the universal intercourse between reality and imagination);

XVIII: the imagination's closest approaches to reality;

XIII: its farthest removals from reality;

XI & XXVII: reality's evolutionary metamorphoses; the flux of the natural world;

XXV & XXVI: the observer (man) ordering this flux--and subject to that of his own imagination;

XXX-XXXI: Oxidia;

XXXII: prescriptions for the discovery of a new reality and a new self to sing it.

Such an arrangement is largely a matter of taste, and another reader might prefer another order as more satisfactory to his own taste.

The justification for my rearrangement of The Man with the Blue Guitar is that the poem does present a sequence of ideas, or an alternation of ideas. Were any other organizing principle at work, such a reorganization could be misguided. For instance, the poem might be put together like a mosaic; the principle of organization might be pictorial. Michel Benamou points out, in an interesting article demonstrating Stevens' knowledge and appreciation of both Impressionist and Cubist techniques in

painting, that Stevens' poems frequently comprise not a sequence of ideas so much as a series of pictures.[140] This is certainly true of "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Often Stevens interweaves pictorial effects with musical repetitions of phrase in his poetry. Certainly, The Man with the Blue Guitar is a poem in which both painterly and musical devices play a large part. The poem is full of images of the instrumentalist (Stevens himself played the guitar), as well as of the sounds of his twangling instrument. These images are strangely colored, peculiarly angled and refracted, but such pictorial effects--no doubt inspired by Picasso's series of Cubist canvases of guitarists--though recurrent, are merely local. In IX, for example, we have a view of the guitarist as from an immense height, a vision illustrating the difficulty of giving form to the bodiless imagination. In XIV there is a still life reflecting the search Stevens shared with Cézanne for an "objective subjectivism"--a subjectivity seen from all angles and thoroughly objectified. The image of the rising sun sparkling off the sea and illuminating the fissures in a cliff face (XVIII.8-10) might be one of Monet's seascapes of Cap d'Etretat. Certain recurrent visual motifs serve to tie together the poem to some extent. One example of this is the use of color: the poem opens with a green-blue duality symbolizing the interchanges between reality and imagination. Blue runs through all its gradations, from cloud blue to

heraldic azure to midnight blue. This is part of the chiaroscuro in which the guitarist sits and plays. But the poem does not constitute a tapestry of interwoven images; rather, it is a confusing collage.

Nor can The Man with the Blue Guitar be said to be a "mood piece," in the sense that "Le Monocle" is, for example. In fact, The Man with the Blue Guitar is a somewhat academic disquisition on time-space, reality and the imagination, the world and man, life and death. One can only conclude that the present organization is by no means the most effective or economical, nor is there anything inevitable about it.

In an interesting book, The Tradition of the New, Harold Rosenberg discusses the current vogue for poetic improvisations, for poems experimental in form which appear to be (even when they are not) direct transcriptions of poets' imaginations responding to reality. "Unless the reader follows the exact movements of the activity indicated he missed the poem," Rosenberg says.[141] But what if he follows these movements faithfully yet, at the end, fails to discover a poem? Stevens himself declared that a poem should be an experience.[142] The Man with the Blue Guitar does not appear to this reader to qualify as one, but is is always possible that we have, in T. S. Eliot's words, "had the experience but missed the meaning,"[143] or, as Stevens would be more likely to charge, missed the experience in an attempt to disentangle the meaning. At any rate, The Man with the Blue Guitar contains little that Stevens has not said elsewhere, and better, in verse and prose.

Footnotes

[1]Stevens in his note to Renato Poggioli on Section XXV identifies the poet-performer therein as "any observer: Copernicus, Columbus, Professor Whitehead, myself, yourself." Mattino Domenicale ed Altre Poesie (Torino, 1954), p. 180. (Hereafter referred to as M.D.) The jacket blurb for the first edition of The Man with the Blue Guitar refers to the guitar itself as a "symbol of the imagination."

[2]M.D., p. 174.

[3]"Sunday Morning" first appeared in Poetry for November, 1915, the stanzas arranged in the order I, VIII, IV, V, VII. The Man with the Blue Guitar appeared in the May, 1937 issue of Poetry. See Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), pp. 187 & 317, respectively. (This volume will hereafter be referred to as Letters.) The comparison with "Sunday Morning" is only made to show that even in a more condensed and tautly organized poem, the arrangement of stanzas can be altered without too much damage--see my discussion of "Sunday Morning."

[4]I suggest one way at the end of this chapter. There are many long, open-ended poems, even romantic classics, of which one feels that the present ordering is not the best. For example, one feels it of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode and of Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode." Cleanth Brooks in The Well Wrought Urn (New York, 1947), pp. 140-47 shows how weak relatively to the rest of the poem Stanzas VII and VIII of the Ode on the Intimations of Immortality are, and how disconcerting is the transition from VIII to IX, the "recovery stanza." It would be a more even poem with Stanzas VII and VIII omitted, the transition from VI to IX being no more awkward than that from VIII to IX. As for Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," it would be more powerful emotionally and intellectually, because more coherent, if the stanzas were arranged as follows: I, II, III, VI, IV, V, VII, and VIII. (There is even some doubt in my mind whether VII might not better be omitted, since it altogether flouts what Coleridge laments, the loss of his "shaping spirit of imagination.")

[5]Letters, p. 359.

[6]Ibid., p. 360.

[7]Most critics, and Stevens himself, refer to each section as a poem in its own right.

A subsidiary question is whether thre is any intrinsic reason for the number of stanzas, thirty-three. Stevens' late dialectical poems do have superficial numerological symmetry--Notes toward a Supreme Fiction is an excellent example. It has been suggested that The Man with the Blue Guitar bears an analogy to Dante's thirty-three canto Purgatorio and Paradiso, but this is extremely farfetched. It seems to me, on consideration, that numbers I, XI, XXII, and XXXIII of this poem are key strophes; however, I cannot make anything of this, inasmuch as II, III, V, IX, and XIX, among others, seem equally crucial.

[8]Stevens cites Henri Focillon to this effect in The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1965), p. 46. (Hereafter referred to as N.A.) A similar idea is expressed in "Two or Three Ideas"--"the style of a poem and the poem itself are one." See Opus Posthumous, edited with introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 209. (This will subsequently be referred to as O.P.)

[9]In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer dated March 17, 1937, Stevens writes of the individual sections of the poem, "Only the ones over which I take a great deal of trouble come through finally. This is contrary to my usual experience, which is to allow a thing to fill me up and then express it in the most slap-dash way." Letters, p. 316.

[10]Many more than are printed as rejected stanzas in O.P., pp. 72-73.

[11]Letters, p. 362.

[12]I am indebted for this insight to Ronald Sukenick's Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York & London, 1967), p. 96.

[13]Mac Hammond analyzes Sections XIII and XX. In XX, he cites examples of repetitio, traductio, kyklos, anaphora, anadiplosis, and epanalepsis. "Believe" is used both as indicative and imperative verb and as a noun--"the concept that it evokes becomes progressively more tenuous." "On the Grammar of Wallace Stevens," in Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller's The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore, 1965), pp. 180-81.

[14]Gross's book is subtitled A Study of Prosody from Thomas Hardy to Robert Lowell (Ann Arbor, 1964). It considers Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane together; Gross's remarks on rhetoric are to be found on p. 216.

[15]Other difficult syntactical passages are X.6-7 and XVII.7-10.

[16]Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 226.

[17]Ibid.

[18]"The Owl in the Sarcophagus," VI, Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), p. 436. (Hereafter referred to as C.P.)

[19]Poets of Reality, p. 10.

[20]M.D., p. 176.

[21]Letters, p. 363.

[22]Since we do, according to Stevens, invent the world we perceive, the sun, as the poet states in "Description without Place," "is something seeming and it is." C.P., p. 339.

[23]These explanations are extraordinarily full and detailed--indeed, they often appear to play the game of the emperor's new clothes. They are to be found not only in the notes to Renato Poggioli, but in three letters to Hi Simons, written in August, 1940--see Letters, pp. 359-64. The notes to Poggioli are also reprinted in the Letters, pp. 783-85; 786-87; 788-91, and 793-94, with some minor variations.

[24]In "A Primitive Like an Orb," the poet writes the poem "is something seen and known in lesser poems," and that "One poem proves another and the whole." C.P., pp. 440-41. Though many of the early, short poems cohere about a single image or a chosen few, the late, long poems use a clutter of different images, present them briefly, then sashay off to something else.

[25]M.D., p. 174.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid., p. 182.

[28]Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, "It Must be Abstract," X, C.P., p. 388.

[29]M.D., p. 174.

[30]Letters, p. 360.

[31]P. 139.

[32]Letters, p. 359. The image recalls the monstrous arm of Grendel nailed to the beams of Heorot. This poem contains several stately seigneurial metaphors--the "high hall" of XII and the lord of XXI, for example.

[33]M.D., p. 175.

[34]Ibid.

[35]As Sukenick explains in Musing the Obscure, "The last couplet answers the first by asserting that the idea of 'things as they are' as shown in the intermediate couplets, cannot be confined to reality, but will be metamorphosed by the imagination, 'This buzzing of the blue guitar.'" P. 85.

[36]"Their feelings demonstrate the subtlety of people," says Stevens (Letters, p. 359). Subjective reality is represented as a humming sound. So Bergson represented the internal life, as Frank Doggett points out in his book, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore, 1966), p. 57.

[37]In The Life of Reason--as cited by Doggett, p. 124.

[38]Cf. XXXIII.9-12.

[39]Letters, p. 360.

[40]M.D., p. 175.

[41]In The Necessary Angel, Stevens states that "poetic truth is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination of a man disposed to be strongly influenced by his imagination, which he believes, for a time, to be true . . . " P. 54.

[42]Letters, p. 362.

[43]As it is used in "Description without Place," I, C.P., p. 339.

[44]Letters, p. 362. Cf. Esthétique du Mal, II and An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, X.

[45]Sukenick explains the passage thus: "If one were to exclude reality from one's work, the work would be abstracted from the life lived in reality, so that men would seem 'Mechanical beetles never quite warm.' One would not then . . . be able to call on the imagination, the moon, as a 'merciful good' for relief from reality. (Literally, ll. 8-10 read: 'could I then call on the sun, reality, the way I now call on the moon, the imagination, as an escape?') Such a state of mind, withdrawn from life, leaves the imagination cold; the speaker cannot approve of it and hopes not to fall into it." Musing the Obscure, pp. 86-87.

[46]Cf. Esthétique du Mal, VIII.

[47]M.D., pp. 175-76.

[48]Ibid., p. 176.

[49]In "A Collect of Philosophy," Stevens asserts, "We do not see the world immediately but as the result of a process of seeing and after the completion of that process . . . we never see the world except the moment after. Thus we are constantly observing the past." O.P., p. 190.

[50]Letters, pp. 362-63.

[51]C.P., p. 240.

[52]M.D., p. 176.

[53]The symploce is typical late Stevens, and is decidedly ambiguous. Since Stevens has himself glossed this poem, we know that line 7 should not be read with a caesura; we know, further, that "that all believe" is a noun clause, object of "whom all believe," not a relative clause qualifying "whom all believe."

[54]Thus, Riddel believes the stanza describes the death of God--see his The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 141. John J. Enck interprets the pagan as a supernatural being in his Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments, with a Preface by Harry T. Moore (Carbondale, 1964), p. 125.

[55]M.D., pp. 176-77.

[56]Twice Stevens misled Poggioli with off-the-cuff interpretations which he later felt obliged apologetically to amend. The stanzas concerned are X and XIII--see M.D., pp. 177-78.

[57]In addition, Stevens altered the poem after its first printing in Poetry. According to a footnote on p. 360 of Letters, Section X, as originally printed, comprised the first four couplets plus this one: "Subversive poet, this is most rare./Forward into tomorrow's past."

[58]Ronsard's Elegy XXIV, for example.

[59]Letters, p. 363.

[60]Ibid., p. 360.

[61]"In short, the dull world is either its poets or nothing," says Stevens--Letters, p. 363.

[62]"A Thought Revolved," C.P., p. 186.

[63]P. 115. Here Stevens is describing two kinds of poetry: that which draws on the collective subconscious, a "marginal, subliminal" surrealist poetry, and that "central poetry" which recognizes that "the central problem is always the problem of reality." (P. 116.) Stevens makes it clear that he adheres to the second theory of poetry, that he feels poetry should celebrate the external world rather than dredge subliminal seas. In the context of stanza XII, it seems that an inherent contradiction is involved between the two kinds of poetry unless one assumes that the larger consciousness is something like that attributed by Emerson to Man Thinking, a grand potential of consciousness.

[64]The quotation is from "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," C.P., p. 222. In Adagia, Stevens also affirms that "the poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man." O.P., p. 160.

[65]M.D., p. 178. This was a second thought on Stevens' part, as he himself admits to Renato Poggioli. His initial interpretation of the last line of this strophe (and thus of the import of the whole) had been that of a "metamorphosis into reality." (M.D., p. 177.)

[66]This interpretation is derived from Hi Simons' "Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé," Modern Philology, XLIII (1946), 243.

[67]C.P., p. 430.

[68]See "A Thought Revolved," II, C.P., p. 185.

[69]"This Solitude of Cataracts," C.P., p. 424.

[70]M.D., p. 178.

[71]C.P., p. 514.

[72]"Artificial Populations," O.P., p. 112.

[73]Letters, p. 362.

[74]"It may be that the little candle of the imagination is all we need to illumine the world," says Stevens--Letters, p. 362.

[75]C.P., p. 524.

[76]Stevens told Poggioli this remark was either Picasso's or attributed to him by his biographer, Christian Zervos. (M.D., p. 178.) In his essay, "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens alludes to the same remark as a "horde of destructions." (N.A., p. 161.) According to Zervos (Cahiers d'Art, VII-XX (1935), 173), what Picasso said was, "Chez moi un tableau est une somme de destructions."

[77]Musing the Obscure, p. 91.

[78]M.D., p. 178.

[79]Stevens speaks of a disequilibrium between imagination and reality in favor of the latter during our time, so that we are deprived of the mercies of imagination. See N.A., p. 13.

[80]Musing the Obscure, p. 92.

[81]M.D., p. 178.

[82]Both because of "excess realism" and of external pressures sufficient to extinguish any power of contemplation--see N.A., pp. 26-27.

[83]Compare the "man of bitter appetite," the realist in Esthétique du Mal, XI.

[84] M.D., p. 179.

[85] Letters, p. 360.

[86] M.D., p. 179.

[87] P. 360.

[88] That it may subjugate what Stevens calls "the chaos and barbarism of reality"--M.D., p. 179.

[89] The phrase comes from "Of Modern Poetry" (C.P., p. 240), where the voices are those of artist and audience commingling, as in XII.8-12 of The Man with the Blue Guitar. Stevens uses the duet to symbolize the agreement between imagination and reality, and that between poet and audience.

[90] P. viii. Again, in his Adagia, Stevens says, "The great poem is the disengaging of a reality." O.P., p 169.

[91] Other modern poets have used similarly stony images to represent the recalcitrance of reality and of modern poetry's imaginative conquest of it. Yeats, for example, uses the beryl stone illumined by the agate lamp of imagination.
It is interesting to speculate about how Stevens arrived at the figures of the lion in the lute confronting the lion locked in stone. He may have had in mind Theodore Rousseau's dreamlike picture of a man sleeping in the desert (the poet), his lute laid beside him, and a lion regarding him intently. More likely, I think, the image may have been inspired by two Chinese lions of black crystal presented to Stevens by Harriet Monroe's sister. Stevens commented that their heads were curled back on their shoulders. Letters, p. 230.

[92] As Frank Doggett points out in Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 189.

[93] See "A Collect of Philosophy," O.P., pp. 190-91.

[94] M.D., p. 179.

[95] N.A., p. 171.

[96] M.D., p. 180.

[97]"St. John and the Back-Ache," C.P., p. 437.

[98]Letters, p. 364.

[99]"Absence in Reality: A Study in the Epistemology of the Blue Guitar," Kenyon Review, XXI (Autumn 1959), 548.
In "A Collect of Philosophy," Stevens quotes from Jowett's translation of Plato's Phaedo: "Is the soul related to the body as sight to the eye, or as the boatman to his boat?" The answer implied by Stevens' poetry (see The Man with the Blue Guitar, XVII, for instance) is that the former view is the valid one. The soul is a faculty of the body.

[100]"Poetry as an imaginative thing consists of more than lies on the surface." "Poetry is often a revelation of the elements of appearance." Adagia, O.P., pp. 161 & 177.

[101]This reading may seem to some too ladylike, but it is also most characteristic of Stevens.

[102]O.P., p. 167.

[103]"The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," C.P., p. 358. (See also "Large Red Man Reading," C.P., p. 423.)

[104]M.D., p. 180.

[105]Ibid.

[106]Ibid.

[107]Ibid.

[108]Ibid., pp. 180-81.

[109]Stevens describes "the grass went round" as involving the ideas of revolution and change. (M.D., p. 181.)

[110]Letters, p. 361.

[111]Andrew Marvell, "The Garden."

[112]M.D., p. 181.

[113]C.P., p. 215.

[114] *Letters*, p. 364.

[115] The sea's "tattery hues" (XIV.5) seems to be an echo of Valéry's "chlamyde trouée." The constant denial of the earth as a mother (XVI.1-4) may derive from Valéry's "Maigre immortalité . . . Qui de la mort fait un sein maternel."

[116] *M.D.*, p. 181. Sukenick provides the explanation that this strophe satirizes he "who does not accept the changes of reality as they occur, but goes in search of them, goes on a quest for metamorphoses of reality or tries to create them himself . . . when all the while reality is itself changing . . ." *Musing the Obscure*, p. 97.

[117] *C.P.*, p. 215.

[118] "Religious ceremonies and delights are evasions of reality. External life, the opposite, is all a wedding with reality. The ancient argument goes on forever. It is like a comparison of masks," says Stevens. *M.D.*, p. 182.

[119] See my discussion of this stanza and poem.

[120] "On Poetic Truth," *O.P.*, p. 237. These two quotes, contained within the same paragraph, reveal the dualistic and the monistic sides of Stevens' mind. As Frank Lentricchia says in an excellent article entitled "Wallace Stevens: The Ironic Eye," (*Yale Review*, LVI [Spring 1967], 340), Stevens is constantly endeavoring to "penetrate to a realm of permanence, the logical antithesis to the world of change."

[121] *M.D.*, p. 182. "You have me up a tree on this one," Stevens writes Poggioli.

[122] *Ibid.*, pp. 182-83.

[123] Stevens provides a drawing of such a smokestack whose lid pours out smoke at white heat which makes it look moist and "dew-dapper" (*M.D.*, p. 183). The image is aurally more effective than it is visually, but it is most inappropriate to its context.

[124] *Ibid.*

[125] As in *Adagia*, *O.P.*, pp. 168 & 173 & in *Letters*, p. 362: "Occasionally I put something from my neighborhood in a poem. We have wild pheasants in the outskirts of Hartford. They keep close to cover, particularly in the winter, when one

rarely sees them. In the spring they seem to reappear, although they have never really disappeared, and their strident cry becomes common. Thus, toward the end of winter one can say how long and late the pheasant sleeps."

[126]J. V. Cunningham provides an autobiographical interpretation of XXXI,13-14: "a poet blunted by business civilization holds tight to the nuances of poetry." "The Styles & Procedures of Wallace Stevens," University of Denver Quarterly, I (Spring 1966), 10.

[127]Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 178.

[128]Oneself, Stevens adds, "not as one really is but as one of the jocular procreations of the dark. . . . The point of the poem is, not that this can be done, but that, if done, it is the key to poetry, to the closed garden . . . of youth and life and renewal." Letters, p. 364.

[129]Musing the Obscure, p. 101.

[130]See Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, C.P., p. 408.

[131]O.P., p. 117.

[132]"Reflections on Wallace Stevens" in Poetry and the Age (New York, 1963), p. 144.

[133]"Of Modern Poetry, C.P., p. 240.

[134]Letters, p. 287. Stevens underestimates, of course, the extent to which he is "off the normal." (This letter was written about six months before he published The Man with the Blue Guitar--on October 22, 1935.)

[135]Letters, p. 360.

[136]Ibid.

[137]Ibid., p. 361.

[138]Quoted by Samuel French Morse in "The Native Element" in Ashley Brown & Robert S. Haller's The Achievement of Wallace Stevens (Philadelphia & New York, 1962), p. 207; also in Explicator (November 1948).

[139]So says Joseph Riddel in The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 137. He calls the poem's structure "the qualitative structure of the modern long poem," whatever that may be, but nonetheless finds its unity extremely tenuous.

[140]"Wallace Stevens: Some Relations Between Poetry and Painting," reprinted in Brown & Haller's The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, p. 240.

[141]In a chapter entitled "Oh This is the Creature That Does Not Exist," p. 122. (New York, 1959)

[142]"To read a poem should be an experience, like experiencing an act." Adagia, O.P., p. 164. See also p. 177--"A poem should stimulate some sense of living and of being alive."

[143]"The Dry Salvages," II, Four Quartets.

CHAPTER VI

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction

It is natural to consider Notes toward a Supreme Fiction to be Stevens' key poem, the lynch-pin of his entire work. All his life he aspired toward the creation of a "supreme fiction"--an expression of the absolute, ultimate reality that would satisfy both human reason and emotion. He never achieved this. His mind could find no permanent resting place either in reality or in the imagination. Notes is what it says it is--a collection of notes, of specifications for and illustrations of the qualities a supreme fiction would have to possess. Stevens predicated his poem on the assumption that modern reality has made it impossible to believe in anything but a fiction, and that a supreme fiction is not only possible, but that there is an urgent need for one.[1] Yet Stevens' second prescription--"It Must Change"--implies that such a fiction could be supreme only for a particular time and a particular place.

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction consists of an eight-line Prologue, three major subject divisions composed of ten sections of seven tercets each, and an Epilogue, also comprising seven tercets. The poem is written in a free verse that shows frequent approximations to iambic pentameter rhythm. The

Epilogue relates the poem as a whole to the time in which it was written. Notes was composed during the spring of 1942, during the darkest days of World War II.[2] This has given it a certain urgency of tone (most apparent in the Epilogue), though the poem's over-all coloration is far from sombre. It is war-time, but also spring.

The poem is, in parts, very difficult to understand and to interpret. It is fortunate that Stevens himself has explained various sections in some detail.[3] Notes presents some of the problems posed by The Man with the Blue Guitar, though it appears more condensed and coherent than that poem. Stevens stated that he originally tried to follow a more rigid schematization than appears in the poem, but that he discovered poetry was thus sacrificed to arbitrary organization, and so abandoned the attempt.[4] Nevertheless, he claims for the poem a "latent logic" based on the law of opposites. Here, as elsewhere, he subscribes to Blake's belief that "without Contraries is no Progression."

The rationale for Stevens' three prescriptions for the Supreme Fiction--that it must be abstract, must change, and must give pleasure--is implicit in his own view of poetry.[5] Abstraction is the only source of "single, certain truth," the only means of traveling back to the fountainhead of reality, that inconceivable first principle which is the "first idea." This "first idea" is essentially unknowable and unnamable; since it is beyond this world, even though the force which galvanizes it, it is beyond the attributes we might bestow on it. Yet it can be viewed only through the particular objects of this world, which

it infinitely transcends. It is a mystery, and the poem deliberately leaves it a mystery. For example, it is not at all clear whether Stevens believes in the "first idea" as the true life force or principle of all being, or whether he regards it as something dreamed up by man, the "thinker of the first idea" (I.vii.2), when he finds himself, as Stevens did, "stripped of every fiction except one,/The fiction of an absolute" (III.vii.18-19). In either case, whether fact or fiction (and surely in our ignorance we had best assume it to be both), the "first idea" is something without the intimate recognition of which both life and poetry become meaningless.

Abstraction is one of the mind's most indispensable and powerful organizing faculties. The craving for wholeness, order, and harmony necessitates abstraction, a getting beyond the "dreadful sundry" of this world. Stevens rates a poet's power of imaginative abstraction very highly: "The imagination is the only genius . . . . and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction."[6] Poetry must provide some universal concept that will be an abstraction from reality, and will possess not only contemporaneity but originality--reality perceived, as the first poem of Part I makes clear, freshly, "without its varnish and dirt."[7] Only abstraction can satisfy the human desire for "Belief in an immaculate beginning" and "an immaculate end." (I.iii.) Thus, abstraction comes closest to providing some permanent validity; poetry mired in the objects of this world will be too bound to both present and past to revert to the primacy of the "first idea."

But poetry that is wholly abstract is no longer poetry, but philosophy. Stevens himself was vividly aware of the dangers of abstraction, its dessication of the élan vital of poetry. He viewed this as a particularly personal hazard: "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."[8] And again, "my real danger is not didacticism, but abstraction, and abstraction looks very much like didacticism . . . because the didactic mind reduces the world to principles or uses abstractions."[9]

Stevens' ideas are basically few and simple--chiefly meditations on the nature of perception and esthetic principles garnered from experience and a pastiche of philosophies--those of Bergson and other French poets and estheticians, Santayana, and possibly Whitehead. Stevens cannot be considered a strictly philosophical poet. Stevens' meditative poetry, at its best, presents the experience of perceiving or of thinking--The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice."[10] One of the most important issues, as Stevens came increasingly to realize, is whether what suffices for the poet will suffice for the reader. Notes toward a Supreme Fiction contains its fair share of fictive sufficiencies and deficiencies.

Stevens' abstractions have to be made concrete. Part of the recalcitrance of his poetry, particularly of his later, longer poems, lies in the difficulty of interpreting the esoteric particulars by means of which he embodies his abstract

principles. These particulars do not always mean to others--or mean it so powerfully--what they meant to Stevens, as his own exegeses of his poems reveal.

As often in Stevens' poetry, there is a "dumbfoundering abyss" in Notes between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract, an abyss quite as unbridgeable in Stevens' poetic practice as that between the mind and its object in his poetic theory. He feels the necessity for minute particulars because only sharply realized physical details can do justice to physical reality (and he is bent on doing that); further, only these can do justice to the metaphysical genius with which reality is perceived. However, Stevens' particulars often fail to cohere in any intelligible pattern, whether sensuous or logical. The images jostle each other in an anomalous, sometimes contradictory, manner. (Sections II.vi and III.v are particularly problematic from the point of view of confused imagery, and may be compared with such comparatively unified and integrated poems as II.i, II.iii, II.iv, II.viii, and III.iii, for example.) The power of the abstract to provide a unifying concept, a supreme fiction, is too often undermined by the warring of its constituent images. Stevens' imagination rarely seems to dwell sufficiently on any particular image to permit its natural, inherent meanings to accrete about it. This criticism is certainly not applicable to his early poems, but his late, long poems present veritable junkpiles of images, each one given a quick look, a wrench, and rapidly passed over for something else that briefly engages the mind's eye.

One of Stevens' chief methods of embodying the abstract in this as in other poems is through personification. The personae of Notes are numerous: an ephebe, Phoebus, Adam, Eve, Descartes, Franz Hals, Viollet-le-Duc, MacCullough, major man, the old seraph, the President, General Du Puy, Nanzia Nunzio, Ozymandias, the blue woman, the maiden Bawda and her captain, the fat girl representing the earth, and the soldier. Occasionally, such personae seem integral to the poem because sustained, consistent, and meaningful use is made of them so that one feels justified in considering them symbols.[11] Others, however, appear merely picked up and dropped into place to provide baffling local color, like the lobster dinner in III.v, at which Canon Aspirin presides. (The ephebe, Franz Hals, Viollet-le-Duc, and, to a lesser extent, the Canon and his sister--none of these is really integral to the poem.)

"It Must be Abstract" displays a unifying thematic concept in the "first idea." This is applied both to reality and to humanity. Within this first part, Sections I to III are concerned with the inconceivable idea of reality which has to be realized in the Supreme Fiction. Only a supreme fiction can embody this inconceivable reality. Sections IV and V treat the "first idea" in the light of evolution. Sections VI and VII are concerned with the human imagination's response to an inhuman world, with the emphasis on imagination in VI and on simple naturalistic perception in VII. Sections VIII through X of Part I repeat the realization that "The first idea is an imagined thing," and make the important discovery that "The

major abstraction is the idea of man" (I.viii.4 and I.ix.1, respectively). Finally, an attempt is made to reconcile the abnormal with the normal, the poet with the man-in-the-street--a major preoccupation of the later Stevens.

The structure of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction is only superficially and intermittently dialectical. Its seemingly taut, symmetrical organization--suggested by its arbitrary tripartite division--is really quite loose. The three parts are not discrete; they are interwoven, though not in a strictly dialectical manner. R. P. Blackmur was right when he described the poem's principle of organization as not successive or continuous, but "mutual and inextricable."[12] It is easy to overemphasize the degree to which any one part of Notes is implied in or by any other part, however.

The three principles of abstraction, change, and pleasure--particularly the two first--imply each other. Since both reality and imagination exist in flux, our abstract conceptions of reality must change. The need for some kind of permanence, implied by abstraction, is balanced (if not superseded) by the need for renewal. Otherwise, since reality is constantly changing, forever evolving and renewing itself, the human mind would lose contact with it. Similarly, the last two principles are intimately connected in Stevens' mind: there can be no pleasure without change. That the supreme fiction must give pleasure may seem obvious to the poet or the poetry lover; it does not, however, follow as the necessary synthesis of the propositions that such a fiction be abstract and change.

But for Stevens, permanence and change are necessary principles of one another, and both may be subsumed in the principle of pleasure.

Notes presents one of Stevens' variations-on-a-theme. Though none of the poem's three parts appears necessarily complete in itself--as a series of improvisations, it could be added to indefinitely--the poem as a whole presents a cycle of purification, change, and elaboration of our imaginative representations of reality.

Joseph Riddel makes the following proposition: "The three major divisions . . . have their own inner development: the first three sketch out the basic problem, the fourth derives a major proposition, and the next five advance negative and positive variations leading toward a synthetic conclusion in the final canto."[13] After careful study, one can accord this structural analysis only qualified acceptance. For example, the first three sections of Parts I and II do exhibit thematic unity, both within and between the two sections. They can be construed as sketching out the basic problems in evolving a supreme fiction that is abstract and must change. The first three sections of Part III, however, do not concentrate solely on the necessity of making the supreme fiction pleasurable. Instead, they show Stevens' characteristic oscillation between extremes: the pleasures of fresh, unmediated vision--"except for the eye, without intrusion"--are contrasted with tedious, stale versions of reality.

Riddel's hypothesis is correct in that the fourth stanza of each section is definitely climactic. In Part I, it is the fourth stanza which defines the "first idea" as something alien to and prior to our existence. The mutual antagonism of mind and matter, springing from the fact that being precedes consciousness of being, "that we live in a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves," is resolved in the truly Hegelian dialectic and synthesis of II.iv, where the intermarriage and interdependence of opposites is seen to give rise to a new being. (Throughout most of the poem, there are pendulum swings from reality to imagination, with a synthesis only hinted at: none materializes until the imagination alights on the angel of reality in III.viii, although there are repeated images of the spirit wedding reality in II.viii and III.iv.)

Riddel's rather vague observations about the fifth through ninth stanzas of each section are not really either provable or disprovable. I find all kinds of cross-linkages among the different stanzas of different sections. For instance, I find what might be called a dialectical movement as between I.vii, II.vii, and III.vii. In I.vii, abstraction is thrown away, and we learn that truths are proclaimed by the body of the world, seemingly without the mediation of the human mind. In II.vii, on the contrary, Stevens points out the opposed self-sufficiency of the mind: the human imagination, in certain solipsistic moods, does not need the world. In III.vii, the poet reverts to an idea proposed in I.vii--that spontaneous revelations of natural order are superior to the impositions of

the human imagination. This poem appears even to suggest an almost transcendentalist or symbolist evolution of the actual out of the potential, the imagination embracing reality more and more closely and satisfactorily.

In addition, the eighth stanza of each section appears to me to be both crucial and climactic. In I.viii, we learn that the "first idea" is a fiction. The last three stanzas of Part I modify the definition of the "first idea," modulating into the specifically human realm, where we discover that "The major abstraction is the idea of man." (I.x.l.) In the eighth stanza of Part II, a female representation of Stevens' "green . . . fluent mundo" (Nanzia Nunzio) weds herself to the human mind (Ozymandias). Finally, the poem's high point, it seems to me, is reached in III.viii, where the poet recognizes that his own earthly vision is, nevertheless, the source of transcendent beauty and significance.

Aside from the pre-eminence of the fourth and eighth stanzas of each section, it is hard to see any recurring pattern of development in the three parts. Most of Part II is concerned with antithetical illustrations of the principles of repetition (Sections I and VI), of attempted stasis (II) and the fiction of immortality (III). Section IX recapitulates in terms of language instead of personality (compare the final poem of "It Must Be Abstract") the reconciliation between poet and populace. But the crux of "It Must Change" is surely stanza IV, where the principle of change is seen to originate in the interdependence of opposites.[14]

Much of the third part of the poem is concerned with the conflict between an imposed and a discovered harmony or order. This theme is explored in the first and seventh sections, but was already announced in the seventh stanza of "It Must Be Abstract." Perhaps the most important theme taken up in Part III is that of belief. III.iii presents in religious terms the culminant horror of stasis explored in secular terms in II.ii and iii. The magnificent eighth stanza of "It Must Give Pleasure" resolves the problem of belief, it seems to me. The Canon Aspirin poems that precede the eighth section really form a unit on their own, and sections IX and X, in their different ways, celebrate "the pleasures of merely circulating."

It is not true to say that each stanza leads out of the one preceding. The poem proceeds by fits and starts, with temporary blind alleys, and frequent recapitulations of previous stanzas. There is a definite hiatus between Parts I and II, but the last section of Part II demonstrably leads into Part III. The final lines of the concluding stanzas of Parts I and III have a certain air of finality; those concluding "It Must Change," however, do not—appropriately to the topic, perhaps.

The poem has a musical flow: various themes are stated, dropped, picked up again, elaborated, and later recapitulated. Themes are interwoven throughout: different statements within sections imply others, though the Prologue and Epilogue (particularly the latter) have a somewhat detached air.[15]

Though there is little that is extraneous or merely repetitive in Notes, the ordering of the strophes is not always consistent with the main topic heads. Thus, the apotheosis of the fortuitous in III.i and vii (though plainly pleasurable) would seem better adapted to the theme "It Must Change" than to "It Must Give Pleasure." The necessity of change is demonstrated in II.vi only by presenting "an anatomy of monotony," such as might well be a companion piece to sections II.i through iii and to III.iii. Section III.ix might suit better the rubric "It Must Change" than "It Must Give Pleasure"--though, again, it implies the interdependence of the two principles of change and pleasure.

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction has, nevertheless, a certain unity and integrity as well as fluency, freshness, and variety. Stevens has invented a whole universe of discourse. Notes presents a world full of vital form and color, though unfortunately empty of recognizable human beings. The poem both requires and rewards detailed exegesis of its overt and hidden beauties and difficulties; these will be taken up as the occasion requires.

The Prologue celebrates Stevens' love for poetry, which is, for him, the imagination of life. (The dedication to his close friend, Henry Church, has nothing to do with the Prologue.[16]) "The extremest book of the wisest man" is "the book of reality," but of reality imaginatively perceived.[17] The scholar consulting this book that he cherishes secretly in his heart is a familiar image in Stevens' poetry. "The

uncertain light of single, certain truth" points to the ambivalence and fortuitousness of the rendezvous between subjective and objective which, meeting center to center, or heart to heart ("in the central of our being") together--but only momentarily--create "single, certain truth." As Stevens affirms elsewhere, "the central problem is always the problem of reality."[18] Stevens is a poet who aims at transparence and shuns the opacity that interposes itself between external reality and that light which, like true vision, adds nothing but itself. (Had Stevens been a painter, he would have been an Impressionist, not an Expressionist.) Reality clearly seen is his aim--"the vivid transparence" that confers "The brilliant mercy of a sure repose."[19]

Bearing in mind our analysis of the interrelationship between Stevens' three prescriptive principles for his supreme fiction, we might even say that the Prologue outlines this in little. "Single, certain truth" is to be attained only through abstraction. The "living changingness" of light glances at the principle of change, while the peace conferred by the revelatory rendezvous between imagination and reality (pictured in the final line of III.x as a revolution in crystal) represents the union of the principles of permanence, change, and pleasure in an image of process rendered transparent and peaceful.

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction has something of the casualness and fortuitousness that Stevens associates with the Platonic dialogue (at any rate, as adapted by Valéry in his Eupalinos.)[20] It adopts a similar method. The ephebe is

harangued throughout the first part without replying; the poem is a meditative rather than a dramatic monologue. The ephebe, initiate to manhood and to citizenship, and (more appropriately to the context) to the craft of poetry, is exhorted to begin by conceiving the inconceivable! The sun is the fountainhead of reality, as it is of all fictions of reality, in the sense of all perceptions of it. So it is the "first idea" both of the actual world and of "this invented world," the world as we perceive it and the world as poem. (Even the most rudimentary perception entails some imaginative perspective, placement, ordering, projection, and coloration. Thus, perception is poetry.) Supreme reality has to be confronted by a supreme fiction, but before this can be created, decreation has to take place; reality has to be stripped of all the existing fictions that belie it. This cleansed vision is described as "ignorant" because it would be like a child's sight--without preconceptions. However, to see reality absolutely as it is is a task beyond human vision.

The beginning poet is adjured not to project our own image onto a reality that is mindless and unconscious in any human sense (ll. 7-9--compare The Man with the Blue Guitar, XXVIII.7). He is not to suppose the existence of an anthropomorphic god. All the gods are dead. Phoebus who drove the chariot of the sun across the sky reminds us of Plato's figure of the soul as a noble charioteer, which Stevens analyzes as a splendidly imaginative but utterly dead

fiction in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words."[21] Phoebus was a classic personification of the sun-god; the image of him lying in "autumn umber" associates him with Phaethon's plunge through the sky and with the vegetation gods of classic mythology (Attis-Adonis-Osiris) whose slaying and burial were believed annually to refertilize the earth. (The assonance and alliteration of "Phoebus-ephebe" and "umber-slumber" are self-advertising and obtrusive, but clever.) The fourth tercet extols a naked, inhuman reality in a manner reminiscent of Stevens' "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" and "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit." The ephebe's project is to "Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky/Without evasion by a single metaphor."[22]

The paradox of inconceivable reality continues to haunt the creative mind which has to find names even for the unnamable. Renaming reality is an ever-present project for the human imagination. To confound the paradox still further, beyond the names we give it, the sun must continue to be conceived as nameless, transcending all our efforts to describe it; it is a potentiality infinitely beyond our power to realize.[23] It must exist "In the difficulty of what it is to be." This line contains an intentional double meaning: it points forward to the future fiction that will rename the sun; it points, too, at the essential impossibility of describing anything that exists; finally, it underlines the difficulty of existence itself.[24]

Sections II and III are intimately related, since both analyze, in different ways, the motive force that drives us

back to the "first idea." "The celestial ennui of apartments" may remind us of "romantic tenements of rose and ice,"[25] since both suggest a vision of life that has wholly withdrawn from reality and compartmentalized the world. An attenuated, insipid romanticism will eventually recoil on itself; touching the "quick/Of this invention," it will revitalize itself by partaking once more of the live core of reality absorbed into "the central of our being." And yet, "the first idea inevitably becomes another metaphor . . . which we ravish from the truth and which is fatal to the truth." Metaphor betrays reality. "We live in the mind, which, as it contemplates reality, transforms it into metaphor in order to capture it and then, in its ennui of that metaphor, desires to contemplate reality again--so that the first idea is . . . like a hermit . . . 'Who comes and goes' all day."[26] The truth seduces us to try to seize it, but this is a mortal enterprise (in both senses of the word mortal) since to become part of the pure being at the end of seeming, part of the ultimate reality, we have (like the corpse in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream") to be dead.[27] This is what Hegel meant when he said, "Pure Being and Nothing are the same."

The artist emulates the elusive reality he pursues; he is himself a hermit. He is contrasted with priest and philosopher only in the manner of his pursuit and expression of truth. (Lines 10-11 are explained by Stevens' remark in "A Collect of Philosophy" that it is the philosopher whose world-view determines the contemporary view of reality in all fields of human

knowledge.) While the poet internalizes knowledge, presenting it as experience, the philosopher externalizes and systematizes it, and the priest transcendentalizes it. But the desire of all three should cause them to keep seeing differently and thus to keep changing the first and all succeeding ideas of reality.[28]

It is boredom with the unreal (I.ii.1) and a sense of our poverty in the face of reality (l. 13) that sends us back to "the first idea." However, there is "an ennui of the first idea," also. The eye's plain version of reality is as grating as its fancy version becomes effete. These respective ways of viewing reality figure in Section III as the "ever-early candor" and its "late plural," just as in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, VI they are embodied in the ciphers Alpha and Omega. With successive embroideries of reality, or "iris frettings on the blank," we come to realize that what we have is "what is not," and we throw it away. (In the fifth and sixth tercets of Section II, an aged, crabbed imagining of reality is like the tail-end of winter; it must emulate the season and reinitiate spring with its "particulars of rapture.") The forget-me-not (myosotis) is an emblem of imaginative renewal (as well as of memory)--it is blue, and it renews itself. The "calendar hymn" reminds us of the virile and "boisterous devotion" to our "savage source" in the penultimate stanza of "Sunday Morning," or of "a verity of the most veracious men,/ The propounding of four seasons and twelve months" in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XI. The poem concludes that

when fictions diverge too far from reality they must be thrown on the rubbish dump.

