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THE SPIRIT'S OWN SEDUCTION: THE EROTIC CENTER OF WALLACE
STEVENS' POETRY

City University of New York

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THE SPIRIT'S OWN SEDUCTION:

THE EROTIC CENTER OF
WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY

by

BARBARA FISHER

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

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Abstract

THE SPIRIT'S OWN SEDUCTION:

THE EROTIC CENTER OF
WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY

by

Barbara Fisher

Adviser: Professor Allen Mandelbaum

This study demonstrates the rich erotic substratum that runs through the entire Stevens canon. By examining major texts and some of the shorter poems, it explores the transformations of eros, partly as a measure of the poet's development and partly as an indication of his versatility. The study provides an entry into both the broad and subtle dimensions of Stevens' humor, and--because erotic energy develops into philosophical, theological, and aesthetic modes in the poetry--offers a meeting ground for the major critical approaches to his work.

I have defined eros in the broadest possible way, because a serious study of the erotic content in Stevens' poetry must refer to sources as widely distant in time and place, and as distinct in philosophical bias, as Plato, the speculative theologians, and Freud. Because the

mythopoeic power of Plato's dialogues exerted an abiding influence on Stevens, however, and because almost all subsequent meditations on the relation of loving to knowing refer back in some way to the Symposium and the Phaedrus, I have relied upon Plato's original model of eros as a dynamic principle to describe the progress of desire from a physical to a metaphysical object. I have used the Symposium in general for a reading of Stevens' poetry, but more particularly to show that Plato's Diotima "prefigures" Stevens' key figure of "a woman with the hair of a pythoness."

Two questions have served to establish the thematic boundaries of each of the six chapters in the dissertation: What are the most apparent, and recurrent, objects of desire in the poetry? What is the relation of the poet to his own "interior paramour"? In sequence, then, the chapters address the following themes: (1) desire aimed at knowledge of the unknown and the sublime; (2) the background, characteristics, transformations, and significance of the Paramour; (3) desire aimed at destruction, and the sexual elements in Stevens' humor; (4) the erotics of place; (5) symbolic and mythographic dimensions of Stevens' poetry of the Evening Star; (6) ultimate union, the telos

of desire. The Coda to the dissertation shows the contrast between expression of the erotic element in Stevens' work and that of his contemporaries, and suggests Stevens' affinity with a line of English poetry that considerably predates the Romantics.

This dissertation is dedicated to
Alexandra, Benjamin, and Sam
who, with an understanding rare in
much older people, gave me the great
gift of time in which to write it.

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I should also like to express gratitude to Jason Saunders, Professor of Philosophy at City College of CUNY, who infected me with his love for Aristotle, provided my first real entry into Plato, and who patiently taught me

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INTRODUCTION

It is not generally recognized that Wallace Stevens' unique accomplishment has been to introduce a body of love poetry into a terrain that most of his contemporaries experienced as an aesthetic and spiritual waste land. Stevens has been read as an elitist, a humanist, a mannerist, a meditative, and an ironist. He has been identified with the French symbolist and the American transcendental schools, and aligned with the Romantic tradition. His poetry is considered constructivist by some and reductivist by others; still others approach Stevens as a pragmatist, or see his poetry as the expression of an existential world-view. The major critical work on Stevens, to date, presents a "diagnosis" of the canon, an interpretation of the poetry in terms of Oedipal conflict and "repression." More recent criticism has approached Stevens' work as a phenomenal declaration of Being, while a few conservatives persist in the view that Stevens is a "poet's poet" writing poems about poetry. It would appear that every aspect of a many-sided poetry has been sifted through the industrious critical net, that each turn of the poet's temperament has been noted and classified. It is significant that a focal element of the

canon--which has a bearing on every approach identified above--is an element that eludes tidy classification. The powerful and pervasive erotics of Stevens' poetry have remained unremarked and unexplored.