In Section III, life is conceived as innocent of human meaning (ll. 2-5).[29] Poetry should refresh our sense of it, inculcating a feeling of equilibrium between "an immaculate beginning" and "an immaculate end." This sense of balance and harmony with a nature pure and undefiled but realized to be inherently alien to us (see I.iv.13-14) is something that we experience occasionally in life--"not balances/That we achieve, but balances that happen." Poetry must capture and record such balances with something of "original cold" and "original earliness,"[30] and with that power of poetry which is able to clothe the abstract with flesh and fill it with blood so that it feels like "thought/Beating in the heart," and becomes "an abstraction blooded." (I.vi.21.)

The Arabian of Section III would remain wholly mysterious (as in some sort he seems intended to be) had we not Stevens' explanation that he represents the moon.[31] Stevens acknowledges that the Arabian is one of several items in Notes which needs annotating, and that the casual reader could not possibly be expected to realize that he is the moon. The poet feels, however, that this does not matter! (The initiate reader might possibly realize what the Arabian represents by recalling similar images of the patron of imagination as a "round effendi" in Esthétique du Mal, for example.) Stevens' idea of what does and what does not need annotating is indeed curious. He explains at almost tedious

length what tanks are in Section V of Part I--something obvious to any well-traveled reader. The Arabian is only one of many similarly problematical, because peculiarly private, images. The poet, had he taken a little more trouble, could have made the meaning of such images fully apparent within their context. "The unscrawled fores," he says, are "the undecipherable vagueness of the moonlight . . . the unformed handwriting."[32] The nonsense syllables in this verse sound like the bubbling of the Arabian's hookəh, or the "bubbling of bassoons" to which the moon rises in "The Man on the Dump." The sound is repeated with variations in the pigeon's chant--the dove frequently represents the imagination in Stevens' poetry[33]--as also in the ocean's inhuman howling. "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation." This line is arresting in its concise expression of highly compressed and suggestive meaning. Nonsense has two meanings, the literal one, and "non-sense." So, too, does relation, which means both message and relationship. Those things which do not share human consciousness, such as the howling of the sea, transfix us as though about to reveal some message from the world beyond us, some revelation of our relationship to it.

"The first idea was not our own." On the contrary, "There was a muddy centre before we breathed." Stevens holds with Santayana that "all origins lie in the realm of matter."[34] We, our human consciousness and reason, are only the latest flowering out of the mud. Adam was the ancestor of Descartes, but even Adam applied a kind of rudimentary reason (or

imagination) in Eden when he named everything he saw there, while narcissistic Eve "made the air the very mirror of herself,/Of her sons and of her daughters."[35] Stevens reverses Descartes' formula: "Cogito, ergo sum" becomes "Sum, ergo cogito."[36] Existence is prior to thought. The poet looks back to a completely physical myth[37] that preceded the myths forged by human consciousness, trying though anthropomorphism to domesticate a blind and alien universe.

Poetry springs from the fact "that we live in a place/ That is not our own, and, much more, not ourselves." Were the earth our own, coeternal and consubstantial with us, there would be no mystery and wonder of experience, no reaching after a felt knowledge that infinitely transcends us. "And hard it is in spite of blazoned days." This, too, is a brilliant line. It is difficult to live in an alien world, difficult in spite of days full of natural radiance, and in spite of those that, through sheer effort, we make radiant for ourselves through poetry. Nature does not mimic us; we should imitate nature. Hence, "Clouds are pedagogues": they teach us to be as changeable as they are. Similarly, the air does not mirror us; it is "bare board" for all its "bright-dark" markings, like the flats or wings of a stage ("coulisse") on which we strut through the tragicomic twilight of life, adding to it our own "sweeping meanings" which the thunderous elements reduce to mere pipsqueaks.

Section V is an extension of the preceding poem. It continues the presentation of an evolutionary canvas illustrating

the adjustment of self to environment. The picture is one of progressive physical and mental alienation from nature, physical alienation and weakness paradoxically resulting from increasing mental power over nature. Lion, elephant, and bear are chosen to exemplify brute strength, size, and power. The image of the lion, roaring at and defying brute matter "to evolve his match,"[38] of the elephant cleaving the darkness with his trumpetings,[39] and of the bear's perfect adaptation to the seasons' changing exigencies, all these are contrasted with man's alienation from nature. In making his own environment--lines 11-18 evoke an urban landscape--man has cut himself off from his roots. The picture of the poet agonistes seeking to master his environment through the eloquence of words instead of brute sounds nevertheless shares something with the preceding vignettes. The animals, though attuned to, are also in conflict with their environment. The beasts share with man a violence within that responds to a violence without.

For man, however, the struggle is no longer physical, but mental; the difference is made by more than brute consciousness. The attic window, rented piano, and writhed-upon bed suggest the isolated, rootless, and agonizing existence of the modern poet--and, indeed, of modern man in general. His "voluble dumb violence" is an oxymoron characteristic of Stevens. Roofs throughout the poem suggest limitations, ceilings of experience (compare I.vi.6 and III.viii.21). The poet is part of them, yet is cowed by his environment as the beasts are not by theirs. Stevens explicates lines 16-18 thus: "What I mean

by the words 'sigil and ward' is that the person referred to looks across the roofs like a . . . creature of the roofs, an image of them and a keeper of their secrets."[40] (A sigil is an occult sign, seal, or device; a ward is used, of course, in the sense of guardian.) Man is both the master and the victim of his environment. In zoo and circus, he has lashed the lion, caparisoned elephants, and taught bears to juggle. (Lines 20-21.) Man has tamed the beasts and nature, but has yet to accommodate himself to the habitation he has made for himself, which cows him (l. 18). He must adapt himself to his man-made environment through new vision and new description. Surely some irony is involved in calling men "the heroic children whom time breeds/Against the first idea"? We are the topmost creatures on the ladder of evolution from the "muddy centre" or "first idea." Since this "mud master" is our original enemy and ultimate friend, we are bred, as it were, against it--first of all to master, but finally to be mastered by it.

Section VI is more difficult to grasp. The unnamed subject of the initial assertion would appear to be still "the first idea." Stevens explains the poem as follows:

> The abstract does not exist, but it is certainly . . . immanent . . . the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract. First I make the effort; then I turn to the weather because that is not inaccessible and is not abstract. The weather as described is the weather that was about me

> when I wrote this. There is a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro.[41]

The poem is an excursion into the imagination,[42] here based on present perception. It exemplifies the difficulty of realizing the unrealizable, of making the abstract concrete, of compelling the potential to become actual through imagination, and of metamorphosing reality into poetry. The poet tries to name the unnamable, the first idea. He cannot because, as J. V. Cunningham says, "reality is nothingness," the reality underlying reality's manifold appearances is an inconceivable abstraction "of which ultimately nothing can be said, hence we must find it to be nothingness, or body it forth."[43]

This is what Stevens attempts to do in the allusion to "weather by Franz Hals," and in the further details of the spring landscape he was apparently contemplating at the time of composition. The stanza poses several interesting problems; it will be best to tackle them immediately, before trying to explain what individual lines mean. First of all, why Franz Hals? As Ronald Sukenick points out, Hals made his reputation not as a landscape artist but as a portrait painter. (Parenthetically we may remark that Stevens is his artistic antithesis.) Is Sukenick right, then, in deducing that the choice of "weather by Franz Hals" implies the degree of artificiality inevitable in concretizing the abstract?[44] Anyone who has seen Hals' landscapes knows that the description "brushy winds in brushy clouds" is most apt.

In several ways, Hals seems an appropriate painter for Stevens to have picked.[45] He was celebrated for his swift seizure in bold brushstrokes of momentary light effects.

Perhaps the most interesting issue raised by this poem is that of its privacy. Stevens tells us that the weather of the poem is as it was at the time of its composition, indeed that the weather he then observed inspired the poem. He says this also of the highly problematical stanzas II.vi and III.ii, both "occasional" pieces, in which the context fails to make private references publicly accessible. Does it help one's understanding of I.vi to realize that "my house" is the poet's house, that the forsythia and magnolia just coming into bloom are in his garden? Scarcely, perhaps. But in II.vi, we have no means of comprehending the meaning of "clappers going without bells," or of the poem as a whole, until Stevens explains that it was raining in his coppice at the time, and that what this poem celebrates are sudden, inexplicable changes in the sound of birdsong.[46] Even so, such disclosures do not altogether clear up the ambiguities and seeming contradictions in both II.vi and III.ii. (In III.ii, the abstract is universalized to some extent; we are accustomed to the figure of the imaginative woman, muse, or "interior paramour" in Stevens' verse.) Nevertheless, parts of these poems remain unintelligible. Stevens invokes the law of opposites, the fluctuations between abstract and real to justify I.vi, and those between the real and the fictive to sanction III.ii.[47] Stevens appears not to realize that all anomalies cannot be

smoothed out so easily by a blanket appeal to the law of opposites or contrasts whenever the meanings of his stanzas or the transitions between them fail to come clear.

It is possible to disentangle most of what is meant by the remainder of Section VI of Part I. Since the subject of the repeated negative infinitives is not specified in the first six lines, the reader is invited to fill in his own; he must recognize, however, that the subject is some kind of abstraction that has to be realized. The ambiguous syntax of line 6 prompts one to ask whether "without a roof" merely describes this abstraction as being without limits, or specifies the only manner in which it may be addressed, that is, when contained within some concrete embodiment. Both meanings of the phrase apply, perhaps, but the second is more crucial to an understanding of the passage as a whole, for it makes clear the function of the ensuing details.

"The dark-blown ceinture loosened, not relinquished" may remind us of the disrobing of the earth (represented by Nanzia Nunzio) in II.viii. The image suggests that the dark underside or inner lining of the gay surface reveals itself momentarily, as this sombre abstraction is realized in gay, concrete particulars. (Stevens' poetry is full of such representations of the darkness lurking beneath "the hallucinations in surfaces." What lurks there is really a blank, but it seems to be human psychology to translate blankness into blackness, since nothingness, like darkness, often seems the most frightening thing we can conceive of.[48])

The way that "yellow thins the northern blue" connotes the lightening and brightening of the dense northern atmosphere, as forsythia signals the passing of winter and heralds the coming of spring. (The same colors reappear together in III.v.8, where Canon Aspirin's sister decks out her daughters in grey-blue and yellow; these are the colors in which "a painter of pauvred color paints"--the colors of an imaginatively impoverished time, as wishy-washy and insipid as the transition from winter to spring.)

Perception is fleeting; reality is, as always in Stevens, unseizable, for no sooner have we seen an object than light, perspective, or mood changes, and the object reveals itself in a new guise. Flicks of feeling falsify form. In addition, there are the linguistic obliquities and evasions of metaphor that can, at best, render a "falseness close to kin." And what the word "reality" means to Stevens is as ungraspable as what it means to the modern physicist, for example. It is an abstraction from slippery phenomena, ever-receding, ineluctably unknown. The uneasy relationship between the concrete and the abstract, the actual and the potential, is further suggested in lines 16 to 18. The entire stanza demonstrates first the physical emerging out of the metaphysical, and then its reabsorption by the mind via the "seeing" (abstraction) of the eye. Frank Doggett points out that Bergson writes in <u>The Creative Mind</u> in similar terms of the interaction of the potential and the actual. According to Doggett, Bergson affirms that

> the possible is nothing more than an image of the real displaced in time. It is an after-thought . . . projected back into a purely imagined past. [Presumably, it may also be a memory projected into a purely imaginary future intuited from the past.] For the possible to become the real . . . it would be necessary to imagine it as a sort of semi-reality that becomes real only through the addition of human thought. Thus . . . "the possible would have been there *from* all time, a *phantom* awaiting its hour [compare III.vii.14-17 & III.x.11-13]; it would therefore have become reality by the addition of something, by some transfusion of life or blood."[49]

Hence we have "an abstraction blooded," something as vital to a man as thought, which is itself composed of abstractions. Reality, whatever it is, depends for its realization on the human mind, on the spirit's encounter with matter. Until we realize an abstraction, it can neither be loved nor hated (l. 2); until it has been "imagined well" (l. 12), it can occupy no place in mind or heart. The weather, as is customary in Stevens' poetry, stands for the essential reality, while "the giant of the weather" I take to be the human imagination. When the two confront each other in essential concord--as in The Man with the Blue Guitar, XIX, for example--the human spirit inhabits a pure element. Stevens cites with obvious relish this passage from Valéry's Eupalinos (the speech is put into the mouth of Socrates): "The air, deliciously rude and pure . . . confronted me--an impalpable hero that I must vanquish in order to advance. And this resistance, ever overcome, made of me, too, at every step an imaginary hero, victorious over the wind, and rich in energies that were ever reborn, ever equal to the power of the invisible adversary."[50]

Sometimes reality feels good as it is, without the interposition of imagination. Section VII of Part I looks forward to Sections I, II, and VII of Part III, "It Must Give Pleasure," in celebrating the "balances that happen," those fortuitous harmonies felt within, but without the deliberate working of the human mind. The unsought balances of mind with nature are contrasted to those achieved through human volition. Man here figures as the "thinker of the first idea," since only he is capable of pondering reality. He often has to resort to thought in order to promote a sense of harmony between himself and the world.

In this stanza, however, simple, unmediated perception of nature suffices to induce that sense of well-being which at other times has to be sought for and deliberately cultivated. We know from Esthétique du Mal, XIV that Stevens finds lakes to be more accommodating to the human mind than oceans, more conducive to certainty and the formulation of "definitions" (propositions about the nature of reality, perhaps). Hepatica is crowfoot, a flower of the buttercup family. (It is prettier than its Latin name, which sounds like a disease of the liver.) Its presence in the poem is probably quite fortuitous. Knowing what we do about Stevens' poetic habits, we may speculate that he was probably looking at crowfoot flowers when he felt the onset of one of those unpredictable "times of inherent excellence" that this strophe celebrates. The setting for this ecstasy happens to be a lake bordered by pine-trees. The almost tactile word "swags" suggests rather solid clumps of

pines, trees Stevens loves and often imbues with connotations of deep physical well-being and imaginative health. For example,

> . . . the blue-green pines
> Deepen the feelings to inhuman depths.
>
> These are the forest. This health is holy . . .[51]

The cock crowing on the left is but another detail of a landscape in which every detail occurs as it occurs. It heralds "a kind of Swiss perfection." The word "machine" continues the connotations of Swiss mechanical precision, and is used to signify the body of the world, precisely equilibrated, vibrating with the pullulant swarmings of its life--its Schwärmerei--absolutely the correct word.

The precarious, recherché balances achieved by the imagination when, for example, it carefully places a jar on a hill in Tennessee, or delicately plays about an indigo bottle flung carelessly in the grass--those juggleries that "balance things/To and to and to the point of still," but only momentarily seduce one into believing that the balance rests[52] these are scarcely to be compared with the encounters of love at first sight. For these awakenings into ecstasy, these casual revelations of miraculous harmony, "extreme, fortuitous, personal," we gladly sacrifice the labored intellectual and imaginative constructs represented by "academies like structures in the mist."[53]

The opening of Section VIII is prompted by the concluding line of the preceding stanza, with its implication

of fine, high-faluting falsifications reared as fortifications of the human spirit; through these reality must relentlessly bore its way. For the real amours or weddings of the human imagination and reality take place in plein air.[54] "A castle-fortress-home" for "major man" is beyond the powers of even Viollet-le-Duc. Le-Duc was a leader of the Gothic revival in France; he restores Notre Dame, the Sainte-Chapelle, the cathedrals of Amiens and Laon, and the great walls of Carcassonne, as well as writing several discourses on architecture. But the Gothicizing instinct is a thing of the past; we cannot immure our "major man" within medieval walls. He is the modern man-in-the-street and must be at home there.

Stevens dismisses MacCullough as "any name, any man."[55] (The name sounds suitably huge, masculine, and intractable, though not particularly American.) Joseph Riddel suggests that "the MacCullough" approximates Emerson's "Man Thinking,"[56] all men together fulfilling their highest and widest potential. Stevens' "major man" does indeed seem to have been suggested by Emerson's "One Man,--present to all particular men only partially," although he subsumes all men, since one soul animates them all.[57] The suggestion that "the MacCullough" is "Man Thinking" is supported by the representation of him as "The pensive giant prone in violet space." (Violet, like purple, represents for Stevens the color of imagination at its most intense; thus, "violet space," like the "lapis-haunted air" of III.viii.9, represents the space through which imagination wings its way.) Just as "The first idea is an imagined thing,"

so the "thinker of the first idea" is an imaginary giant, synonymous with "major man" and with "the MacCullough"--though not with individual men or individual MacCulloughs. (In such terms, both inhuman and human origin become conceivable by the human mind.)

We now confront the problem of Stevens' difficult humanism, and the absolute cleavage he conceives between the concrete and the abstract. The explanation of lines 10-11 is this: though the abstract is part of the concrete (having been derived from it), nonetheless the abstraction projected by means of concrete particulars shares no part of the concreteness of its particles. Thus "the MacCullough" represents all the MacCulloughs there are, but is not equivalent to any of those individuals of whom he is the grand abstraction. He represents all of them in potential, but none in actuality. Nor, by analogy, is major man equivalent to individual man. Major man, like the giant MacCullough, is an expedient, like a mathematical exponent--man raised to his highest collective power. This highest potential should not be confounded with the actual individual.

I call Stevens' humanism difficult because he himself declared that he found humanism a difficult thing, and no adequate substitute for God. "The trouble with humanism is that man as God remains man . . ."[58] Stevens' humanism was acquired under duress, hardly acquired, and often hardly convincing. It remained a product of the poet's head rather than of his heart.[59]

The figure of the imaginative giant reclining beside the sea--the ocean representing the chaos of reality, as it does in The Comedian as the Letter C and "The Idea of Order at Key West"--this figure extends man, makes him, in Stevens' words, "a possibly more than human human"--"The impossible possible philosopher's man" of "Asides on the Oboe." "The act of recognizing him," Stevens says, "is the act of this leaner being [l. 17] moving in on us."[60] The "leaner being" suggests an abstraction, a purification of the self, but might well have remained opaque had Stevens not commented on it. Stevens' own "thin man" became more insistent though not always more eloquent with age. The last lines of Section VIII are strange; they suggest how sounds alien to human speech--the sound of the waves, for example--may one day merge with it, enabling it to say things that almost exceed human speech. (Compare the final tercet of I.iii--"Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.")

Section VIII is extremely labored. This can be seen by comparing it with the preceding stanza, for instance, where Stevens indulges his intermittent impulse to sit back and enjoy nature for its own sake, to let reality be whatever it will.

In Section IX, the origin of major man is declared not to be romantic apotheosis, nor yet the mechanically applied precision of reason. The syntax of lines 6-7 is ambiguous: are we to attach "compact in invincible foils" to the statement that "he comes," to "from reason," or to both? The tenor of the subsequent lines suggests that the "invincible

foils" foil reason, though penetrable to the brooding imaginative eye, that major man springs from a reason beyond reason, from "The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind."

Several meanings of major man are evolved in this strophe. He is

> The central man, the human globe
> . . . the man of glass,
> Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

The breast he reclines on is the earth's, with which he is in intimate relation. Being "the transparence of the place" in which he finds himself,[61] he is able to set "the spirit's diamond coronal" on the reality of which he has made himself the contemplative part. (In II.viii, he appears as Ozymandias, the human imagination which, throughout millennia, has aspired to magnify its dwelling place.) Major man is so attuned to the earth that "my dame" (the modern muse of line 15) sings for him "accurate songs." At the same time, major man is modern man, an orphan of the destitute present (l. 17). As poet, even when disinherited of "the infected past," he remains a spellbinding weaver of "rainbow sortilege."

We recall that, in the opening section of "It Must Be Abstract," the poet was called on to name an unnamable reality, but that afterwards, paradoxically, he was commanded to savor in his imagination the full potentiality of this without assigning it a name. So, now, we are adjured to create no image of our hero but to cherish his potentiality in our hearts (ll. 19-21). As we discover in Section X (and as was already hinted in the latter parts of Sections VIII and IX),

the hero is really two figures superimposed upon one another. He is the poet, the exceptional man (he who wages the perpetual war of mind against sky in the Epilogue to Notes), and he is the man-in-the-street or "on the town," the ordinary modern man, soldier and true hero of a war-torn age. The most suggestive image of major man as poet is that in IX.19, where the command to "look not at his colored eyes" summons up the image of Dionysian youth, washed up by the sunless seas of his vision:

> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honeydew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of paradise.[62]

The first two tercets of Section X proclaim the fertility of the major abstraction which is the idea of man. This abstraction represents the full human potential as no individual could. The third tercet begins the reconciliation of poet and populace, of the exceptional with the normal, that is the main theme of the rest of the stanza, and one of Stevens' abiding preoccupations. The rabbi and the clown, the pioneer who seeks to tap and master current reality and the tatterdemalion refugee from the present who still hankers after the past, these two figures merge as one. For it is the obligation of the former to realize and to express the latter. Stevens' final exhortation to his ephebe is to capture bare reality and modern man who inhabits it in sober speech, without palliation or transcendence. The poet's must become the voice of the multitude.

The opening poem of "It Must Change" is, as Sukenick points out, reminiscent of an Italian religious fresco.[63] "The old seraph" seems to be a representation of "the necessary angel," in whose sight we see the earth anew. But the poem's faded, confectionery imagery makes it clear that this particular version or idea of renewal is not radical enough. Recurrence is not the same thing as repetition: "the distaste we feel for this withered scene/Is that it has not changed enough." The part-gilt angel ("parcel-gilded" is Jonsonian coin), the nostalgic scent of violets (the "appointed odor" of memory), doves like spirits, Italian maidens wearing jonquils almost as their mothers wore them, and bees buzzing about hyacinths--nothing has changed enough. (Or nothing is seen to have changed, which amounts to the same thing.)

The universe is, in fact, inconstant; its constant repetitions are transmutations; not resurrections of being, but the continual putting forth of new beings. "The bees come booming/As if--" as if they were last spring's bees, but they are not. And the pigeons that clatter in the air are new ones, rudely vital, having nothing to do with the phantom doves of old chronologies. Because reality is inconstant, ever-changing, so must the "night-blue" of imagination renew itself through change. In addition to external changes, there are internal changes of mood: the seraph can become a satyr "according to his thoughts." Stevens declared he had forgotten what he

meant beyond "visible change" by the "obvious acid" of line 20,[64] but it is obvious what he means. Inevitably, decay sets in, this is the smell of decay, and "the booming is blunt" or final--death is its end. "It is/A sound like any other. It will end." (II.vi.20-21.)

The second poem of Part II contrasts the failing fictions of the present to the faded fictions of the past evoked in the preceding stanza. "The President ordains the bee to be/Immortal." The pun is obvious; the bee, though it seems to carry special connotations for Stevens,[65] is a synecdoche for any entity which the secular authority futilely ordains to be immortal. All such attempts to make the world--or anything in it--stand still, are doomed to failure. The body, dissolved by physical solvents, cannot rise again (ll. 2-6).[66] The booming of the bee has, indeed, subtly altered; it cannot "recapture a lost blague," or idiom. (It does seem as though the bee here represents the poet. The image of the bee as a hornsman sounding a "bottomless trophy" is similar to that in The Man with the Blue Guitar, XVII or "On an Old Horn."[67])

That the President should have apples on his table is puzzling. Is this because they are the fruit of knowledge--a knowledge that has nevertheless failed to come to grips with the world? (In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," we recall that "an apple serves as well as any skull/To be the book in which to read a round." But the President does not read his apples aright.) Or are apples, perhaps, intended to provide a plain

New England flavor? (The foreigner's, and perhaps the native's, stereotyped image of the President of the United States is usually that of a New Englander, something of a withered apple.) The President's barefoot servants are also baffling: are their bare feet intended to suggest only the stealth with which they move about their master, adjusting the curtains that screen him from reality? Or do their bare feet suggest also their own contact with the earth, a contact from which the President is cut off?

The image of flapping flags makes a brilliant burst of sound and color. This "red-blue dazzle," like the "red-slitted-blue" visage of the undying but essentially dead god of III.iii, seems to represent (as the combination of these two colors in this order does elsewhere in Stevens) the crude tyranny exerted by a moribund imagination over reality; it is a savage and misguided attempt to erect a partial, temporary reality into some sort of pseudo-eternal principle. The nation's banners defy the weather (the changing reality of the moment); they are at variance with it. To attune ourselves to reality demands changes as sudden and arbitrary as those of the seasons. So, in the final tercet, spring "vanishes"--both vanquishes and banishes--winter. Spring is not a return after the death of winter, nor a recurrent dream after winter's sleep. It is not itself a sleep. It is a "beginning, not resuming," the new-come spring with its new-come humming life, its new-come lovers "at last accomplishing/Their love."

General Du Puy is close kin to the President, taking over where he leaves off. His statue is another example of an artifact of the past that in the present appears to be a wholly outmoded fiction. Yet I would argue (from lines 1 and 8) that this statue was once great and, in a sense, true--like Verrocchio's famous equestrian statue of Bartolommeo Colleoni, which Stevens discusses in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Erected shortly after the General's funeral, the statue has remained in its place, gesturing grandiloquently for centuries. It has presided over the funerals of generations of inhabitants of its Place.[68] The "final funeral" suggests how dead and gone the General and all that he represents really are, and, in Dylan Thomas' words, how "After the first death, there is no other."[69] However, except for the General's statue, the music cannot halt, nor the horse stand still. Life goes on.

In his essays, Stevens opines that anything raised to a sufficient height becomes imaginative. To reinforce the double-edged epithet "great" applied to the statue in line 1, he describes the General's effigy in line 8 as "strongly-heightened." Lawyers taking their Sunday constitutionals, and doctors after their Sunday baths, study the statue's noble but "nerveless frame." The description is brilliant, epitomizing the fact that life is no longer fluent in this particular "inhuman bronze." The General's posture is so rigid and grandiose as to be absurd. "There

never had been, never could be, such/A man" is the reaction of the modern observer, to whom the statue must seem to have been a lie even in its own time. We are no longer accustomed to heroic conceptions of man. And so the statue, though a well-imagined and sculpted likeness of its era, becomes a relic in ours, only marginally related to the modern imagination--"Among our more vestigial states of mind." Stevens comments on the last lines, "We cannot ignore or obliterate death, yet we do not live in memory. Life is always new; it is always beginning."[70] Thus it is that the General, a fiction which has lost its relation to reality and thus its artistic value, becomes "rubbish in the end."

One may disagree with Stevens, and continue to treasure the Colleonis, Can Grandes--even more, perhaps, the Davids and Perseuses--as trophies of a nobler past, a more heroic vision of humanity than our own century can recover, but Stevens' attitude is uncompromising. Such statues are the flotsam and wreckage of history, esthetically of historical interest only. Stevens' endeavor to live without recourse to past glories was unremitting and ruthless. In his letters, he recalls reading an article about the Renaissance, in which he felt the author had truly captured and epitomized its monumental vitality and variety of spirit; yet, says Stevens sadly, "When you think it over afterwards . . . you think that it is just one more proof that the right always comes to nothing."[71]

The innate dualism of Stevens' mind is dramatized in Section IV, the nucleus of "It Must Change." As man depends on woman, day on night, one point of the compass on its opposite, each season on the one out of which it evolves, and life on death, so imagination depends on reality, from which it springs and to which it must return. The imagery of this stanza is simple, homely, and profoundly persuasive. It is this interdependence of opposites, their need to marry and procreate something new that is the origin of change, the "motive for metaphor," and the source of our delight in life. For Stevens, the salto mortale (mortal leap) separating us from something other than ourselves is a source of joy, not grief. For him, the sense of a saving separation is almost always greater than the longing for union. It is for this reason, because Stevens' motions toward a monistic conception of the universe are much more tentative and timorous than his outspoken delight in the dualism he plainly sees there, that I object to Cunningham's frequent references to Stevens' monism.[72]

The two lovers "that walk away as one in the greenest body" are one way of representing the imagination's wedding with reality.[73] (This resembles the crowning of Nanzia Nunzio by Ozymandias with the imagination's diamond diadem in II.viii, or the final transformation of "my green, my fluent mundo" into a globe of revolving, multi-faceted crystal in the final strophe of Notes.[74]) The trumpets in Part II, Section IV have no transcendental reverberations; our "island solitude" does

not echo the sounds of some heavenly fastness beyond it. The "little string" that "speaks for a crowd of voices" suggests the guitarist-poet's in The Man with the Blue Guitar, IV.[75] The poet celebrates, as in the final stanza of "Sunday Morning," our "island solitude, unsponsored, free"--this, and this only. The meaning of the two final tercets is that we are changed by the changes of our environment. (The figure of the child, almost undifferentiated from its natal environment, recalls Wordsworth.) The captain and his men become one body, in a sense, while the sailor who devotes his life to the ocean is, in turn, invaded by it. The two final lines, very Whitmanesque in tone, are an invocation to the imagination to follow the flux of reality in its never-ending changes to our own necessary end.[76] (The "interior paramour" is evoked in terms of dear relation that remind us of those in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," where the soul is addressed as a child and a celestial brother.)

The "blue island" in a "sky-wide water" may well remind the reader of the picture of our world presented at the close of "Sunday Morning."[77] The planter is man. His world continues "to bloom and to bear" long after his death--as it did long before his birth (see I.iv). All that remains of his own efforts at cultivation are three lime-trees "weighted/ With garbled green." The imaginative iridescences with which he invested these in his mind's eye (turquoise and orange blotches) have reverted to "zero green," to that ultimate reality to which he himself has returned. With the

disappearance of the human, there is no eye left to see or appreciate nuances of appearance. It is hard to know what to make of the planter's island in relation to the one he came from, or of the one south of his plantation to which he aspired. (In order to identify all three, one has to go beyond the poem into Stevens' metaphysics, which proclaim man's origin, life, and destination to be one seamless continuum.)

Several critics read the images in lines 10 through 18 as sexual: thus, the banana tree is phallic, the pineapple a female sphere, and the melon womblike. Eugene Nassar, for example, compares the "great banana tree" to what he sees as the phallic tree standing "gigantic, with a certain tip/To which all birds come sometime in their time" in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," X.[78] Another critic, too, sees the banana tree as a "chic" phallic symbol--if one can imagine such a thing! C. D. Cecil describes it as "a fiction of tropical sensuality" which "pierces the clouds (. . . a negative light) presumably the intellectuality of the North, but itself [the banana tree] obscures the sun (reality) on half of the world (the torrid zone)."[79] This just shows what knots one can tie oneself up in when trying to give a more or less consistent, but too allegorical, reading of Stevens' more difficult poems by imaginatively conflating individual images with those they recall in other poems. (The previous involved explanation does at least have the merit of suggesting that the banana tree bears the same relation and color value to the climate

of the planter's mind as forsythia does to the dense wintry blue of the sky in I.vi. But this may be merely misleading.)

Again, what is one to make of the land from which the planter came? It is described as pink, but "If seen rightly . . . a possible red." Stevens customarily uses pink to suggest a somewhat romantic nostalgia, and red to evoke a flaring, rather daunting reality.[80] The south always means to Stevens vitality and sensuous abundance. (Stevens' paradises, like Auden's, are always located in the south, while harsh reality is found in the north.) Is our planter an emigrant from the leafless north, who has failed to savor or realize the reality of his own land (ll. 16-18); who settles in the tropics, but dreams of a land still more tropical (ll. 10-15), an eternal Florida of the imagination, with its endless beaches, "sea myrtles in/White sand," and the eternal "patter of the long sea-slushes"? All that we can know of him for certain is that he was an imaginative and creative man, strongly affected by his environment: "An unaffected man in a negative light/Could not have borne his labor . . ." Stevens admits to a fondness for this exotic interlude in Notes, which taps the vein of some of his most vivid and mellifluous but also most incoherent poetry. The planter, he declares, is "the laborious human who lives in illusions and who, after all the great illusions have left him [lines 10-15 will not warrant this reading] still clings to one that pierces him." The "banjo's twang," Stevens explains, is

intended to represent those little things that mean more to us, even in crises, than "increases, accessions, magnifyings . . ."[81]

I find II.vi a much cleverer but equally perplexing poem. It appears, at first glance, to be a parody of a certain kind of romanticism, not the egotistical sublime of Wordsworth so much as the antithetical sublime of Shelley. It expresses his characteristic yearning to become one with the universe, to be swallowed up by, engulfed in it, and yet to enjoy a second, vicarious, transcendent consciousness while wafted about on "the viewless wings of Poesy." Stevens' repeated "bethou me" is a parodic echo of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind":

> Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
>
> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!

The sparrow, like other sparrows and other birds throughout Stevens' verse, seems to represent man.[82] He says to the "crackled blade"--this suggests the sere grass of late summer or early autumn[83]--and to the wind blowing through the copse, "Bethou me." This is a perfect expression of self-centered human consciousness attempting to enlarge its domain by projecting itself into all things, while simultaneously trying to absorb them in a single super-identity. "Bethou is the spirit's own seduction," says Stevens.[84]

The poem is based on personal observation; Stevens' testimony on this helps us to understand why a strophe which

is supposed to illustrate the principle "It Must Change" should seem, instead, to illustrate "A single text, granite monotony." (In fact, it is intended to demonstrate change arising out of monotony.) Thus, Stevens refers to a copse of evergreens in his garden, in which the monotony of repeated birdsong (represented by the repeated but opposed sounds, "bethou me" and "ké-ké"[85]) creates first the desire for change, and then actual, seemingly spontaneous changes of sound. It is necessary to quote what Stevens says about this stanza in detail:

> I suppose that insistent be-thou is a catbird. About the bloody wren: wrens are fighters. [The jay belongs to the magpie family; magpies are notorious thieves.] . . . . All this insistent tutoyant becomes monotonous and merges into a single sound. So faces tend to become one face as if they had met a glass blower's destiny; as if a glass blower, for all the bubbles he blows, blows only one, and so he does . . . .
>
> . . . for no particular reason a change of sound takes place in the coppice. Of course, there may be a psychological reason . . . . The change is an ingratiating one . . . . There was a wild minstrelsy, although inarticulate, like clappers without bells: drops of rain falling made lines which were clappers without bells.[86]

These comments on a stanza containing so many of Stevens' characteristic beauties and defects repay sustained analysis. First of all, those "clappers without bells" are quite unintelligible without the poet's explanation. Unless we see raindrops pearling down plant stems, we are unlikely to grasp the image visually--though an extremely sensitive reader might

grasp it aurally, and thus extract its meaning; it is supposed to represent the "voluble dumb violence" of nature.

Secondly, Stevens (whose letters, as we might expect, reveal an eye and ear sensitive to the minutest naturalistic details) here violates naturalism altogether. He should not be faulted for this, of course, were his anti-naturalism either consistent or effective. It is neither. The wren may be a bloody fighter, and the jay a thief; by a stretch of the imagination, we may see the robin as "jug-throated" (though never hear him making sounds like Eliot's nightingale), but a sparrow is not a catbird. If the poet meant a catbird, why not say so in the first place? Furthermore, the catbird's chief claim to charm is that its song is not repeated--its song consists of many different calls. How can a repeated "bethou" represent the variety of its song, the endless variations that the reiterated "ké-ké" lacks? (Incidentally, no sparrow, catbird, wren, jay, or robin makes a sound approaching "ké-ké.")

But suppose we forget all this stickling realism and, comparing the poem itself to Stevens' assertion of what it means, ask whether it successfully conveys to the reader what he intended. Surely we must conclude that it does not. The idea of monotony is strongly present; that of change is nowhere apparent. "Bethou" cannot stand alone as its objective correlative. Though otherwise suggestive, we need help to realize that "bethou me" is opposed to the collective "ké-ké" of the other birds' "idiot minstrelsy," especially when we are told at the end that this is "a sound like any other"

and will end. (This, admittedly, is an idea easy for anyone familiar with Stevens' insistence on the common origin of intelligible and unintelligible sounds, to grasp.) Death swallows up all sounds, those that are meaningful to us along with those that remained meaningless. Nevertheless, it would seem from Stevens' exegesis that he intended some distinction between true minstrelsy (human song) and mindless imitation, though both finally merge in silence.

The "anatomy of monotony" in terms of "One sole face, like a photograph of fate" is partly clear and partly obscure. The "Eye without lid, mind without any dream" is intended to suggest an eye that reflects only the external, that, having no lid, is unable to cease reflecting what is outside it, yet is incapable of self-reflection.[87] Perhaps the "bloodless episcopus," like Milton's startling synecdoche in Lycidas, where the angry poet addresses bishops as "blind mouths," is based on the original Latin meaning of the word episcopus, that is, overseer. (An eye without a lid, a mind having no power to contemplate itself, would be likely to promote meaningless speech, devoid of thought.)

The "lustre of the moon" in Section VII is intended to convey intense imaginative reverie in which the imagination becomes sufficient unto itself. The imagination, which Stevens calls a perpetual lover of the earth,[88] when sated with its own abstractions from reality, its memories--lilacs for Stevens, as for Eliot, mingle memory and desire--creates its own paradise. This inner haven is usually associated in Stevens'

poetry with moonlight, midnight, deep blue or purple.[89] The "interior paramour," imagination, is described as giving off its own heady fragrance which is absolute, evoking nothing that exists--there is not even a yearning for reality since the mind has become temporarily self-sufficing. (The same solipsistic mood is presented in III.viii.) The internalization or inward assimilation of reality (compare I.iii.8-9) is the essential poetic process: poetry is "to have or nothing."[90] Again, we encounter the figure of the scholar-poet with his companion, "the ignorant man," who celebrate together "the metaphysical changes that occur,/Merely in living as and where we live."[91] He who has studied reality diligently and faithfully knows its dark center, its tragic chiaroscuro, but is able to perceive and appreciate "degrees of perception" (ll. 20-21). Unlike the woman of "Sunday Morning," he is satisfied with accessible, expressible bliss; he no longer yearns for "some imperishable bliss."

Section VIII strikes me as one of the most successful in "It Must Change."[92] Nanzia Nunzio is the woman who often in Stevens' verse represents the natural universe or reality in all its fluctuations. (She will reappear in the final strophe of "It Must Give Pleasure" as the "fat girl.") George MacFadden is surely right in regarding her name as a play on the word "annunziazione."[93] It is Nanzia Nunzio (a nuncio is a messenger, and hers is the voice of inhuman nature) who speaks throughout. Addressing the human spirit embodied in the person of Ozymandias, she declares that she is its spouse, and must be

contemplated by it to be made precious and fruitful--not by any paraclete or holy spirit from another world. She announces the impregnation of reality by the imagination. The imagination's successive orderings of reality are aptly represented by Ozymandias, since man's works are continually outstripped by reality and devastated by the passage of time. Nanzia Nunzio's trip around the world is like the voyage of wind over wave. Her marriage with Ozymandias will fix the flux of reality in an abstraction--represented by "the spirit's diamond coronal."[94] Nanzia Nunzio divests herself of all her jeweled trappings (gold, emerald, and amethyst are imaginative colors) in an effort to confront the human imagination with a reality stripped of all ornament, the essential nakedness of reality before and beyond embellishment.[95] She seeks the crystalline, many-faceted, pure and crowning realization that only man can give her. But the human imagination (which, after all, is doing all the stripping here) knows that

> . . . the bride
> Is never naked. A fictive covering
> Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.[96]

In Section IX, we return to Stevens' obsession with reconciling the peculiar speech of the poet with the vulgate, the vulgar language spoken by the masses.[97] The poet must consult what is current in general speech in order to speak for "a crowd of voices." To be spokesman for the people at the "bluntest barriers," of which death is the final one, he must cherish as his own their vital preoccupations. Thus his utterance will become "the bread of faithful speech" for them--

see the Epilogue. Despite several similar poetic manifestoes, Stevens fails signally as a poet either to speak the speech or think the thoughts of most people.

The poet asks whether his peculiar speech merges or alternates with that "gibberish of the vulgate" that he seeks (l. 17).[98] Does the poem mediate between them, speaking two languages at once, or does it fluctuate from one to the other? (To project this speculation on a larger scale, does style in general fluctuate between the mannered and the mundane, or does it contrive to reconcile the two?) While "luminous flittering" evokes the fitful lightnings of the poet's perceptive speech, "the concentration of a cloudy day" suggests the massed opacities of common speech. Nassar connects Stevens' desire to reconcile poetic and public speech with his sense of the doubleness of poetry; one recalls Stevens' assertion that "one is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry"--the first the "true subject," the second "the poetry of the subject."[99] Nassar identifies the true subject with the vulgate, and the poetry of the subject with the poet's speech,[100] but Stevens would scarcely have approved this interpretation, since he felt that style and subject must become one. The "poem that never reaches words" seems to be the inarticulate poetry of the people, while the one "that chaffers the time away," would appear to be that of a glib poet who evades the people and their concerns, who inhabits his own "senseless element"--a sphere too far removed from everyday reality and

consciousness to be meaningful. The opposite interpretation is equally feasible, however.

The poem, then, must needs be both "peculiar and general," peculiar in the sense of extremely perceptive and particular, so as to capture meanings beyond verbality--"speech only a little of the tongue"--and general enough to subsume the popular imagination. The poem must present the universal concretely. In a manner reminiscent of "Metaphors of a Magnifico"--"so the meaning escapes"--Stevens comments on his own meditation here which is, also, "old song/That will not declare itself. . ." The "imagination's Latin" represents the poet's scholarly gibberish, the "lingua franca et jocundissima," the mingled speech of poet and people, a new and improved vulgate realizing the poet's desire to combine his own pedantically precise and erudite utterance with the freshest, freest, and happiest speech of the crowd.

The final section of "It Must Change" presents the poet dreaming on a park bench--"A bench as catalepsy is a place of trance," says Stevens.[101] The poet's dreams take wing from the cultivated world (the park) and the domesticated water (the lake) about him. His imagination peoples this setting with "artificial things." (This is, perhaps, a fancifully embroidered version of the more simply presented natural landscape of I.vii; this fanciful projection succeeds the realization that "The casual is not/Enough.") The west wind represents the volatile agent of change that matches the dreamer's internal moods to the changing nuances of his

external surroundings. Frank Doggett expresses this well, in saying that the lake of consciousness is superimposed over the lake of reality; mind and world are conjoined because "the flow of consciousness is our own version of the outer flux of reality."[102] "Iris frettings on the blank" is a remarkable evocation of the mind's "rubbings of reality," the way in which it invests the blank of reality with iridescences, so that it is "Saved and beholden, in a robe of rays."[103] "The eye of a vagabond in metaphor/That catches our own" reminds us of the hidalgo-vigilante of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XXV, who enjoins the poet to be faithful to the moment, to transcribe with fidelity the imaginatively experienced passing perceptions of life.[104]

But "the casual is not enough." (The reader of Stevens cries "Hear! hear!" and wishes the poet had meant this in the technical and perfectionist sense, and had taken it more often and deeply to heart.) Presumably, Stevens means here that fidelity to the fortuitous, to sudden change, is not enough. The fortuitous has to be placed in necessary relation to ourselves to become meaningful. The world remains the mirror of our moods, subject to our transformations of it; though we must mirror the world as faithfully as we can, finally the two reflections--our reflections on as well as our reflections of it--must be placed in harmonious and significant relation. What Stevens means by "rubbings of a glass in which we peer" is made clearer in an essay on William Carlos Williams entitled "Rubbings of Reality": "writing is the grinding of

a glass, the polishing of a lens, by means of which . . . to see clearly . . . rubbings of reality."[105] The "suitable amours" of imagination and reality are faithful records of the embracement of successive moments by mind.[106] "Time will write them down."

The opening section of "It Must Give Pleasure" takes up a theme that was first briefly announced in I.vii, but which threads its way through the third part of the poem, emerging as the dominant theme of the first and seventh stanzas. (In a sense, this theme expresses the idea that the casual, if it moves us sufficiently deeply, is more than enough.)

> . . . the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
> On the image of what we see, to catch from that
>
> Irrational moment its unreasoning,
> As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
> Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall
>
> Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
> Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
> We reason about them with a later reason.
> (III.i.14-21.)

This implies that the most valuable, difficult, yet pleasurable poetry is that which captures the miraculous transformations we observe in nature. To do this directly is more difficult and more worthwhile than to sing regular ceremonial hymns or to repeat the responses of already composed litanies. Stevens appears to hint also that the poet who celebrates the instantaneous, irrational miracles of reality's changing appearances must be a pioneer, whose poetry will always be a little in advance of, a little hard to grasp for those who do not practice this "difficultest rigor." Were his poetry more

conventional in style and subject, were he to write in a mode to which the public was already habituated, then the poet might "be crested and wear the mane of a multitude," exulting in expressing its finest vulgate. But this, compared to the pioneering of new ways of seeing and of describing ever-changing reality, is a "facile exercise."

St. Jerome was, of course, the translator of the Bible into Latin in the so-called Vulgate. Stevens says he intends "begat the tubas" to represent the act of translation. He adds, "I suppose this would have been clearer if I had spoken of harps."[107] (Assuredly it would have been, since Stevens then goes on to use an image of "golden fingers picking dark-blue air.") These plucking fingers are a representation of the imagination populating space. The color scheme of gold against deep blue is close to that of the angelic skyscape in III.viii, where golden wings cleave lapis air. (Both colors are symbolic of imagination at its most intense.) Similarly, the sound of deep strings being plucked (line 8 is a jazzy version of the Biblical, like a Negro spiritual) is often used by Stevens to suggest imagination in its most profound and potent moods--one recalls his use of bassoons, trombones, and oboes in other poems.[108]

Jerome is an example of the poet who provides jubilas for the multitude or hymns for "companies of voices." The meaning of lines 11-13 would appear to be that such hymns search the empyrean for our spiritual essence, our "bleakest ancestor" (compare the "leaner being" of I.viii.17). The

bleakest ancestors of our transcendental yearnings are presented as sound and light.[109] One wishes to separate St. Jerome from those pioneer poets who pursue "the difficultest rigor," and who, like Stevens, find complete satisfaction in mere air, in deep space empty of heavenly choirs. Jerome is not a spiritual adventurer because he went back beyond the Greek to the Hebrew to produce his Vulgate. He was a translator of others' visions, and this poem seems to celebrate the difference between "mediated and unmediated vision."[110] It seems to me that Frank Doggett provides the best comment on the gist of the poem, though he glides over some of its local difficulties:

> . . . to know the world in accordance with the accepted understanding of it is to form part of the human chorus . . . and to experience reality in common with other men. But to see the world in immediate experience is an approach to . . . "the first idea," and it is "irrational" because it is close to the non-human. It is later . . . that we abstract experiences, that "we reason about them" . . .[111]

The poet must mediate not only between his own vision and other men's, his own speech and other men's, but also between the inhuman and human realms. The concluding lines of this first poem of Part III are magnificent.

The blue woman looking out of her window in the following strophe appears to be the imagination gazing out of its window on the world. This is the woman as muse, the "interior paramour"--in other words, the imagination. Stevens' own exegesis of this stanza does not appear to me very illuminating; for the light

it does shed, however, not only on this poem but on the difficulties of interpreting Stevens' poetry in general, I quote it in full:

> The blue woman was probably the weather of a Sunday morning early last April when I wrote this. I had the feeling that the "feathery argentines" were right and that it would not help to change them to something else, any more than it would help to metamorphize [sic] this, that or the other (clouds into foam, living blossoms to blossoms without life, heat to a form of heat.) In the memory . . . there had always been a place for everything, free from change, and in its place everything had been right. This validated the memory . . . and in any event it gave an intensity expressible in terms of coldness and clearness.
>
> One way of making progress is by mere contrast. . . . The law of contrast is crude. Even in a text expounding it must change, it is permissible to illustrate it must give pleasure without any law whatever. Obviously in a poem composed of the weather and of things drifting round in it: the time of year and one's thoughts and feelings, the cold delineations round one take their places without help. Distinguish change and metamorphosis.[112]

Beautiful as this poem is, it strikes one as somewhat incoherent. The stanza and Stevens' explanation of it illustrate well what J. V. Cunningham means when he calls Stevens an amateur poet: "The amateur . . . likes to write poems, and may perfect them or not. He doesn't mind botching the job."[113] Thoughts and feelings, the weather and the things about one "take their places without help." They are left drifting about on the page; hopefully the reader will be able to follow their drift, but if the writer is satisfied, that is the main thing. Too

many of Stevens' poems are shorthand transcriptions from life. The occasion of this poem, as of most modern poems, was a private one. As is usual with Stevens, it was not something that happened to him but something that he perceived on a particular cold April morning. (Stevens would of course deny that a perception is not an experience; granted it is, the point I wish to make is that it may entail esthetic appreciation without generating much emotion; that emotion often generates its own principles of organization; mere esthetic appreciation often does not.) The observation is made, admittedly, with the utmost delicacy and finesse, by an imagination capable of the most exquisite traceries:

> . . . the argentines
> Of spring come to their places in the grape leaves
> To cool their ruddy pulses--

to give just one example. Stevens' explanation makes clear that he is presenting an observer who is content with what she sees, who is content to watch the landscape and its fleeting changes without metamorphosing them into something else. The fact remains that she does metamorphose the landscape; Stevens' mere description of it does that.[114]

To get back to the lady of this stanza, we are told that "it was enough/For her that she remembered." It seems to be enough for her largely because, through memory, she anticipates. She anticipates, for instance, "the harmonious heat of August pines," and this anticipation, based on memories of past Augusts, sharpens her appreciation of the coldly pink dogwood blossoms which are actually present to her gaze. The poem is

supposed, however, to illustrate the self-sufficiency of unvarnished perception and of faithful memory. The description of what is perceived, however exquisite, is as "linked and lacquered" it could possibly be. Could it be the intention to demonstrate the impossibility of immediate perception uncolored by *memory*? In fact, *memory* is like the inner lining of present perception throughout the poem, as it surely is in life. Aside from the fact that the stanza illustrates the necessity of change as much as that of pleasure (Stevens makes it clear he is aware of an inherent contradiction, but reverses his terms), the stanza fails to distinguish change from *metamorphosis*, *present from past* vision, or the observer from the landscape. One would have no quarrel with it, did it not claim to do so.

Section III of Part III is wholly successful, I think. One proof of its general appeal and intelligibility is in the number of critics who read it in the same way,[115] and with the same marked appreciation. "The lasting visage in a lasting bush" is the face of a god whom for long ages humanity perversely did not permit to die his natural death. It does not matter whether we visualize him as classic Jove, Hebraic Jaweh, or the Christian God the Father, he is a spent image of the supernatural, bled out, utterly finished and used up. Since his *meaning* is self-evident, it is not essential to repeat what Stevens has said about him. However, since this is eloquent, here it is:

> The first thing one sees of any deity is the face, so that the elementary idea of God is a face: a lasting visage in a lasting bush. Adoration is a form of face to face. When the compulsion to adoration grows less, or merely changes . . . the face changes and, in the case of a face at which one has looked for a long time, changes that are slight may appear . . . to be melodramatic.[116]

The imagery expresses well the tedium of something fixed for all eternity. Red throughout this strophe has the connotations of tired blood ("ruby-water-worn"). In conjunction with emerald, it recalls the vitality that the supernatural statue once had, before it became overgrown by vines like frowning basilisks, when it was still the object of vital worship. "Red-slitted-blue" suggests the way in which blue imagination has pitted or worn grooves in this outworn conception of a once red reality. (This deity only seemed to be real, of course, but this made all the difference. As Stevens says in Adagia, "It is the belief and not the god that counts."[117]) Compare these lines from the last stanza of the poem "Examination of the Hero in Time of War," which declares the pressing need for a new conception of the human hero:

> Each false thing ends. The bouquet of summer
> Turns blue and on its empty table
> It is stale and the water is discolored.
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . So
> Summer, jangling the savagest diamonds and
> Dressed in its azure-doubled crimsons,
> May truly bear its heroic fortunes
> For the large, the solitary figure.[118]

The full flower of any fiction cannot last forever. Eventually, it will become a betrayal of reality. However "venerably used,"

it will become used up. The divinest utterances become rusty with repetition and strike the ear as tedious.

The dead shepherd is not so easily dealt with. Stevens admits frankly, "This dead shepherd was an improvisation. What preceded it in the poem made it necessary, like music that evolves for internal reasons and not with reference to an external program. What the spirit wants it creates . . ."[119] These statements apply to Notes toward a Supreme Fiction as a whole, not just to this stanza. Within this particular verse, the human imagination, in order to escape from the tedious fiction of the Jove-like god, dreams up a redder, more vital and humane god,[120] who came bidding his sheep rejoice, as he delivered us from the hell in which our imagination had imprisoned us. The dead shepherd suggests both Christ[121] and Orpheus.[122] The concluding lines of III.iii are in a pastoral strain reminiscent of Blake's Songs of Innocence. They suggest the freshness and infinite variety of the ephemeral.

The development of Notes as a whole may be aptly described as musical, evolving, as Stevens puts it, "for internal reasons and not with reference to an external program." Thus, the three major statements of the three principal sections are, as we have seen, interwoven; mood alone sometimes appears to dictate the development of individual strophes within these major divisions.

The opening line of Section IV repeats the last of the opening stanza of "It Must Give Pleasure." The "mystic

marriage in Catawba" is yet another wedding of reality (the maiden Bawda) to the imagination (the captain). The name Catawba probably recommended itself to Stevens as an indigenous American Indian place name,[123] while he presumably chose Bawda for its robust sound and suggestions of bawdiness. The marriage in Catawba may be a sly parody on the wedding at Cana at which Christ turned water into wine. This wedding of imagination to reality is another of those spontaneous, casual weddings of soul to world that we reason about with a later reason. Those things that we have seen clearly and abstracted truly become landscapes of the mind, places "dependent on ourselves" (l. 3). The marriage takes place in midsummer, at noon, during the full imaginative flowering of reality. The repeated "anon" of the marriage service is used in the obsolete sense of straightway or directly. The captain is also described in Elizabethan language that reminds us of Othello, but his bride does not take him for "his puissant front." Nor does he take her for "her subtle sound": the association of the maiden Bawda with "the shoo-shoo-shoo of secret cymbals round" suggests that she is an earth goddess, a Cybele.[124] Bride and groom are also presented as magic ciphers, signs whose alliance will arrest the whirlwind and balk the elements. It is typical of Stevens that he should have his captain marry not for love of his bride but for love of her dwelling place (ll. 19-20). However, the paradox is resolved by Bawda's representing the earth in her own person, while her love for the captain is like Penelope's

for Ulysses, that wanderer whose constant voyage is identified with the sun's in "The World as Meditation." The tone of that poem is similar to this one--"they had met/Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement."[125] Their meeting place, the marriage place, the "ever-hill" that both captain and maiden live in so happily is "neither heaven nor hell," but this earth, "terra infidel."

Stanzas V and VI introduce the Canon Aspirin, a persona who may well come close to being a self-portrait of Stevens.[126] The colorful meal with which Section V opens is typical of Stevens the gourmet, but seems quite extraneous to the rest of the poem.[127] I must confess that I find these opening lines in dubious taste: the bright, particular details serve no integral purpose as they do in the initial stanza of "Sunday Morning." This is the Stevens who could include among his Adagia a recipe for Parfait Martinique.[128] According to the poet, the details of the Canon's meal are supposed to indicate his catholic taste.[129] The name Canon Aspirin is a near pun on "aspiring"; it does not, I think, carry bromidic associations, though one who had not read Stevens' tribute to the Canon might be pardoned for thinking so. Stevens calls the Canon "the sophisticated man," one who has explored all the projections of his own mind. He is the antithesis of his practical, earthbound, unimaginative sister, whom he nevertheless admires, though she "has never explored anything at all and shrinks from doing so."[130] This sister in her "sensible ecstasy" is

obviously better attuned to a modern, uninspiring, unimaginative reality than the Canon is; in fact, the Canon's sister might well be taken to represent the modern imagination. (Without wishing to make of her and her daughters allegorical figures, we may regard them, like Crispin's daughters in The Comedian, as imaginative offspring, poems which display--though Stevens may not have intended this--a simpler, plainer, more elegant taste than the Canon's.) Nassar is probably right in seeing the Canon as a split personality, an aspiring soul with a "burgherish" side.[131]

The Canon's sister sees things, even those nearest and dearest to her, as they are (l. 14); indeed, they are the dearer to her for her denial of dreams (l. 12). What she feels for her children, though stripped of all transcendent longings, is still too deep, too subtle for simple speech (l. 15). When her children sleep, their mother invokes for them only a dreamless slumber. But for her brother, bare reality does not suffice. When midnight strikes, the Canon's yearnings for transcendence send him winging his way through the empyrean of his aspiring dreams.

The two poles between which the Canon moves, which form the opposite and utmost boundaries of his flight, are the nakedness of absolute thought beyond which fact cannot progress (III.vi.3-4), and the nakedness of absolute fact beyond which thought cannot progress (ll. 15-16).[132] The Canon's flight is couched in language strongly recalling the flight of Milton's

Satan: "Forth then with huge pathetic force/Straight to the utmost crown of night he flew." According to Doggett, this represents the human imagination's pathetic struggle to transcend itself and its mortality.[133]

Night represents the nadir of reality and the zenith of imagination, when facts "yawn themselves away"; the verb is well chosen, a metonymy from the sleeper for whom facts yaw off into the distance as he enters the illimitable space of his dreams. Objects vanish like phantoms, like "silver in the sheathing of the sight,"[134] while beneath the surface of the closed lid and in the sleepy humming of the mind, the dreamer surrenders to his own private visions.[135] He ascends, borne on the wings of his imagination to its outermost stars. The Canon, however, despite his learned conceptions and the golden illuminations of his dreams, has to return to earth, to descend again "to the children's bed." Nassar explains that Stevens always uses terms of intimate physical relation--mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children--to signify intimate imaginary ties. Nassar also captures well the value that the color gold symbolizes in this and Section VIII: "gold is the imagination's order, a fictive permanence."[136]

The Canon discovers, at the end of Stanza VI, that the poverty of spirit alone, of essence without existence, is as great and as fatal as that of existence without essence. Having reached the ultima Thule of imagination, he has to make a choice, a choice of inclusion, not of exclusion (ll. 17-21).

Realizing that imagination and reality depend on one another, he sings a "fugue of praise" celebrating "The complicate, the amassing harmony." Stevens has expressed the nature of the Canon's choice more plainly elsewhere. For the young poet in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he says, it will be

> imperative for him to make a choice, to come to a decision regarding the imagination and reality; and he will find that it is not a choice of one over the other and not a decision that divides them, but something subtler, a recognition that here, too, as between these poles, the universal inter-dependence exists, and hence his choice and his decision must be that they are equal and inseparable.[137]

The protagonist in the opening lines of Section VII may still be the Canon, though it appears, if so, that the poet's voice takes over from him in line 7, reiterating the superiority of a discovered to an imposed order. Nonetheless, even the impositions of an imperious imagination are "a brave affair." One imposes orders on the chaos of reality as instinctively as the beasts do. The human imagination constructs capitols (supreme intellectual concepts); this word frequently carries pejorative connotations in Stevens' poems.[138] In their corridors, the human mind erects statues--"whiter than wax" suggests the intellect going as far as it can go, "the obliteration of all color in life through the operations of the intellect or the fading away of an imaginative world."[139] Perhaps wax is used as Descartes used it, as a basal substance. It suggests, too, the extreme malleability of the world to the human intellect which, however, through the "applied

enflashings of reason" finally molds reality into shapes that rob it of its fluid vitality. The owl stands for intellect, the elephant for memory. "Fame as it is" is always a thing of the past.

The discovery of order that entails submission to reality rather than wilful manipulation of it reminds us of the fortuitous apotheoses of experience, the miraculous revelations of reality celebrated in I.vii and III.i. (The distinction may be viewed as one between the operation of Imagination and that of Fancy, with the discoveries of the imagination identified, characteristically by Stevens, with the clearsighted apprehension and appreciation of the seasons.) Yet for all the Canon's willed obliviousness of "the gold centre, the golden destiny" (VIII.6), Stevens' search for what he called "the centre" continues, as he urges the Emersonian and Bergsonian idea that all potentiality tends to actualize itself:

> It is possible, possible, possible. It must
> Be possible. It must be that in time
> The real will from its crude compoundings come,
>
> Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,
> Warmed by a desperate milk. (III.vii.13-17)

The beast who represents the potential becoming actual is presented in evolutionary terms, as a strange new form of life, "Warmed by a desperate milk," brought into being and nourished by the will of things. Finally, there is the realization that even a reality stripped of transcendence requires one fiction, the fiction of an absolute. The poem closes with an apostrophe

to "the necessary angel" to be silent and listen to a human song in praise of the imagination.

The purely human hymn of Section VIII seems to me the finest stanza in the whole poem for its brilliant resolution of the problem of belief that has haunted Notes toward a Supreme Fiction intermittently since its beginning, and which haunted Stevens all his life. The angel of our imagination is realized to be one with us. True, we only imagine this angel, but because this is so, and because we realize that this is so, his wings become ours, and the deep space he inhabits becomes our home. This stanza cannot be praised too highly for what it says and for the magnificence with which it says it. The "spredden wings" are Miltonically tactile, the "lapis-haunted air" is Stevens at his most felicitous, and the ultimate realization that we create our own and only paradise within our imaginations and here on earth is expressed with unexampled majesty and power. Stevens has written nothing so profoundly persuasive and moving as this since

> . . . And shall the earth
> Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
> 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.[140]

To explain details, let me cite Sukenick, whose interpretation is most accurate:

> If one can imagine an angel who gazes at the chaos of creation ("the violent abyss") and makes of it glorious music ("pluck abysmal glory"), flies through what the evening . . . reveals, and needs nothing

> but the deep chaos of the abyss ("deep space") without the "gold centre" of god or the "golden destiny" of heaven, if he is satisfied merely in the equilibrium of his motion without further destiny or purpose, is it not true that one imagines this . . . angel as a projection of one's own experience? Is not his satisfaction . . . our own?[141]

The answer is yes, and that if we can be haunted by such a vision for an hour, then there may come a day, a month, a year in which the human spirit creates its own self-sustaining majesty out of deep space unpopulated save by the imagination. In the expression of such bliss we forget "need's golden hand," the need that is our glory, because "out of desire come imaginative creations."[142]

The oracular "I have not but I am and as I am, I am" is also expressive. (It reminds one of Coleridge's vatic description of the Primary Imagination.) It suggests the inherent blessings of a poverty that has to sustain itself on the fictions it creates--the foundling of the fairytale "fulfilling herself beneath the roof"--and it affirms Stevens' profound conviction that as a man is, particularly as he sees, so is he either rich or poor. One's vision is one's style, and style is the man: "Style is not something applied. It is something inherent, something that permeates. . . . It is not a dress. It may be said to be a voice that is inevitable. A man has no choice about his style. When he says I am my style the truth . . . is that it is his style that is himself . . . as my poem is, so are my gods and so am I . . ."[143]

And elsewhere Stevens has expressed in the most eloquent prose the ecstasy of imagination that he celebrates here in such glorious poetry:

> . . . if we say that the idea of God is merely a poetic idea, even if the supreme poetic idea . . . if we say these things and if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in his seat in heaven in all His glory, the poet himself, still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, would have seemed . . . a man . . . uttering hymns of joy that followed his creation.[144]

Not man as god, but man as visionary and as the creator of gods. One is reminded of Yeats's remark after reading the poems of John Donne--"One who is but a man like us has seen God."[145] Or of Handel, after the two week burst of inspired creativity in which he composed his Messiah, on his knees, saying, "Methought I saw a vision of the great God ascending."

After this great vision, the poem swings back to this world in its constant revolutions, preparatory to the final stanza. The birdsong in III.ix may well remind us of that in II.vi, but the command to the birds here is to go on repeating themselves, since this stanza unexpectedly praises "he that of repetition is most master." (Stevens certainly qualifies for this title.) The poet's command to the birds is so ambiguously phrased that it may well represent an order not merely to repeat, but to go on repeating with variations, as the world itself does. "Whistle aloud, too weedy wren. I can/Do all that angels can" has the sound of a nursery rhyme.

Man can enjoy like an angel--that is, ethereally, but like a man, too--that is, sensuously. The meaning of "light secluded" is suggested, perhaps, by some lines from "The Owl in the Sarcophagus"; what men enjoy in an age of realism are their own creations within "the light-bound space of the mind."[146] Repetition is seen here as something final and good in itself. "The pleasures of merely circulating" are celebrated as something extremely enjoyable, like the passing round of a wine bottle at a picnic in a wood, or the eccentric spinning of an autumn leaf as it whirls slowly to the ground. What, one may ask, has happened to "It Must Change"? It is superseded here by the pleasures of constant repetition, repetition, surely with slight variations or mutations. According to Riddel, Stevens is here extolling a proposition of Santayana's: the ideal is "to witness rather than control [or to witness and thus control through practiced repetition] the revolutions in matter."[147]

The "fat girl" of the final stanza appears in similar guises in many poems of Stevens; she is described as "terrestrial," quite simply, because she is "the earth."[148] She is located "in difference," in shifting contours, in not quite completed changes. She goes on repeating herself, too, but always with slight differences--evolving as she revolves. The "fat girl" is the ultimate reality of summer and of night imaginatively perceived, though the poet feels the urge to check her evasions ("the intricate evasions of as"--of metaphor), to hold her to herself, to make her declare herself, indeed to name her flatly, in as few words as

possible. Finally, he addresses her as "my green, my fluent mundo," thus paying tribute to her reality and to her infinite variety. (Lines 5 and 6 suggest the kind of amorous dalliance, this time under a tree,[149] that figures frequently throughout the poem. The coy inversion of line 5 introduces a somewhat jarring tone; it leads into the odd personification of lines 9-13. This appears to me to be in the strongest tradition of pathetic fallacy, though I doubt very much that the "fat girl" is "one's wife," as Cunningham asserts she is.[150]) "The fiction that results from feeling," that imaginatively distorts reality however tenaciously and faithfully perceived, recalls the "fictive covering" that "weaves always glistening from the heart and mind."

The reference to a lecture at the Sorbonne at which it will one day be realized that the imagination, which transcends reason, nevertheless has a suprarational logic of its own, echoes an idea of Stevens that is close to Pascal's "The heart has its reasons that reason knows not of." We shall be delighted when we make the discovery that the uncharted territory of imagination is also inherently reasonable. The "gildered street" is a streettransformed by imagination. In this final poem, the poet salutes in his crystal globe that coalescence of real and imagined which figured in the opening poem of "It Must Be Abstract" as "The inconceivable idea of the sun," or the inconceivable reality behind reality. As Stevens says in his Adagia, "The final poem will be the poem of fact . . . . But it will be the poem of fact not realized before."[151]

The Epilogue, written at the end of May 1942, has a tacked-on quality.[152] Yet it is, in a way, integrally related to the poem as a whole. As Sukenick says, "It is addressed to the soldier who, in war, might be imagined to represent an extreme test of the beliefs, or fiction, with which the poet is concerned, and in comparison with whom the importance of the poet may be established."[153] Stevens was almost desperately concerned in time of war and in face of the soldier to establish some sanction for the poet and for poetry, which he saw as the essential sanction of life in general. Such a sanction for life must prove itself in the face of death. There emerges in a letter the poet wrote to Harriet Monroe towards the end of World War I an almost morbid sensitivity on the subject of death, and of finding some excuse for writing poetry while millions perish on the world's battlefields. "There are too many people in the world, vitally involved, to whom it [death] is infinitely more than a thing to think of. One forgets this," Stevens says in a note of heartfelt apology for having momentarily forgotten it.[154] The feverish excitement with which war filled him is expressed in a letter written to his wife shortly afterwards from Tennessee, where he was watching the entrainment of Negro conscripts: "last evening a train of negroes that had been drafted passed through . . . on the way to camp. The station was crowded with negroes . . . . the truth is that I feel thrilling emotions at these draft movements. I want to cry and yell and jump ten

feet in the air . . ."[155] Lest this excitement seem too vicarious and self-indulgent, one should read Stevens' "Poems from 'Lettres d'un Soldat,'" published in May 1918;[156] a reading of these is germane to an understanding of the Epilogue of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.

The war between mind and sky, between human consciousness and the empty physical geography of our planet, is presented in a series of dualities which inevitably terminate in the interdependent opposites of the reality the poet courts by remaining always "in the sun," and the imagination he abstracts from it and out of which he endeavors to construct his supreme fiction. "It is a war that never ends"--the war between life and death, or between imagination and reality. Hence, the soldier's and the poet's battle are seen as one, though fought on different fronts. They meet "in a book in a barrack," where the soldier discovers whether he can confront death in his own person, armed with the poet's fictions expressed in "faithful speech." The soldier's letters home are a test of the fidelity of that speech. The war between mind and sky is never ending, but the soldier's is soon over; he may return to his home, or he may die. Lines 13-14 strike one as ill-advised, intolerably frivolous in such a context with their "six meats and twelve wines." Further, "to walk another room" really begs the question of death that Stevens faces unflinchingly in other poems.

The soldier is addressed as the poet's comrade, who will be richer for the poet's lines, since "war for war,

each has its gallant kind," and, as Auden says in "In Memory of W. B Yeats," "The words of a dead man/Are modified in the guts of the living." Here, however, the words of the living, ideally, modify the guts of those who are about to die, so that "the fictive hero becomes the real," and "gladly with proper words the soldier dies,/If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech."[157] This certainly is a monumental project for poetry, the ultimate test of which would be that it should nerve the soldier to die heroically. Could it do so, not by betraying, but by rendering justice to reality, poetry would indeed have taken the place "Of empty heaven and its hymns,"[158] and would have become the Supreme Fiction.

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction is a microcosm of Stevens' poetry as a whole, exemplifying its characteristic excellencies and defects. I agree with Frank Kermode that it is the finest of Stevens' long poems presenting a series of variations on a theme. I even believe that it is, in a sense, the summa of the poet's later work. The poem seems to me to have been overpraised, however, if not in Kermode's judgment that the last two hundred lines "give continuously a higher delight than anything of comparable length written this century,"[159] then certainly in Harold Bloom's pronouncement, "Nothing else in twentieth century poetry written in English matches the significance of Stevens' Notes."[160]

An evaluation of different sections of the poem is bound to reflect the critic's personal tastes, but I hope I

speak for other readers when I find the following stanzas pre-eminent as poetry: I.iv, II.iii, II.iv, II.viii, III.iii, and III.viii. While agreeing with Cunningham that, by and large, Stevens' most successful style is either splendidly oratorical or quietly elegant,[161] examining the stanzas cited above reveals them to be written in a variety of different styles. What distinguishes them from the other, less successful strophes (for example, some of the worst appear to me to be I.viii through x, and III.iv, v, and vii) is their intelligibility and the highly wrought quality of their craftsmanship. I.iv, for example, contains its fair share of mannerism, but it is not the fussy mannerism of the first stanza of Notes, or of the latter part of the third stanza. The attractiveness of I.iv is in the stark contrast between varnished, theatrical imagery and the muddy matter out of which such imagination springs. The poem has something cogent to say and says it well. I.v begins vividly, but trails off into strenuously mannered agonies. Only part of I.vii is successful, beginning with the quiet relish of the description of the natural landscape in line 7. Stanzas I.viii through x are extremely forced and labored (as are parts of I.i, ii, and vi--though to a lesser degree). It is interesting to note that Part I, though doctrinally or rationally far more coherent than Parts II and III of Notes, contains far less poetry. One finds oneself agreeing with Randall Jarrell's observation that abstractionism was a fatal attraction for

Stevens, leading him into "generalizations of an unprecedentedly low order."[162]

Of all the other parts of the poem I have cited as particularly fine, II.iii is Stevens poking elegant fun at the grandiose; he is usually very good at this, as we see from examining his mock-heroic gambits in such short imagistic poems as "Bantams in Pine-Woods" and in longer, more serious pieces like "Le Monocle." II.iv is superlatively fine poetry, by turns simple and oratorical. It appears to be the nexus or nucleus of the entire poem, expressing Stevens' profound conviction of the blessed interdependence of opposites. II.viii is a more embroidered, abstracted version of the same theme.

II.i has the merit of a style suited to its subject--Stevens' candied, confectionery style is used to show up the faded artificiality of outmoded imaginative concepts. III.iii is also splendidly successful as the evocation of a dead god. In III.iii, as in II.viii, Stevens uses a bejeweled, surreal kind of imagery in which he is most adept. III.viii is Stevens using his most hieratic style. The vividly visual qualities of III.i are superadded to sustained and majestic rhetoric. This seems to me the high point in a poem dedicated to resolving the problem of belief.

Stevens' lush, tropical vein appears briefly in II.v. The style of the following stanza is intriguing but not altogether coherent in what it says. III.ii is in Stevens' "exquisite" manner; this is the kind of poetry he writes better than any other twentieth century American poet.

III.ix is an example of his "plain" style, containing some lines mysteriously affecting in their simplicity--for example, lines 14-15 and 16-19. The final stanza is "parcel-gilded," only partially successful, I feel, like the vatic Prologue and the plain but finer (though far from flawless) Epilogue.

The imagery of Notes is heterogeneous in the extreme; there are frequent breaches of stylistic decorum, soarings into ecstasy followed by slumps into something approaching bathos. There is much that remains unintelligible because the poet would not take the time and trouble to wrestle with it. Notes is, as J. V. Cunningham would have it, the work of an amateur. Stevens sent if off to the printer with the announcement that he might quite likely wish to alter several sections or rearrange them later; he even offered to rewrite lines that proved difficult to set up in print![163] The poem has the casualness and spontaneity that Stevens considered essential to poetry. The concomitant of this casualness and spontaneity is intermittent incoherence. Nevertheless, Notes is the grand poem of a master amateur.

At the beginning of this chapter, it was suggested that the supreme fiction as Stevens conceived it could be supreme only for a particular time and place. Perhaps it should be added that it could, in this day and age, be supreme only for a particular person--for Wallace Stevens. What Stevens meant by his supreme fiction remained, quite frankly, an enigma even to himself. For though he defined it at first quite simply as

poetry,[164] he confessed later that he knew he had not really defined what he meant by this abstraction which haunted him so persistently and urgently all his life: "I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean. The next thing for me to do will be to try to be a little more precise about this enigma. . . . In principle there appear to be certain characteristics of a supreme fiction and the NOTES is confined to a statement of a few of those characteristics." Essentially, he adds, what he is trying to create is "something as valid as the idea of God . . ."[165]

Now, what can be as valid as the idea of God, once one has recognized that God does not exist? Can reality, whatever that is, take God's place? In its essence as unknowable as God, can it provide a sanction for life that will endow it with meaning and value? Modern artists, and even more modern scientists, have tried to make a god of reality. As a deity, it has this grave disadvantage: it takes no note of the destiny of the individual (or even, it may be, of the species). We may worship and try to live in accordance with its laws, but it will not recognize us, nor can its laws ever be wholly our own. God was responsible and responsive, creator and ruler of the universe. Reality represents only the process by which the universe is; many of its laws (particularly those recently discovered in microphysics) appear to be blind and random.

Notes is Stevens' blueprint for his Supreme Fiction. Stevens believes that a fiction should have its own kind of

truth--truth to the human mind--yet that this truth should be well founded in observable reality external to the mind.[166] Reality is what is left by the withdrawal of God. It is a vacuum in which human nature cannot live. For our spiritual sustenance, we require poetry and its fictions. This is "to have"; without this, there is nothing. Stevens follows the path of the modern romantic. Truth is found not in reality alone--for this, in any case, can never be known by the mind. Truth resides in the meeting of subject and object "in the central of our being," the world greeted, cherished, momentarily accommodated to and possessed by the mind, as the mind is by it.

It is important to realize that the mind's reclamations of reality are only temporary, and part of "an exertion that declines." The sense of union with being that our own hunger for meaning and certitude drives us continually to seek (God having vanished) can be only momentary. The weddings of the spirit with matter are casual and fleeting. Afterwards, consciousness relapses into a sense of its own separateness, of "that which gives life as it is." (This state of mind might be described as dualistic, while the temporarily induced sense of union is monistic; the two kinds of poetry to which each mood gives rise might be described as objective and descriptive or subjective and revelatory.) Again, relaxation with the "given" of life cannot sustain the mind for long; it is driven back again to seek an essential core

of significance behind phenomena that it can intuit but of the existence of which, without the mind, it remains doubtful.

While one sympathizes with this dilemma out of which Stevens' poetry springs, and with his determination to record in poetry the oscillations of his mind between the satisfactions of reality and those of imagination--and the inherent dissatisfactions of each--still, one may well grow weary of constant repetitions with only slight variations on this theme. In addition, too much brooding seems to be done aloud and on-the-spot in the poetry. So much of it could have been spared, or greatly improved and sharpened, if what was recorded was not transcribed as it occurred, but had undergone further shaping and deliberation. This is, of course, to ask for less spontaneity, fortuitousness, and diffuseness, and for more deliberation, conscious craftsmanship, and compression. Stevens would probably have held such conscious revision to be incompatible with that "difficultest rigor" of seizing from the "Irrational moment its unreasoning" (III.i.16), but that appears to be only rationalization.

What I have said about Notes in this essay implies that Stevens has not, in fact, succeeded in creating his supreme fiction. To which it is only necessary to add that he never expected to. We should be aware, too, of the difference between an absolute fiction and the fiction of an absolute. In a letter to Sister Bernetta Quinn, whom he considered a kindred soul, Stevens admits, "I do seek a centre and expect to go on

seeking it. I don't say that I shall not find it or that I do not expect to find it. It is the great necessity even without specific identification."[167] In other words, the great necessity is to go on searching, as the greatest pleasure is to journey, never to arrive.

It must be obvious by now that what Stevens was searching for was a center that would be at once the center of reality and of the imaginative self, that meeting-place to which he alludes in his Prologue to Notes. He might not even have balked at calling this center God--provided his god were stripped of all the dirt, varnish, mystification, anthropomorphism, and false piety of centuries. In a further letter to Sister Bernetta Quinn, Stevens says: "For nine readers out of ten, the necessary angel will appear to be the angel of imagination, and for nine days out of ten that is true, although it is the tenth day that counts."[168] One may believe in some kind of god six days of the week, but it is the seventh day, the day when one is suddenly and utterly bereft of his company and left alone to watch over oneself and the world, it is this seventh day that counts. Notes toward a Supreme Fiction is a remarkable grappling with Stevens' most profound and fertile theme--the struggle for a realistic fiction that would at the same time constitute an imaginatively satisfying belief, that both for himself and for others would provide "the bread of faithful speech." Though the project can scarcely be said to have been an unqualified success, it is exhilarating to have participated in it.

Footnotes

[1]"It is implicit in the title that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction," Stevens says in a letter to Henry Church dated December 8, 1942. He goes on to recount a conversation he had with a student from Trinity College, in which Stevens insisted that "we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction." Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 430. (Hereafter this will be referred to as Letters.)

[2]Letters, pp. 408 & 443 make it clear that it was written from March through the end of May.

[3]Particularly useful to the critic are the letters to Henry Church on pp. 426-27 & pp. 429-32, and those to Hi Simons, pp. 433-36, 437-39, & 444-45 of Letters.

[4]Ibid., p. 431.

[5]Joseph Riddel suggests that these three prescriptions may be compared to Stephen Dedalus' integritas (wholeness), consonantia (harmony), and claritas (radiance), set forth in Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Parts I and III of Notes bear some resemblance to the first and third of Aquinas' esthetic prescriptions, but Stevens' concept of harmony, of agreement between the constituent parts of a poem is far less rigorous than Joyce's. See Riddel's The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, 1965) p. 184.

[6]The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1965), p. 139. See also: "The momentum of the mind is all toward abstraction," Adagia, Opus Posthumous, edited with an introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 179. (The first volume cited will hereafter be referred to as N.A., the second as O.P.)

[7]In Letters, pp. 426-27, Stevens explains the "thinker of the first idea" thus: "If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea." Plainly, this is an inadequate interpretation; to be "thinker of the first idea" implies a far greater effort of abstraction than this.

[8]Letters, p. 290.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 302.

[10]"Of Modern Poetry," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954), p. 239. (Hereafter referred to as *C.P.*) I also have in mind here J. V. Cunningham's remark that Stevens' best poetry is about experiences, not ideas as such, but experienced ideas. See this critic's excellent article, "The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," *University of Denver Quarterly*, I (Spring 1966), 13-14.

[11]In *Letters*, pp. 427 & 435, respectively, Stevens denies that Canon Aspirin and the planter are symbols, though he realizes that readers may regard them as such. Stevens says that the Canon is a mere figure whose name is supposed to suggest his character; while it is possible to consider the planter a symbol of change, he also represents "the laborious human who lives in illusions."

[12]"An Abstraction Blooded" in *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (New York, 1952), p. 251.

[13]*The Clairvoyant Eye*, pp. 167-68.

[14]A quotation from the *Letters*, p. 368, though it is a comment on another poem--"The Old Woman and the Statue" in *Owl's Clover*--seems particularly apposite: "When I was a boy I used to think that things progressed by contrasts, that there was a law of contrasts. . . . Afterwards I came to think more of the energizing that comes from mere interplay, interaction. Thus, the various faculties of the mind co-exist and interact, and there is as much delight in this mere co-existence as a man and a woman find in each other's company. . . . Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking are illimitable. They make things inter-dependent, and their inter-dependence sustains them and gives them pleasure."

[15]This probably stems from Stevens' refusal to look over the poem till he had written the Epilogue--see *Letters*, p. 406. It is also possible, though there is no conclusive evidence, that he may have composed the Prologue after the main body of *Notes*.

[16]Stevens is quite explicit about this in letters to the Cummington Press who first published *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. Nevertheless, several critics have assumed the Prologue to be addressed to Henry Church.

[17]Eugene Nassar so identifies the book in his Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 185. I fail to see, however, why he finds the Prologue "one of the saddest things in modern poetry." I believe he is right in calling it an invocation to the "interior paramour," however.

[18]N.A., p. 116.

[19]See "Credences of Summer," VI, C.P., p. 375.

[20]See "Two Prefaces" to works by Valéry in O.P., p. 280.

[21]N.A., pp. 3-5. It is helpful to realize that this essay was written very shortly after Notes, because there is some cross-pollination of idea and image between the prose essay and the poem.

[22]"Credences of Summer," II, C.P., p. 373. White has connotations of pristine purity or emptiness, as of a blank page.

[23]Cf. "The Latest Freed Man," C.P., p. 205--lines 15-17 are almost identical with the concluding lines of I.i of Notes.

[24]Cf. the similar injunction in I.ix.19-21 not to describe man, because as potential he is dearer and more valuable than any particular name or image can make him appear in actuality.

[25]"Man and Bottle," C.P., p. 239.

[26]This is Ronald Sukenick's explanation of these lines in his Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York & London, 1967), pp. 137-38.

[27]Though Stevens has no belief in any existence beyond death, he speaks of some possible realm of being "Whose venom and whose wisdom will be one"--the lines reveal a striking similarity to I.ii.3-5--see "St. John and the Back-Ache," C.P., p. 437.

[28]Cf. the idea expressed in the third strophe of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven: "The point of vision and desire are the same."