It seems to me that the eclectic nature of Stevensian criticism reflects the eclectic character of Stevens' thought. What has been lacking, to date, is a unifying theory which, far from invalidating the various modes of approach, explains their variety and supplies a central meeting ground--as well as a corrective--for the individual readings. I propose to advance such a theory, in this study, by exploring the erotic component in Stevens' work.

This is a subject that requires cautious handling. The manifestations of eros are extremely varied in the poetry, yet the erotic element cannot always be isolated from the poetry itself. That is to say, eros may emerge sharply in the language, imagery, or symbolism of a given poem, but it may also act simply as the impulse to produce the poem. Again, eros tends to the unitive as against the divisive; as a dynamic principle, it seeks to effect conjunction between subject and object, subject and subject, and will move across established boundaries to do so. It is the force that resolves the many or reconciles the two

"into one thing," that nurtures the idea of unity and cohesion. Alternately, it can function as a destructive force, employing irony, parody, and satire to accomplish its purpose. In keeping with his affinity for Plato, and with a Platonic description of the eros principle, Stevens will sometimes use aggressive humor to destroy obstacles that stand in the way of ultimate union. Finally, eros is present in the poetry as an agent of transformation. Far from being negated by alternations of mood or turns of thought, the versatile erotic impulse can adapt itself to conform to, be reflected in, or generate change in many of them. In sum, eros can be understood as the underlying dynamic of Stevens' poetic as well as the erotic want or need that impels to the act of poetry. In Stevens' own words, "the need of the poet for poetry is a dynamic cause of the poetry he writes" (OP, 229).

I am defining eros in the broadest possible way in this study, partly because the diverse nature of Stevens' poetic demands it, and partly because such a study must refer to sources that are as widely removed in time and approach as Plato, the speculative theologians, and Freud. For a working definition, then, eros will be considered the essential energy, disposition, desire, or drive of a living

organism to complete itself, to arrive at what Aristotle calls a "state of perfect fulfillment" or entelecheia (Physics, 3.1). The desire for completion, in Stevens' poetry as elsewhere, may take a physical or extra-physical object; it may tend toward a primary sexual goal or extend its aim toward a spiritual or noetic end.

If one traces the expression of love and desire in Stevens' poetry, one finds that it ranges from the satiric to the sublime, and further, that the search for completion will often embrace the mode of the via negativa. In a very few poems the erotic object is unequivocal and clearly stated; in some it is ambiguous, while in others it remains obscure, existing by inference alone. But, following the turns of Stevens' own temperament, as it must, the erotic thrust of his poetry is alternately sensual or metaphysical, pragmatic or mystical, ironic, bitter, tender, and sometimes, purely playful.

It has seemed best, for the purpose of exploration, to approach the erotics of the Stevens canon by concentrating on two related questions: What are the most apparent, and recurrent, objects of desire in the poetry? What is the relation of the poet to his own "interior paramour"? The result has been a division of material into

general thematic groups, each of which determines the focus of a chapter. In the sequence of chapters, then, the following themes are addressed: (1) desire aimed at knowledge of the unknown and the sublime; (2) the presence and transformations of the Paramour; (3) desire aimed at destruction and the erotic element in humor; (4) the erotics of place; (5) symbolic dimensions of the evening star: creation, re-creation, continuance; (6) ultimate union, the telos of desire. With the exception of the final chapter, perhaps, it will soon become apparent that the boundaries set up by the themes sketched above are as often honored in the breach as in the observance. As noted above, the eros dynamic moves to join disparate elements, to effect syntheses, and in Stevens' poetry as in other arenas, it tends to ignore methodological boundary lines.

I have attempted, in Chapter I, to provide a substantial foundation for the chapters that follow, but, beyond that, to introduce the idea that the development of Stevens' poetry reflects the progress of his eros toward a sublime object. It has been necessary, therefore, to cover a good deal of territory in the first chapter, and to look at a number of poems, ranging from the early to the latest periods of publication, in which desire is manifestly aimed

at the unknown or the divine. This mode of knowing, in Western thought, was first developed systematically by Plato in the Symposium; it continued as a major element in neo-Platonic philosophy, and by way of neo-Platonism, entered the medieval Church as contemplative mysticism, or speculative theology. That aspect of Stevens' poetic that has to do with erotic energy directed toward the sublime is closely related to this tradition of thought. To make the relation clear, the chapter includes a discussion of some aspects of the Symposium, with respect to its influence on Stevens, explores the figure of Diotima in the dialogue with respect to Stevens' "interior paramour," and closes with a brief outline of the tradition of thought that grew from the original Platonic construct.

To cultivate a garden in the wasteland requires extraordinary dedication, and an inner conviction that the garden contains its own significance and its own reward. The love poems that bloom sometimes hesitantly in Stevens' meditative garden spring from a rich erotic soil. And along with a native shyness or diffidence in Stevens, one may often hear the voice of the Psalmist chanting in his verses: "In my meditation a fire shall flame out."

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CHAPTER I

THE METAPHYSICS OF DESIRE

"Plato, the reddened flower,
the erotic bird"
(CP, 253)

Desire aimed at the unknown permeates Stevens' work from the earliest poems in Harmonium (1923) to the final period of The Rock (1954). In a talk on "The Irrational Element in Poetry" given at Harvard in or about 1937, Stevens observed:

It is the unknown that excites the ardor of scholars, who, in the known alone, would shrivel up with boredom. We accept the unknown even when we are most skeptical. . . . it has seductions more powerful and more profound than those of the known.¹

The language of desire, used here to describe the pursuit of knowledge, is next brought to bear on the making of poetry; the seduction of the unknown becomes that inner dynamic which both generates and sustains the poetic act: "Those who seek for the freshness and strangeness of poetry in fresh and strange places do so because of an intense need. The need of the poet for poetry is a dynamic cause of the poetry he writes."² One thinks of the rare declaration in the Adagia--rare because it departs from the diffidence and constraint so characteristic of Stevens' prose: "In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and the images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all."³ Clearly, for Stevens, there is a connection between the scholar or philosopher's ardor to find and the poet's necessity to make. The relation lies

not only in the quality and intensity of the desire, but (in the phrase so reminiscent of Pater) in the "fresh and strange" nature of its object.

The erotic craving that directs its energies toward a mysterious and sublime object is allegorized with delicate wit in one of the first poems in Harmonium. Bearing a title that floats like a heraldic streamer over its thirty-one lines, "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste. Ursule, Et Les Unze Mille Vierges" unfolds an emblematic tale of seduction. Ursule, radiant in red and gold brocade, kneels in the grass "where none can see" to make a secret offering to the Lord. In place of the cultivated "frail" blossoms she has hitherto cut from the formal garden to display upon the altars of the Church, she offers up radishes and meadow-flowers, addresses the Lord intimately as "my dear," and weeps. In His own garden, the Deity is apparently searching for just that which Ursule so ardently desires Him to receive:

The good Lord in His garden sought
New leaf and shadowy tinct,
And they were all His thought.
He heard her low accord,
Half prayer and half ditty,
And He felt a subtle quiver,
That was not heavenly love,
Or pity.

This is not writ
In any book.

(CP, 22-23)

Ursule's desire, uprooted like her radishes and wildflowers from the substance of earth, the body that nurtures them, wings its upward way to strike the good Lord who is at once the creating source and metaphysical end of her desiring. He, receptive to "her low accord, / Half prayer and half ditty," feels a corresponding "quiver."