[29]As in Esthétique du Mal, X and The Auroras of Autumn, VIII.

[30]Cf. An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XXII.

[31]Letters, p. 433.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Or the "interior paramour," as in "The Dove in the Belly," for example, which appears to be a parody of the Incarnation, somewhat in the mood of Joyce's "Ballad of Joking Jesus."

[34]Scepticism and Animal Faith (New York, 1923), p. 109.

[35]George McFadden is surely right in seeing Adam as representing the intellectual and Eve the emotional life. As is obvious from Notes, Stevens knew his Milton well, particularly Paradise Lost. McFadden's remarks are to be found in his essay "Poet, Nature, and Society in Wallace Stevens," Modern Language Quarterly, XXIII (September 1962), 267.

[36]As Newton P. Stallknecht points out in his article, "Absence in Reality: A Study in the Epistemology of the Blue Guitar," Kenyon Review, XXI (Autumn 1959), 548.

[37]Stevens describes this physical myth or "muddy centre" as "a huge abstraction, venerable and articulate and complete, that has no reference to us"--Letters, p. 444.

[38]Frank Doggett says the lion "with his red-colored noise" probably derives from Viollet-le-Duc's Discourses on Architecture. See his "This Invented World: Stevens' 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,'" in R. H. Pearce & J. Hillis Miller's The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore, 1965), p. 20.

[39]In Letters, p. 434, Stevens explains that "glitter-goes is a paraphrase for 'vibrancies of light'; the words 'velvetest far-away' are a paraphrase for very remote distance."

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Cf. The Man with the Blue Guitar, Sections IX, XIII, & XX.

[43]"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," pp. 17 & 15, respectively. This nothingness is the vacuum left by the withdrawal of God. Even if we reinterpret the word God to mean reality, that force which we shall never see "face to

face," but of which we are the manifestation, it remains ipso facto impossible to say anything about this life force or principle of being as such without bodying it forth in concrete particulars.

[44]See Musing the Obscure, p. 141.

[45]Towards the end of his career, Hals developed a cool palette based on blacks, whites, and intermediate greys--a palette calculated to recommend him to a poet who prizes chiaroscuro as Stevens does. Hals' dramatic skyscapes are fairly evoked by the cool colors of line 5. Hals' white, in particular, always looks chalky, as though it contained a large admixture of chalk or lead pigment.

[46]Letters, p. 438.

[47]Ibid., p. 444.

[48]In "Explanation," life is an old black dress on which the poet embroiders French flowers; in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," the dead are covered over with heterogeneous blossoms and garish images.

[49]"This Invented World," Act of the Mind, p. 22.

[50]O.P., p. 269. (This is man's only, his life-giving element, that "health of air" celebrated in The Man with the Blue Guitar--see Sections XX and VIII, respectively.) Stevens visualizes air as both friend and enemy, ultimate savior and adversary; the "giant of the weather" has to overcome this impalpable hero for as long as he can.

[51]"Parochial Theme," C.P., p. 191.

[52]The Man with the Blue Guitar, XXIX.

[53]The last tercet of I.vii, representing the thin edge between sleeping and waking, is similar to that felt by "The Latest Freed Man," C.P., p. 204.

[54]The opening lines suggest, though only tangentially, Section XXIX of The Man with the Blue Guitar. If we try to enshrine the spirit or reality within a castle or cathedral, we place them beyond reach of fresher, truer, more vital collisions of mind against matter taking place beyond ramparts or parvis.

[55]Letters, p. 434.

[56]The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 173.

[57]"The American Scholar," Selected Essays, Lectures, & Poems of R. W. Emerson, edited with an introduction by Robert E. Spiller (New York, 1963), p. 64.

[58]Letters, p. 434.

[59]The letters at large betray a mistrust of people in general. "The fact is, most people are a great nuisance, and my own disposition is not remarkably lenient. . . . Perhaps that is why my own likes are more often for things than for people: because of intolerance." (P. 107.) In the Adagia, however, we find the claim, "Poets acquire humanity." (P. 170.)

[60]Letters, p. 434.

[61]All these quotes are from "Asides on the Oboe," C.P., pp. 250-51.

[62]These are the concluding lines of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan."

[63]Musing the Obscure, p. 145.

[64]Letters, p. 434.

[65]Stevens associates bees with poetry (the honey of life), with memory (distillations of experience), and with industry. The bee can thus represent the poet, as he seems to here. The connotations of memory are best exemplified in a line from "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," IV--"A bee for the remembering of happiness."

[66]The President may remind us of the King's soliloquy in Shakespeare's Henry V, Act IV, scene i: "Can'st thou, when thou command'st the beggar's knee/Command the health of it?"

[67]In Letters, p. 404, Stevens comments, "A lion roaring in a desert and a boy whistling in the dark are alike, playing old horns: an old horn, perhaps the oldest horn." Sukenick suggests that the bee's horn may refer to the calyx of a flower. (Musing the Obscure, p. 146.)

[68]The word "catafalque" is, I believe, incorrectly used. A catafalque is a dais on which the bedraped coffins of the great lie in state--it is not really portable.

Stevens is occasionally guilty of misusing his more recherché words, and of getting certain naturalistic details wrong. For instance, in I.ii.17, myosotis is described as growing on a bush. Granted that Stevens' use of the word "bush" is often strange, forget-me-nots do not grow on bushes. (Cf. my further remarks on II.vi.)

[69]"A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London."

[70]Letters, p. 434.

[71]Ibid., p. 432. The article was Lionello Venturi's "The Idea of the Renaissance." This remark is in the same fatalistic spirit as certain of the Adagia--for instance, "In the long run the truth does not matter." (O.P., p. 180.)

[72]See particularly pp. 15 & 18 of "The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens." I admit, however, that monism seems usually to be (even in Stevens) the inescapable corollary or obverse of dualism. It is only Cunningham's emphasis that I quarrel with. In Stevens' poetry, it seems to me, the emphasis is on dualism, though of course the interdependence of opposites and their temporary synthesis (as in II.iv) creates a recurring though transient unity which could be seen as monistic.

[73]This seems to reflect Stevens' idea that an extraordinary actuality--the highly imaginative efflorescence of summer or of the tropics, for instance--is so close to imagination as to be indistinguishable from it. In The Comedian as the Letter C, II, he writes: "The fabulous and its intrinsic verse/Came like two spirits parleying."

[74]Cf. An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, VIII.17-18.

[75]Nassar explains this as "the poet's music" speaking of "this isolation and of the permanent death of multitudes"--An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 201. The meaning of lines 13 & 14 is elusive; these lines appear to have been suggested by Wordworth's "The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep" from his Ode on the Intimations of Immortality, but here there is no echo "from the fields of sleep," though one voice may speak for crowds of lonely voices.
(Cf. the last tercet of II.v.)

[76]Cf. "Somnambulisma" (C.P., p. 304):

> The generations of the bird are all
> By water washed away. They follow after,
> They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away.

[77]The tropic coloration if II.v is reminiscent of that in Sections VI and XIII of Esthétique du Mal, and of other lush, Floridian poems in Harmonium.

[78]As far as I am concerned, this tree simply represents the high peak of existence, a reading for which there is ample support in the way Stevens uses trees in other poems. See, for example, "Of Mere Being."

[79]"An Audience for Wallace Stevens," Essays in Criticism, XV (April 1965), 203. Frank Doggett in "This Invented World" also joins the ranks of those who see this stanza as full of sexual symbolism. (Act of the Mind, p. 16.)

[80]George McFadden's "Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens" is the most sustained but by no means the best article on Stevens' symbolic use of color. McFadden gets carried away by his analogy of Stevens' scheme to Newtonian optics and the colors of the spectrum. He says that Stevens uses red "as the color of the feebly real," but this is too partial a reading, though strongly supported by III.iii of Notes, for example. More often, red represents for Stevens the starkly real; as the color of blood, it is naturally associated with vitality. (See Modern Philology, LVIII [February 1961], 189.)

Eugene Nassar's treatment of Stevens' color symbolism (An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 37-41) is, I find, superior to McFadden's, less subjective and better documented. Both men agree that pink is for Stevens the color of nostalgia--see the article and page cited previously, and Nassar, p. 38.

[81]Letters, p. 435.

[82]Examples of such an identification are too numerous to cite from the very early to the very late verse. In "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle," Esthétique du Mal, and Notes, birds occasionally represent the generations of man. In such poems as "On an Old Horn," and "Somnambulisma," the identification is plainer and more sustained.

[83]Stevens describes the poem as presenting "the onomatopoeia of a summer afternoon"; the poem seems to have been inspired by remembered rather than immediate observation. Letters, pp. 435 & 438.

[84]Letters, p. 438.

[85]"Bethou is intended to be heard; it and kê-kê, which is inimical, are opposing sounds." Letters, p. 438.

[86]Ibid., p. 435.

[87]Frank Doggett compares the "Eye without lid, mind without any dream" to the collective, as opposed to the individual, mind." (Act of the Mind, p. 27.)

[88]N.A., p. 30.

[89]This, according to McFadden, is the imaginative (or unreal) end of Stevens' color spectrum, violet approaching "the pregnant darkness of night." "Probings for an Integration," p. 193.

[90]"Poetry is a Destructive Force," C.P., p. 192.

[91]Esthétique du Mal, C.P., p. 326--these are the final lines of that poem.

[92]Cunningham judges it harshly, calling it "adolescent," however--"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," p. 24.

[93]"Poet, Nature, and Society in Wallace Stevens," p. 267.

[94]Harold Bloom in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," reprinted in Marie Borroff's Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 87, contrives to reverse the symbolic values of Ozymandias and Nanzia Nunzio.

Eugene Nassar (An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 205-06) interprets this as a solipsistic and onanistic marriage of human desire with itself!

Joseph Riddel (The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 177) describes the wedding accurately as "the putting back of abstraction into change" and the freshening of the human imagination by contact with a vital "vestal" reality; unfortunately, he garbles the rest of the stanza.

[95]Sukenick (Musing the Obscure, p. 150) explains line 9--"Beyond the burning body that I bear"--as describing the essential reality beyond even naked physical appearance.

[96]Unlike the "applied enflashings" of reason, the fictive coverings woven by imagination cannot be stripped from the abstractions they enwrap. They are a "final filament," a kind of spiritual integument that cannot be torn away without destroying the organism they enfold, any more than the mesentery can be ripped from a physical organ without damaging it.

[97]The same problem is treated in terms of perception in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, I.

[98]To understand why Stevens refers to all speech as gibberish--even the most perceptive and acute--one must recognize that he regards speech as sharing a common origin with meaningless sound, with cries that concern "no one at all."

[99]O.P., p. 221.

[100]An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 197. Nassar rightly calls this poem "a masterpiece of equivocation." He explains lines 4-5 thus: "Is the poem simply burnished 'mirror' (the concentration of a cloudy day), or a fitfully flaming 'lamp' (a luminous flittering)?"

[101]Letters, p. 435.

[102]Act of the Mind, p. 25.

[103]An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XVII.15.

[104]Nassar has a different interpretation: "Metaphor, in our time, carries with it no belief; like us, it is a vagabond," he says in An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 183.

[105]O.P., p. 258. In Letters, p. 432, Stevens says, "The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus."

[106]As Sukenick points out, Part II is full of erotic metaphors--see Sections IV, VII & VIII--Musing the Obscure, p. 152.

[107]Letters, p. 435.

[108]Sukenick even interprets the word "fundament" musically--*Musing the Obscure*, p. 152. I can find no precedent for this; although the word means base or ground, it does not appear to mean "ground-bass." (It may also signify a landscape unaltered by cultivation.) But its most obvious meaning makes it seem a most unfortunate choice.

[109]Thus Sukenick interprets this part of the poem--*Musing the Obscure*, p. 153. He describes the picture presented in III.i as though it were depicted on the stained glass of a church window. It is in line with Stevens' penchant for elemental imagery for him to present light and sound as the parents of life. (Perhaps, too, there is an oblique allusion here to the voice of God saying, "Let there be Light.")

[110]Harold Bloom makes this point in his commentary on *Notes*, *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 89.

[111]*Act of the Mind*, pp. 16-17.

[112]*Letters*, pp. 444-45.

[113]"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," p. 9.

[114]Here we meet the same phenomenon we encountered in *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*, for the poet tells us of the latter that he is giving us the plainest possible vision of New Haven he can give; what he in fact offers is something out of the Arabian Nights. The notes to III.ii of *Notes* and the poem itself claim to be "except for the eye, without intrusion," but the very style prevents an unmediated transcription of what the eye saw.

[115]Riddel is the one exception: he finds himself unable to comprehend this stanza. (*The Clairvoyant Eye*, p. 180.)

[116]*Letters*, p. 438.

[117]*O.P.*, p. 162.

[118]*C.P.*, pp. 280-81. Compare also the attempt to see reality totally without imaginative mediation in "Landscape with Boat," such reality being described as "without blue, without any turquoise tint or phase,/Any azure under-side or after-color." (*C.P.*, p. 241.)

[119]*Letters*, p. 438.

[120]Cf. "Sunday Morning," III, 6-8, and Esthétique du Mal, III, 4-14.

[121]So Nassar says, "The poem is resolved in metaphor that figures both the poet describing the moment, and Christ describing paradise. Just as Christ 'saved' the world's imagination then, the poet saves it now." An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 210.

[122]Another shepherd who returned from the underworld bringing "tremendous chords" or Orphic music.

[123]Both Riddel (The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 181) and Sukenick (Musing the Obscure, p. 154) locate Catawba in South Carolina; Catawba is the wine-growing district in northern Ohio.

[124]Cybele (Rhea), wife of Cronos (Saturn) was the mother of the gods, celebrated in orgiastic rites by the Corybantes who clashed cymbals, sounded horns, and beat drums in her honor.

[125]C.P., p. 521.

[126]Some critics see Canon Aspirin as the protagonist of Section VII also--see, for instance, Frank Kermode in "The Words of the World," Encounter, XIV (April 1960), 50; Harold Bloom in his commentary on Notes in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 92; Eugene Nassar in An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 211, and Joseph Riddel in The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 181. It seems to me, however, that in Sections VII and VIII the poet is speaking directly in his own voice.

[127]It is, in fact, a typical piece of twenties' exoticism or estheticism, resembling parts of Conrad Aiken's Preludes for Memnon--for example, this:

> Two coffees in the Espanol, the last
> Bright drops of golden Barsac in a goblet,
> Fig paste and candied nuts . . .

[128]O.P., p. 158.

[129]Letters, p. 445.

[130]Ibid.

[131]An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 212. Nassar appears to me misguided, however, in suggesting that the Canon's sister is his "interior paramour"; as such, she would be much less imaginative than her brother, who plainly has transcendental yearnings she does not share. Stevens admits it is puzzling that his persona here should be a Canon--Letters, p. 445--but he obviously has an inherently religious turn of mind, as did Stevens.

[132]One can also agree with Doggett's interpretation that the first represents "the nothingness of sleep, that ultimate barrier of reality . . . where the self lives solely in its imaginings," and that the second is "the nothingness of death . . . . ultimate barrier of the imagination." Act of the Mind, p. 26.

[133]Ibid. I agree, but without finding the struggle pathetic.

[134]Esthétique du Mal, VIII, C.P., p. 320.

[135]The sleeper surrenders to what Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey calls "the mighty world of eye and ear" that we "half create"--a relic of that mighty world that we perceive by the light of day. Coleridge's Primary and Secondary Imagination are blent, as is usual in Stevens' poetry.

[136]An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 19 & 80, respectively.

[137]N.A., p. 24.

[138]As in "Anecdote of Canna," for example (C.P., p. 55).

[139]Nassar cites in support of this the image of the white pigeon in "Le Monocle," XII--An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 37.

[140]"Sunday Morning," III--C.P., p. 68.

[141]Musing the Obscure, p. 157.

[142]Nassar, An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 214.

[143]"Two or Three Ideas," O.P., pp. 210-11.

[144]"The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," N.A., p. 51.

[145]The Letters of W. B. Yeats, editor Allan Wade (New York, 1955), p. 570.

[146]*C.P.*, p. 436.

[147]The quote is from Willard Trask's *Santayana and the Sense of Beauty* (Bloomington, 1950), p. 140.

[148]*Letters*, p. 426.

[149]Stevens says the tree is a "symbol of fixity, permanence, completion"--*Letters*, p. 444.

[150]"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," 21.

[151]*O.P.*, p. 164.

[152]Cf. footnote #15. The poem is, in any case, one of Stevens' infinitely extensible poems. In a letter to Robert Pack (*Letters*, pp. 861-62), Stevens admits, "For a long time, I have thought of adding other sections to the NOTES and one in particular: *It Must Be Human*. But I think it would be wrong not to leave well enough alone." (This letter is dated December 28, 1954.)

[153]*Musing the Obscure*, pp. 159-60.

[154]*Letters*, p. 206.

[155]*Ibid.*, p. 209.

[156]*O.P.*, pp. 10-16.

[157]As Sukenick expresses it, "The hero conceived by the poet becomes, if the conception is convincing, the hero in reality. The faith conveyed by the poet, if it is conveyed accurately and is appropriate . . . is the spiritual sustenance by which the soldier lives and dies." *Musing the Obscure*, p. 160.

[158]As Nassar says, "The soldier needs the poet, needs the sustenance of things of the spirit . . . values, beliefs, joy in something . . ." *An Anatomy of Figuration*, p. 207.

[159]"The Words of the World," *Encounter*, XIV (April 1960), 50.

[160]*Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 76.

[161]"The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens," 23-25.

[162]"Reflections on Wallace Stevens" in Poetry and the Age (New York, 1953), p. 140.

[163]Letters, pp. 407-08.

[164]Ibid., p. 407.

[165]Ibid., p. 435.

[166]In this he differs from Mallarmé, who also aspired to the creation of a supreme fiction. But Mallarmé recognized that his supreme fictions were lies--"devant le Rien qui est la vérité, ces glorieux mensonges!" Though he believed in the Ideal, this Ideal was the negation of all that was real. All Mallarmé's admiration was for man as a seeker after a mystery that did not exist, yet, if it had, would have been the truth: "Mon admiration tout entière va au grand Mage inconsolable et obstiné chercheur d'un mystère qu'il ne sait pas exister et qu'il poursuivra, à jamais pour cela, du deuil de son lucide désespoir, car c'eût été la vérité . . ." (The first quotation is from Mallarmé's first letter to his friend Cazalis; the second is to be found in Mallarmé, introduced and edited by Anthony Hartley, with prose translations of the poems [Baltimore, 1965], xix & xxvii.)

[167]Letters, p. 584.

[168]Ibid., p. 753. This letter refers to the poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans."

CHAPTER VII

Esthétique du Mal

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world . . .

Wallace Stevens

Denn alle Schuld rächt sich auf Erden.

J. W. von Goethe

Wallace Stevens' Esthétique du Mal is a companion piece to his "Sunday Morning." "Sunday Morning" locates paradise firmly on this earth, and Esthétique du Mal, as well as describing the place of pain in this earthly paradise, prescribes, too, the only way in which pain may be transcended. Pain is not to be escaped nor explained. It is to be faced and endured. And the only way in which we may fortify ourselves against it, Stevens feels, is through the gaiety of language. Anyone to whom such verbal solace seems vapid or facile should study Stevens' poem to discover how difficult it is to conquer suffering through language. To treat evil as an aesthetic problem, as Stevens does, is not to underestimate it.

Esthétique du Mal is a much more difficult poem than "Sunday Morning." It is also a much longer poem, which is one reason for its comparative lack of unity. The sustained lyricism of "Sunday Morning" is gone from Esthétique du Mal.

As Robert Pack notes, its form is looser and more discursive.[1] The technique, so beloved of Stevens in his late, philosophical poems, is that of the theme-with-variations.[2] Most of the stanzas contain twenty-one lines and are divided into two parts; others, however, contain as many as twenty-four or twenty-five lines and are divided into three parts (Sts. II and XII), and yet others are cast in the form of tercets (St. III) or quatrains (St. VII). The basic meter is iambic pentameter.

While one has to concede that Esthétique du Mal is not as fine a poem as "Sunday Morning" in terms of thematic unity and intensity of imagery and diction, it is equally rewarding. It is a more knotty, less even poem than its predecessor; neither the thought nor its expression is consistently fine in Esthétique du Mal. Nevertheless, this highly intellectual poem, wrestling as it does with the most obdurate and difficult facts of human existence, does attain perceptions so profoundly true and so consummately expressed as to triumph artistically over its subject matter--human suffering. The poem proves what it affirms--that suffering, like death, is the mother of beauty.[3]

Esthétique du Mal opens with a still life characteristic of Stevens. The setting is Naples, the city most redolent of and inviting to sensual ease, were it not for the active volcano, a constant reminder of destruction, that broods above its bay. The almost silent protagonist of the poem--a figure reminiscent of the lady in "Sunday Morning"[4]--is writing letters

home, and at the same time reading paragraphs on the sublime. In the background, the volcano smolders and groans; nevertheless, it is pleasant to be sitting there. (One wishes to discount one critic's suggestion that these letters are letters of grief at bereavement.[5] The poem provides no basis for this belief other than that the man reads, between letters, a book on the sublime. Perhaps he is reading Longinus, but this, too, is an assumption unncecessary to an understanding of the opening stanza. Nor is my idea that the "flickering fulgurations" cast corners not in a mirror[6] but in a wineglass. The shape of a wineglass better suggests the casting of corners, and though this is not a man who would drown putative grief in wine, I agree with Robert Pack to some extent that, with him, pleasure comes first.[7]) Lunch in this sensualist's regime is as important as pain (l. 13):

> . . . He tried to remember the phrases: pain
> Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,
> Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.
> (Ll. 8-10.)

Do these lines refer to his reading, or to his own description of the volcano and the memories it evokes in his letters? (Certainly, they do not refer to Longinus <u>On the Sublime</u>.) It is easy to describe what has been heard and described since time immemorial (ll. 6-8). The phrases that are recalled suggest that humanity, which alone feels pain (ll. 20-21), has a threshold for feeling it: thus pain kills pain, is extinguished even as it redoubles its violence.

The volcano--together with the mountain and the rock[8]--a favorite image of Stevens', is both destructive and beautiful, life-destroying and sublime. Thus it trembles "in another either,/As the body trembles at the end of life." (Ll. 11-12.) Though its peak seems to belong to, and to be, pure air, the volcano spews out destruction on the life gathered about its lower slopes. Its lower slopes thus belong to the realm of objective, humanly destructive fact. Such upheavals as volcanic eruptions seem inevitably to attend changes in states of being. Pain is inseparable from dying, but the body ceases to feel it as life ebbs.

With deliberate bathos the quotidian intrudes upon the contemplation of the sublime. "It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human." (L. 13.) This certainly puts pain in its place. As Daniel Fuchs observes, this is "a clever juxtaposition which underscores the fact that pain is a very common [and regular] occurrence."[9] The sensuous detail provided by "There were roses in the cool cafe" (l. 14) is typical of Stevens, whose notations of pleasure are as precise, detailed, and vivid as he can make them, and much more frequent than his notations of pain.

"His book/Made sure of the most correct catastrophe" (ll. 14-15) is slightly ambiguous. It may refer to the detailed historic record of Vesuvius' eruptions (cf. ll. 8-10), or"the most correct catastrophe" may, as Fuchs affirms, refer to tragedy--the most humanized and cultivated version of

suffering, in which suffering ennobles, thus becoming significant and beautiful.[10] (Though I find this interpretation ingenious, it does not fit the expression "made sure of," and seems to disrupt the development of the thought here.) The essentially human quality of pain is insisted on in lines 16-18. "The cocks that crow us up to die" are the harbingers of disaster, also, presumably, susceptible to pain--an intrusive allusion to Christ's betrayal by Peter. (I confess I do not know what this parenthesis is doing here; it seems to me to contribute nothing, except perhaps an ironic hint that the world's destruction may come without warning, without benefit of eloquent Cassandras or humbler roosters.) "This is a part of the sublime/From which we shrink." (Ll. 19-20.) Sentience must instinctively shrink from indifference. These lines convey a shuddering sense of human loneliness at the center of an indifferent universe. We alone feel pain. Pain as a historical reality is dependent wholly on human consciousness.[11]

In the second stanza, the protagonist, again placed, somewhat ironically, in a most beautiful setting, sinks deeper into despair. This despair, it is true, is subconscious, not yet conscious (ll. 2-7). I would not go so far as to describe this verse, as Fuchs does, as "a dark night of the soul."[12] It represents a development in the protagonist's mood like that of the woman in "Sunday Morning," when she feels "the dark/ Encroachment of that old catastrophe."[13] Like her, Stevens' new protagonist finds "a kind of elegy . . . in space."[14]

The fact that the moon--Stevens' primary symbol for the imagination[15]--evades the man's mind implies that the moon in its pristine glory, stripped of all human significance, challenges and defies the imagination to grasp it, for it is something beyond man and his world, supremely representative of the alien nature of the universe. (Ll. 10-11.) A similar failure or panic of the imagination is described in Stanza IX. In the long poem The Man with the Blue Guitar, the same sublimely alien value is attributed to the moon: "It is the sun that shares our works./The moon shares nothing. It is a sea";[16] again, in the short poem "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," Stevens affirms "It is the human that is the alien,/The human that has no cousin in the moon."[17] Such a sense of alienation can temporarily beggar even Stevens' imagination, and is the ultimate poverty.

> . . . he
> That has lost the folly of the moon becomes
> The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty.
> (IX.8-10.)

"It is pain that is indifferent to the sky" expresses the obverse of the idea implicit in the preceding stanza--that the sublime is indifferent to pain. We may profitably compare this with the third verse of "Sunday Morning," where Stevens declares that if we recognize the earth as the only conceivable 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.

Pain, as well as being an affliction, is a hallucination. It warps will and distorts vision.

> It does not regard
> This freedom, this supremacy, and in
> Its own hallucination never sees
> How that which rejects it saves it in the end.
> (Ll. 19-21.)

How does that which rejects it (the sublime) save that which alone feels suffering (humanity)? Does the contemplation of our helplessness, our isolation, alleviate pain? No, but we do end in oblivion. We are finally relieved of pain by being deprived of consciousness. A drastic cure indeed! To feel pain is the price of being alive; one can transcend suffering totally only by dying, thus becoming part of the indifferent sublime.

The third stanza comprises seven triplets, a form typical of Stevens throughout his oeuvre, from the early "Peter Quince at the Clavier" to the late Notes toward a Supreme Fiction. The fine first image--"His firm stanzas hang like hives in hell"--is a favorite one in Stevens. This honey is the distilled sweetness of experience, and it is hived, or stored, in poetry. In line 16 of this stanza, Stevens says, "It seems as if the honey of summer might be enough," thus recapitulating the wistful, "It seems/As if the health of the world might be enough." (L. 15.) In a sense, Stevens reverses Samson's riddle: for Samson, out of strength (the lion) cometh forth sweetness (the honeycomb); for Stevens, out of the sweetness of poetry that is distilled from the bitterness of experience comes the strength that enables us to continue confronting that experience without flinching.[18]

The earth, the unbelieving earth (terra infidel) is now both heaven and hell. "Sunday Morning" is concerned with the earth's paradisal aspect, Esthétique du Mal with its satanic side. The second, third, and fourth tercets reject pity as a palliative for suffering, the divine pity that is at the heart of the Christian faith.

> The fault lies with an over-human god,
> . . . . . (L. 4.)
>
> . . . the reddest lord,
> Who has gone before us in experience. (Ll. 8-9.)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> A too, too human god, self-pity's kin
> And uncourageous genesis . . . (Ll. 13-14.)

This god, "Who by sympathy has made himself a man," and is not to be distinguished from man is, of course, Christ, whose birth, agony, death, and resurrection, all creations of the human heart,[19] "relieve us of woe both great and small."[20] But such relief is to be rejected, for it finds the justification, and thus the remedy, for suffering in a world beyond this one, such a world as denies the ineluctable and unique reality of this world. The stanza concludes with the assertion that pain exists, though hell does not, and that suffering may be borne even after we have ceased to seek an explanation for it. Once the reward for suffering (heaven) disappears, so does the explanation for the necessity of pain and evil (hell). The full implications of the disappearance of heaven and hell are explored in Stanza VIII.

In the fourth stanza, Stevens explores different emotional reactions to suffering. The "Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs d'après Nature"--the antithesis of Mallarmé's "l'absente de tous bouquets"--might be said to symbolize the sentimentalist's indiscriminate search for pleasure; Wells describes it as a "symbol of the indiscriminate mind caught in the meshes of the emotional life."[21] Such heedless hedonism--and of course Yvor Winters[22] and Lionel Abel[23] are wrong in seeing Stevens as a mere hedonist--dissipates the energy necessary to confront "the genius of misfortune" who "is not a sentimentalist" (ll. 17-18). The dissipations of sentiment are contrasted with the passionate artistic economy and intensity poured into the music of Bach, for instance. (Wells believes that "B" may equally stand for Beethoven and Brahms; I think not.[24]) Bach's technique of variations on the same, usually simple basic motifs which he builds up into harmonies of intense and subtle complexity is a model for Stevens' own technique. Bach thus achieves a singleness and economy of effect that has never been rivaled in music. His music has, as Stevens notes, a transparence and a finality that make it the aural equivalent of crystal: a perfect crystal focuses within itself all rays of light and resolves all colors into what Shelley called "the white radiance of Eternity."[25] Only the artist who can take evil as one of his notes and resolve it into harmony with the rest has finally vanquished suffering.[26]

If one believes in God, life is a set of variations on a grand, unifying theme. If one believes only in man, life may still be a set of variations on a grand, unifying theme, but this theme is only to be arrived at by the austere yet joyous wedding of the human imagination with brute fact. The result will be a fiction, in which one will believe only as one believes in a fiction. "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."[27] Thus life itself becomes a work of art.

The "Spaniard of the rose" (l. 10) was suggested to Stevens by Senor Pedro Dot, a hybridizer of roses;[28] he is not Gonzaga, as Wells suggests.[29] The rose itself, as Pack proposes, is a symbol of infinite reality ever to be freshly conceived. The object is to see the rose, not one's sorrow in the rose, which is mutability.[30] The rose is transient; it has thorns; it is the color of blood. Such beauty is not innocuous, but it is supreme. It does not cloy, and is to be preferred above the beauty of many other flowers.

In lines 10-17, Stevens proclaims once again the necessary consummation of a marriage between imagination and reality. He who indulges in aesthetic dalliance, the collector of "all sorts of flowers," will muff (miss his chance at) the mistress by not looking higher than her maids, and thus will waste himself in "barefoot philandering." The mistress is, of course, naked reality--compare "the

softest woman" of Stanza X--and the most intense passion life has to offer is a true mating of the mind with reality. The same idea is expressed in Stevens' "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," where the "interior paramour" is the imagination, and the external paramour, reality: "This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous."[31]

It has been rightly said that Stevens treats evil as an esthetic, not as an ethical, problem.[32] However, there is a sense in which esthetics and ethics overlap, or coalesce. Furthermore, there are moments in the poem when Stevens recognizes the internal quality of evil, its seat in human consciousness. This is one of them--

> . . . that evil in the self, from which
> In desperate hallow, rugged gesture, fault
> Falls out on everything . . . (Ll. 18-20.)

All animals suffer pain, but man is the only animal, it seems, with a sense of evil.[33] "The genius of misfortune" inhabits the human mind; in desperation, he both hallows and condemns, thus corrupting the mind in which we live,[34] and the body through which we live.[35] Even when one has dispensed with God and Satan, one is constrained to feel that sin is that which harms, virtue that which fosters joy. This, too, is part of the despairing effort to explain and thereby to domesticate or tame suffering. The assignments of value, while they are indispensable to the regulation of human conduct, are "false engagements of the mind" in that they receive no sanction from reality. The last eight lines of

this verse contain an unpleasant truth expressed in highly compressed and cryptic language, which suggests, to me at any rate, the fatal fissure, the unbridgeable and bottomless abyss that separates man from his source of being. He who looks into this abyss, as Nietzsche observes, finds it staring back at him with a blank, closed, pitiless gaze much more unbearable than malice. For the abyss denies any significance to human life. Yet Stevens finds the impersonality of the universe liberating.[36]

In place of divine pity, Stevens proposes as a defense against suffering human brotherhood and sympathy.[37] This is the meaning of the first lines of the fifth stanza: let us sympathize with one another, but let us not invent apotheoses of pity.

> . . . Within what we permit,
> Within the actual, the warm, the near,
> So great a unity, that it is bliss,
> Ties us to those we love. (Ll. 3-6.)

Bliss, as Stevens defines it, is a certain warm, limited certainty that binds together the human community. One must concede, however, that his expression of human brotherhood is marred by preciosity; such images as "regalia" stick in the reader's throat as fast as the "brother" sticks in the mother's. The verse is comparable to the seventh stanza of "Sunday Morning" in its failure to harmonize with those stanzas that immediately precede and follow it. Even within this section there are somewhat jarring changes of key, as in the cleavage of tone between the lines cited above and the

logarithmic permutations of "in-bar" and "ex-bar."[38] To "willingly forfeit the ai-ai/Of parades in the obscurer selvages" is charming, but it is perhaps a little too conscientiously comic to fit such a serious context. (One wonders, too, why Stevens divides the stanza between lines 12 and 13.) The passage beginning "Be near to me, come closer, touch my hand" sounds curiously strained; this is the kind of poetic exhortation to lovemaking that Conrad Aiken does more convincingly and movingly than Stevens.[39] The circumlocutory and evasive reference to sexual lovemaking as "the services/Of central sense" remains one of nothing so much as a telephone exchange. Stevens' tone in describing the value of human love is uncertain. Why should palpable love glances be described as "nebulous" when they are about to be contrasted with truly nebulous things--"clouds, benevolences, distant heads"? The poet wishes to have it both ways: looks dignified as the "regalia" of "the being's deepest darling," more precious than any heavenly guerdon, are and are not "minutiae." It is not the thought one quarrels with, but the expression of it. It is a relief to turn from a subject whose expression is always tinged with embarrassment and awkwardness in Stevens' poetry to a mode more characteristic of and more congenial to him.

Stanza VI is a disquisition on mutability.[40] The cycle of the seasons is described in startling, somewhat apocalyptic imagery.[41] The sun, prime symbol of reality in

Stevens' poetry,[42] is, characteristically, presented as a comedian "in clownish yellow," but he is a delusive comedian. His manner is that of the "good clown" in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" who "Came, bowing and voluble, upon the deck,"[43] beaming forth the reassuring light of day. But day fails and is succeeded by night, and this recurrent alternation, Stevens suggests, is not perfectly regular, nor guaranteed forever to recur. The sun's "rejected years" imply that time, for this world at least, is perhaps running out, for space is sown thick with burned-out stars (ll. 7-8). The image of the predatory bird pecking continually at the sun as though it were a ripe yellow fruit is an image of insidious destruction.[44] The account of the origin of this destructive force is an ironic comment on the religious fable explaining the origin of evil in Lucifer's rebellion. For Stevens' universe, strangely, is Manichean. This bird "rose from an imperfection of its own"; it did not arise out of defiance to or defection from creative forces. This means that the creative and the destructive impulses in the universe--only to be labeled "good" and "evil" in human terms--are equally potent and inseparable. The appetite of the predatory bird is insatiable and, even when corrected, when it has the earth's plenty to batten on, it enjoys a "serene/Indulgence out of all celestial sight." (Ll. 16-17.) In this regard, Stevens' Weltanschauung is dualistic, looking back to Pascal, disagreeing with Transcendental optimistic monism.

The bird which "in the brightest landscape downwardly revolves" reminds us of the numerous birds in Stevens' poetry that, like the pigeons in the last stanza of "Sunday Morning" "make/Ambiguous undulations as they sink,/Downward to darkness on extended wings." The second part of this stanza is even more difficult to elucidate than the first. Is the bird of line eighteen the same predator described in lines 8-11? It would seem so. It is migratory, forever seeking "fresh fields and pastures new," yet disdaining redness and ripeness for "perfections cast away."[45] "The yellow grassman's mind " (l. 24) is the sun's. The bird enjoys the run of illimitable prairies.

The image of the rose that opens the seventh stanza is carried over from the fourth, and is applied to, of all things, a soldier's wounds. "An image of beauty is derived from an image of mal."[46] The soldier is, of course, an abstract personification of all the soldiers who have ever fallen in battle--an abstract personification of the same order as Stevens' heroes and giants. The "mountain in which no ease is ever found"--perhaps an oblique reference to Dante's Purgatorial Mount--is imbued with the contradictory qualities of objectivity and transcendence which Stevens always assigns to the image of mountain, volcano, or rock.[47] This transcendence needs to be strictly qualified, however. It is not, as Fuchs affirms, a question of the soldier's "transcending death by facing it with courage."[48] The transcendence here is the passing beyond human

existence--the only ultimate kind of transcendence to be found in Stevens. Death is a fact, a fact which transcends human comprehension.

It is at first not clear what Stevens means by "indifference to deeper death" (l. 6), but I believe he is here mocking the idea of eternal damnation (just as he mocks the idea of personal immortality). It is the same affirmation made by Dylan Thomas in concluding his "Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London": "After the first death, there is no other." Further light is shed on Stevens' meaning by a passage from another poem of his:

> . . . Stanzas of final peace
> Lie in the heart's residuum . . . Amen.
> But would it be amen, in choirs, if once
> In total war we died and after death
> Returned, unable to die again, fated
> To endure thereafter every mortal wound,
> Beyond a second death, as evil's end?
>
> It is only that we are able to die, to escape
> The wounds. . . .[49]

To be sure, this is inferior as poetry and involved as belief, but it seems to make clear that by the "second death" Stevens means to deny the Last Judgment. (Stanza VII of Esthétique du Mal shows that evil is relative and conditional to human existence, not to the existence of the universe.) Yet Stevens contrives to invest his soldier with deathlessness, for non-existence is not death in the sense that we usually mean it. It is a suspension of the state of being--an eternal suspension, if you like, but a kind of immortality after all.

I find these quatrains extremely moving, for though Stevens uses traditional imagery,[50] he uses it in such a way as to forge new meanings. I should like here to dispose of J. V. Cunningham's objection that Stevens' poetry is parasitic on what it rejects.[51] Having once noted and conceded this, why should we pause in reproof? Anyone who propounds a new religion has first to define it using the counters of the old faith. We all express ourselves in terms of what we reject. This is inevitable.

The spell Stevens weaves over his dead soldier in the last two quatrains is woven with consummate artistry but without one iota of factitious belief or sentiment. Lines 13-16 recall these lines from "Sunday Morning":

> They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
> Of men that perish and of summer morn.
> And whence they came and whither they shall go
> The dew upon their feet shall manifest.[52]

But the most profoundly stirring and consoling lines are the concluding ones of this stanza of Esthétique du Mal:

> . . . his wound is good because life was.
> No part of him was ever part of death.
> A woman smoothes her forehead with her hand
> And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that stroke.
> (Ll. 17-20.)

If we are puzzled by the assertion that his wound was good because life was, we may turn to a brief and unsentimental elegy that Stevens wrote called "Flyer's Fall":

> This man escaped the dirty fates,
> Knowing that he died nobly, as he died.
>
> Darkness, nothingness of human after-death
> Receive and keep him in the deepnesses of space--

> Profundum, physical thunder, dimension in which
> We believe without belief, beyond belief.[53]

This may be compared with the feeling that inspired Laurence Binyon's elegy in Poems for the Fallen--"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old"--but it is much simpler, owes little to windy rhetoric, and is withal no less moving. "No part of him was ever part of death" is surely one of the most magnificent, true, and consolatory lines that has ever been written. It yields what Stevens elsewhere calls "The brilliant mercy of a sure repose."[54] This we may believe and take comfort in. The pain of death is not with the dead but with those who remember and yearn for them. The skillful juxtaposition of the woman smoothing her brow and of the soldier lying calm beneath that stroke suggests the necessary exorcism by the living of the grief that afflicts them, not the dead.

In the eighth canto, Stevens begins his long meditation on the cost to the human imagination of the denial of evil. "The death of Satan was a tragedy/For the imagination." When one contemplates the fact of human suffering, the rejection of Satan is even more of a privation, perhaps, than the rejection of God, over which Stevens expresses comparatively less nostalgia in the third stanza.[55] In Stevens' poem, the devil ironically inhabits a tenement[56]--not a bottom or abyss. Stevens thus shows that Satan truly belongs in God's territory and is God's twin, born at the same time and to serve the same human need. The tenement also suggests the relegation of both deity and devil to the attic of the human mind, whence they are both to be simultaneously and ignominiously evicted.

The "capital negation" that destroys Satan is, of course, the denial of God, in whose fall the devil is necessarily implied.[57] This negation is eccentric because it is not the dramatic conflict between good and evil principles envisaged by theology: Satan is not struck down by Jehovah's wrath--he is merely denied by man. Lines 10-13 recall the dismissal of the classic deities and otherworldly havens in the fourth stanza of "Sunday Morning."[58] "The phantoms flee before the spectacle of being."[59] But Stevens does not minimize the emptiness that the fleeing phantoms leave behind them--

> How cold the vacancy
> When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
> First sees reality. (Ll. 14-16.)

The negative movement of the dialectic must be succeeded by a positive one. We must oppose some belief to this sweeping negation and fill this aching void with some conviction. Negation is merely empty and tragic;[60] reality has to be transfigured and redeemed by the imagination, though the imagination must never permit itself to forget that it is embellishing reality. This is what Stevens means by

> . . . the yes of the realist spoken because he must
> Say yes, spoken because under every no
> Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.
> (Ll. 20-22.)