The double yearning generated from the secular and the spiritual halves of being is shaped into a unity in Ursule's low "accord," for it is a chord composed of both sacred and profane notes. In a much later poem, Stevens will rearticulate the chord of desire as an interrelated sequence: "The physical pine, the metaphysical pine" (Credences of Summer, CP, 373). In Ursule, however, the good Lord's "subtle quiver" is the essential ambiguity and the key to the poem's reigning idea; that is, the idea that active desire is the agent by which a discrete subject and object are brought into alignment, made interchangeable, become each other. The subtle quiver represents action and reaction on the one hand, substance and potency on the other. It may be the first stir or the final shudder of desire, but it is also the quiver that holds, not the Augustinian beams of caritas, "not heavenly love, / Or pity," but the fiery darts of Eros. And here, in this

slight but curiously intricate poem of Stevens' early period, we come upon the figure of Christ Archer, a figure that entered Christian thought in the third century (ca. 240) with Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs.

Origen's concept of Christ as the Bridegroom who pierces the individual soul with the "wound of love" is a compound of the pagan myth of divine Eros with the Hebraic allegorical representation of God as the bridegroom of Israel. "The soul," says Origen in the Prologue to the Commentary, "is moved by heavenly love and longing when, having clearly beheld the beauty and the fairness of the Word of God, it falls deeply in love with His loveliness and receives from the Word Himself a certain dart and wound of love."⁴ A little further the Logos has become the arrow of desire: "If . . . a man can so extend his thinking as to ponder and consider the beauty and the grace of all things that have been created in the Word . . . the grandeur of their brightness will so pierce him as with a chosen dart--as says the prophet--that he will suffer from the dart Himself a saving wound, and will be kindled with the blessed fire of His love." Finally, in Book Three of the Commentary, desire and knowledge become interchangeable elements while the human soul becomes the

dart hidden in the holy quiver:

If there is anyone anywhere who has at some time burned with this faithful love of the Word of God; if there is anyone who has received the sweet wound of Him who is the chosen dart . . . if there is anyone who has been pierced with the lovable spear of His knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for Him by day and night, can speak nought but Him, would hear nought but Him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except for Him alone--if such there be, that soul . . . has received her wound of Him of whom Isaias says: And He hath made me a chosen dart, and in His quiver hath He hidden me.⁵

Origen is drawing upon a particularly graphic passage in Isaiah for the substance of his allegory:

"And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me" (49.2). Origen's ecstatic figure of the soul "pierced by the lovable spear of His knowledge" remained part of the rhetoric of Christian mysticism for more than a millennium, but in no hagiology is the image so peculiarly applicable as it is to Saint Ursula of Cologne. Ursula is said to have been born in Brittany in the fifth century, and she is usually depicted as a crowned princess with an arrow, which is her attribute.⁶ The story of Ursula furnishes us with a backdrop for Stevens' "Ursule," and the most familiar of the legends concerning her runs as follows.

The daughter of a Christian king, Ursula's exceptional beauty and intelligence drew many suitors but none could persuade her to marriage. At last Agrippus, the English king, sent ambassadors to secure her hand for Conan, his only son, and to this proposal Ursula seemed agreeable. However, she stipulated that three nearly impossible conditions be fulfilled before the marriage could be consummated: she must have ten noble virgins for her companions, and she herself as well as each of these ten virgins must have a thousand maidens in attendance; Prince Conan and the entire English court must convert to Christianity, for she would neither marry a heathen nor live among them; finally, she must have three years before the marriage to travel about, so that she might visit the shrines of Christian saints. The ambassadors returned to England ringing Ursula's praises and, perhaps to her dismay, Conan and his father agreed to meet her conditions. Eleven thousand maidens were marshalled for her retinue, and Conan came to join Ursula on her pilgrimage to Rome. Arriving at the outskirts of Cologne on the return journey, Ursula's party was attacked by Huns who had laid siege to the city. Her maidens and her husband-to-be were slaughtered on the spot, but the leader of the Huns took a fancy to Ursula

and offered to spare her life if she became his bride. When she refused, he raised his bow and drove three arrows into her body.

Stevens presents the virgin martyr as Madame Ste. Ursule to indicate that, in the convention of the Church, a nuptial has taken place. In her own mind, at least, Ursule has undertaken the vows of a nun. She is disposed, in Origen's phrase, "to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except for Him alone," for her soul has already been pierced by knowledge of the Word. All this is fairly orthodox allusion to the "bride-chamber" imagery of speculative mysticism, but it is also the fabric upon which Stevens can describe a parabolic flourish. Ursule's portrait is structured by three arrows, three vectors of desire that mark the crucial moments of her life, although they are never referred to explicitly in the poem. Antecedent to the present moment of the poem, Ursule has been made the target of the heavenly dart and she continues to burn with love for its divine Sender; the central moment of the poem shows the Deity struck in turn by Ursule's intense yearning. The good Lord's "quiver" becomes, with positive irony, the inevitable preliminary to the final arrow which will cause Ursule's death, but will also make possible the

total union desired by both. Thus, the savage hand that draws the bow and the hand of God converge into one thing, while the future moment contained in the poem is the moment poised between Ursule's life and her death.

Ursule's early death and her purity of spirit are both suggested by the white roses "frail as April snow" that she has laid upon the altars, enshrined within the sacred edifice. The crimson roots and many-colored flowers plucked from the ground outside, together with the red-and-gold robe she wears, signal that a wilder, richer passion sprung from the senses has joined the austere passion of the spirit. In "Ursule," just as in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (CP, 89-92), Stevens employs the classical metaphor of physical death for the consummation of passion. Beyond this is the intimation drawn from natural cycles that new life, like the changing states of being, is contingent on mortality. In "Peter Quince" we find a reading for the death that is merely suggested in "Ursule":

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
 So evenings die, in their green going,
 A wave, interminably flowing.
 So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
 The cowl of winter, done repenting.
 So maidens die, to the auroral
 Celebration of a maiden's choral.
 (CP, 92)

Although both "Peter Quince" and "Ursule" are concerned with seductiveness and desire, and though one might well be tempted to see "Ursule" in particular as a type of "seduction" piece, this sort of erotic poem seems unrelated to standard seduction poetry in voice, rhetorical basis or tone. "Peter Quince" does begin with a first-person voice speaking in an immediate present, but its central treatment of the Elders and Susanna, and the whole of "Ursule," is third-person narrative of past events. More important, the very foundation of the conventional seduction poem has shifted. In place of the persuasive monologue gracefully or wittily built on a half-veiled threat (let us seize the day before you grow old), and calculated to press a suit in the most civilized way by an urbane manipulation of logic, Stevens chooses in these poems to set forth an almost inarticulate dialogue of yearning between lover and beloved object that is coexistent with savagery and violence.

Erotic reflections such as one finds in these earlier pieces extend through Stevens' later poetry, always maintaining their sensual character and at least a tinge of primitive violence. They continue in the visions of "Sunday Morning" and develop fully in the contemplation

of Penelope in "The World as Meditation." Stevens once made the broad observation that "all poetry is experimental poetry" (OP, 161), and these murmured reflections are in some sense epistemological experiments in an erotic mode. One might think of such narratives having to do with chaste and desirous virgins and matrons as seduction parables, for there is something of illustration and teaching present in them, and an effort to seduce knowledge itself by the careful framing of a question.

At least three such questions are posed in "Ursule": (1) What is the relation of passive to active? (2) What is the relation of the metaphysical to the physical? (3) What is the effect of object upon subject? A fourth may easily be added: How does one differentiate between internal and external experience? To the systematic philosopher, the psychologist, these are "problems" to be approached objectively in the hope of extracting a reasonable conclusion or practicable solution. Stevens is a poet, and he will intuitively fashion his questions out of subjective stuff. Whatever understanding he comes to, and thus communicates, will have been attained through the "irrational element" that is instinct in poetry. With all his diffidence, with his ability to preserve objective

distance, and with a mind that has been shaped, in part, by the rigor of legal studies, Stevens will still note in one of the Adagia that "it is the explanations that we make to ourselves that disclose our character," and continue almost as an afterthought: "The subjects of one's poems are the symbols of one's self or of one's selves" (OP, 164).