This passion for significance, this "rage for order" can never be broken. The future depends upon the strength, fidelity to fact, and imaginative power with which the human mind can meet the challenge flung down by naked reality.

> After the final no there comes a yes
> And on that yes the future world depends.
> No was the night. Yes is this present sun.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.[61]

The next stanza needs to be compared with the second, where the moon, representing the power of the imagination, first escapes the persona's mind. The imperfections of reality dwelt upon in Stanza VI are here supplemented by a temporary failure, or panic, of our best defense against reality--the imagination. For, once we realize that the imagination and its productions receive no support, no sanction from reality, we are liable to become disenchanted with it and with all the old fictions. The image of the moon is a genial, generous one (like the sun in Stanza VI); he is a jolly, Arabian Nights sensualist, but his lavish gifts become mere "lustred nothingness" when we see him as a purveyor of promiscuous images that have no foundation in reality. He holds open to us again a silvered version of the "Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs," cloying in its "big, unspecial facticity."[62] The images of religion are on the dump. It is the same moment that Stevens describes in "The Man on the Dump":

> That's the moment when the moon creeps up
> To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
> One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
> Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
> (All its images are in the dump) and you see
> As a man (not like the image of a man),
> You see the moon rise in the empty sky.[63]

This is the moment when we feel betrayed by the old fictions and profoundly disillusioned with the imagination itself. But we

cannot dispense with the imagination--we can only jettison the old fictions, throw them on the rubbish heap. To be without the imagination itself is to be truly destitute (ll. 8-10).

Lines 11-15 anticipate the concluding lines of Esthétique du Mal. Man's senses have their own subtle thrift or economy, but they cannot be subjugated to the tyranny of one authorized version of reality. "The eye's plain version is a thing apart,/The vulgate of experience."[64] Yes, but we cannot live in face of this surd of vision. To attempt to do so is to deprive ourselves of the multiplicty of meanings that constitutes our paradise. (See Stanza XV.) The sky must not be "divested of its fountains"; the attempt to discover significance in human life, the joy in feeling and in feeling so many different things, must not be dried up at its source. Recognizing and simultaneously rejecting Eliot's Waste Land, loud with its "indifferent crickets" sounding throughout our "indifferent crises," Stevens adjures us to be our own Greek Chorus, crying aloud to the indifferent heavens the tragedy and the ecstasy of life.

Of all the poets who have studied the nostalgias only to reject them, Stevens is, I think, the most regretfully ruthless. As anyone who reads "Sunday Morning" immediately recognizes, the truths propounded by Christianity seem to Stevens profoundly attractive[65] at the same time that they are found false, stale, and enervating. Conventional religious fictions are too far from the truth, too dilute products of

the human imagination. Stevens seeks solace and salvation in a return to nature in her grossest and most primitive aspect (ll. 18-19). She is both fierce and fecund, both a hard and a soft mistress--"the softest/Woman . . . and not the mauve/ Maman" (ll. 3-5).[66] The mauve Maman may be a reference to the ethereal madonna in Picasso's painting Maternité, of his Blue Period. In her exquisite fragility and tenderness, this woman is the antithesis of the savage creature Stevens hails as our fierce mother.[67] Stevens dismisses all "other mothers," the fantastic chimerae of religion and mythology; they are relegated, together with Jehovah and Satan, to the dump.

> . . . His anima liked its animal
> And liked it unsubjugated, so that home
> Was a return to birth, a being born
> Again in the savagest severity,
> Desiring fiercely, the child of a mother fierce
> In his body, fiercer in his mind, merciless
> To accomplish the truth in his intelligence.
> (Ll. 5-11.)

Once again, Stevens is describing the necessary intercourse of the imagination with reality. The starving imagination is sustained by nature's plenty and, returning to its source, is born again, experiencing a true renewal. The image of intercourse is fused with one of birth. By beginning with reality, the imagination avoids "the false engagements of the mind," disentangles itself from the "sleek ensolacings" of religion, proving its fidelity to fact. For the first time we become wholly human and know ourselves. (V.24.)

And now Stevens' protagonist faces the ultimate nostalgia--the longing to understand. But reality "explains"

that pain is not to be understood because it is innocent of meaning, as life itself is (ll. 20-24). And this, if we can accept it, is a curious kind of consolation and assuagement. For if pain is intrinsically human, it is also impersonal, however obdurately we persist in regarding misfortune as a personal visitation, or judgment, upon us. Of course, it is only in Stevens' "third world"--see Stanza XII, l. 19ff--a world that is virtually uninhabitable, that pain can be regarded as impersonal.

The longing to understand evil--the feeling that if we could only comprehend it, its causes and effects, we should be able to control and to endure it--is intensely human. And it dies extremely hard. This endeavor to control agonized feeling by submitting it to rational investigation is responsible for much of what we consider "good," but also for not a little of what we call "evil." Research into evil is good insofar as it ekes out the deficiencies of the human heart. If we do not instinctively <u>feel</u> Christ's Golden Rule or Kant's categorical imperative, it is necessary that we should reach them by the longer, more devious road of mental reflection. But the attempt to explain evil in the guise of sin often inspires guilt, a negative emotion that is also a failure of feeling, one which instead of promoting human love seems often to undermine it. Religions, in particular, have thrived on the inculcation of a mechanical, unreasoning, and absolute sense of guilt. Thus it is that whenever a catastrophe occurs, we try to explain it by reference to our sins, whether of commission or omission.

As Stevens says, "The politics of emotion must appear/To be an intellectual structure." (XIV.6-7.) Every last blow of fate must be accounted for.[68] We could benefit from the elimination of artificial and gratuitous guilt.

Stevens persists in calling evil "innocent." To translate that much misunderstood word into human terms and into human values may lead us to the conclusion that evil as we experience it is indeed dependent on the kind of "innocence" that fails to locate evil "in the self," in the tragic precariousness of human consciousness--a consciousness so often bent on easing, enlarging, or preserving itself at the expense of others. The kind of innocence that implies lack of self-knowledge and of human interrelatedness is arrogant and blind, and in proportion to its arrogance and blindness, it is malevolent. Thus we have the paradox of what one writer, describing the diseased psyche of the Third Reich, has called "the innocent malevolence of the Nordic mind."[69]

In this world, we cannot ignore or suspend the ineluctable laws of cause and effect which seem to operate as inexorably in the realm of ethics as they do in the realm of physics. I have indulged in this long digression in the hope of showing that we cannot give up the attempt to understand and to control evil. These stanzas to the contrary, the best defense against evil in our world and in ourselves lies in rigorous self-knowledge. The human mind and heart must diagnose and correct their own flaws. If this has been one of the most

morally abysmal of centuries, at least it has been one dedicated to exploring and reclaiming the abyss. Stevens himself elsewhere endorses this: "If the mind is the most terrible force in the world, it is also the only force that defends us against terror. Or, the mind is the most terrible force in the world principally in this, that it is the only force that can defend us against itself. The modern world is based on this pensée."[70]

It is with intense pleasure that I turn to a consideration of what I think is the finest stanza of Esthétique du Mal: "Life is a bitter aspic. We are not/At the center of a diamond." (Ll. 1-2.) The appropriateness of comparing life to an aspic, and the felicity of contrasting this with a diamond, is something that we instantly respond to and sense as right, despite the startling quality of the image. Whereas a diamond is flawless, inorganic, and crystalline, life is a flawed, opaque, and heterogeneous jelly, the dubious ingredients of which are difficult to assimilate, and predominantly bitter. The image perfectly evokes life's slipperiness, what Emerson once described as "the most unhandsome part of our condition": it is this "evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest . . ."[71]

> . . . At dawn,
> The paratroopers fall, and as they fall
> They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves
> Of people, as big bell-billows from its bell
> Bell-bellow in the village steeple. Violets,
> Great tufts, spring up from buried houses
> Of poor, dishonest people, for whom the steeple,
> Long since, rang out farewell, farewell, farewell.
> (Ll. 2-8.)

Once again, Stevens evokes poetry out of pain, beauty out of ugliness. The experiences described are experiences of disaster: a tableau of destruction such as the paratroopers of St. Vith and Arnhem must have presented; a shipwreck; a depopulated and buried village. It is important to realize that Stevens is not here painting prettified pictures of ugly actualities, such as would falsify the reality--this he does in his seeming parody of these lines (ll. 13-18). But in the beautiful passage cited, with the stirring movement, sound, and color of its imagery and the sonorous tocsin of its internal rhyme, reality has undergone a transfiguration. The bodies of the paratroopers harrow the ground; if not killed in their fall, they themselves will mow it with machine-gun fire; the vessel sinks loud in its distress; the dead villagers were "poor, dishonest people"--and over them all the bells ring out farewell.[72] Stevens has earned the right to pronounce what at first might seem a somewhat feeble credo: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur,/The gaiety of language is our seigneur." (Ll. 10-11.) This is no idle pronouncement. Language is a potent weapon against pain. "Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language,"[73] but poetry is much more than that--"After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."[74]

"A man of bitter appetite," the realist, he who is in the throes of tasting the full bitterness of life's "aspic," will assuredly disdain the "well-made scenes" that Stevens himself now holds up to ridicule. Without adopting

the outworn rhetoric that he deliberately and mockingly uses in such poems as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "To the One of Fictive Music," Stevens appears to provide here a deliberately parodic recapitulation of his previous fine passage, using his precious style--fussy diction and sugar-icing imagery.[75] He does this to show how only impassioned poetry that is true to its subject can overwhelm the realist's derision of rose-colored "spectacles." Life itself presents few rosy scenes, and the poet must not hide behind smoked lenses if he is to describe any experience in such a way as to transcend the suffering in it. "Gaiety in poetry is a precious characteristic but it should be a characteristic of diction."[76] This caveat, that the feeling must be true to fact if the expression of it is to be moving, is included in Stevens' larger insistence that "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality."[77] Stevens sees the poet as making "silk dresses out of worms,"[78] but he continually proclaims that he must begin with the humble yet proud knowledge of worms; if he does not, he will never be a weaver of silk.

Alas that the last four lines of Stanza XI deteriorate once more into mere preciosity (this time unintentional, one feels).[79] Preciosity is the besetting sin of Stevens' poetry. The tongue caresses metaphors with a voluptuous yet fastidious appetite, distinguishing them from the essentially bitter savor of the experiences they describe, "Like hunger that feeds on its own hungriness." This last line reminds us of the former

"Pain killing pain on/The very point of pain," and "in which/We believe without belief, beyond belief."[80] This kind of ploce, so much more habitual in T. S. Eliot than in Stevens--it usually carries some point--is nevertheless, a kind of logic-chopping that is essentially unpoetic and is often an excuse for concentrated thought or feeling. As one critic demonstrates, the refuge in mysticism thus secured is contagious and daunting. Fuchs's gloss on the concluding line of this stanza is that this is part of "the cryptic calculus of evil."[81] (A beautiful way to save critical steps!) I believe Stevens means by this line that the insatiable hunger for beauty and surcease of pain causes us to create beauty out of suffering and ugliness, all the time recognizing that the beauty inheres not at all in the painful experiences we describe but in our description of them. Thus, I suppose, poetry exacerbates by sharpening our hunger for the unattainable.

In the difficult twelfth canto, Stevens "disposes the world" into three categories. The peopled world is the world of the quotidian, of everyday reality, of others and the knowledge of others. The unpeopled world is the individual mind, the imagination which knows only itself directly. Since we can know others only through our own perceptions, our knowledge of other things and people is limited, colored, and determined by the peculiar quality and range of our own vision.

Is it, Stevens asks, that we recognize ourselves in others, in which case they have no secret from us? Or is it

that we recognize others within ourselves, in which case we have no secret from them? In either case, imagination has mingled with reality to such a degree that we are no longer able to tell where one leaves off and the other begins. Which version, the real or the imaginary, is more desperate on those occasions when it is imperative to know the truth? The real and the imaginary interpenetrate, become interdependent and inseparable. "This knowledge . . . destroys both worlds" (l. 12). The final encounter with the supreme indifference and impersonality of the universe removes us from the world we live in. This is to be truly alone, to cease to know oneself or anything else. This is the "third world" (l. 15), essential, unadulterated reality, "The rock that cannot be broken,"[82] a "land beyond the mind."[83] Here, whatever is is true. The pain of pain is annihilated through its total acceptance (l. 19), the problem being that we cannot breathe the lifeless air of this sphere nor survive in such a stony landscape. "The heart that is emptied is, naturally, an empty heart, and the rocks . . . cannot, by an exercise of ingenuity, be anything but rocklike."[84] To adapt to such a climate is to become something less than human, and to become a permanent feature of this landscape, one must die.

In the thirteenth stanza, Stevens meditates upon the nature of retribution, tragedy, and fatality. He is little concerned with the moral law whereby the son's life may become a punishment for the father's. What concerns him much more is the total tragedy of human fate--"the unalterable

necessity/Of being this unalterable animal." (Ll. 7-8.) It is something of a surprise to find in Stevens such fatalism as he expresses here, such a sense of the exigence and the inexorability of human fate. Like Goethe, he believes that we live in a closed moral system, that all joy and all suffering are vindicated and avenged, if at all, here on earth:

> Ihr führt ins Leben uns hinein,
> Ihr lasst den Armen schuldig werden,
> Dann überlasst ihr ihn der Pein;
> Denn alle Schuld rächt sich auf Erden.[85]

This I find impossible to accept, and I wonder whether Goethe himself could have written such lines had he lived in the twentieth century. How, for example, can the deaths of six million Jews be atoned for, avenged, or vindicated? We should have to believe, with Emerson, that the pain of the sinner is as excruciating as the sufferings of his victims.[86] Who can believe that the misery of being Hitler or Eichmann is equivalent to the agony of six million atrocious deaths or the mangled lives of countless millions more? If the executioner could himself feel the pain of his victim he could neither torture nor kill. (This applies equally to the infliction of mental or physical suffering.) Yet while we are acting out the necessary drama, Stevens would have us all equally salute our fate, however evil, as our "happiest enemy" (l. 12). The recognition of the impartial and unalterable nature of human destiny is the first step towards withstanding it. In "Martial Cadenza," an indifferent star shines over the German camps.

> What had this star to do with the world it lit,
> With the blank skies over England, over France
> And above the German camps? It looked apart.[87]

Coldest of comfort, this.

One feels that this stanza shirks contemplating the obvious and gross injustices tolerated by fate. When we find our protagonist again, sprawled out in the Mediterranean sunshine, the center of a "zone of blue and orange/ Versicolorings,"[88] we are filled with dismay at his anticlimactic intrusion. What is this sensual aesthete doing here? One wishes Stevens would wheel him away. There is a severe drop in intensity at the caesura (l. 12). The persona, presumably, is still contemplating Vesuvius; watching the "fire-feinting" Bay of Naples, he discovers the assassin within himself, in the lava-like flow of destruction within his own blood. He adopts a stance of helpess passivity. But the distinction between active vice and passive endurance needs to be drawn, for surely the poet is not condoning "the politest helplessness" in the face of human malice? "Evil in evil is/ Comparative" (ll. 20-21) means, of course, that evil is relative, but this, too, begs the question of how to cope with evil.

As one critic has remarked, the following stanza seems to depart from the theme-and-variations technique followed thus far,[89] but this is an illusion. Some readers may be pulled up short by the insertion of Victor Serge's prosaic indictment of Konstantinov (ll. 1-4).[90] But the point this quotation carries

is germane to Stevens' theme, and this stanza constitutes a bridge passage to the next. Calvin (l. 11), no less than Konstantinov--the religious, no less than the secular theorist--is condemned as a "logical lunatic." Logic carried to an extreme is lunacy. Religionists, like revolutionists, deny the multiplicity of meanings of which human life is susceptible.[91] Both "would have all the people/Live, work, suffer and die" for one idea "in a world of ideas." (Ll. 19-22.) Both the adherents of "pie in the sky" and those of "pie on earth" try to force the complex and anomalous "politics of emotion" (l. 6) into a restrictive and inflexible "intellectual structure" (l. 7).[92]

The stanza is a further critique by Stevens of the attempt to intellectualize, to rationalize emotion. Stevens believes that agony, like joy, is to a large extent fortuitous. One's painful lapses, like "one's grand flights . . . occur as they occur."[93] The Lake of Geneva, so grey and temperate when compared with the brilliant Bay of Naples, is, perhaps because of this, the ideal climate for logical lunatics. "Lakes are more reasonable than oceans" (l. 13) because they remind us less of our finitude. But if we cannot measure our creeds against the "salt, estranging sea" or against the violence of a volcano, let us at least not forget the lake, as logical lunatics do (l. 18).[94] It is interesting to note that Geneva has been the breeding ground for many narrow and extreme faiths. It was in Geneva in 1541 that Calvin established his

rigid theocracy. After the Russian Revolution, the city became a hotbed of intrigue for dissident Russian radicals and exiled anarchists.[95]

Stevens' contempt for the authorized final versions of existence espoused by Marxism and the schismatic sects it has spawned is cogently expressed in his little poem, "Idiom of the Hero":

> I heard two workers say, "This chaos
> Will soon be ended."
>
> This chaos will not be ended,
> The red and the blue house blended,
>
> Not ended, never and never ended,
> The weak man mended,
>
> The man that is poor at night
> Attended
>
> Like the man that is rich and right.
> The great men will not be blended . . .
>
> I am the poorest of all.
> I know that I cannot be mended,
>
> Out of the clouds, pomp of the air
> By which at least I am befriended.[96]

The "red and the blue house" are the houses of the masses and of the aristocracy, as well as of reality and the imagination. They can never be conjoined in one neat, semi-detached villa. The poor man can never be attended by the panoply of the rich, whose might, by the consensus of this world, constitutes right. Nor can the truly great be brought down to the level of the mass. Stevens is an aristocrat. He does not believe in personal equality, equality of endowment, though to be sure we are all equally infinitesimal when pitted against fate. "I

know that I cannot be mended" reminds us of "the unalterable necessity/Of being this unalterable animal."

Again in this stanza, Stevens finds in the clouds, the multifarious, ever-changing cloud-continents of the sky the sanction for his constant search for new meanings. As a cloud may assume the shape of camel, weasel, or whale--depending on its form, who is looking at it and when--so do men assume many different roles and their lives take on many widely different meanings.[97] If we must be aware of the sea, and of the lake, we should always "be aware of the clouds,/ Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire" (ll. 22-23), mocking them in their protean transformations.[98]

"The greatest poverty is not to live/In a physical world." (Ll. 1-2.) In the opening lines of the last stanza, Stevens again affirms that this world, however flawed, is nevertheless the richest, the most rewarding, the only world in which to live. "There is nothing to be envied like life on earth."[99] "For realist what is is what should be."[100] To invest all one's hope in another life, in an otherwordly paradise, is to yield to despair. (Ll. 2-3.) Lines 4-7 contain a parody of the traditional conception of the after-life that is reminiscent of the sixth stanza of "Sunday Morning"--"Alas that they should wear our colors there . . ." In his skillful transmutation of paradises, our roles are reversed with those of the immortals, for Stevens pictures "the non-physical people" envying our palpable life, our green world, and the major music of our emotions. Of these they enjoy only pallid,

factitious facsimiles. Stevens asserts that "humanity has not conceived of a race/Completely physical in a physical world." (Ll. 7-9.) Scientists and philosophers have; poets, by and large, until recently have not. By the "metaphysicals" (l. 10) Stevens does not mean the bodiless inhabitants of the traditional religious heaven. We are the metaphysicals, for the word means "of the nature or being of essential reality." We are the children of essential reality, who lie sprawling in the full summer of our sensuous existence, having no further need of "empty heaven and its hymns."[101] "This is the thesis scrivened in delight,/The reverberating psalm, the right chorale."[102]

"Esthétique du Mal," one critic avers, "dissolves itself in a coda of uncertainty. It ends in a pluralistic dissonance, the afterthought of him who denies the absolute."[103] As Stevens reviews the evidence of the senses--sight (ll. 15-16), speech (ll. 17-18), hearing (l. 19), and feeling (l. 20)--and finds his final benison in them and in them alone, since these constitute all our wealth, he rounds out his poem with a "right chorale" that is not, I think, "a pluralistic dissonance" but an ultimate harmony, such as he finds in the music of Bach. In composing yet another hymn to this earth, Stevens has not solved the enigma of evil, for be believes suffering, like joy, to be its own reason for being--no more to be explained or justified than life itself. Stevens neither minimizes nor excludes pain from his earthly paradise but seeks to resolve it, together with all the other multifarious and

multivalent notes of experience, into one ultimate harmony. The notes remain separate and contradictory, but the final chord is "one vast, subjugating final tone."[104]

> Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
> Like harmony in music; there is a dark
> Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
> Discordant elements, makes them cling together
> In one society.[105]

The preceding analysis has shown, I think, how uneven a poem Esthétique du Mal is, both formally and contentually. It is neither so whole nor so wholehearted as "Sunday Morning."[106] Nevertheless, it does what Stevens set out to do--it provides an esthetic of evil, a perspective from which to view suffering with calm acceptance as part of the sublime. But this perspective is so remote, the air of Stevens' mountain look-out is so rarefied, and his vantage point projects so far beyond the sphere of human strife and suffering that the poem offers little sustenance or comfort to us here below.

Perhaps we should not come to this poem looking for "help for pain." Still, I imagine there will be few readers of Esthétique du Mal who do not feel that they have been sent empty away from the purely verbal delights of the banquet Stevens once again spreads before them.[107] Stevens himself has diagnosed his greatest deficiency as a poet: "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble."[108] As Wylie Sypher notes, Stevens shows in Esthétique du Mal a momentary willingness to turn from the composition of cosmic landscapes to the contemplation of the human situation.[109] Whenever Stevens

does so, one feels an access of interest in the poem, which is usually matched by an increased intensity and momentum in the passion of Stevens' diction and rhythm. The most satisfying poetry in Esthétique du Mal is contained in Stanzas III; IV, ll. 17-21; VII; VIII; XI; XIV, and XV. But there is at all times an apparent awkwardness in expressing the theme of shared suffering, of human solidarity in the face of suffering. When speaking of the brotherhood of man, Stevens' voice tends to rise to a boisterous shout (Stanza VII, "Sunday Morning") or sink to an embarrassed whisper (Stanzas V, ll. 19-25, and XIII, ll. 21-25).[110]

Once again, Stevens has sounded Notes toward a Supreme Fiction. His notes fulfill his requirements: they are abstract; they change; they give intense pleasure. But we still have no whole fiction to live by. Never did I think to find myself agreeing with such a recalcitrant enemy of modern poetry as Yvor Winters, but I do sympathize with his dismay at "a doctrine which eliminates the possibility of the rational understanding of experience and of a moral judgment deriving therefrom."[111] So firmly has Stevens convinced me that this earth, despite all its woe, is the only paradise, that I am anxious to defend it, and to protect the politics of action, thought, and emotion from the deadly encroachment of Stevens' "third world."

Esthétique du Mal creates beauty out of suffering--it demonstrates its thesis in the very articulation of it. It proclaims its faith in the redemptive power of poetry, and

declares what a mighty fortress is our language. But the poem tends to overlook that mightier defense against "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks/That flesh is heir to"[112]--the fortress of human love.

Footnotes

[1]Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought (New Brunswick, 1958), p. 36. As Joseph N. Riddel notes in his The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 203, the stanzas do not develop according to a logical sequence, "but there is a qualitative development of the argument." However, Riddel's charting of the poem's structure and his account of the development of the positive-negative dialectic is inaccurate and unhelpful.

[2]Cf. The Man with the Blue Guitar and Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.

[3]See "Sunday Morning," V.3. It is significant that Esthétique du Mal was written during World War II, which no doubt inspired it. It was completed in October, 1944. The title, of course, echoes Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal, though the rest of the poem does not. Riddel suggests that the juxtaposition of "esthétique" with "mal" is expressive of the attempt to create order, an esthetic, out of chaos or disorder, mal. Riddel, p. 202.

[4]I call the protagonist "almost silent" because he does not speak, unless the "firm stanzas" of St. III, for instance, can be accounted his speech. Pack calls the protagonist "one voice of Stevens' dialectic," p. 35. Riddel identifies the poet with his persona, and finds the man a "rhetorical convenience for establishing a concrete setting and initiating the theme." Riddel continues by noting that the poet appears as more than a voice in only five of the poem's fifteen stanzas--Sts. I, II, III, X, and XII, p. 203. The picture that emerges on reading the poem is that of Stevens the poet meditating upon Stevens the man as he is becoming poet. Though Stevens never occupied the position occupied by his persona at the poem's opening, the Neapolitan setting provides a vivid, personal touch, as does the setting occupied by the woman in "Sunday Morning." The meditation is thus located, and anchored, in time and space.

[5]Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington, 1964), p. 23.

[6]Ibid., p. 26.

[7]Pack sees the protagonists of both "Sunday Morning" and Esthétique du Mal, rightly, I think, as concerned with pleasure first, and then with pain, p. 34.

[8]Cf., inter alia, "Botanist on an Alp, 2," "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," and "Credences of Summer," VI.iii--

> It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
> A mountain luminous half way in bloom
> And then half way in the extremest light
> Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
> As if twelve princes sat before a king.

The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), p. 375. (Hereafter referred to as C.P.) This is Stevens' country, where the green vegetation of this world merges with the blue vapors of the empyrean, the borderland between the real and the sublime.

[9]The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, 1963), p. 171.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., p. 172.

[12]Ibid., p. 173.

[13]I.6-7, C.P., p. 67.

[14]"This 'elegy,' however, is not what we might expect. It is not about the death of man's relatedness to an external cosmos, but about the life that arises from this death." Fuchs, p. 173. The difference between this mental journey and that of the woman in "Sunday Morning" is that this one is not also a journey through time. However, Stevens asserts in his Adagia, Opus Posthumous, edited with an introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 161, "A journey in space equals a journey in time."

[15]There is a paradox here: how can the primary symbol of the imagination escape the imagination? Answer: the purely imaginative is as hard to grasp as the grossly materialistic. But perhaps it is helpful to cite Riddel's view as a corrective to my own. "The moon--here apparently not a stock symbol of imagination, but a sign of a purity beyond man's distorting eye . . . becomes the absolute for which he longs. . . ." P. 205.

[16]VII, C.P., p. 168.

[17]C.P., p. 328.

[18]Cf. The Man with the Blue Guitar, XVI, C.P., p. 174: "Place honey on the altars and die,/You lovers that are bitter at heart." And

> . . . the utmost must be good and is
> And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees
> And mingling of colors at a festival.

"Credences of Summer," IV, C.P., p. 374.

[19]"This happy creature--it is he that invented the Gods. It is he that put into their mouths the only words they have ever spoken." Adagia, O.P., p. 166.

[20]Stevens is very far from underestimating the appeal of Christianity or that of religious fictions in general. "How has the human spirit ever survived the terrific literature with which it has had to contend?" he asks--Adagia, O.P., p. 168.

[21]Introduction to Wallace Stevens, p. 27. Fuchs describes the livre as a "monotonous catalog of flowers," p. 175. Riddel (p. 206) finds "d'après Nature" the "key phrase," and offers this: "'All sorts of flowers' suggests that the single flower is denied identity, being subsumed under the generic abstraction of Nature." (P. 207.) Riddel is slightly out in this interpretation. Stevens often began with particulars, but like Mallarmé he sought the essence conveyed by the particular, the essence that was absent from any bouquet. Some light is thrown on his pursuit of the mistress, the essence of the rose, by his poem "Bouquet de Belle Scavoir." Stevens' dislike of sentimentality is attested in Adagia, where he states, "Sentimentality is a failure of feeling." O.P., p. 162.

[22]See his "Wallace Stevens, or The Hedonist's Progress," In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1947), pp. 431-59. The term "hedonist," as Winters uses it, is one of moral opprobrium.

[23]"In the Sacred Park," Partisan Review, XXV (Winter 1958), 86-98. Abel, too, sees Stevens as a hedonist, but he uses the term as a point of departure for a stylistic analysis of Stevens' work, and finds the poet's joie de vivre responsible for the sumptuousness of his poetry.

[24]Introduction to Wallace Stevens, p. 27. Riddel is even more inclusive: "(B. may suggest Bach, Beethoven, Baudelaire, any artist who discovers the one by honoring the many) . . ." (p. 207).

[25]Adonais, LII. The striving after a crystalline transparency in Stevens' poetry is apparent in many poems. "The unit of consciousness . . . seems, in Stevens, to be made into glass. It becomes a clear medium through which pass, from all points of the compass, the impressions that a moment . . . provides." Thus Harold H. Watts, "Wallace Stevens and the Rock of Summer," Kenyon Review, XIV (Winter 1952), 127. This is particularly true of Stevens' "winter" poems.

[26]See "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," XIV, C.P., 279-80. See also the reference to "the strict austerity/ Of one vast, subjugating tone" in The Comedian as the Letter C, I, C.P., p. 30, and this (from "Academic Discourse at Havana," IV, C.P., p. 144): "True reconcilings, dark, pacific words,/ And the adroiter harmonies of their fall."

[27]Adagia, O.P., p. 162. This is what Voltaire meant when he said, "Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer," Epîtres, XCVI.

[28]Samuel French Morse, as reported by Daniel Fuchs in a footnote on p. 176 of his book, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens.

[29]Introduction to Wallace Stevens, p. 27.

[30]Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought, pp. 40-41.

[31]C.P., p. 524.

[32]Pack, p. 34; Fuchs, p. 191.

[33]"L'homme n'est ni ange, ni bête, et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête." Blaise Pascal, Pensées et Opuscules (Paris, 1957), p. 493. This is Pensée No. 358. The influence of Pascal's thought upon Stevens' is remarked by several critics, and grows in significance as one becomes more closely acquainted with Stevens' work.

[34]"We live in the mind," Adagia, O.P., p. 164.

[35]This might at first seem too obvious to require a gloss. Without our bodies we should not be alive. The contradiction in terms implied by the idea of "pure consciousness" or spirit is not, at first, apparent. Human beings, as far as we can ascertain, are the only fully conscious members of the universe. In order to merge with the rest of our cosmic

environment, we have to discard our bodies and lose our consciousness--in other words, we have to die. "The spirit comes from the body of the world." (C.P., p. 519.) In "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," VIII, C.P., p. 259, Stevens says: "It is only that we are able to die, to escape/The wounds." Cf. St. VII, Esthétique du Mal.

[36]"Things of August," II, C.P., p. 490: "Breathe freedom, oh, my native,/In the space of horizons that neither love nor hate."

[37]In a lecture during the spring of 1964, Irving Howe deplored the fact that Stevens did not espouse a sense of human fraternity to counter indifferent fate. My endeavor throughout this essay is to show that he does, but that his treatment of the subject is always cautious and unenthusiastic--un-Whitmanesque. This is inevitable, for Stevens is an aristocrat (a bourgeois aristocrat, to be sure), an aristocrat in both thought and feeling. He is always striving to endorse Terence's Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto, but underneath it one always hears a much more wholehearted echoing of Horace's Odi profanum vulgus et arceo.

[38]"In-bar" means internal, "ex-bar" external, as Wells says in his Introduction to Wallace Stevens, p. 28.

As Eugene Nassar points out in Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 18-19, Stevens uses "phrases . . . of dear relation" to "represent all those personal longings, desires for permanence of the self and relation to the world, that the world is not constituted to satisfy."

[39]See Preludes to Attitude, II, 2, Conrad Aiken's Selected Poems (New York, 1961), p. 115, the passage beginning "What dignity can death bestow on us . . ."

[40]As Pack remarks, Stevens has neither a tragic nor a melioristic view of life, as this stanza indicates. Change for Stevens (Pack says) "does not lead toward a goal, a destination, a state of human perfection, but continues to renew that which already is." Wallace Stevens, p. 40.

[41]Wells, p. 28.

[42]As R. P. Blackmur has noted, Stevens regards the sun as the origin and ending of all life. See Blackmur's "Examples of Wallace Stevens," in his Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (New York, 1952), p. 240. Cf. Riddel, who expands on this by saying: "The sun as both source of life and cosmic timepiece becomes Stevens' symbol for the world of process and thus for

imperfection." The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 208. Riddel goes on to say that the moon, by contrast, is a symbol of perfection and wholeness, which in view of the waxing and waning of the moon, I cannot accept.

[43] C.P., p. 101.

[44] Wells notes that "in several poems he [Stevens] finds in golden fruit, as well as in the sun, a light-symbol of well-being and in the depredations of a sharp-beaked bird an image of universal malice, evil, and destruction." (Pp. 28-29.) The best example of the predatory bird that I have found comes from "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," XIII, C.P., p. 152:

> The birds are singing in the yellow patios,
> Pecking at more lascivious rinds than ours,
> From sheer Gemütlichkeit.

Eugene Nassar suggests an alternative interpretation, believing that this stanza may be read as a parable of the mind's relation to reality, the "big bird" which feeds on the sun representing the human "rage for order." An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 90.

[45] Riddel draws a parallel between man and the image of this bird. He says that man, like the phoenix, "has risen from his imperfections, nourishing himself on that which at once sustains him and binds him in mortality. . . . the mind-bird is caught devouring its own source." P. 209. Birds symbolize men in Stevens' poetry.

[46] Fuchs, p. 177.

[47] See poems cited in footnote #8 and "The Rock" itself.

[48] Fuchs, p. 177. As Riddel remarks (p. 209), the soldier "becomes a surrogate and secularized martyr to man's fate, not a Christ figure but another version of Stevens' hero, who does not absolve human evil but solemnizes its necessity. Hence we share in his wound sacramentally, for it is ours: it binds humanity in a mutual suffering and a mutual joy." Riddel's analysis of this stanza, which he considers the poem's finest, is admirable.

[49] "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," VIII, C.P., pp. 258-59.

[50]The eternal, concentric rings, symbols of self-containment and perfection, might have come straight out of Vaughan's "The World," for example.

[51]"Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens," reprinted in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, edited by Ashley Brown & Robert S. Haller (New York & Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 123-40, passim, but see especially p. 136.

[52]VII.12-16, C.P., p. 70.

[53]C.P., p. 336. For the sense of "his wound was good because life was," see also footnote #18, the lines from "Credences of Summer," beginning, "the utmost must be good and is . . ." Or cf. Emerson--"What is must be and ought to be and is the best"--in his essay on "Fate," Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson, edited with introduction by Robert E. Spiller (New York, 1965), p. 340. (I am not alone in detecting certain affinities between Stevens' thought and Emerson's, though they diverge on many important questions. Riddel, too, notes certain affinities, and Richard Eberhart has written an article entitled "Emerson and Wallace Stevens" which appeared in Fairleigh Dickinson's Literary Review (August 1963). Stevens' echoing of Emerson's sentiment here is by no means an endorsement of Leibnitz's dictum that this is "the best of all possible worlds." That is an ideal ever to be aimed at, never arrived at.

[54]"Credences of Summer," VI, C.P., p. 375.

[55]Riddel provides a different explanation for this which I find somewhat baffling. Riddel calls Satan "a symbol of our will to be individual. Hence he is the patron of the imagination. . . . His death destroyed . . . the sense of man free to be himself, free to create . . ." (P. 210.) I fail to see how the principle of evil can ever be creative, and prefer Fuchs's interpretation of the meaning of Satan (vide footnote 57 below).

[56]Cf. "Man and Bottle," C.P., pp. 238-39, where

> The mind . . . to find what will suffice,
> Destroys romantic tenements
> Of rose and ice.

[57]Fuchs, p. 175, calls God and Satan "the moral polarities of the old system. Christianity finds it hard to have one without the other, as the existence of Satan explains away most of the absurdities of the godhead."

[58]C.P., p. 68.

[59]Fuchs, p. 178.

[60]"Reality is a vacuum," Adagia, O.P., p. 168. This is only tragic for us, because we cannot live in a vacuum.

[61]"The Well-Dressed Man with a Beard," C.P., p. 247. As Riddel says (p. 211), "Once again, loss is transmuted into affirmation, a yes in which each man is responsible for making the music that once seemed to reside in the spheres."

[62]Fuchs, p. 179.

[63]C.P., p. 202.

[64]"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," I.1-2, C.P., p. 465.

[65]"At an early age, he [Stevens] ceased to be a Christian, but he retained a deeply religious sensibility and spent a lifetime trying to console it for its loss." Denis Donoghue, Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry (New York, 1965), p. 192. Stevens' letters testify to this nostalgia.

[66]Cf. Esthétique du Mal, XII.20-21: "What lover has one in such rocks, what woman,/However known, at the center of the heart?"

[67]Stevens' fierce mother is only a shade less of a vampire than Swinburne's earth goddess, but Stevens' all-devouring, all-nourishing female principle is fierce without being morbid. The mauve Maman, of course, is more than a reference to Picasso. She is an otherwordly mother, an ethereal madonna. Mauve always has otherwordly (usually deleterious) connotations in Stevens' poetry. (See his woman stripped of rose and violet in "The Common Life," C.P., p. 221; and his reference to the "impopulous purple-plated past" in "Montrachet-le-Jardin," C.P., p. 260.)

[68]Many seemingly innocent victims--certainly innocent vis-à-vis their persecutors--look within themselves to find the cause of their suffering. An article in Daedalus (Summer, 1960) written by a psychologist, Robert J. Lifton, who made a psychiatric study of the survivors of Hiroshima brought to light that the greatest psychic (as opposed to physical) damage these men and women had suffered was their sense of guilt, first at having

somehow deserved to have an atomic bomb dropped on their city, second at having survived their families, friends, and neighbors. A similar guilt is felt by those who survived or narrowly escaped Hitler's atrocities, and is shared by many soldiers whose comrades are killed in action while they survive.

[69]Gabriel Fielding, author of The Birthday King (New York, 1963), in an interview with Peter Green of The (London) Daily Telegraph, reported on the jacket blurb.

[70]Adagia, O.P., p. 172.

[71]"Experience," Selected Essays (see footnote 53), p. 298.

[72]For the significance of the bells, see Stevens' "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home," C.P., pp. 461-62: "Each sexton has his sect. The bells have none." And

> These are the voices of the pastors calling
> And calling like the long echoes in long sleep,
> Generations of shepherds to generations of sheep.

[73]Adagia, O.P., p. 174.

[74]Ibid., p. 160.

[75]It recalls the "rosy chocolate and gilt umbrellas" of "Sea Surfaces Full of Clouds."

[76]Adagia, O.P., p. 178. By "precious" here Stevens of course means valuable, but alas often when his diction is gayest, it is also precious in the other sense.

[77]Ibid., p. 160.

[78]Ibid., p. 157.

[79]Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (pp. 211-12) says this stanza "displays an interesting mutation of images, filtered through this central couplet-- [ll. 10-11] --which celebrated the reigning order of language. Paratroopers, ship, and steeple . . . elaborate the violence, materialistic abandon, and spiritual evasions that have led to the dehumanization of life" and "become in the final stanza [he uses this word oddly, since he considers each stanza a separate poem] images of a sham world. A vulgar materialism provides the sacramental objects

of worship, all of which the 'man of bitter appetite,' the poet, despises." The only problem with this interpretation is that it undercuts what is, for me, the real beauty of ll. 2-8. Still, it does illumine the motivation for what I have called the parodic recapitulation in ll. 12-18. This is suffering à la Hollywood, and reminds us of so many movies which leave us feeling betrayed: war was never like this; love was never like this; life was never like this.

[80]See footnote #53. Riddel (p. 212) believes that "the vulgar world denies itself by wishing away the incipient evils." Thus the last line of this stanza is construed as demonstrating the deficiency of the hunger that denies evil and thus forbids its own satisfaction.

[81]The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, p. 184.

[82]"Credences of Summer," VI, C.P., p. 375.

[83]"Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," I, C.P., p. 252.
It does sound as though Stevens' three worlds parallel Kant's three realms--the world of objective phenomena; the subjective world of inner sense experience, and the noumenal world, inaccessible to human consciousness, of the ding-an-sich.

[84]Harold H. Watts, "Wallace Stevens and the Rock of Summer," 140.
However, both Riddel and Donoghue would disagree with my interpretation of the "third world" as "essential, unadulterated reality," as distinct from "everyday reality." Both Riddel and Donoghue think of Stevens' "third world" as a fictive world of form--The Clairvoyant Eye, pp. 212-213; Connoisseurs of Chaos, p. 207. While I can see the inherent weakness in my own interpretation (how do you distinguish brute reality from everyday reality?), I think that making the "third world" a world of artistic pseudo-statements, such as Riddel suggests, is wrong. The world of poetry, I am sure Stevens himself would agree, should not be a lunar landscape such as is described in the final lines of Stanza XII of Esthétique du Mal.

[85]This exceedingly tough little lyric, the first stanza of which is given below, is called Das Lied des Harfners, and was composed in 1783 for Wilhelm Meister:

> Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen ass,
> Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte
> Auf seinem Bette weinend sass
> Der kennt euch nicht, ihr himmlischen Mächte.

In some editions, a third stanza is added, which is a little inferior to the other two.

[86]"Compensation," Selected Essays (see footnote 53), pp. 268-69.

[87]C.P., p. 238.

[88]The colored and geometric geographical charting recalls "Credences of Summer," X, C.P., p. 378:

> Of blue and yellow, sky and sun, belted
> And knotted, sashed and seamed, half pales of red,
> Half pales of green . . .

Blue, as usual, stands for the imagination, orange, like yellow, for reality, and these symbolic values are corroborated in the opposition of sea and sky to sun.

[89]Fuchs, p. 187.

[90]Serge, one learns from Riddel (p. 213) was author of The Case of Comrade Tulayev, an exposé of the Stalinist purges for which Konstantinov was, presumably, an apologist.

[91]Cf. Stanza XV, ll. 19ff.

[92]Riddel comments on Stanza XIV that it condemns the "lunacy of extreme logic which legislates all antitheses out of its world." The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 204.
Stevens has been accused by Wylie Sypher of being a misologist--a hater of ideas. See Sypher's "Connoisseur in Chaos," Partisan Review, XIII (Winter 1946), p. 85. I fail to see how any metaphysical poet (and Stevens is one, par excellence) can be a hater of ideas. What Stevens does hate are restrictive ideologies--ideas codified into systems, posing and imposing themselves as final truths.

[93]"The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," C.P., p. 222.

[94]In "The Doctor of Geneva," Stevens describes in a mocking manner a Calvinist from Geneva who founds a city in New England in full face of the ocean.

[95]Conrad's description of it in Under Western Eyes expresses his aristocratic detestation for this city, which he always represents as the bland and watery epitome of the bourgeois world, which nevertheless foments violent proletarian faiths in its tepid bosom.

[96]C.P., pp. 200-01.

[97]"Can one man think one thing and think it long?/Can one man be one thing and be it long?" The Comedian as the Letter C, V, C.P., p. 41.

[98]The same significance is attributed to the clouds in, for instance, "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," C.P., pp. 55-56, and in "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man"--see footnote #93.

[99]Fuchs, p. 188.

[100]The Comedian as the Letter C, V, C.P., p. 41. This is true because reality is conceived as the ultimate good.

[101]The Man with the Blue Guitar, V, C.P., p. 167.

[102]Cf. "Credences of Summer," IV.2, and Stanza VII of "Sunday Morning."

[103]Fuchs, p. 189. Cf. Donoghue--"The 'Esthétique,' a humanist's progress, has nothing to say about evil except that it is comparative. So the poem drifts away in yet another hymn to the credences of summer." Connoisseurs of Chaos, p. 207. Donoghue slights the poem, dismissing it in a few ill considered sentences, although his general discussion of Stevens' poetry is very good.

[104]The Comedian as the Letter C, I, C.P., p. 30.

[105]Wordsworth, The Prelude, I.337-40. If one did not know this was Wordsworth, it might easily be mistaken for Stevens.

[106]I find Riddel's verdict reasonably just; he complains of a certain privacy in the poem. Riddel calls Esthétique du Mal "a concentrated meditation on . . . authentic and inauthentic modes of faith" which "'resist(s) the intelligence' almost too successfully. It is unwieldy, intense but provisional, the compactness of the argument suggesting a thoroughness which is not altogether realized." The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 215.

[107]Donoghue has voiced my dissatisfaction with the poem in a phrase he applies to Stevens' poetry in general--"the intransitive world" of the poem, Connoisseurs of Chaos, p. 197.

It should be possible for Stevens to make his poetic world transitive to this one, especially since he insists on building on a basis of fact. "Sunday Morning," I think, is transitive; Esthétique du Mal is not. Donoghue goes on to ask, "But do we need more than consoling sounds? Sometimes we do." (P. 208.) Stevens puts this question to himself in "Academic Discourse at Havana," IV, C.P., p. 144: "Is the function of the poet here mere sound,/Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,/To stuff the ear?" What we hunger for besides the sounds are meanings.

[108] Adagia, O.P., p. 158.

[109] "Connoisseur in Chaos," 86.

[110] The distaste for anything more than a theoretic brotherhood is largely traceable to Stevens' contempt for the middle class--see The Necessary Angel. "Three Academic Pieces" in that volume contains this biting comment: "The resemblance of the profile of a mountain to the profile of General Washington exists for that great class of people who co-exist with the great ferns in the public gardens, amplified music and minor education." The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1951), p. 76.

[111] "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress," In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1947), p. 435.

[112] I agree with Donoghue that "we grow weary of Stevens when we cease to believe that 'words alone are certain good' . . ." Connoisseurs of Chaos, p. 200.

CHAPTER VIII

An Ordinary Evening in New Haven

"Here my intention is to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false."[1] This is all Stevens is on record as saying about his last lengthy meditation on the interrelations of reality and imagination. An Ordinary Evening in New Haven contains nothing false; on the other hand, neither does it contain anything plain. This is not an ordinary evening in New Haven but an extraordinary evening in a town bespangled by the aurora borealis of the poet's imagination. As one might expect, after a sustained acquaintance with the poetry of Wallace Stevens, there are no direct views of New Haven, though one line contains a brilliant evocation of it--"A city slapped up like a chest of tools"(XVIII.17). (The name New Haven seems to carry symbolic overtones. The plain town must become for the modern man's imagination what its name proclaims it once to have meant to its first inhabitants: "Juda becomes New Haven or else must"--XI.9.)

Stevens appears to have worked six months or more on this poem. He read an abbreviated, eleven stanza version of

it to the thousandth meeting of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences in November, 1949. (This abridgement, comprising Sections I, VI, IX, XI, XII, XVI, XXII, XXVIII, XXX, XXI, and XXIX, in that order, is reprinted in the Selected Poems.)[2]

The poem in its final version comprises thirty-one sections of six tercets apiece. The poem is written in extremely supple free verse. There is no rhyme, though much alliteration, assonance, and other sound devices. Stevens himself said that the poem might appear "diffuse and casual," but its development, though not particularly orderly or progressive, is more so than that of The Man with the Blue Guitar. Unlike that poem, An Ordinary Evening in New Haven both begins and ends with the premise that reality is unknowable except in the mind. Because the object can only be realized subjectively, "We do not know what is real and what is not." (X.5.) The poem is not concerned to establish what reality is or is not, therefore, but to insist instead on the imagination's necessary reclamation of reality, and in particular on the immediate urgency of this in the modern world. To begin with, the poem's progression appears to be dialectical: for example, the first six sections fall into two triads, with the emphasis in I and IV on stark, unmediated reality, in II and V on imaginative interpretations of this, and in III and VI on the essential coalescence of realistic and imaginative versions. However, this dialectic soon becomes blurred, and

we may have as many as three consecutive sections devoted to the role of imagination--for example, Sections XXV through XXVII.

"The eye's plain version is a thing apart,/The vulgate of experience." This statement seems simple enough, but is infinitely suggestive. Stevens does not specify what "The eye's plain version" is apart from, but it would seem, in fact, to be apart from one's normal experience of reality, most of which is shaped and colored by subconscious selection and imaginative suffusion or projection. Yet this plain version of things is called "The vulgate of experience"--the common basis of experience. "The vulgate" suggests the lowest common denominator of experience, that state of indifference--or of cultural destitution--in which the human eye sees reality almost in the raw--what Stevens calls, in Section XIV, "the human grim." Such a version of reality might be compared to Coleridge's Primary Imagination, which I. A. Richards defines in words drawn from Coleridge's Dejection Ode as "that inanimate cold world allowed/To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd," and in his own words as "the world of the routine satisfaction of our minimum exigencies."[3] In Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, Stevens refers to "The gibberish of the vulgate," suggesting that a view of reality untouched by imagination is nonsense. This is so in both senses of the word "nonsense." For absolute fact is unknowable; in order to get into direct touch with it, to

become part of it, we would have to die, or, by normal standards, to go mad. But in "The Plain Sense of Things," Stevens makes it clear that "the absence of imagination [brute reality]/Had itself to be imagined."[4] Hence all the qualifications, the "and yets" that follow the poem's initial assertion.

The "never-ending meditation" is not so much about the relations between stark reality (since this cannot be known) and imaginative transformations of it, then, as it is about old and new (or inadequate and adequate) versions of reality. (The question referred to in line 5 is that stated in line 6, just as the "giant" of line 11 is identified in line 12.) The identity of the first giant is difficult to establish, but appears to be reality untransformed, in as naked and recalcitrant a state as we can conceive it. The modern world lives in such a reality, only minimally altered by imagination. What is required is a new imagining, as vitally refreshing and natural as the sun, Stevens' prime symbol for reality. (Compare Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, Part I, Section I, where, again, the sun is the source of all reality--this time both inside as well as outside the mind.) Such a reimagining of the world must commend itself to the largest possible audience, becoming the "vulgate of experience" on a higher plane. "Collops" are crude lumps of matter, those raw materials which must be made to cohere in harmony. The section ends with an image of heroic stature, a living statue, who reappears throughout

the poem and who seems to represent man as "Ruler of Reality," once he is truly consort of the "Queen of Fact."[5]

Section II presents a movement into the imagination. The plain town, object of the poet's meditation, is seen as it is when placed wholly within the mind--"an impalpable town." It is thus removed beyond time and place (l. 9). The picture is one of fluid sound and color, which looks forward to the fluid reality of the final section of the poem. "Dim-coned bells," a strange geometrical image, sound as though from a submerged cathedral at the bottom of the sea. Everything is drowned in subjectivity so that we can no longer distinguish the idea from that which conveys and experiences the idea. And yet this experience of reality, without objective reference, is real, too. (New Haven is real both beforeand after we see it, though most itself while we are seeing it, presumably--XXVIII.5-6.)

"The point of vision and desire are the same." "Point" is just the right word, for it means both the driving force and its objective. Both motive and target are focussed in one line-of-sight, from perceiver to object of perception. Sight is consciousness, since consciousness is the desire to know. Lines 13 to 17 posit desire as the motive force behind all seeing. It is an insatiable hunger, engulfing objects to fill its own emptiness, and at the same time bathing them with a transfusion of its own. But this desire of the eye for the object can never be satisfied, since the mind can never be

in direct touch with reality. "It can neverbe satisfied, the mind, never," Stevens affirms in "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard." Nonetheless, "We fling ourselves, constantly longing, on this form" (VIII.1). The "hero of midnight" is the poet whose vocation it is to make a beautiful mountain of reality's heap of stones.[6] The "ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth" is the imagination, which is called upon to realize the paradox that if its desire can never be realized, if it is ever to be frustrated, yet it can, for the same reason, never cloy. Like the love depicted on Keats's urn, the desire of the imagination for its object is "Forever warm and still to be enjoyed," secure and immortal in that it can never possess that which it longs for. "Bats" are clods of earth like the "collops" of Section I. It is hoped that the imagination may evolve and, in the process, assimilate its world, from fragments of hardened clay into a fine, smooth procelain.

Having achieved a metaphysical reconciliation between the dual principles of reality and imagination, the poet now moves back to the contemplation of "plain things." Plain things untransformed by imagination are savage. Modern man has cast out all the illusions of the past--the verb "was" is used substantively, as verbs frequently are in Stevens' poetry. As a result, destitute of imagination in a time of harsh reality, man lives like "The Men that are Falling," in the "grinding rierac." Only death brings ease (ll. 4-5). The third and fourth tercets suggest that "plain men in plain

towns," neither nice nor knowing about the satisfactions they need, nevertheless find these in their own reactions to the realities of contemporary existence. Their "cry" is presumably their imaginative response, though it is difficult to understand how this can possess the anomalous qualities of savagery, subtlety, and simplicity. Since the response is imaginative, on however low a scale, the "diviner opposite" might be a superior interpretation of their reality or that reality itself.[7] (Stevens assumes nature to embody a creative principle prior to human consciousness.) In the seasonal cycle, fertile spring burgeons from winter's poverty, and the full glory of summer is the prelude to the cool, spectral airs of autumn. Blossom and dearth, heat and cold are necessary, interdependent opposites. So, it seems, are humanity's alternate cleavings to fact or fiction in pursuit of an equilibrium between themselves and their world.

In Section V, reality is realized as something apprehended by the mind. Thus, the last illusion of the realist, that he can live without illusion, is exploded.[8] The choice between two dreams seems to be a choice between a more or less realistic, a more or less recent imaginative version of reality; this looks back to the two giants of the first section. It is impossible to live in a world of absolute fact, as it is impossible to live in one of pure imagination. As in Section II, we are presented with a subjective vision of the world reflected in the lake, ocean,

or mirror of the mind. No pejorative is implied: shadow stands for nuance, and a great town hanging in it becomes part of the inescapable, essential chiaroscuro of day (reality) and night (imagination) presented in Section XXIII. (In XXIV, the town poised on the horizon as though about to sink into darkness carries similar connotations.) An enormous nation is happier for having evolved a style of seeing and thus of being. The division between those who hold "tenaciously in common earth" and those who search the sky is both a division among men--between homme moyen sensuel and poet[9]--and within man, between the prosaic and the romantic faculties in all men. The "inexquisite eye" means an eye not especially selective or censorious, and may equally refer to the eye of the poet or of the ignorant man.[10] The entrepreneur who has divided mind from matter, or anima from animal, is something non-human although Stevens calls it the "self." It is the source from which first inorganic, then organic, and finally conscious life arose, and to which all return.

In Stevens' Adagia, he says: "The real is only the base. But it is the base."[11] Naked Alpha represents this basic reality. The "hierophant Omega" represents imagination at its farthest remove from Alpha's plain version of things. Omega is described as "Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals" because he is enshrouded with mystery; his envoys are iridescent products of imagination, insubstantial as air. (These two embodied ciphers, their descriptions evoking their shapes, are reminiscent of the baby and the old man

in Blake's "The Mental Traveller," as the image of learned Omega kneeling on the edge of space conjures up Blake's picture of God the Father with his compasses, portioning out space.) What Alpha fears is the betrayal of the reality from which he has so recently emerged, of which he is still almost a part. In addition, he fears Omega's projections of the human into the supernatural--the evocation of such anthropomorphic gods as the hieratic figure of Omega himself suggests. As Stevens lucidly epitomizes this cycle in his Notes toward a Supreme Fiction: ". . . not to have is the beginning of desire./To have what is not is its ancient cycle."[12] This section is an extension of the previous one in its consideration of two radical, antithetical, yet interdependent principles of self (compare V.12-18).

Alpha and Omega, as universal ciphers and dramatis personae, are all about us on the world's stage. For Alpha that stage (reality) is enough; for Omega, it is not. Yet neither is ever wholly absent from life, since both seek to interpret it to us. Life, however, lies in their penumbra. If Alpha is the beginning, he is also the way to that end represented by Omega, but Omega has constantly to be refreshed by Alpha's invigorating transfusions of reality.[13]

Architectural images stand for imaginative or intellectual concepts in Stevens' poetry, and so we can assume that the chapels and schools of VII are Omega's recent imaginings of Alpha. The "impoverished architects"

are men in the modern world, who appear less pauperized when they have translated their dreams into reality. These artifacts themselves "tingle" into life. The meaning of lines 5 through 7 is difficult to grasp. Sukenick provides a good reading. He interprets "the lesser productions of 'rigid realists'" as "exteriorizations of the spirit of practical men." Thus, even "the imagination of the realists makes possible new conceptions about reality."[14]

The rest of this section deals with the transformation of men into things. (Stevens would appear to have in mind Bergson's master recipe for the comic--men behaving like machines.) Stevens views the modern period as one of rigid realism, whose real genius is not for poetics but for politics.[15] In such an age, men are disposed about and disposed of as though they were things. Paradoxically, in Section VII, the living subject seems to be changing places with the dead object. Men dressed in "antic symbols" suggest men as ciphers or theatrical props. Some light may be cast on such men's loss of the ability to conceal themselves by Stevens' "Nudity in the Colonies": ". . . bright nouveautés leave one, at best, pseudonymous./Thus one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous."[16] Stevens maintained that in any age the boundaries between the credible and the incredible were shifting. Finally in this section he uses a very precious image--"The tips of cock-cry pinked out pastily"--to show incredible fiction becoming credible fact again. The

outrageous shapes of night reveal themselves to be real in the dubious light of dawn.

Enamored of reality, we try repeatedly to seize it. Frequently in Stevens' poetry, the central blank which is the reality underlying the prolific forms and profuse colors of creation (XVII.6-7) is balanced against an inner void at the heart of individual consciousness (III.16). Our own "sepulchral hollows" echo the void at the core of the universe, as the blue imagination mirrors and reflects the anomalous blue of the sky, "the anonymous color of the universe." As in The Man with the Blue Guitar, XX, air is the only healthful thing with which to fill this inner vacuum. Sukenick interprets the puzzling "three-four cornered fragrances/From five-six cornered leaves" as a very private reference of Stevens to the effects of music in three-four and five-six time.[17] This is ingenious, though tentatively offered, as any interpretation must be. If we try to interpret the image symbolically, we are thrown back on Stevens' habitual use of "corners" to suggest the refraction of light into individual rays or colors, and thus to suggest individuation generally.[18] These lines perhaps indicate the way in which imagination adds an extra dimension to things perceived, as green reality signals its lover, the blue imagination, to come forth. Similarly, though in aural, not visual, terms, "The cry that contains its converse in itself" is the imagination's response to reality, or that of the individual to the universal self. (The personal pronoun

in line 10 refers to nature or reality.) The search for the meaning of reality is a fierce one, the atmosphere in which we live is a "desperate element" because it is inherently meaningless and alien to us. In the concluding lines, the two voices (as in Sections XV and XXI), the unimaginable voices of matter and spirit, meet in soundless accord.

The hotel, as in the poetry of Baudelaire, represents the world to which we keep returning after our attempts to depart from it--"n'importe où hors du monde" (anywhere out of this world). Our hymns to the empyrean are deflected by the winds and fall back on our hotel; the word indicates that we are only transients here, though destined for no other world. (There is absolutely no nostalgia in these fine, resolute lines, though there would be had they been written by Baudelaire.) "The poem of pure reality" we seek is one "without evasion by a single metaphor."[19] Such a poem in praise of reality would not eschew all metaphor, but would deny itself any false trope. It would seek "simple sight," untainted by "reflection"--a clever pun which suggests that simple sight is concrete rather than abstract, and original, not secondhand. Thus the poem would get as close to "The eye's plain version" as possible, but in seeing "Nothing beyond reality" yet within it everything, it would inevitably subtilize and transform its object. The closing lines of Section IX are a dramatization in visual imagery of "the spirit's alchemicana."

The moon, transcendent romantic principle, is fatal and vacuous if we court and try to live in its dead sphere. Here on earth, moonlight is only the obverse of sunlight, as imagination is of reality, or subjective of objective--this is what is meant by a "total double-thing" (compare I.10-12). It is a paradox that the moon, subject to the constant change of its eternal phases should be imprisoned, while our sublunar sphere "resides/In a permanence composed of impermanence."[20] The man in the moon is used as a personification of a fixed and therefore dead imagination, one which has tried to arrest the eternal flux and duality of mind and matter by subjugating them to some transcendent, eternally fixed principle. The stanza ends with a description of the eternal recurrence of day and night; the "evening feast and the following festival" are sunset and starlight. Together, the unfailing alternation of light and dark makes gay "the hallucinations in surfaces." The final line reveals that this gaiety is an illusion, that beneath the seductive colors and shapes of our world lies "the dominant blank, the unapproachable."

In a letter to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, Stevens acknowledges a card she sent him depicting the lion of Juda, symbol of supreme power and majesty and emblem of the royal house of David. Stevens mentions that he is putting the lion into a poem he is working on.[21] The allusion remains somewhat mysterious, but recalls, in its comparison with a "great cat [that] must stand potent in the sun," Stevens' many

representations of poetry as a lion, or of imagination and reality as two lions confronting each other--"the lion in the lute/Before the lion locked in stone."[22] There is a transference of power constantly taking place between imagination and reality. All that we remember now of the majesty that the lion of Juda symbolized is the phrase itself. It is a symbol that suffices at night to stimulate the imagination,[23] but in the harsh light of the twentieth century and of common day, we need to evolve a symbol of our own that will subsume the character of our own era. New Haven must become the new Juda, but can do so only if we invest it with the might of an imagination that has grappled with contemporary life.

The "metaphysical streets of the physical town" are its nighttime streets, when our "dilapidation of dilapidations" is hidden in the folds of darkness, and the night walker's imagination is haunted by the splendid symbols of the past. When he wakens, however, he shrugs off their majesty in face of the objects surrounding him; his need for nobility, for the "fecund minimum" of imagination remains, however. He stands in need of a "clou"--the word means literally a nail or rivet; metaphorically, it means some central attraction. It can also mean an idea. (There is a French expreesion, "un clou chasse l'autre," or one idea drives out another.) No doubt the word is also used as a pun in English: man needs a clue whereby he may connect his imagination and reality.

He will find his truth, his <u>rapprochement</u> between reality and imagination, paradoxically, in studying one of

the oldest things we know, the cycle of "four seasons and twelve months." The contemplation of nature is far more congenial to Stevens than that of ramshackle New Haven, and far more likely to yield "The brilliancy at the central of the earth." In view of the title and declared objective of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, however, we may find the scarcity and obliquity of the views Stevens gives us of New Haven as an exemplar of the modern world a failing in the poem.

Section XII is masterly; it seems to tower over the other sections of the poem. This is one of the most anthologized pieces of Stevens' poetry. Wherein does its superiority lie? For one thing, its imagery is perfectly chosen to exemplify the truth of the opening and closing propositions. For another, it is both profound and succinct. Stevens' characteristic diffuseness and heterogeneity, especially of image, are banished. Finally, everything in this stanza is integral to it: there are no superfluous words, ideas, or images.

It has been suggested, and seems likely, that Stevens is here illustrating a philosophical maxim of Santayana's: "The poem . . . may refer to universals as well as to particulars, but the universals must exist in re, in the concrete experience of the poem, not merely ante rem in the mind of the poet or post rem in the reflection of the reader."[24] The abstract, universal meaning of the poem must be perfectly embodied in its concrete particulars. (This is frequently not the case in Stevens' major poems, although in this stanza it

is, as will be shown.) Stevens is further insisting that the poem be a faithful embodiment of the particular time and place which give rise to it. It rises from these like a cry; it is part of them. It does not describe them, and therefore cannot be said to be "about" them. The poem expresses the poet's experience as this takes place. (This would appear to imply that the poem must be an extempore jotting "on location," but this is not so. The writing of a poem, however faithful a transcript of experience, necessitates abstracting that experience in the mind. Stevens recognized this, that the poem cannot present the actual occurrence, the actual image of time and place, but at best presents these as reflected in the mind of the poet. Stevens' poems are, indeed, illustrations of this thesis.) The poet speaks "by sight and insight as they are": external landscape is drawn into the mind's eye, and becomes what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "inscape." Nevertheless, sight and insight must be true to the moment at which they coalesced, when marble statues suddenly looked like marble newspapers. In this illustration, Stevens juxtaposes the most durable with the most ephemeral of artifacts, and telescopes them into a composite image. It is profoundly persuasive visually, because the folds of the drapery of marble statues on a windy night resemble the crumpled, sharp edges of blown newsprint. Vision and meaning fuse. Stevens is a past master at presenting such images of solid objects dissolved in the mind's flux. He had perpetually in mind the discovery of modern physics that

there is no such thing as a solid object, and frequently focusses on "the life/That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze."[25]

The poem is written in the present, in the imaginative if not in the actual presence of that which inspires it. Neither past nor future exist for the poet as he writes. Only tomorrow will the statues metamorphosed by his mind "have gone back to be things about." Even such a superficially neutral line is charged with several meanings. On the simplest level, the word "about" suggests that tomorrow the statues, like other objects placed in meaningful relation within the poem, will have become simply things scattered randomly about. They will also have become once more objects about which urban guidebooks, for instance, might well expatiate. Finally, in their own right, the statues will be asserting whatever it is that they are about. (Only for the sculptor who has caught the spirit as well as the lineaments of his subject as truly as the poet has caught his, will his statue <u>be</u> what it represents rather than <u>about</u> it.)

Stevens is again brilliant in his metaphorical revelation of the difference between "is" (the living present) and "was" (the dead past). The "mobile flickering" may remind us of the newspapers, as the "immobile flickering" may recall the statues on a literal level. Within the imagination, both are fluid and alive with movement; beyond its reach, they will become fixed and dead. (The abstract word "area" concretely suggests an area-way in which dead leaves are blown about.)

The difference between vital present and dead past, a moment's difference, is like that between autumn leaves flaming on the trees and autumn leaves whirling in the gutters. The "casual litter" of self, town, weather, and world together proclaims that "words of the world are the life of the world." Poetry and old newsprint have a common source. The genius with which these lines have been made, in fact, to proclaim just this is something that, as true poetry, almost defies analysis. Self is to town as weather is to world and as spirit is to substance. The self alone is able to illumine the world with its words. It is "the presence of thought," of brooding sight that makes the "casual litter" of objects seem meaningful. Thus a moment's experience between is and was is captured. Tomorrow it may seem histrionic as the statues, or alien as the lion of Juda, though its fidelity to imagination rather than fact will preserve it from being dead as the newspapers will be. In any case, however soon or late they become outmoded, the poet's words are "the life of the world."

It is very difficult to sustain such a high level of poetry as we find in Section XII, with its perfect fusion of intuition and expression, of sight and insight. The following section slumps into a mode characteristic of Stevens' late verse; it is both precious and flabby. The ephebe is Stevens' characteristic exquisite poet. He is solitary because, contrary to what his vocabulary might lead you to expect, he is "A strong mind in a weak neighborhood." (This is a

forceful line, but sorts oddly with the fussy description of the "ephebe.") He avoids "the journalism of subjects"--that which is merely "about" things--and concentrates on their inmost qualities--"the perquisites of sanctity." Line 5 suggests that this poet is single-minded but far from glum. The gist of lines 7 and 8 seems to be that the poet does not align himself with mysterious cults or precarious intellects. (Owls represent intelligence in Stevens' symbology.) It is difficult to decide what priest and proctor represent, but both suggest timidity before "the big X [the unknown] of the returning primitive." The poet must courageously confront the "returning primitive"; he must grapple with it. It is "low eve," before nightfall; the world is again returning to darkness and the unknown. What is needed is a fresh transfusion of imagination which can cope with the actual landscape and capture its essence. The "long, too constant warmth" surely refers to the anthropomorphic cast of mind, which projected its emotions into nature and conjured up the image of a human god. What is needed instead of such chimerae in the clouds is something like an aerial or lightning rod--"A thing on the side of a house"--which physically links the earth with more spiritual forces.

Professor Eucalyptus is an alter ego of the poet, trying to see reality with an austere eye, yet to present what he sees "in paradisal parlance." The eucalyptus, a tree that grows in arid lands and has healing properties,

draws sustenance from its rain-clouds. Professor Eucalyptus, inhabiting the modern wasteland but able to transform it into the terrestrial paradise, is forbidden to seek salvation in the clouds. For God is no longer to be found there; he is to be found, if anywhere, in ourselves, in a happy alliance between our spirits and the objects that surround us. The poet's choice of subject is confined to the things of this earth: the only choice he has is that of the language with which he will celebrate mundane subjects. Although they are described as "commodious," his adjectives will accommodate an exigent reality to an equally exigent imagination. An expanded interpretation of lines 11 to 16 (not a paraphrase) might read as follows: he seeks not grim reality itself (for reality is inaccessible to the mind, and grim only insofar as it is blank and meaningless). Nor is his eye indifferent to what it sees--as the eye of the mob is indifferent, so that it mars natural beauty and creates a hideous reality of its own, "the human grim." The poet will eschew "The vulgate of experience" in this sense, yet court a version of reality as plain as he can achieve. This he will then transform into something faithful to both fact and spirit, "Transfixing by being purely what it is." Thus he will substitute for a crude realism which is "of the essence not yet well perceived" a divine speech in which the essence is well perceived.

Once again, in this and the following section, we encounter a discomfiting disparity between Stevens' "exquisite" vocabulary and the crude reality he aims to

capture and transform with it. Transform it he does, but into something so unrecognizably quaint or effete that one wonders whether raw reality was ever grasped by the mind's eye. Thus, "the commodious adjective," though one can explain it in terms of the poet's intention, may well strike the reader as creating just the wrong effect. What one would expect would be the acute, the telling, the veracious adjective. Similarly, the "tink-tonk" of rain in a waterspout or its "wet wallows" scarcely strike one as the epitome of crude realism or of a reality defying the imagination to deal with it.

The imagination, in a sense, works in opposition to the reality which is its environment, or at least has an instinct for its antithesis.[26] This is the meaning of the first tercet of Section XV, which closes with an image reminiscent of the one concluding "Sunday Morning," where birds (which in Stevens' poetry often represent men) drop "downward to darkness on extended wings." The "wide delvings of wings" here are the sweeping, circular motions of the imagination's wings. The rainy and the rainless are used only as illustrations of the adjustment between inner and outer mental or emotional climates. The imagination has to balance or compensate for whatever is found in too great or too little measure in the world outside. The yearning for the physical is balanced by a yearning for the non-physical. The spheres of reality and imagination have to be reconciled into a single "tournamonde,"[27] a single revolving globe in which imaginative seeming is equivalent to true being, or in which being is the finale of seeming to be.

This is the world of poetry, of metaphor. For Stevens, the theory (and practice) of poetry are equivalent to the theory (and practice) of life, in that both poetry and life involve imaginative recreation of the raw material of experience. We live by metaphors; these are the building blocks of perception. They cast a network of resemblances over the diverse events, real and imagined, of our lives.

The syntax of lines 8 and 9 is inverted. Straightened out, this would read, "a kind of counterpoint irked the wet wallows of the waterspout for its counterpart." This section continues with examples of seasonal antitheses: in spring, the darkness of winter still lingers in the air; this is like the sudden exposing in autumn of the skeletal structure that underlies summer's abundant foliage. This is the real base of all fictive weavings, the bare rock of reality. The sheer weight of reality can be moved only by the light will of desire and the dreaming but immediate touch of the mind.

The world of the present is called the "dilapidation of dilapidations" because so many other worlds have risen and fallen before it came into being. However, our time still remains to be realized. The human imagination has not yet evolved for it any "venerable mask." This ancient face needs a new make-up. What should be a bearded being, "alive with age" (the rock of reality plus its outgrowth of imagination) remains as yet simple being, new and unassimilated. (The third and fourth tercets are elusive--particularly "the Oklahoman--the Italian blue."[28] The image recalls others of giants or

gigantic couples recumbent on the horizon, and suggests an ultimate abstraction from reality, a point beyond which imagination cannot progress.) The west wind whimpers as it announces the passage of time, but has found no human voice to relay its message. The only "venerable mask/In this perfection" is presumably the cycle of the seasons. During the dearth of winter--this wintry time in which imagination has been almost exiled--life has moved close to the "total leaflessness," the absolute poverty of death. "This should be tragedy's most moving face." But it is not. Instead of a golden bough as a passport to the underworld, we see a bough illumined by electric light tossing in the dark outside--very little to signalize our whirling passage into oblivion.

Section XVII employs Stevens' characteristic theatrical and heraldic metaphors to show how imagination--"trials of device"--makes gay embroideries over the blank that underlies reality--"The dominant blank, the unapproachable." The poet's productions are both serious and gay. They are not altogether comic because the strength needed to confront the blank pupil at the center of reality is serious, but nor are they tragic in their colorful dances on the edge of the abyss. Imagination is forever active--it rejects "pin-idleness" for splendid draperies. "Blue verdured" represents the imaginative rendering of reality--blue figurings overlaid on green. The way in which imagination plays over reality, coloring it and loading it with decorative detail, is compared to embroidery with gold thread, the scintillation of precious stones, and,

in a Biblical allusion, to the mystic flames of a sacred burning bush. These, recorded and beheld, clothe night and the wastes of time in "a robe of rays."

The meditation on the window as what interposes between us and present experience recalls Mallarmé's "Les Fenêtres." The difference is that Mallarmé welcomes the window as a distancing device, something through which to view the ideal, "d'où l'on tourne l'épaule à la vie"--from which one turns one's back on life. For Stevens, the window is a frame and medium of vision. It represents the way in which the eye frames and thus forms one's perception of reality. Perception is determined as much by past as by present vision, because present sight is colored by memory. So it is difficult to paint things as they are, much more challenging than to paint them as they were. Furthermore, a new subject may necessitate forging a new style. Throughout his prose writings and in his letters, Stevens is always insisting on the necessity for close and accurate observation. Looking out of the window is not enough. One must descend to the street and walk there, alert for its sights and sounds. "In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;/But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud."[29]

The third tercet is typically ambiguous; there is an intentional double entendre here. On the one hand, the poet affirms that to capture the present entails using the eyes and ears as if they were physically part of the present scene, as if life and death were only physical. On the other hand, he

implies that one's eyes and ears are always partially detached, not susceptible to every nuance or sound, and that life and death are metaphysical. Because of the domination of the subjective self and the insidiousness of memory, objects are subtly altered in the mind, and all perception is past perception.

The carpenter seems to be a simple artisan, one of Stevens' personae, like the baker and butcher of Section XIII. The "fuchsia in a can," like William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow, is only an instance of what the carpenter's life depends on--imagination. The unrealized iridescences intuited from an actual flower can be realized only through the imagination, through art. The latter half of this section remains opaque. Sukenick gives the following interpretation: "His present is his imaginative elaboration of reality ('a carpenter's iridescences'), artificial ('wooden'), and is the model for those who would be men of the imagination ('astral apprentices,' those who learn to 'star-gaze,' so to speak)."[30] What is perhaps suggested here, then, is art in the raw, apprentice to a new reality. The last line suggests its contemporaneity and subjection to time, while "slapped up like a chest of tools" implies its crude yet functional quality.

In Section XIX, with the moon rising in the mind, we turn again to "imaginative transcripts" of New Haven, in which "public green" turns "private gray." Public reality becomes moon-blanched and unreal for the individual imagination. (Gray, color of ashes, usually represents decreation or

exhausted imagination in Stevens' chromatic symbolism.) Under the domination of the moon (rather than night, which nevertheless gives rise to it), the individual imagination comes into its own again and sheds over the public domain its private rays. In the light of common day, "the radial aspect" emanates from the sun and is more objective. Every century leans toward one of the two poles of reality or imagination, and evolves out of its own leaning its characteristic style and symbolism through which to order chaos. The section concludes by asking which is the dominant influence on our own time and place. That ours is only a "colony of a colony/Of colonies" suggests its dependent status, suspended between the poles of reality and imagination, themselves only the axes dividing chaos. A hieratic figure, a poetic seer who is both "rugged" (realistic) and "luminous" (imaginative), is beginning to record our sense of things, but his text as yet remains obscure.

With the coming of daylight on a particular day, imaginative versions of New Haven seem nebulous as clouds, and emotional tributes to it become incoherent. When day is absolute, imagination dwindles to nothing, leaving the town a neutral heap of unaccommodated matter.[31] Nevertheless, imaginative records of New Haven in the past remain, and the feelings its citizens cherished towards it in the past still haunt its present streets. These are likely to invade part of the consciousness of a man who sequesters himself away from the crowded streets. There, in his solitude, the "pure sphere" of a fresh and individual imagination may escape the "impure," the

stale, conventional imagination of the past and of the crowd. The pioneers of imagination are left with "everything to make," however. And the danger is that pure imagination will retreat into a hermitage out of all contact or desire for contact with reality, a narcosis of the will. Such a withdrawal can be only temporary, nonetheless. No man can evade for long his own will to master reality, nor the communal will--least of all, necessity, the primordial instinct so to do.

The remainder of Section XXI is extremely difficult to interpret. The "black shepherd's isle" symbolizes objective reality. The sound of the sea lapping its sides suggests, as is usual in Stevens' poetry, the ocean of phenomenal flux, "Black water breaking into reality."[32] The black shepherd, though somewhat Watteauesque--Stevens may have had in mind Watteau's "L'Embarcation pour l'île de Cythère"--is a slightly ominous figure. Frank Doggett suggests he is an "Orphic figure" representing "universal creative will." Hence, the "black shepherd's isle" is "the universal creative source," while "the other isle symbolizes the reflection of the world . . . within each mind."[33] The isle which lies opposite Cythera and is the antithesis of that land of heart's desire, a totally imaginary island, is one in which "the senses give and nothing take." It appears to represent the subjective self. A similar image of the self imprisoned within the body appears in "Montrachet-le-Jardin," where "night's undeciphered murmuring/Comes close to the prisoner's ear," delivering him from himself into reality.[34] The interpreter

of this stanza should note that three islands seem to be being compared: Cythera represents a sphere of pure imagination utterly divorced from reality; the "black shepherd's isle" represents reality, while the central island, "the object of the will, this place," must be the island of self. The two romanzas (ballads or songs) of imagination and reality finally mingle in our imaginative interpretation of the realm in which we live (whereas Cythera remains a realm in which we have never lived and shall never live). One can imagine Stevens being very pleased with the nonsense syllables he has derived from the French brouhaha, meaning noise. This onomatopoeic word yields "boo-ha," suggesting a cry of sorrow and one of joy rolled into one.

The search for reality is the search for god in a secular age. Professor Eucalyptus momentarily reappears to affirm how momentous this search is. While the philosopher objectifies the truths we discover subjectively, the poet does the opposite, infusing the subjective into the object. If the search for god is the search for reality, it is also the search for the source of being. It should be a daily searching of this world--not "the predicate of bright origin." That is to say, we do not descend from some higher sphere; our origin and reality are non-transcendent.[35] ("Predicate," in addition to its use as a grammatical term, means proclamation or affirmation.) "Creation is not renewed by images/Of lone wanderers." Creation was not a single event inaugurated by a single principle, but is eternal recreation between the two

interdependent principles of reality and imagination. Nor do we create new works of art by promulgating faded fictions. We do not wander lonely in this world, "trailing clouds of glory . . ./From God, who is our home," as Wordsworth would have it.

The image of the evening star shining "From the sleepy bosom of the real" seems, nevertheless, to be a most romantic image, not in the least realistic, nor particularly original.[36] It is intended to show the way in which the potential becomes actual, perhaps, but also to indicate that it is only one metaphor among many for "The most ancient light in the most ancient sky." (Again, it is suggested that the poet, though limited for subject to the things of this earth, may yet radically transform what he sees.)

Section XXIII uses the duality of day and night. Although it represents reality, the sun is described as "bodiless," because, as light source, it is immaterial. Sukenick suggests, and he is surely right, that the sun is called "the bodiless half" because "it is reality beyond the self, or body."[37] The duality of day and night also stands for that of life and death (the "single sleep" of line 9). In life, we are our "separate, several selves"; in death, we return to the original, undifferentiated clay from which we came. Even here, however, "disembodiments/Still keep occurring"--life continues to detach itself from the inert mass. The second and final tercets are somewhat difficult to interpret, but both concern the "wasted figurations" of imagination, lingering in the twilight between passing day

and oncoming darkness. The colors and texture of fading imagination are "effete green" and black and finespun cashmere. In line 18, the green ferns represent reality, while the "forms of farewell" lurking among them are the fading products of imagination.

I take the opening assertion of Section XXIV--"The consolations of space are nameless things"--to mean that we have still to name our consolations in our newly discovered reality.[38] Further, it is intrinsically impossible to name in any final way the joys of reality. Since the explosion of our image of an anthropomorphic god, we live in a new, starker reality, which remains, as yet, unaccommodating because of our starved imaginations. It is customary for Stevens to represent the infinite reality of which we are a part by the single word "space." Our self-created god was dynamited in the ripe reality of summer, when there is no need of otherworldly fictions. But the imagination, like nature, abhors a vacuum. It has become necessary for it to refill empty space. The religious crisis inevitably affected both "space and the self," both reality and the imagination. It renewed the world and ourselves in our own sight so that it is no longer possible to see either as we once saw them. On the contrary, it is essential now imaginatively to recolonize space. The baton is raised for the beginning ("Incomincia") of a new symphony, a new orchestration of real and imaginary from a town suspended between the poles of light and darkness--"poised at the horizon's dip."

In XXV, the poet is represented as constantly and jealously watched by life for any signs of betrayal. The "stair of glass" is one of Stevens' favored crystalline abstractions, a representation of life. It seems to owe something to Emerson's description of the poet who, like Lyncaeus, is able to see right through the earth, who "turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession."[39] Stevens' poet seems to be wandering up and down this stair of glass while life fixes him through it, as it were. The air may seem empty, but it is full of eyes watching, intent that the poet shall render an accurate description of life. Even at night, life, in the guise of an hidalgo (a minor Spanish nobleman), sits by the poet's bed, tuning its guitar. The syntax of lines 8 and 9 is typically ambiguous; it would appear, however, that life, without recognizable speech, strikes a note or two on its instrument disclosing its identity. In line 10, it is again unclear who the pronoun "him" refers to, whether to the poet or to life. Probably it is the poet who is constantly changing, while the abstract representation of life in the figure of the vigilant hidalgo remains constant. Or life itself may change, while its essence remains the same.

Stevens uses heraldic imagery to suggest how, in "isolated moments" which are nevertheless false--moments in which the poet feels himself temporarily abandoned by his realistic double, playing its own unimaginable music--"The

commonplace [becomes] a rumpling of blazons." Blazons are armorial bearings, heraldic descriptions or proclamations; in this context, it is easiest to visualize them as colorful standards or clarions with pennants attached. The abstract, highly stylized details and vivid primary colors of heraldry turn the real into something highly unreal. Similarly, the skeletal tree of reality looks unreal hung with scarlet fruit. However, the attempt to abstract the essence of life, its representation as a hidalgo, is also unreal. A hatching is another heraldic figure: hatching is shading with parallel strokes to represent different colors. As such, it is a way of representing "the anonymous color of the universe" or the dominant, unapproachable blank at its center. Hatching is also used in its other sense, of something invented.[40] Even reality is something invented in the mind, something searched for its "possibleness."

The following section presents with sensuous sound and seductive visual effects the imagination's indulgences. The tone would seem to be pejorative from the use of the adverb "facilely," yet the fourth tercet seems anything but pejorative. This is a beautiful presentation of the earth as "inamorata," seen, perhaps, in a more imaginative time and place than New Haven in the present. In such a time, imagination seemed to be like a fountain flowing eternally between earth and heaven. Having discovered the earth to be our only home, origin and destination, we have lost such romantic perspectives (lines 13-15). We have sloughed off the visions of the

"purple-plated past"--purple and blue, red, gold, and lapis are all colors symbolic of imagination in this passage. (Lines 6 through 9 are phonetically brilliant.) The final lines present an earthly yet inhuman voice, like the hidalgo's, which both grits and soothes the ear. The oxymoron is deliberate, but disturbing; it reminds us that "a savage assuagement cries"--or whispers--"with a savage voice." While harsh and grating, it appeases us because it is the voice of reality.