The medieval setting of "Ursule," and the Provençal dialect of its title, justifies a reading that takes into account the ideas and images of speculative theology, particularly as this school of mysticism flourished in twelfth-century France. Before looking at some of the later poetry, however, we should note Stevens' attitude toward mysticism in general. In the lecture on "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens takes great care to dissociate the idea he is developing from "mystical rhetoric . . . and that sort of thing." Five years later in 1942, the year Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction is published, he writes to Henry Church, "I loathe anything mystical" (LWS, 428). It is not hard to understand why Stevens found the term distasteful, or why the thought that he might be charged with "mystical" tendencies should make him uncomfortable. In the popular mind, mysticism was (and still is) associated with quasi-religious cults, vague

or fanatical beliefs, occultism. Evelyn Underhill points out, in her invaluable work on the subject,⁷ that the term is a catch-all that has been "impartially applied to the performances of mediums and the ecstasies of saints, to 'menticulture' and sorcery, dreamy poetry and medieval art, to prayer and palmistry, the doctrinal excesses of Gnosticism, and the tepid speculations of the Cambridge Platonists--even, according to William James, to the higher branches of intoxication." It is safe, I think, to assume that when Stevens publicly disavows an affinity with "anything mystical," he is trying to set himself apart from the catalogue of confusions recorded by Underhill.

On another level, however, there is unquestionably something in Stevens which sees a close relation between theological mysticism and aesthetic experience. Both are stimulated by the seductions of the unknown, and Stevens tends to see them both as expressions of the philosophic urge that "begins in wonder," as Aristotle puts it. For example, in that same talk on the "Irrational Element," Stevens establishes a parallel between poet and mystic, and then refers both to the quest for a "first principle" that occupied classical philosophy:

All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational. . . . and while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. (OP, 222)⁸

The Stevens of the later poetry has tightened the bond that relates poetry to both theology and philosophy. In "A Collect of Philosophy" (1951), he speaks of the formation of conceptual thought as fundamentally a poetic process, or poiesis. In this context, the idea of God becomes "the ultimate poetic idea," while "the one poem that is unimpeachably divine is the poem of the ascent into heaven" (OP, 193). Also in 1951, in an essay that deals with the relations between poetry and painting, we find Stevens circumspectly but deliberately connecting the art of poetry to both theology and mysticism:

The theory of poetry, that is to say, the total of the theories of poetry, often seems to become in time a mystical theology. (NA, 173)

In the talk on painting and poetry, Stevens refers to the "economy of genius" that enabled William Blake to follow both arts simultaneously. A short essay "On Poetic Truth" written probably in 1954, the year before Stevens' death, discusses with Blakean conviction the poet's necessity to reject "abstract systems," and adhere to the

concrete and the particular. And there is an echo of the poet-painter's energetic mysticism, in this late essay, when Stevens speaks of a "revelation" that cannot be reached by means of a purely cognitive process:

The wonder and the 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. (OP, 237)

These selections from Stevens' prose writings date from the beginning of his middle period to the time of the late poetry. They show an increasing willingness on Stevens' part to give public expression to a side of his nature that, in the earlier periods, was reserved for poetry alone--and then with some qualification. I most emphatically do not mean to suggest that, at some particular stage of his development, Stevens "converts" from rational thinking to mystic illuminations. It is not so clear-cut as that. Stevens does not relinquish one approach to knowledge for the sake of another; it seems he will have them all. And this ascetic strain in Stevens, this aspect of contemplative mysticism is, reduced to its simplest terms, one of his ways of apprehending reality.