The scholar of Section XXVII is a figure resembling, if not identical with, Professor Eucalyptus. "The Ruler of Reality" is man, and recalls Emerson's figure of Man Thinking. His Segmenta are (like Stevens' Adagia) epigrammatic observations on the nature of perception. The "Ruler of Reality" who is "consort of the Queen of Fact" is imagination wedded to reality. This ruler's imperium is unreal insofar as it represents the metamorphosis of matter by the mind. As in XXIII, the sun symbolizes the fully imagined reality of day, while the Queen of Fact's empery, strangely, begins with the return to darkness. (It is necessary to note that Stevens more frequently uses day and night antithetically to represent the simple duality of reality and imagination, respectively.) By being itself, yet constantly in touch with its superior consort, reality, the imagination rules its world and is able to dispense with the imaginative symbols of the past.

A homely, uninspiring still life demonstrates the consequence of the philosophic proposition that reality exists

in the mind. Since Stevens does not share the Idealist view that reality exists only in the mind, "it follows that/Real and unreal are two in one." Further illustrations follow. Sukenick deftly interprets lines 5 to 9 thus: "New Haven exists in the mind whether as one imagines it before arrival, or as one sees it after arrival. Things apprehended through the imagination, whether on a postcard, in darkness, in description, through hindered vision, or in conversation, co-exist in the mind with things apprehended clearly and immediately by the senses. Thus, since reality registers in the mind exactly like imaginative experience, all experience may be considered 'an endlessly elaborating poem.'"[41] The truth is that nothing is directly perceived--all is recomposed and therefore recreated in the mind. So it is that the theory of poetry becomes the theory of life, since in experience, as in art, the raw data supplied by experience are made over by the imagination. The "intricate evasions of as" refers to the manner in which metaphor, though seeking a more intimate relationship with reality, is nevertheless continually evading it. Hence life is lived between the seen and the unseen, the real and the unreal, the imagination creating its own worlds on the pattern of the one it inhabits.

The three final sections of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven are fine. Section XXIX originally ended the poem in its abridged form. It is a delightful demonstration of the power of words to recreate landscape, and of the prior power of outer environment over inner. The tropic landscape is evoked

in all its brilliant color and sound and vivid nuance, nuance that escapes detection by the capable but clumsy sailors who visit it from overseas. In "the land of the lemon trees," yellow is not one tone but two; it is yellow-blue or yellow-green, depending on the degree of imaginative intensity with which one sees it. (Reality and imagination are almost indistinguishable, however, as always in Stevens' tropic landscapes.)

"The land of the elm trees" is probably Holland, in any case a northern land with "weather by Franz Hals," its large ruddy inhabitants the antithesis of the lithe, dark-skinned rollers of r's "in the land of the citrons." The contrast is one between a land of autumnal abundance, of recurrent seasons and "brushy clouds," and one of perennial blue skies loud with "the mic-mac of mocking birds." The speech of the northern mariners is as imprecise and clodlike as that of the southerners (probably Spaniards) is precise and fluent. "Bronzed hard" by the "blond atmosphere" of the south, the visiting sailors can still describe it only in terms of the environment they come from. Though they recognize it as the inverse or antipodes of their homeland, they are reduced to describing its exotic flora and fauna in their own sober language. Thus, a choice of adjective, a change in vocabulary can change the nature of what is described, causing a permanent alteration in the nature of a landscape greater than the difference of light or shade.

The penultimate stanza describes the onset of winter and its symbolic significance in magnificent language. "The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen." Animals have withdrawn into their lairs; the wind whistles and hums in muddy ponds which no longer reflect the sky. However, it is not a moment for nostalgia, for the "cold volume of forgotten ghosts." Winter, like old age, is an exposure of "the basic slate," the bare rock of life that summer's foliage hid from view. It is not a time for farewell but for faring forth. "The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,/Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks." Thus Cézanne painted pine trees. The attention that in summer was drawn to the summit of the tree, that eyed the high peak of existence, is now focussed on its roots, and becomes itself a "gusty grappling with rocks." The air assumes elemental force, washed clear of summer's and autumn's abundance, the reality of which seems now like something imagined. Clearness is restored, but it is not transparence, not a view into the bottomless abyss. If this is the fecund minimum of existence, it is still existence, not nothingness. Like a many-faceted diamond, the winter landscape comprises the simultaneous vision of it of "hundred of eyes." Its observers are not yet quite nothing themselves, not snow men, though they come close to beholding "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."[42]

What the poet seeks to capture in the final stanza are the most subtle and elusive meanings of reality as he

perceives it--"the little reds/Not often realized," the lightest drum taps, the kernel of meaning beneath the outer shell. As Stevens affirms in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "Poetry is a finikin thing of air,"[43] as delicate and shifting in its nuances as the reality it tries to seize on the wing. "The general fidget" to record reality, whether in plain or fancy representations, has littered the world with trophies, from busts of Constantine to photographs of the late President. Philosophers, poets, and diarists must go on practicing to get their experience right, for, in this casual litter of memories, "words of the world are the life of the world." The "spectrum of violet" represents the range of imagination needed to grasp and do justice to shifting reality.

Reality, which has been growing progressively more tenuous throughout the poem, assumes in the final section its least substantial form. An Ordinary Evening in New Haven comes full circle in a way that neither The Man with the Blue Guitar nor Notes toward a Supreme Fiction does. Frank Kermode does not agree with this assessment. He says An Ordinary Evening is "full of superb trouvailles, the fortuitous caught up into and sustained in meditation." However, "One is never quite heartily admitted to the town or given a share in the fables. The persistence of its metaphysics tends to reduce the brilliance it ought to have as kin . . . of the Supreme Fiction; it is not quite living in a physical world."[44] This final charge, as has been indicated, is one that can justly be made

against all three of Stevens' lengthy meditations on the interdependence of reality and imagination. However, An Ordinary Evening in New Haven organizes its metaphysical speculations more consistently than The Man with the Blue Guitar or Notes toward a Supreme Fiction. In addition, it never purports to be able to put us directly in touch with the town or to give us a plain version of it. The final tercet looks back to the poem's opening one, as we discover that what the poet has been trying to seize all along "may be a shade that traverses/A dust, a force that traverses a shade." In its perpetual shifts and fluctuations, "this endlessly elaborating poem" reflects in its own form the "edgings and inchings" of particles of matter seeking their own final form. Like the poem, however, life has no final destination. It will go on renewing itself, and reality and imagination will go on embracing each other forever.

Footnotes

[1]In a letter addressed to Bernard Heringman dated May 3, 1949--Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 636. (Hereafter referred to as Letters.)

[2]Selected Poems of Wallace Stevens, edited with an introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1959), pp. 145-52. Morse dates the poem December, 1949, but it is not at all clear that Stevens had completed the thirty-one sections by that date. In Letters, p. 636, Stevens says that he started work on the poem in March, 1949.

It is interesting to note what a different effect is created by ending the poem with Section XXIX rather than with XXXI. If one concludes with XXIX, the stress is on the difference in appearances wrought by language, and the effect is almost comic. Ending with XXXI, the stress is on the essential nature of reality; the final tercet, which is very fine indeed, undercuts whatever solidity the poem appears to have had, and causes a terrifying but exhilarating metaphysical shudder. It concludes the poem in a way that XXIX, delightful as it is, could never pretend to do.

[3]Coleridge on Imagination (New York, 1935), p. 57. Both descriptions seem to jibe well with Stevens' "plain version," though Coleridge's Primary Imagination is far less restrictive: it refers to the way in which we all perceive the world, with some imaginative coloring, but without the ability to transform or recreate it through description or expression.

[4]Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), p. 503. (Hereafter referred to as C.P.)

[5]See Section XXVII of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. The image of "a great bosom, beard and being, alive with age" may well remind us of "the hero's head, large eye/And bearded bronze" of The Man with the Blue Guitar, II; or of the thinker of the first idea, major man, or the MacCullough of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction. In this poem, too, such images represent man realizing his potential imaginatively to transform his world. There is a sense in which all the poem's personae--the living statue of Section I, the "bearer-being of the idea" of Section II, the poet-hero of midnight of Section III, the similar figures of walker and poet in Sections XI and XII, the figure like Ecclesiast in Section XIX, and the thinker and scholar of Sections XX, XXI and XXVII, the ephebe of XIII and Professor Eucalyptus (XIV-XV)--are related.

[6]Frank Doggett suggests the image of beau mont derives from Santayana's Life of Reason, in which he compares the philosophy of Parmenides to a heap of stones crowned by a transcendent image. Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore, 1966), p. 130.

[7]Doggett offers this interpretation: "The plainness that rejects the life of the imagination is a savagery because it is close to animal reflexes and animal somnolence. . . . The life of practical action finds its 'diviner opposite' in the life of thought and art, in the whole range of the abstract or fictive." Ibid., p. 162.

[8]C. Roland Wagner, in his article "A Central Poetry," reprinted in Marie Borroff's Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 74, suggests this might be Stevens' answer to T. S. Eliot's Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, who says in The Cocktail Party, "Disillusion can become itself an illusion/If we rest in it."

[9]Further light is shed on this division in Stevens' essay, "Effects of Analogy," where he says: "The corporeal world exists as the common denominator of the incorporeal worlds of its inhabitants. If there are people who live only in the corporeal world, enjoying the wind and the weather and supplying standards of normality, there are other people who are not so sure of the wind and the weather and who supply standards of abnormality." See The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1965), p. 118. (Hereafter referred to as N.A.)

Merle E. Brown insists that Stevens' chief preoccupation in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven as a whole, as in The Man with the Blue Guitar and Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, is "the need of the exceptional man and of the ordinary man to live in harmony with each other." "Concordia Discors in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," American Literature, XXXIV (May, 1962), 246. This, however, is only a minor theme in all three poems; the main theme in all three is the interaction of reality and imagination.

[10]Daniel Fuchs's reading--"The eye is 'inexquisite' because, without imagination, it sees plain things in their inexquisiteness"--contradicts the preceding line, line 9--"Everything as unreal as real can be." The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, 1963), p. 130.

[11]Opus Posthumous, edited with an introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 160. (Hereafter referred to as O.P.)

[12]It Must Be Abstract, II. 13-14, C.P., p. 382.

[13]Ronald Sukenick says of Alpha and Omega, "each considers himself the faultless ('immaculate') interpreter of life. The difference between them is that between an end and the way to it." Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York & London, 1967), p. 171.

[14]Ibid.

[15]See "Imagination as Value," N.A., pp. 143-45.

[16]Modern man tricks himself out in the colors of a single insufficient creed or else in the garb of a series of passing dogmatic vogues. Stevens seems to imply this, and that thus he loses his capacity for adaptation, change, and self-concealment.

[17]Musing the Obscure, p. 172.

[18]See Esthétique du Mal, I, C.P., p. 314. These lines from "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers" suggest the immediacy of sensual experience without symbolic clairvoyance:

> The crude and jealous formlessness
> Became the form and the fragrance of things
> Without clairvoyance, close to her.

(C.P., p. 247.)

[19]The line comes from "Credences of Summer," II, C.P., p. 373.

[20]Again, Sukenick explains this well: "While the static moon is imprisoned by the change which surrounds it, our changing spirit is at home in permanent change."

[21]The letter is dated April 22, 1949--Letters, p. 634.

[22]The Man with the Blue Guitar, XIX.11-12.

[23]"Each such symbol of the spirit, in the absence of the reality it once represented, is an imaginative light that shines only at night when the rest of reality is not in evidence, and exists only in the mind as an idea, a 'transparency' through which we may see reality." Thus Sukenick explains lines 3-5 in Musing the Obscure, p. 173.

[24]This is cited by Frank Kermode in his Wallace Stevens (New York, 1961), p. 109 as found in Schilpp's edition of Santayana's Philosophy (1940), p. 273. It is also mentioned in Frank Doggett's Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 165.

[25]"The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," C.P., p. 222.

[26]
> Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman, day on night, the imagined
>
> On the real.

"It Must Change," Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, IV.

[27]In Letters, p. 699, Stevens identifies this as one of his coinages.

[28]In contrasting the Oklahoman with the Italian blue, Stevens seems to be comparing the new imagination with the old, the raw and earthy (see the reference to Oklahoma in "Earthy Anecdote") with the spiritual, finely polished, but somewhat faded (see the Italian fresco in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, II.1).

[29]"Of the Surface of Things," C.P., p. 57.

[30]Musing the Obscure, p. 178.

[31]"Thus the imagination does nothing to transform the town, which remains inert like the residuum of a chemical reaction, a 'neuter' losing its form ('shedding shapes') in a dominant absolute within which it loses its identity." Ibid., p. 179.

[32]The line comes from "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," IV.

[33]Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 185.
Sukenick's interpretation is diametrically opposed to Doggett's and to mine, since he posits the black shepherd and his forms as "the imagination and its creations," and the other isle as an island of the senses devoid of imagination. (I fail to see how one can altogether separate imagination from the senses.) Musing the Obscure, p. 180.

[34]C.P., p. 261.

[35]In a letter to Harvey Breit dated August 8, 1942, Stevens refers to a pamphlet written by Judge Hasbrouck on the Dutch Reformed Church, beginning, "When Spinoza's great logic went searching for God it found Him in a predicate of substance." Stevens comments, "If a lawyer as eminent as Judge Hasbrouck

went to church because it made it possible for him to touch . . . the very predicate of substance, do you think he was anything but a poet?" Letters, p. 415.

[36]Stevens' poetry is full of stars; they fascinate him in much the same way, and for much the same reason, as they do Keats. They are symbols of fixity and permanence, seemingly beyond mutability, and it is for this reason that we aspire to their condition of unearthly radiance and permanence. For Keats, the star, like the soul, is always associated with breathing, with animated breath. So in the sonnet "Bright Star," he associates the star with the rising and falling of his beloved's breast in an attempt to unite the immutable, immortal, and unearthly with the mutable, mortal, and earthly. It seems to me that Stevens is doing much the same thing in the twenty-second section of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. (There are other poems, of course, where Stevens denies absolutely any connection between matter and spirit as symbolized in the relation of humanity to the stars--as in "Nuances of a Theme by Williams": "Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses/You in its own light." C.P., p. 18.)

[37]Musing the Obscure, p. 181.

[38]According to Frank Doggett, the opening assertion of Section XXIV is a contradiction of Boethius, to whom it is an allusion--Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 143. Boethius insisted on naming all the consolations of philosophy and personifying them in endless detail.

[39]The passage from Emerson is to be found in "The Poet," Works, III, 25, cited by William K. Wimsatt & Cleanth Brooks in their chapter on Symbolism in their Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York, 1967), p. 586. In addition, Frank Doggett, in his article "Wallace Stevens' Later Poetry," suggests that the stair represents existence, the balcony present experience, and that "outsensing distances" means remembering or imagining beyond the present. Journal of English Literary History, XXV (March 1958), 137-54.

[40]Hatchings are also random shafts sunk for mines. Such a reading also seems appropriate--a sapping of the abyss--though it is perhaps unusually ominous for Stevens.

[41]Musing the Obscure, p. 184.

[42]"The Snow Man," C.P., p. 10; in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," we find a similar presentation of the winter scene:

> The winter wind blew in an empty place--
> There was that difference between the and an,
> The difference between himself and no man . . .

Merle E. Brown, in her poorly reasoned and worse written article, claims that Section XXX demonstrates how "what is not is as real . . . as what is," and how "the essential Is-ness . . . is the immediate imaginative identity of Is and Is Not." (Unfortunately, this kind of writing is typical of much Stevens' criticism.) "Concordia Discors in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," 263.

[43]Section XXXII, C.P., p. 155. It seems worth noting that a secondary meaning of the word "finikin" is a kind of pigeon. Stevens' poetry abounds in birds, particularly pigeons--see "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," XII, for instance.

[44]Wallace Stevens, p. 111. Kermode finds Notes toward a Supreme Fiction Stevens' most impressive poem.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

Stevens' major poems were written in the following order: "Sunday Morning" (1915); "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," (1918); The Comedian as the Letter C (1921-22); The Man with the Blue Guitar (1937); Notes toward a Supreme Fiction (1942); Esthétique du Mal (1944), and An Ordinary Evening in New Haven (1949). Thus, these poems span almost thirty-five years of Stevens' career. In thinking of them, however, they appear to fall into two groups which cut across chronological sequence. "Sunday Morning" and "Le Monocle" bear stylistic resemblances, and I would place with them Esthétique du Mal, composed, surprisingly, twenty-six years later. Though Esthétique is far longer than "Sunday Morning" or "Le Monocle," these three poems are shorter than the remaining four, and display a fairly similar stanzaic structure and principle of organization. "Sunday Morning" is the most lucid and unified of the three poems; "Le Monocle" and Esthétique comprise poetic mosaics of vivid verses on a variety of themes (and, in the case of Esthétique, in a variety of styles) which are strung together like abbreviated sonnet sequences. Both poems employ a style more obscure, more parabolic, than that of "Sunday Morning."

All the poems studied are, of course, sets of variations on a theme or on a group of related themes. Thus, "Sunday Morning" meditates the problem of belief, "Le Monocle" the mutability of life and art, but particularly of love, and Esthêtique du Mal comprises a series of meditations on evil, suffering, fate, and death. Among the longer poems, The Comedian treats successive adjustments between self and world; The Man with the Blue Guitar, examining the interaction of reality with imagination, handles the role of poetry and the poet in society; Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, reverting to the problem of belief, formulates the specifications for a Supreme Fiction, and, finally An Ordinary Evening in New Haven seeks to define reality. The longer poems really constitute poetic disquisitions on the nature of poetry and the problems of Stevens' poetics. "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle," and Esthêtique du Mal are distinguished from them by more concrete subject matter and more luxuriant style. Though "Le Monocle" and Esthêtique are more discontinuous than "Sunday Morning," they appear more compressed and tightly organized than the longer poems. Even so, as has been shown in these chapters, the ordering of Stevens' stanzas, from "Sunday Morning" to An Ordinary Evening in New Haven is essentially haphazard. "Sunday Morning" is relatively integrated, but after it one looks in vain for a poem similarly unified.

A survey of these seven poems reveals how comparatively few themes Stevens has compared with the rich variety of his styles. Since Stevens was forty-four when his first volume of poetry was published--the original version of "Sunday Morning"

was published when he was thirty-eight--it might well be argued that he was mature at the beginning of his career. Subsequently, rather than maturing, says A. Alvarez, Stevens clarified his poetic preoccupations and methods of expression.[1] One might well argue the appropriateness of the word "clarification," if what is intended by it is elucidation, for the later poetry becomes increasingly difficult and obscure. If, however, the meaning purification is intended, this is appropriate. In his later poems, Stevens grows increasingly preoccupied with abstraction and transparence. His poems become more overtly doctrinal, and his basic ideas are presented, though cryptically, more austerely and nakedly than in the earlier poems. It has been observed how Stevens' poems, as they become longer, become also looser, more repetitive and discursive, and less unified. The Comedian as the Letter C, as Stevens' only excursion into disguised autobiographical narrative, stands somewhat apart from the rest of his work. The three later meditations on the nature of poetry, however, demonstrate how Stevens' variations-on-a-theme become ever more improvisatory and abstract. As Babette Deutsch says, revery "gaily illumined by metaphor gave place to overly abstract revery about the meaning of metaphor."[2]

Compared with the colorful, sensuous opulence of "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle," and The Comedian, the later poetry, with the exception of Esthétique, seems an arid doctrinal desert, dotted by occasional oases recalling the poet's former luxuriance. The Man with the Blue Guitar strikes one as particularly sterile. This poem marks the

watershed between the exoticism of Harmonium and the arid public verse of the thirties. The Man with the Blue Guitar is written in a new stripped style composed of plain unrhymed couplets. It presents a startling contrast to the highly decorated blank verse of The Comedian. But perhaps one may be forgiven for finding the new style as grating in its drabness as The Comedian was cloying in its fussy preciosity, its tedious euphuism, and its diffuse, unrelenting irony. For it has to be admitted that the surfaces of The Comedian and "Le Monocle," with their gorgeous impasto, really distract--and sometimes detract--from what each poem has to say. Crispin's flaunting style fails ever to reflect his changes of vision, particularly his embracement of plain prose realism. He continues to be a précieux ridicule, from beginning to end of the poem, on the evidence of his style. Drawn out to such length, the sameness and self-conscious mannerism of The Comedian grows wearisome, and one becomes far from "breathless to attend each quirky turn." "Le Monocle," on the other hand, covering its "basal slate" with some of Stevens' most ravishing forms and dazzling colors, contains some of the poet's most exquisite verse. But its parts are more impressive than the whole--although this poem appears orderly and unified by comparison with Esthétique du Mal.

The Man with the Blue Guitar is, I believe, the least satisfactory of Stevens' long poems, although it is successful in parts. The thirties are generally considered to represent Stevens' poetic doldrums. It was during this period that he

was trying manfully--if not particularly engagingly--to grapple with social themes, to concern himself with the man-in-the-street. The two volumes Ideas of Order (1936) and The Man with the Blue Guitar (1937), while they contain between them some valuable poems, still represent Stevens' poetic nadir.

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction is the most impressive of Stevens' long poems. Thanks to its intricate structure, it is more orderly than The Man with the Blue Guitar. Though superficially tightly organized, however, Notes, as has been shown, does not possess an intrinsically dialectical structure or unity. It will scarcely support some of the grandiloquent claims made in its behalf by other critics. It is inspired, like "Sunday Morning," by what appears to be perhaps Stevens' most fertile, as well as his most problematical theme--the problem of belief. Notes provides a blueprint for the supreme fiction, and endeavors to adlib towards such a fiction, a belief as valid as the idea of God. Naturally, it does not arrive at this, since for Stevens there is no final truth beyond nature, no goal beyond life. But the poem represents a heroic and moving effort. Some of its transitions are casual, and, in the cause of fortuitousness and spontaneity, some rather crude, plodding meditation is indulged, but there are surpassingly lucid and beautiful passages in the poem.

An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, the last of the long poems, seeks to define reality, and does so as "a thing seen by the mind," the world shot through by the spirit so that it becomes "a shade that traverses/A dust, a force that traverses

a shade." This poem demonstrates perhaps better than the others what Howard Nemerov means when he calls Stevens "the only truly modern poet of our time."[3] For in An Ordinary Evening, reality is pursued on the wing and pulverized or atomized in the mind. The poem realizes a fluid world like that described by modern physics, a world of flickering sub-atomic particles, or, as Stevens puts it, of "Flickings from finikin to fine finikin." The style of the poem is not, as Stevens claimed, plain or ordinary. It has a certain sober elegance, but this is imaginatively bespangled.

Stevens' later long poems present, as a whole, somewhat ghostly acts of the mind, which become increasingly abstract, ingrown, and unintelligible. This is partly because one of the prices Stevens has had to pay as a poet has been the loss of a universally accepted tradition or body of belief on which to base his poems. Even for purposes of denial, such a generally accepted system of beliefs is an invaluable poetic stock-in-trade. This is demonstrated by "Sunday Morning," in which conventional piety is foiled, but which proclaims a new religion in terms derived from the old. And, as Cunningham says, some of the poem's deep feeling seems to emanate from what is being denied.

If Stevens were a poet content--as so many contemporary poets are--to write poems drawing on personal experience, then raising this to a generalized, impersonal level, the loss of traditional beliefs would be less of a problem. To write poetry based on subjective experience requires no other stock-in-trade

but that experience itself and the ability to universalize it. (Here, again, a poet may run into the problem of the loss of universal beliefs.) But Stevens' temperament not only forbade his writing personal poetry, it also prevented his writing poetry centered on the human figure.

Stevens' poetic ambitions were, nevertheless, of the highest. He wanted to write poems of the earth that would sustain men in a time when all religious beliefs and values seemed to have been swept away. How was Stevens to do this? There was no body of belief to which he could appeal. Instead, he had to forge a new faith, and he discovered that this could not be done wholly negatively by relying on and then denying ideas drawn from Christian theology.

Stevens found himself in a difficult position, poetically bankrupt as it were, needing to create a new currency with whose counters he might expound his own mystic sense of the essential intercourse of reality and imagination. Other poets have, of course, found themselves in a similar impasse. Stevens is in some ways a poetic pioneer, but he did not, like Blake and Yeats, for example, evolve a whole new symbology. A poet's symbology seems to be the noeud vital of his comprehensibility--both of his accessibility and of his comprehensiveness. Stevens' symbolism is based on nature rather than personal experience; his symbols are neither perfectly congruent nor particularly deeply felt. Though Stevens' symbolism, as indicated, is reasonably consistent, and although it has a naturalistic basis, Stevens does not

deploy his symbols in a natural manner, letting their meanings sink in, and reinforcing them by harmonizing individual images with their surrounding contexts. Thus it is that Stevens' images, while setting up certain reverberations among themselves, awake little public response, arouse few echoes in the public mind. In addition, certain of Stevens' images--for example, Stevens' hero, his man of glass, his major man, his ephebe, his fat girl, and his fluent mundo--can never seem more than willed, arbitrary, and private.

The comparison of Stevens with Blake and Yeats is instructive. Both Blake and Yeats had radically new visions to impart and began, like Stevens, with a poetic exchequer that was bankrupt. Both Blake and Yeats proved able to invent whole new symbologies which, esoteric and difficult as they are, provide the framework for powerfully moving and intelligible poetry. (Blake had the advantage of being able to turn Christianity upside-down in order to express his own mystic vision. Yeats had the advantage of roots in a living folklore, Celtic mythology, and an imagination open to supernatural communications.) But in both cases, the poetry comes first, the system second. No one would ever read Blake's Prophetic Books or Yeats's A Vision had they not first been roused to do so by the impact of their poetry. More important, to comprehend the greater body of either poet's work, it is not essential to delve into their prose writings. Symbolism in itself is important, but, in the last analysis, what will determine its comprehensibility is how it is used.

What makes Stevens' poetry so difficult is not so much an absence of system or symbology as a lack of universality due to other factors. In the first place, Stevens' poetry suffers from an incoherence due to no more hidden cause than his careless attitude to poetry. Had he drafted and revised his poems as Yeats did, who knows what he might have achieved? Secondly, as has been shown, Stevens tends increasingly to use particulars not in their own right, but to illustrate general points. Some of these generalizations are so abstract as to be nebulous; the particulars by which they are embodied are usually emblematic images, having a single rigid signification which is often not that appearing on the surface. The root association may be quite private. Why, for instance, should the image of a cat always signify reality and that of a rabbit imagination? Why should a cock be an emblem of evolutionary process? But these are their respective meanings in Stevens' poetry.[4] Rarely do these animals appear for their own sake. Moving from the early to the late verse, we note Stevens' growing tendency to squeeze many heterogeneous and ill-assorted objects together in rapid succession. Whereas in the early poetry Stevens is inclined to let the poetic context determine the selection and range of his imagery, his later poems are wrenched apart by too many dissociated images.

Stevens' symbols would be more comprehensible if he would allow them poetic elbow room and time to make their effects. This would entail a more economical method of presenting images, a greater concentration on individual ones,

and, generally, more conscious and painstaking craftsmanship. An illustration will help. Stevens' chief poetic theme is the mind's accommodation to nature, the relation between the earthly paradise and what Yeats once called the heaven of man's mind. Yeats, too, sometimes treats this theme, as he does in "Sailing to Byzantium," for example. It is rarely that Stevens achieves the concentration of expression Yeats achieves--here as elsewhere--through focussing on a few powerful, cohesive images: the dying generations at their sensual song; the scarecrow figure familiarized by many of Yeats's poems; the sages of the gold mosaic who are to help the poet make of his soul a golden bird to sing to the inhabitants of the realm of being of that world of becoming he has left. If we compare with this one of Stevens' finer poems exemplifying the mind's relationship to nature, we will discover certain essential differences. "The Idea of Order at Key West" is a highly wrought poem and compares well with "Sailing to Byzantium." (Of course, Stevens cannot even envisage sailing to Byzantium; he must remain in this world. The real and imaginary worlds are not separated, but superimposed.) "The Idea of Order at Key West" is unusual for Stevens because, though repetitive, it is most economical in its imagery. There are only two major images--the singer and the sea. The meaning of the relationship between them is elucidated through incremental repetition of the images. But, comparing "The Idea of Order" with "Sailing to Byzantium,"

we surely find Yeats's poem to be, in some way, more moving than Stevens'. I believe this is because, though it ends on an unearthly note, it expresses itself, as Yeats habitually does, in human terms. The poem focuses on the figure of the old man, yearning to move into the world of the spirit. Stevens' singer, on the other hand, like all his personae, is something of a device, not a human being, but a way of representing the human imagination. She is theatrical as she strides along the shore pitting her own histrionics against the ocean's. We sense that the imaginative pressure behind her is not so great as that behind Yeats's scarecrow.

Indeed, if we examine Stevens' use of personae from "Sunday Morning" to An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, we find these figures becoming more and more shadowy devices. The woman in "Sunday Morning" carries on a dialogue with the poet; she provides one of the poem's voices and has something both cogent and poignant to say. But the uncle of "Le Monocle" is the sketchiest of pegs on which to hang this poem's meditations. And Crispin is a cipher, a puppet, not a full-bodied figure. The guitarist of The Man with the Blue Guitar provides a kind of visual center. But in Notes and An Ordinary Evening, there is a whole gallery of figures, little more than puzzling names, who appear and disappear without really contributing anything--perspective, voice, or understanding--to these poems. How much does the gentleman writing letters home from Naples do for Esthétique du Mal? The ephebe, the MacCullough, major man, Nanzia Nunzio, Ozymandias, Canon Aspirin and his sister, and

Professor Eycalyptus contribute even less to Notes and An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. If we wish to see how much lucidity has been lost between the poetry of Stevens' middle and late periods, we might compare "The Idea of Order at Key West" to, for example, the fourth section of "It Must Give Pleasure" in Notes. This is the ceremonial hymn between the Captain and the Maiden Bawda, intended, too, to represent the wedding of mind to world. Its cryptic counters are scarcely intelligible even to the Stevens initiate.

In general, writers may take several different ways out of the cultural dilemma posed by the loss of a tradition. Some--like Joyce, Yeats, and Graves--make their work intelligible by using some form of mythology as an underpinning, whether Greek or Roman or Celtic. Others rely on the archetypal symbolism of Jung. Still others, building on personal experience, try to evolve a restricted symbolism of their own that may be made publicly accessible through repeated and careful use. Some adopt a combination of two or even all three of these approaches. Yeats did, for instance, and he was successful in creating a significant and powerful body of poetry which found, comparatively speaking, a large audience. Stevens, adopting an approach half archetypal, half private, has not been so successful. His symbolism, when comprehensibly rooted in the natural world, fails to engage the popular mind because it is so inhuman.

Let us recapitulate Stevens' excellences and defects in order to see what his poetry can and cannot give, and to assess

his stature as a poet. I believe Stevens' is a great imagination unaccompanied by a great sensibility or a large temperament. In The Necessary Angel, he distinguishes between the two, and endorses Cézanne's proclamation that the artist should be true to his vision, however large or small.[5] Stevens' subject is nature, a subject of enormous scope, though it has not, perhaps, the potential, the popularity, or the urgency of the subject with which he strove throughout his career increasingly to engage himself--that of human nature, of man individually and in the mass.

Stevens' incapacity to bring people into his poetry is correctly pointed out as his greatest defect,[6] but it seems senseless, beyond noting and regretting this, to castigate any poet for not writing poetry that is beyond his scope. When Stevens tried, in mid-career, to take man as his subject, he got no further than "a hero's head . . . but not a man." Ultimately, it is useless to quarrel with a poet's temperament because it is, as Stevens said, a "given," "the unalterable necessity/Of being this unalterable animal." Stevens was surely right in saying that the poet could do little, if anything, to alter his innate sense of the world, a sense which dictates his subject matter.[7]

Stevens' poetry appears inhuman not only because of the absence of people in his landscapes but also because his poetry is lacking in human sympathy. Like Emerson, Stevens appears to have had no real conception of evil, or therefore

of pain. He is not nearly as successful as Blake or Yeats--who also have their inhuman aspects--in encompassing evil and incorporating it into his poetic universe. In Esthétique du Mal, he views it with the "politest helplessness," and this is his only concentrated study of the subject. For the most part, he seems to view evil with blithe unconcern. In commenting on the work of a young poet, he wrote: "A bird singing in the sun is the same thing as a dog barking in the dark."[8] But they are not the same--even when viewed from an Olympian perspective. Blake does not claim that his tiger and his lamb are the same, though he persuades us that both are antithetical and necessary companions in our universe. The hardening in the hearts of Blake and Yeats seems a willed, necessary thing; the poems that express it seem to have earned it and to be validated by others that show an overwhelming compassion. Stevens' indifference to pain and evil--pain is human, and we are eventually saved from it by the inhuman, by death, is what he says, in effect--seems part of a perspective too remote to be human. Or part of a temperament in which something vital is lacking.

As one reviewer remarks, Stevens' letters are "the most passionless letters I have ever read by a major writer--they are almost as devoid of emotion as they are of humour." This is true: they are utterly devoid of passion, even of simple human warmth. And, although the poetry is full of humor, the correspondence is not. I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with this reviewer when he concludes that

Stevens' Letters suggest "something missing in the man which, cumulatively, is faintly depressing."[9] Indeed, it is more than faintly depressing.

Stevens is, as several critics point out, essentially a comic poet. But even his comedy tends to be inhuman. There is a meditation on suicide in the Letters which is extraordinarily detached; it produces its frisson and makes its point:

> Somehow, in this season, I like to get my pipe going well, and meditate on suicide. It is such splendid melancholy, and, mixed with a little beer and whiskey --divine. If only one could look in at the window when they found one's body-- one's blood and brains all over the pillow. How terrible the simple books would look--and the chairs and the curtains so carefully drawn! How empty, for a moment, the lawns would seem,-- the Sunday twittering of birds! How impotent all the people! Such a death is a death to everything-- Then one would tap on the window and laugh and say, "It is all a mistake. Let me come in again. I know how foolish it all is. But what is one to do?"[10]

One is to live out the whole meaningless charade, sustaining oneself on the projections one's imagination can make against the "hilarious dark."

Stevens is not really an optimist, but he refuses to be tragic. "To have nothing to say and to say it in a tragic manner is not the same thing as to have something to say," he observes.[11] He shares the comedian's acceptance of life, of its bare facts, and with these always in mind, contrives to transcend them in his imagination. He would have approved Ramon Fernandez when he said, "The courage of the intelligence

does not constitute a refusal of the tragic, but represents a utilization of the tragic. . ."[12] Stevens contrives to revel in chaos and to apprehend orders that harmonize, without violating, meaningless reality. As Howard Nemerov puts it, Stevens may be said "to have found his artistic life still where he found his profession, in the investigation of surety claims."[13] The imperfect being our paradise, the lifelong project is to wrest order from chaos through the delight that "lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds."[14]

What Stevens' poetry can and does give in generous measure is exquisite sensuous pleasure. Even its inhumanity becomes, in the finest poems, an asset, exhibiting a certain strength and fearlessness in facing the essential meaninglessness and nothingness at the heart of things. As Stevens said, "The mind with metaphysical affinities has a dash when it deals with reality that the purely realistic mind never has because the purely realistic mind never experiences any passion for reality."[15] Stevens' imagination was so powerful, one feels, that he must have experienced from time to time those "fallings from us, vanishings" which Wordsworth records, and it was no doubt these, the tremendous abstractive energy of his mind, that caused him to fling himself on reality with such constant longing. What passion there is in Stevens' poems is a passion for reality, for a nature recognized to be devoid of human sympathy or meaning--but perhaps all the more beautiful for that.

Stevens' feeling for nature is therefore thoroughly fresh, modern, and vital. Perhaps it is as original as Wordsworth's was. "To talk about nature in Wordsworth's way was at the turn of the nineteenth century to be at the forefront of thought, to take into account the science, philosophy, and psychology of the age, its religious skepticism, the French Revolution, the problem of the modern analytic intellect as the destroyer of feeling," as Robert Langbaum says of Wordsworth.[16] Stevens' sense of nature is as contemporary, if not as all-encompassing as Wordsworth's. This is because it excludes man, and man, particularly man in society, is, as Stevens recognized, the modern literary subject.

Still, Stevens had participated in one of the great human experiences--perhaps the greatest: he had seen the gods, all the gods, dynamited out of existence. He had seen reality stripped of every vestige of the unreal right down to the rock, "the basal slate." This is what he celebrates. Even if Stevens' style dates very quickly, his sense of the world is likely to remain current for a long time to come. (Indeed, there are many who have not yet caught up with that sense.)

Stevens recognized that "the measure of the poet is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the sense of other people."[17] He even acknowledges that "the poet fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others."[18]

This is the acid test by which Stevens will be judged a major or a minor poet.

The public significance of a poet's sense of life and the manner in which he expresses this lies in its bearing on his accessibility, which, in turn, governs the size of his audience. If the size of the audience determines the stature of the poet and decides whether he may be called a major poet or not, Stevens will probably never be considered a major poet. He himself said there was no major poet writing in this century whose audience amounted to more than an elite.[19] Stevens wanted to be accepted because, he said, no poet is taken seriously until he is accepted, even if only by a very small coterie. But it is certain that Stevens neither expected nor wrote for a large audience. In fact, he wrote for an audience of one--himself--because poetry was for him a vital need, the sanction of his life.

To ask whether Stevens' poetry will last, or how well it will last, is to ask to what extent and degree it will continue to engage the imaginations of others. I believe Stevens' sense of the world will increasingly involve the sense of other people insofar as they realize that they inhabit a world without God; insofar as Stevens' is a world without people, his poetry will probably continue to seem somewhat barren and sterile.

I do not believe that a poet's greatness is measured by the size of his audience. Though this provides some index to his stature, it is the quality of the audience that counts.

The ultimate question is whether or not Stevens is a major poet. I believe that his superlative gift for expression is often in excess of what he has to express. Though he has at his command the most magnificent arsenal of poetic techniques available to any American poet of this century, Stevens has, relatively speaking, little to do with it, little to say. As Blackmur remarks, there is the desire to make tremendous statements, and an ability to do so unprecedented in an American poet.[20] But there is nothing left to make tremendous statements about except the imagination--and of this Stevens was not always certain, as Blackmur says. Irony, working like a cancer, saps the vital organism of the would-be vates, whose pronouncements tend to trail off apologetically. Nevertheless, on a limited number of subjects, with infinite repetition, and to a select few, Stevens is capable of imparting the utmost imaginative and sensuous delight. Stevens' oeuvre contains much poetry of the first rank, and some that is indubitably great. "Sunday Morning" may well be the finest meditative poem written by an American poet of this century. Considering the whole body of Stevens' work, however, one may at this time acclaim him as a major poet, yet doubt that he can, or ever will be, considered a great poet.

Stevens' own attitude to his poetry is to be found in three different poems expressing three different moods or stances. "A Postcard from the Volcano" envisions a definite posterity:

We left much more, left what still is
The look of things, left what we felt

At what we saw.

. . . . . .

We knew for long the mansion's look
And what we said of it became

A part of what it is. . . Children,
. . . . . .
Will speak our speech and never know,

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming blank walls . . .[21]

But "Valley Candle" looks forward to nothing but extinction.

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
Until the wind blew.
Then beams of the huge night
Converged upon its image,
Until the wind blew.[22]

"The Planet on the Table" is a more personal poem, expressing Stevens' pleasure both in having lived and in having written his poems.

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
They were of a remembered time
Or of something seen that he liked.

. . . . . .

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 was important 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 a part.[23]

We, too, rejoice that this Petronius Arbiter of a graceless age, with his metaphysical passion for reality, has left such imaginative records of it. His poems, at their best, are unsurpassable. They have what he called "the potency of fineness."

Stevens seems to be the only modern poet who can legitimately say, "My mind to me a kingdom is"--a kingdom won from the contemplation of chaos. One may say of Stevens' poems what E. M. Forster said of Virginia Woolf's writings: "These trophies . . . were won by the mind from matter, its enemy and its friend."[24] Indeed, one may say more for Stevens: his imagination, and his poetry, are a veritable paradise.

Footnotes

[1]Stewards of Excellence: Studies in Modern English and American Poets (New York, 1958), p. 25.
J. Hillis Miller also maintains that "at the beginning Stevens is already as far as he ever goes," although he concedes marked stylistic changes in Stevens' poetry. "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," reprinted in Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller's The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore, 1965), p. 89.

[2]Poetry in Our Time: A Critical Survey of Poetry in the English-speaking World, 1900 to 1960 (New York, 1963), p. 272.

[3]"The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Sewanee Review, LXV (Winter 1957), 13.

[4]For these interpretations of particularly baffling images I am indebted to Mildred Hartsock's study of Stevens' imagery, "Image and Idea in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Twentieth Century Literature, VII (April 1961), 14-15.

[5]The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination (New York, 1965), p. 47. (Hereafter referred to as N.A.)

[6]By Randall Jarrell and a number of other critics. However, as Jarrell points out, there are ample compensations in a "poetry that knows so well the size and age of the world"--"Reflections on Wallace Stevens," Poetry and the Age (New York, 1953), pp. 141-46.

[7]N.A., pp. 120-22.

[8]Cited by Samuel French Morse in his article "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater" in The Act of the Mind, p. 69.

[9]The reviewer is Tony Tanner in the London Magazine (New Series), VII (April 1967), 111.

[10]Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 91. (Hereafter referred to as Letters.)

[11]Adagia, Opus Posthumous, edited with introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 165.

[12]Cited by Babette Deutsch in Poetry in Our Time, p. 285.

[13]"The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," 14.

[14]"The Poems of Our Climate," Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1954), p. 194. (Hereafter referred to as C.P.)

[15]The remark is made about Jack Yeats, the painter, in Letters, p. 597.

[16]"The New Nature Poetry," American Scholar, XXVIII (Summer 1959), 329.

[17]N.A., pp. 123-24.

[18]Ibid., p. 29.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (New York, 1952), p. 258.

[21]C.P., p. 159.

[22]Ibid., p. 51.

[23]C.P., pp. 532-33.

[24]"Virginia Woolf," Two Cheers for Democracy (New York, 1951), p. 258.

CHAPTER X

A REVIEW OF STEVENS CRITICISM TO DATE

The purpose of a critical review is to be selective. Accordingly, this review of Stevens criticism to date concentrates on those items which have helped this writer to come to grips with Stevens' poetry. A comparison with the main bibliography will show how relatively few of the articles and books written about Stevens are, in this writer's opinion, indispensable reading. In the years since Stevens' death in 1955, Stevens criticism has been proliferating. Most of it, alas, is worthless--either mediocre, or misleading, or obscurantist. It is not the intention of this essay to engage in negative criticism, however. Its aim is to save the reader as much time and energy as possible by eliminating unhelpful criticism and directing him to those studies which have something cogent or valid to say about this difficult poet. I have not selected the books and articles discussed in this chapter because I agree with all the points made by the various writers, but because each of these works pierces in some way, however obliquely or partially, to the heart of Stevens, presenting or epitomizing the difficulties, problems, and rewards encountered in the investigation of his poetry.

At the outset, it is necessary to note that articles and reviews of Stevens' work taken as a whole offer more valuable insights into and commentary on the poetry than do the dozen or so full-scale studies of Stevens. In particular, the three collections of critical essays that have appeared to date contain some valuable articles with which no serious student of Stevens can afford to be unacquainted. These collections of critical essays are, in order of publication, Ashley Brown & Robert S. Haller's The Achievement of Wallace Stevens (1962), Marie Borroff's Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays (1963), and Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller's The Act of the Mind (1965).

In addition, four of the recent full-length studies of Stevens are incisive and helpful. The most recent and, I believe, the most valuable of these, from the point of view of detailed interpretations of the major poems, is Ronald Sukenick's Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (1967). This book is a "must" for serious students and teachers of Stevens. It is divided into three parts: a brief introductory survey of Stevens' poetic theory and practice; line by line readings of most of his important poems, constituting the main body of the study, and a short summary of the burden of those poems not included among the detailed exegeses, forming a supplement or appendix. Sukenick's introductory survey of Stevens' poetry contains only one serious flaw--the insistent use of a psychological, specifically a Freudian, outlook and terminology.

Thus, one section of Sukenick's introduction is called "Ego and Reality." By the term ego, Sukenick intends what Stevens means by imagination, but ego and imagination are by no means synonymous. Ego means self as compared with others, or that part of the mind which has become conscious of itself and of reality. It can be argued, however, that the mind is not all ego or self, nor wholly conscious, and that certainly the imagination, with its largely instinctive and empathic powers, is not. For Stevens, imagination subsumes the self and is larger than mind, since it includes the senses. As Stevens defines imagination, it is the sum total of our faculties. It is wise to discuss a poet in terms drawn from (or at least in the spirit of) his own work. The terms Sukenick uses are jarringly inappropriate to a poet who was not psychologically minded and frequently declared himself to be resolutely non-Freudian.

Sukenick's interpretations of Stevens' most important poems are thorough, sensitive, and accurate. He believes the chief difficulty in interpreting Stevens' poems is the discrepancy between the discursive and the figurative uses of language. As examples of poems in which it is essential to recognize the difference between language used solely as a medium of communication, and language used creatively to evoke the feeling of an experience without expository comment on it, Sukenick adduces "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." In the first, he

explains that "although some sections are figurative statements about the working of the imagination, others are merely instances of it." (P. 72.) In "Le Monocle," part of the poem's difficulty is attributable to Stevens' technique, whereby "what is given is never the line of reasoning itself, but the more or less metaphorical illustration of the line of reasoning, often in the form of obscure illustrative parables." (P. 40.) There are whole poems composed of parabolic mosaics, such as "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." Sukenick's Musing the Obscure provides a high level of sustained critical insight. It takes one a good way along the road to understanding Stevens' poetry, while leaving one plenty of further foraging to do for oneself.

Another valuable and well written new study is Robert Buttel's Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium (1967). This is essential for an understanding of the provenance of Stevens' early poetry; it does not proceed beyond Harmonium. Buttel traces the development of Stevens from a talented but rather palely derivative undergraduate versifier to the original and highly accomplished poet of Harmonium. Buttel also examines in detail various streams of influence on Stevens--Imagist, Impressionist, and Symbolist. He does this with tact and thoroughness.

Frank Doggett's Stevens' Poetry of Thought (1966) is by far the most impressive full-scale study of Stevens' thought. In describing the philosophical climate in which the poetry took shape, Doggett traces the influence on the poet of

Santayana, Bergson, and Whitehead, among other recent philosophers. Much of Doggett's book is devoted to explicating the poetry. To do this, he often juxtaposes passages from the poems with parallel passages of philosophy. Doggett is aware that explaining the ideas behind the poetry is only part (though an essential part) of understanding it. As he points out, in poetry of thought, ideally the distinction between thought and feeling should disappear. Sometimes Stevens achieves this in marrying idea to image. Sometimes (often disastrously for the poetry), instead of converting experience into image, and concrete particular into abstract universal, Stevens tries to convert idea into experience, marshaling particulars to illustrate some general truth. (Randall Jarrell has commented on this unfortunate habit.) Stevens' Poetry of Thought would make heavy reading, pursued from cover to cover. But it is enlightening and enjoyable in parts. The final chapter, "The Poetry of Thought," is particularly impressive.

Eugene Nassar's Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (1965) is a tautly analytical and organized study of specific images which recur throughout Stevens' work. The first half of the book groups such images into constellations, while the second half is devoted to sustained analyses of particular poems. Nassar's opening chapter is called "The Two Minds of Wallace Stevens," and sets forth his thesis that Stevens held a curiously dual attitude to his art. Stevens both believes and disbelieves in the power of poetry to order the chaos of reality. As he says in "The Pure Good of Theory,"

> . . . to speak of the whole world as metaphor
> Is still to stick to the contents of the mind
>
> And the desire to believe in a metaphor.
> It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
> Belief, that what it believes in is not true.

Because the universe of language is forever separate from that of nature, metaphor, the drawing of analogies and tracing of resemblances, is an evasion. The true subject, the thing-in-itself, and the poetry of the subject, as Stevens notes in "The Irrational Element in Poetry," are separate. This leads to what Nassar calls the "analogic fallacy." Stevens' metaphors are frequently artificial because the limited, special, and sometimes illogical relations between the image and what it represents are part of a "belief in the distinct separation of words and things" (p. 18).

Nassar makes some penetrating remarks on Stevens' characteristic use of imagery. He extracts from an object a single, essential meaning, thus reducing its power of signification almost to the rigidity of an algebraic formula. Thus, for example, a hat or a parasol is a shield from the sun. Since the sun represents reality, both objects are seen as shields against reality. It would not be unusual for Stevens to make one of his figures wear a hat or carry an umbrella in the least likely of contexts in order to convey the idea that he was evading or protecting himself from reality. Stevens' symbols can be complex, in the sense that they are frequently farfetched, but he uses them consistently to represent the same, relatively simple ideas. Wigs, curls, and beards, for

instance, always represent imaginative excrescences or embroideries. (They are human foliage.) Nassar draws an illuminating contrast between the imagery of Yeats and that of Stevens. Where Stevens' images are somewhat flat and emblematic, Yeats's are concrete and deeply suggestive. Both poets use recurring images, but within a single poem by Yeats, an image is likely to be autonomous, wholly comprehensible within its particular context. A Stevens image is usually not autonomous within its particular context but requires for its elucidation cross-reference to other poems. Yeats's images are prolifically evocative because they exist in their own right with a naturalness and plenitude that Stevens' images often lack, and because they blend more harmoniously and homogeneously with their contexts. This can be seen, for instance, by comparing Stevens' "Le Monocle" with Yeats's "Among School Children." (The comparison is mine, not Nassar's.) Both poems are complex meditations on aging and mutability; both are full of seemingly dissociated images, and both contain different currents of feeling and channels of thought. "Le Monocle" laments the transience of love and life and art. "Among School Children" meditates, among other things, on growing old, on primal sympathy, on the theme of education, on the mutual mockery of the ideal by reality and of reality by the ideal, and, finally, on their ultimate reconciliation. If we restrict ourselves to considering the imagery of each poem, we find that both use heterogeneous images. But Yeats's are unified in a way that Stevens' are not. Thus,

Stevens' images include a thinking stone and a sea of thought; a red bird on a golden ground; prinking sages and courtesans' mountainous coiffures; an apple like a skull; the star, Venus; crickets; sentimental paintings and pedantic erotica; mules, angels, centurions, tankards, honey, and a heavenly maiden; rotting squashes; mystic fountains, bejeweled and natural trees; squeaking dolls, croaking frogs, lilies like clipperships, and, finally, blue and white pigeons and a rose and a dark rabbi. Such a kaleidoscopic parade of images is held together, if at all, by imaginative sleight of hand. Were each image to be dwelt, focussed, or concentrated upon, it would begin to assert its individual authority, and unity would become well nigh impossible, at least within the poem's present compass. So it is that Stevens slips from one image to the next in rapid succession. But Yeats's images are related one to another: baby, child, and scarecrow form one continuum, as do lovers, mothers, and nuns. The image-worshiping nuns and mothers and the scrawny philosophers are integrally related to the nuns and children in the schoolroom, and to the sixty-year-old scarecrow who is examining them at work. The Ledean body of his youthful beloved is connected to the perfect egg of Plato's parable, as to the beautiful fledgling and the ugly ducklings. The images of flowering chestnut tree and ecstatic dancer are introduced in the final stanza's affirmation of a unity at once organic and achieved through voluntary submission in self-absorbed activity. While Stevens' "Le Monocle" seems to separate itself into its component stanzas, rather like a

sonnet sequence, Yeats's poem, because of its more cohesive imagery, achieves unity.

Of the older studies of Stevens, the one that seems to me to have stood up best and to be in least need of revision is Robert Pack's Wallace Stevens: An Approach to his Poetry and Thought (1958). Pack accurately captures the tone and grasps the principal preoccupations of Stevens. He emphasizes the sensuous quality of Stevens' poetry, characterizing it as both fastidious and robust. He notes, too, its abstract, generalizing tendencies. Pack stresses the comic aspects of Stevens' art.[1]

In reviewing the many valuable critical articles on Stevens, it seems best to adopt a roughly topical approach. Accordingly, I shall briefly review those articles which deal with Stevens' themes and techniques--these are generally, of necessity, treated together; then those articles concerned more with Stevens' thought than with the poetry itself, and finally those articles which trace Stevens' influences. The first topic category is by far the largest and most important from the point of view of this study.[2]

For some years, R. P. Blackmur's criticism of Stevens, contained in three articles on the poet in his book Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (1952), was the most seminal criticism of Stevens extant.[3] To this Blackmur added an article entitled "The Substance That Prevails" in the Kenyon Review for Winter, 1955. In the chapters in Language as Gesture, Blackmur notes (as Hi Simons does) Stevens'

ability to transform thought into feeling and vice versa. Blackmur aptly defines Stevens' characteristic mode as rhetorical, "a structure of loose ends, spliced only verbally," as in "Le Monocle" and The Comedian as the Letter C, for example. The poet's meditations on his poems are inserted in the poems themselves. Thus we have poetry about the making of poetry. Like many other critics, Blackmur plays down Stevens as an intellectual poet, pointing out that in his best poetry he "sees his ideas." (This jibes with Doggett's remark that ideas are embodied in images, although Doggett asserts that sometimes the idea is prior to the image--Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 207.) Blackmur prepared the ground for critics such as Cunningham and Howe who are much concerned with the price Stevens must pay for the loss of a tradition. As Blackmur says, "If you have a set of counters to shove around they must have (and somehow deploy) whole sets of associations not your own, or your meanings will be assigned and will disappear with use." (Language as Gesture, p. 256.) In spite of the fact that Stevens uses symbols drawn from the natural world--sun, moon, stars, sea, wind, weather, trees, flowers, birds, and animals--there are other images and symbols, such as "major man," Stevens' "fat girl," his ephebe, Chocorua, Oxidia, and so forth, that seem arbitrary and contrived, incapable of sparking general recognition. Blackmur would appear to have been right in intimating that Stevens' poetry might date rather rapidly. In conclusion, Blackmur divines Stevens' deep desire to make "tremendous statements," statements which his austere aesthetic

denies. This is the religious impulse in Stevens, which ultimately finds the human imagination an inadequate substitute for God.

J. V. Cunningham has written two most penetrating and comprehensive articles on Stevens. The first is his "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens," reproduced in Brown and Haller's The Achievement of Wallace Stevens.[4] Cunningham puts down Stevens' stylistic oddities to the need to violate conventional poetic expectations. He identifies as Stevens' real "religious theme" not the romantic exaltation of imagination, but "the intuition of a bare reality behind conventional appearance," the realization of the empty space that is left by the death of God. Cunningham observes that this theme is infertile, inasmuch as it is "unproductive of detail," but that nevertheless Stevens celebrates it several times with astonishing virtuosity and devastating clarity in his wintriest, most nihilistic poems--for example, in "The Snow Man," in "The Course of a Particular," and in "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself."

Yet Cunningham correctly notes Stevens' deep and enduring emotional attachment to Christianity. In his greatest poem about the loss of and the need for belief, "Sunday Morning," Cunningham insists that "much of the deep feeling of the poem is derived from the exposition in sustained and traditional rhetoric of the position which is being denied." In this sense, he concludes that the poem is "parasitic on what it rejects." Stevens, according to Cunningham, wishes to preserve in the setting of his new humanism--this unsponsored "chaos of the sun,/

Or old dependency of day and night"--the emotional values of the old religion. While both Graham Hough and Irving Howe overestimate the extent to which Stevens overcame the "crisis of belief," it seems to me that Cunningham underestimates it. It is true that Stevens' poems sometimes betray religious nostalgia. It is also true that Stevens was forever trying to arrive at a substitute for God with which his imagination could remain satisfied. However, Stevens' poetry does not exalt the old God or gods; it banishes them. It consistently and ruthlessly denies the anthropomorphic habit of mind. It seeks unremittingly that center or supreme fiction which will replace God at the heart of the universe. (The few poems that hark back to Christianity are laced with scorn.) Furthermore, Cunningham's charge that "Sunday Morning" is "parasitic on what it rejects" needs to be judged against the realization that we all define ourselves in terms of what we reject. This is an inescapable human response. Until a new style of seeing or mode of being has evolved, how else is one to define oneself? Cunningham's criticism is valid and searching, if restricted to some of the early work, but surely he would agree that most of Stevens' later poetry ceases to be, in his sense, parasitic? In any case, Cunningham rightly discerns at the heart of Stevens' poetry the desire to be in harmony with his environment, a desire which was surely thwarted by his being domiciled in Hartford--yet it is to this fact that we probably owe the poetry.

Cunningham's most recent article on Stevens cuts very deep, both into the pretensions of the poetry and into those of

its exegetes. "The Styles and Procedures of Wallace Stevens" appeared in the first issue of the University of Denver Quarterly (Spring 1966), and seems likely to cause--if it has not already--a critical furore of a salutary kind. Cunningham asserts that of the twelve thousand lines (four hundred titles) produced by Stevens, much is junk. He views Stevens as an amateur poet who wrote poetry for the pleasure of it but did not care if he botched his work. Stevens was no perfectionist. (This is no more than the truth, but as Cunningham puts it, it is likely to explode like a bomb in the Stevens arbor of the Groves of Academe.)

Cunningham analyzes four basic styles of Stevens: the imagistic, the mannered, the grand rhetorical style, and the plain style. Thanks to Stevens' early affiliation with the Imagists, many of the poems of Harmonium belong to the first category. (I would suggest as examples "In the Carolinas," "The Load of Sugar Cane," "Tattoo," and "Life is Motion.") The mannered style is Stevens at his most rococo, when his language is most wild with motion and full of the din of coinages, foreign, esoteric, and nonsense words. (Examples are provided by "Bantams in Pine-Woods," "Indian River," and "The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade.") Stevens' grand manner is the manner of "Sunday Morning," full of echoes of the nineteenth century poetic tradition, a heady blend of Wordsworthian syntax, Keatsian sensuousness, and Tennysonian melancholic cadence, naturalized by Stevens and given his own inimitable tang. The plain style becomes most apparent in the later poems, though there are early poems, such as

"The Snow Man," written in it, too. A late example would be "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm." The justness and comprehensiveness of Cunningham's categories can be demonstrated by trying to find poems that do not fit them. The only serious deficiency I can find in his breakdown is that it fails to accommodate Stevens' many symbolist pieces. It will have been observed that the poems cited to illustrate what Cunningham means by Stevens' imagist style are by no means the best of his poems to present vivid, clearcut images. They have been selected, however, because clearcut images are all that they present. But there are many poems in Harmonium which one hesitates to place in Cunningham's imagist category because their images are symbolic. Among a host of examples, let me cite "Earthy Anecdote," "Domination of Black," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "The Ordinary Women," "Anecdote of the Jar," "Valley Candle," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "The Bird with the Coppery Keen Claws," and "Explanation." (Some poems occupy a borderline between imagism and symbolism, as perhaps do "Life is Motion" and "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock.") Cunningham might well argue that the poems cited above are nevertheless written in the imagistic, the mannered, or the plain style. Thus, "Earthy Anecdote," "Domination of Black," and "Anecdote of the Jar" might be said to be in the plain style; "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws"--perhaps even "The Ordinary Women" and "Explanation" in the mannered--and "Thirteen Ways" and "Valley Candle" in the imagistic. Still, one feels the need

of a symbolist category. And in any case, the distinction between the imagist and the plain style tends to blur out, only the mannerist remaining clearly recognizable. There are some symbolist poems written in a mock version of the grand style, such as "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds" and "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb." One final question: what would Cunningham do with such poems as "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"? To call the first imagist and the second mannered renders not a tithe of justice to the lyric imagism and symbolism of either.

When Cunningham turns to Stevens' themes, he detects a few, simple-minded gambits. Stevens has few subjects. One of them is the loss of belief (the death of God) and the need to believe which persists--hence the search for a supreme fiction. Secondly, there is Stevens' never-ending oscillation between imagination and reality, the subjective and the objective. (J. Hillis Miller, in his Poets of Reality, finds both themes endemic to Romantic and Post-Romantic poetry.) Imagination and reality are seen under different guises in different poems or sometimes within the same poem. Grouping these different modes under Stevens' own rubrics of imagination and reality, Cunningham finds that the imagination may express itself as a romantic embroidering of reality; going a step further, it may become wholly fantastic or surrealistic; it may be affective and distorting, as in certain types of Imagism, Cubism, and Expressionism; it may be a perception of resemblances so profound or far-reaching as to point to a monistic unity. Or

it may be a furious process of abstraction and decreation prior to the formulation of a mythical intuition of reality, a supreme fiction. (The process of abstraction--as in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, I.i--might seem to fit better the rubric of reality, but Stevens says in "The Plain Sense of Things" that "the absence of imagination had/Itself to be imagined.") Under the rubric of reality, Cunningham finds several different versions of reality. First, reality may be what Stevens calls in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven "The eye's plain version" without the mind's intrusion. Secondly, it may be the quotidian, the everyday world, again seen without imagination. Thirdly, it may be the ultimate reality, what Stevens calls in Esthétique du Mal "a third world without knowledge" because it is beyond our apprehension; Cunningham calls this "monism at the heart of things." Finally, it may be nothingness, the void. The reader has surely noticed that, whether on the imaginative or the real spectrum, these categories merge; indeed, the mind's abstractive intuition of reality differs little, if at all, from its apprehension of ultimate reality as nothingness. As Hegel observed, "Pure Being and Nothing are the same." Cunningham traces Stevens' progress from point to point in several poems, but the reader familiar with Stevens' poetry will recognize both these way stations and their termini. Finally, lest this review of Cunningham's latest findings seem too negative, it is necessary to affirm that he recognizes that when Stevens is good, he is very, very good.

Graham Hough's article on Stevens' poetry in the Critical Quarterly for Autumn 1960 overestimates Stevens' present stature in the United States, unequivocally acclaiming him as a major American poet. Hough himself believes that Stevens has written "three or four of the finest poems of our time." He particularly admires "Sunday Morning," which he rightly describes as the gateway to Stevens' work. Like Cunningham, Hough delights in Stevens' grand manner, in watching, as he puts it, "the praetorian cohorts of our poetic diction performing their practised evolutions." But he is aware that Stevens performs these evolutions with a difference. Hough finds Stevens' spectrally abstract verse equally impressive.

It is necessary to comment on several overestimates or overstatements in this otherwise admirable essay. First of all, like Irving Howe, Hough overestimates the extent to which Stevens has passed beyond the crisis of belief. Secondly, I think he overstates the irrelevance of Stevens' titles, and what he calls his "foolish tastelessness." (Cunningham makes the outrageous statement, apropos of Stevens' mannered style, that "it is the style of a man with no taste at all"--"The Styles and Procedures of Wallce Stevens," p. 22.) It is always rash to argue about taste, but a taste for the gaudy is not no taste at all. Further, most of Stevens' titles make sense of a sort if one is prepared to exercise one's ingenuity, and this claim may be extended to almost all the poetry. While I sympathize with Hough's complaint that Stevens' prose criticism is insufferably oracular and pretentious--a game of the Emperor's new clothes if ever

there was one--Hough surely goes too far in considering Stevens not to have been, outside the sphere of his poetry, particularly intelligent. Finally, Hough looks forward to Frank Lentricchia's anatomy of Stevens' irony, finding it diffuse, curiously unfocussed, and "something of a smokescreen."

In his book A World More Attractive (1963), Irving Howe deprecates the view of Stevens as a philosophizing poetaster. He emphasizes instead the pressure of reality to which Stevens' poetry was a response. Howe admires the example Stevens set "in searching for that 'inmost allegiance' [the phrase is Santayana's] by which men might live out their years in thousands of Hartfords." (P. 158.) Howe agrees with Cunningham that Stevens wrote too much, however, and he views his linguistic felicity and facility as sometimes acting as a liability. Stevens did not wait for the grace of inspiration; for him poetry was a pleasurable routine, "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating."

Howe notes that the eye is the central organ in Stevens' poetry, that he is, as Howe expresses it, "a moralist of seeing" (p. 164). (In The Necessary Angel, Stevens speaks of "the morality of the right sensation.") Another salutary emphasis of Howe's is on the experiential basis of Stevens' poetry in general. (Cunningham, too, insists on this.) In Stevens' best poems, the conflicts and conjunctions of imagination with reality are not, Howe says, mere conceptualizations or epistemological shufflings; they are insights experienced by the poet. Thus, the winter poems describe the imagination's response to actual

winter experiences, and similarly with the summer poems. The imagination-reality theme degenerates into mere formula only when Stevens' imagination is not working at full pressure.

Howe raises one of the pervasive problems of Stevens criticism when he comments on the disproportionate response that a single poem may elicit in someone who is familiar with the body of Stevens' work. Stevens' poetry provides proof of his assertion that "One poem proves another and the whole," but Howe feels that an individual poem may not warrant the kind of total response we bring to it if we are familiar with Stevens. This may be a danger to be guarded against in doing more than justice to individual poems, but Stevens is one of the poets whose work forms a galaxy in which the individual poems are planets, and the interpretation of his imagery frequently necessitates one's using knowledge culled from other poems.

Randall Jarrell, in "Reflections on Wallace Stevens" in his Poetry and the Age (1953), praises Harmonium for containing "six or eight of the most beautiful poems an American has written" (p. 139). Jarrell upholds the early work at the expense of the later poetry, which he finds too abstract, philosophical, and tedious. Jarrell pinpoints the uneasy relationship in Stevens' work between the general and the particular. He quotes Goethe's asseveration that the poet should always grasp at the universal through the concrete particular, the latter having poetic priority. Stevens, Jarrell remarks, has the habit (deplorable for a poet) of "thinking of particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths"

(p. 140). Hence all those "generalizations of an unprecedentedly low order" in Stevens' work. But what hurts his poetry most of all, Jarrell concludes, is its lack of drama because it does not concern itself with human lives. Jarrell's judgment of Stevens, though it belittles the later poetry, is both precise and penetrating.

Frank Lentricchia's "Wallace Stevens: The Ironic Eye" appeared in the Spring 1967 issue of the Yale Review. Lentricchia views Stevens' consistent irony as stemming from his dissatisfaction with his own theory of poetry. This essay is indebted to Blackmur's observation that Stevens' desire to make momentous statements about imagination cut right across his austere aesthetic. The opposition of Stevens' romanticism to his realism or naturalism results in what Lentricchia terms an "unresolved dialectic." This unresolved dialectic may be seen in the unbridgeable gulf between subject and object, between the world as perceived by the mind (as it has to be) and the world as it is. It may also be seen in Stevens' alternate celebrations of the world of flux and his longing for a realm of permanence within that flux. The only possible resolution is to celebrate momentary marriages of mind with world and to posit, as Stevens does, a world of eternal recurrence. Lentricchia stresses Stevens' dualism. In the end, he says, the relation of imagination to reality is seen as forced and artificial because mind and matter are dual, never one, although the mind, in which reality is refracted, may interpret them as one. (This is Nassar's "analogic fallacy.") Lentricchia is

keenly aware of how uncomfortable and urgent Stevens' oscillations between imagination and reality were. Stevens found solipsism an uneasy retreat, but complete objectivism, too, was unendurable for more than brief moments. Lentricchia sees Stevens swinging from a belief in external reality to a belief in the reality of imagination because he "needed the life of the imagination so that . . . he could compose and pattern the world as he wished, especially at those moments when the world's chaos impinged upon his sanity." (P. 345.) Here Lentricchia draws an analogy between Yeats and Stevens, inasmuch as neither of them "could be fully satisfied with either the imaginative or the real world, nor could they maintain a static attitude to either half of the antinomy." (P. 436.) The comparison between Stevens and Yeats is often instructive. (One should remember, however, that Yeats's imaginative realm is supernatural; Stevens' is not.)

Geoffrey Moore's estimate of Stevens, entitled "Wallace Stevens: A Hero of Our Time," is to be found in his book, The Great Experiment in American Literature (1961). (This--together with Graham Hough's article--is the justest estimate of Stevens' stature by an English critic; Frank Kermode's book Wallace Stevens and his subsequent essays tend to overpraise Stevens.) Moore, like Jarrell, notes and laments the absence of ordinary human passion in Stevens' verse. Nevertheless, he finds Stevens' inhumanity more than compensated for once one has accustomed oneself to the rarefied atmosphere of Stevens' poetic cosmos. (One has to acclimatize oneself much as one does to Henry James's fictional world, Moore says; one then

finds oneself amply rewarded for one's perseverance.) Stevens' poetry is poetry of heightened awareness. Moore finds the body of Stevens' work far more rewarding than the sum of the individual poems.

Howard Nemerov, in an article on Stevens' poetry in Sewanee Review (Winter 1957) rightly sees the only drama in Stevens' poetry as the drama of perception. Nemerov claims Stevens' use of metaphor is peculiarly arbitrary because he asserts that all things resemble one another, even if the resemblance cannot be traced. Nemerov views Stevens' ordering of chaos as forced because the statement of relations between particulars and between particulars and generalities cannot be proven; it simply exists in the perceiver's mind. (Nemerov has recourse to Stevens' article "Effects of Analogy" in The Necessary Angel; the first of "Three Academic Pieces" would have been more to Nemerov's purpose, however, for it presents more forcefully Stevens' belief that because reality is reflected in the mind, everything can be said to exist in the same place, and therefore anything may be compared to any other thing. It is well to remember, however, that Stevens recognizes three kinds of comparison or levels of resemblance: the comparison of things recognized to have objective existence with others of the same class; the comparison of such real objects with imagined ones, and, finally, the comparison among themselves of imaginary entities. Stevens' interest is in the first two types of comparison, particularly in the second. He is not often to be caught dabbling with the third.) Nemerov remarks--

as do Howe and Hillis Miller--Stevens' characteristic equations using the verb to be. These resemble algebraic formulae in which A is to B as B is to C. A more frequent and tentative formula of Stevens is expressed thus: "It is as if . . ." Nemerov stresses the phenomenalism and relativity of Stevens' viewpoint. He sees Stevens as writing a wholly new kind of poetry and hails him as "perhaps the only truly modern poet of his time." This strikes one as excessive; one wonders if Nemerov has read Hillis Miller's Poets of Reality, which makes it very clear how modern Stevens is--certainly among the vanguard--but not alone.

Hi Simons, a critic in whom Stevens confided and who really understood his work, has written several significant articles on Stevens. In "The Genre of Wallace Stevens," reproduced in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, Simons identifies as Stevens' four principal themes the relation of the artist to his environment; the relation of imagination to reality; the problem of belief, and he adds to these Stevens' humanistic concern, as evinced in such poems as The Man with the Blue Guitar and Owl's Clover. Simons sees Stevens as a metaphysical poet possessing a "direct sensuous apprehension of thought," who is able, through metaphor, to recreate thought into feeling. Simons identifies as Stevens' distinctive genre the "intellectual lyric framed on the Symbolist principle of implication." (Pp. 52-53.)

Among the more specialized studies of facets of Stevens' technique and over-all vision, there are two excellent concentrated examinations of Stevens' imagery and color symbolism. These are

Mildred Hartsock's "Image and Idea in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," which appeared in Twentieth Century Literature for April 1961, and George McFadden's "Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens," which appeared in Modern Philology for February 1961. Mildred Hartsock's article comprises a highly condensed review of the significance of Stevens' major recurring images. (Eugene Nassar's Anatomy of Figuration does the same thing on an enlarged scale and is thus able to avoid some of Miss Hartsock's oversimplifications and partial interpretations.) Miss Hartsock's study is generally accurate and helpful. George McFadden's article is somewhat pretentious. That Stevens' color system was consciously based on the color spectrum as defined by Newtonian optics seems to be a grandiose claim. McFadden's study is nevertheless the most sustained foray into the meaning of Stevens' colors outside of Nassar's more detailed treatment. Though McFadden is occasionally wrong--as in his description of Stevens' vitalistic red as "the color of the feebly real" or of "the dying or dead past"--he is generally accurate. Anyone seeking to interpret Stevens' poetry without being acquainted with these two articles is working under a handicap.

Among the criticisms of Stevens' thought, the most outstanding is Frank Doggett's book, which has already been discussed. In an article on Stevens' later poetry (reproduced in The Act of the Mind), Doggett reaches some of the same conclusions stated in his book. He observes that Stevens' ideas, though thematically related, do not form a coherent

system. He joins Cunningham and Howe in asserting that what looks like doctrine is often rooted in experience.

J. Hillis Miller devotes a chapter of his brilliant book Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers to Wallace Stevens. (He has also contributed an essay on "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being" to The Act of the Mind.) Miller insists that Stevens' poetry and thought are not dialectical because they never achieve a synthesis. "It is impossible to find a single systematic theory of poetry and life in Stevens. . . . His poetry is not dialectical, if that means a series of stages which build on one another . . . in some version of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. . . . There is no progress, only alternation." (Poets of Reality, p. 259.) This is so. Miller sees no development in Stevens' vision, though he concedes stylistic changes. He is correct in citing The Man with the Blue Guitar as initiating a new, improvisatory, open-ended style which contrasts with the early, more highly wrought poetry.

The chapter on Stevens in Miller's Poets of Reality contains some profound insights and accurate descriptions of what Stevens' poetry is like. Following its argument, however, one finds it to be somewhat self-contradictory. (Perhaps this is to be expected, since Miller finds Stevens' thought self-contradictory.) Starting from the valid premise that the subject-object or imagination-reality dichotomy is Stevens' central concern, Miller affirms that imagination and reality, though equal and inseparable for Stevens, are poles that can never touch but can only repel one another. Stevens is therefore

propelled from one pole to the other. He may express in individual poems a leaning toward one or the other extreme, or he may try to incorporate both in a single long poem--as he does in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, for example. In the latest work, however, Miller sees Stevens' inveterate dualism giving way to a realization that "imagination never exists separately. Reality never exists separately. All that ever exists anywhere, for man, is imagination-reality, an imaginary reality or a real imagination." (P. 275.) Stevens' own most sustained exposition of this view is to be found in An Ordinary Evening in New Haven--"Reality is a thing seen by the mind,/Not that which is but that which is apprehended." Thus, according to Miller, Stevens finally moves beyond dualism. But, by Miller's own admission, if Stevens ever moves beyond it, he always falls back into it again. In his tracing of Stevens' different attitudes to imagination and reality, Miller consistently underestimates Stevens' ability, from the first, to wed the inner to the outer world, to achieve momentary syntheses of imagination with reality. In addition, it seems to me that those critics like Miller who think that Stevens only came to embrace a Kantian view, midway between idealism and realism, subjectivism and objectivism, late in life, are probably undervaluing his initial realization that the mind conditions what it sees and that beyond the mind's world there is only the "third world" of Esthétique du Mal, a world beyond knowledge, inapprehensible.

Several of Miller's statements about Stevens are erroneous. He asserts, for instance, that Stevens' use of

color and imagery is not symbolic, nor is it consistent. Stevens' use of both color and imagery shows a very high degree of consistency (as critics such as Nassar, McFadden, and Miss Hartsock show). And the use of color and imagery is symbolic, though this is symbolism of a curious kind, as reference to the studies by Nassar and Nemerov will show. Miller, too, remarks an extraordinary use of metaphor whereby all the objects in a Stevens poem exist at the same level of reality. What Miller means by this is best shown in an example. In "Domination of Black," for instance, he would maintain that the leaves seen in the crumbling coals of the fire exist on the same level of reality as the fallen leaves outside the window, as the imagined peacocks' tails and as the turning planets. Similarly, the color of the hemlocks is as the striding night--neither is more real than the other. But it is impossible to accept such a judgment unless one is willing to dissolve poem and setting and move the whole thing into the speaker's mind. Refusing to do this, it will seem that the colors of the peacocks' tails and their cries exist on a different metaphorical level from the fire, the autumn leaves, the hemlocks, the night, and the stars, all of which might have been present and visible to the speaker's actual (as opposed to his mind's) eye at the time of composition. In wholly imaginary compositions--such, for instance, as "The Load of Sugar Cane" appears to be--every object does, of course, exist on the same imaginary plane. And in some of the tenuous, half-realistic,

half-imaginary episodes of the later long poems--for example, in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, I.vi and III.ii--one sees the force of Miller's and Nemerov's remarks about the peculiarity of Stevens' use of image and metaphor. But I cannot concede that Stevens' use of color and image is non-symbolic. Miller believes that because of Stevens' realization that reality is refracted through the mind, because he believes that language as a medium of description is forever divorced from the objects it describes, and because he consistently declares metaphor to be an evasion, therefore the tenor and the vehicle of a Stevens' metaphor exist on the same level of reality. But this is not so. Miller provides an excellent description of the extraordinary quality of Stevens' imagery, particularly in his later poems, when he says that Stevens evokes a "spatial representation of a temporal sequence of metamorphoses" (p. 226).

On the subject of Stevens' influences, there are three critical studies that are invaluable. The first is Robert Buttel's book, which has already been discussed. In addition, there is Michel Benamou's article "Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination" in Act of the Mind. Benamou shows probity in pointing out that, though there certainly are affinities between Stevens and the French Symbolists, within these affinities, the differences are perhaps more striking than the similarities. Unlike Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Stevens does not exercise his imagination to get out of this world; he wishes rather "to step barefoot into reality." Again, unlike the Symbolists, he

does not believe that the human imagination has a supernatural source. For Stevens, ideal purity is to be reached not beyond our world but through a cleared vision of it. Stevens celebrates the beauty, fecundity, and seasonable variety of nature; Baudelaire cannot and does not because nature, to Baudelaire, seems putrefaction--hence his devotion to the inorganic and the petrified. The comparison of Stevens and Mallarmé seems more likely to yield significant resemblances. Both Stevens and Mallarmé are great poets of negation. However, Benamou shows that there are important differences in their poetic methods and vocabularies. Mallarmé's imagery and syntax make of his poems extremely concentrated, highly wrought linguistic jewels. (His poetic vocabulary numbers only two thousand words.) Because he was such a perfectionist, Mellarmé's poetic output was small. Stevens, on the other hand, is both prolific and prolix. His vocabulary, enlarged by esoteric words, coinages, and imports from other languages, is enormous, and his use of imagery is not tight-knit but diffuse and heterogeneous.

It is interesting to compare with Benamou's article Simons' comparison, "Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé" in Modern Philology for May 1946. Simons points out seven specific and seven general resemblances between the two poets. He claims Mallarmé exerted an influence on Stevens from 1915-23. In his Letters, Stevens denies this, saying that he was far more influenced by Verlaine.[5] The specific resemblances that Simons

discerns are lines and phrases in particular poems. Of the general resemblances, probably the most important is the similar signification assigned by Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Stevens to the color blue. Where blue represents for the French poets the color of the Ideal (Mallarmé uses white with the same significance, though his white is frequently associated with sterility), for Stevens, from 1919 onward, blue consistently stands for Imagination. Simons notes that both Mallarmé and Stevens are masters of condensed and extended conceits--metaphors in which the point of analogy is so restricted as to be startling. Both poets show great virtuosity in the use of sound, rhythm, and connotation. Both show an uncanny ability, through concrete abstractions and negatives, to evoke the idea of nothingness. (In this regard, C. Roland Wagner has published in the Spring 1952 issue of Accent an interesting essay on "The Idea of Nothingness in Wallace Stevens.") Finally, though Simons regards Stevens as an Idealist, as Mallarmé was, he acknowledges that Stevens, unlike Mallarmé, did not wish to escape "the chaos of the actual . . . the tangled mixture of real and ideal" (p. 249). Since in each poet the same preoccupations are discernible from beginning to end of his career, the body of each poet's work forms a grand whole. Hence, Simons insists (pace Howe) that individual poems of Stevens have to be read in the light of the whole.

This concludes this brief but considered survey of what I believe to be the indispensable critical readings on

Wallace Stevens. Most of the criticism the writer has waded through has proved to be useless. The bulk of it was merely mediocre. If it did not state the obvious clearly, it did so with ambiguous flourishes. If it was not pedestrian, it was nebulous. If it was not portentous, it was frivolous. Much of it was incomprehensible or patently absurd. One recognizes that the interpretation of Stevens' poetry lends itself to murky paraphrase, empty posturing, and the utterance of grandiloquent nothings. In conclusion one can only trust that one has avoided these faults, and pray that no one who need not do so will descend into the literary bazaar to haggle with the many peddlers of sham who are to be found there.

Footnotes

[1]As does Daniel Fuchs's The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, 1963). I found Fuchs's book sound in parts.
Of the other full length studies of Stevens, Frank Kermode's Wallace Stevens (New York, 1961) provides a good, though sketchy, introduction; it traces the major themes of Stevens throughout his work.
William Van O'Connor's The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens (Chicago, 1950), and William York Tindall's pamphlet, Wallace Stevens (Minneapolis, 1961) are more elementary than Kermode's study, and definitely only for the beginner. Tindall is inclined to be flippant.
Joseph Riddel's The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, 1965) stands alone as a long, complex, and detailed study. Unfortunately, the thought and style are so obfuscatory that I have found it little help.
The books by John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments (Carbondale, 1964), by Herbert J. Stern, Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty (Ann Arbor, 1966), and by Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington, 1964) deserve to be grouped together, with Stern and Wells considered as somewhat superior to Enck. These books are desultory, simplistic, and self-indulgent.

[2]I have found it necessary to restrict my discussion to those articles which adopt a broad approach to Stevens' poetry and do not concentrate on particular poems. I should like to draw attention in this footnote to two excellent articles on single poems--Richard Ellmann's "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," Kenyon Review, XIX (Winter 1957), 89-105, and Hi Simons' "'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," Southern Review, V (Winter 1940), 453-68. Ellmann's article centers on "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," but it also considers the theme of death in Stevens' poetry generally. Another article, ostensibly on influences, which throws interesting sidelights on The Comedian is Samuel French Morse's "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater" which appears in Roy Harvey Pearce & J. Hillis Miller's The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore, 1965), pp. 58-91.

[3]His most important article, "Examples of Wallace Stevens," first appeared in Hound & Horn, V (Winter 1932), and was then reprinted in The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation (New York, 1935), as well as later in Language as Gesture.

[4]This article, first published in Poetry, LXXV (December 1949), was revised for Cunningham's book, Tradition and Poetic Structure (Denver, 1960). It is also reprinted in Irving Howe's Modern Literary Criticism: An Anthology (New York, 1958).

[5]Stevens writes: "Mallarmé never in the world meant as much to me as all that in any direct way. Perhaps I absorbed more than I thought. Mallarmé was a good deal in the air when I was much younger. But so were other people. . . . Verlaine meant a good deal more to me." Letter to Bernard Heringman dated May 3, 1949--Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 635.

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