Turning back to the poetry, one again finds Stevens employing the language of desire for a contemplative

purpose in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, the major work of the middle period. In the second canto of Part I ("It Must Be Abstract"), the erotic principle is given as the dynamic cause that motivates the "monastic man" as well as the artist and the philosopher:

The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher
Appoints man's place in music, say, today.
But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.
(CP, 382)

As in "Ursule," the interchange and mingling of roles stands out as a focal condition. As a result of this fluid interchange, the separate pursuit of the sacred, the aesthetic, and the philosophic merge into a single action, and this action is derived from a state of negation: "not to have." Stevens thus imparts a positive value to negation as the primary source of desire, action and creation. This is a Bergsonian statement made by a poet who had an abiding respect for Bergson's ideas. "And not to have is the beginning of desire" encapsulates Bergson's theory of action in a single line of verse. In Creative Evolution, the French philosopher and mathematician defines human action as a response to negation, "absence" and "lack":

Every human action has its starting-point
in dissatisfaction, and thereby in a feeling

of absence. We should not act if we did not set before ourselves an end, and we seek a thing only because we feel the lack of it. Our action thus proceeds from "nothing" to "something," and its very essence is to embroider "something" on the canvas of "nothing."⁹

Stevens' axiom of negation prepares the way for a meditation on the act of poetry in canto III. In this canto, priest, artist, and philosopher are conjoined in a single identity and speak in a single voice. Here, too, the erotic lexis is closely bound with what might easily be termed "mystical rhetoric," a theological proposition of Immaculate Conception. Bergson's "canvas of nothing" is expressed as "an immaculate beginning" and the poem becomes the "something" that is embroidered on the canvas. The poem, says Stevens, enables the poet to "share, / For a moment, the first idea," to participate in a primary act of creation:

It satisfies

Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these
points:
From that ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power. (CP, 382)

The exhilaration of "thought beating in the heart" comes about when the "immaculate end," the unknown, appears within one's grasp. The writing of the poem is at once an act of discovery, described in terms of intense sensation. A letter to Henry Church, dated December 8, 1942, also relates this experience of discovery in vividly physical terms. Stevens tells Church that he has received a letter from a genealogist whom he has engaged to research his family, "written in a state of great excitement because she has just made another discovery." He goes on to compare this feeling with his own sensations when preoccupied with the writing of Notes: "It is the same thing with an idea like the idea of a supreme fiction. When I get up at 6 o'clock in the morning . . . the thing crawls all over me; it is in my hair when I shave and I think of it in the bathtub." (LWS, 431)

At a later period, the language of eros is linked more firmly than before to the idea of the ascetic and the sacred. An Ordinary Evening in New Haven (published in The Auroras of Autumn in 1950) explores the varieties of perception and the presence of interior vision. Here, the sublime object of desire emerges in chiaroscuro, half-revealed as the "object / Of the perpetual meditation,

point / Of the enduring, visionary love, / Obscure"
 (CP, 466). Out of the initial proposition of the third
 canto, "The point of vision and desire are the same,"
 comes an invocation to the "ancientest saint ablaze with
 ancientest truth":

Say next to holiness is the will thereto,
 And next to love is the desire for love,
 The desire for its celestial ease in the heart,

Which nothing can frustrate, that most secure,
 Unlike love in possession of that which was
 To be possessed and is. But this cannot

Possess. It is desire, set deep in the eye,
 Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene.
 (CP, 467)

The theme we first encountered in "Ursule" is
 stated here as a measured descent from the sublime "object
 of the perpetual meditation" to its irreducible origins in
 the erotic impulse. In this later poem, however, there is
 a clear disjunction between desire for a non-temporal love,
 "which nothing can frustrate," and the love which is
 concerned with possession. The mutability of "love in
 possession" is suggested by the swift succession of tenses
 which accompany the idea, and with which the idea termi-
 nates: "that which was / To be possessed and is." Far
 from producing a "celestial ease in the heart," this is a
 paradoxical condition in which the object of love takes

possession of its possessor. Perhaps the most explicit statement of "love in possession" is made in Credences of Summer (canto VII) where the subject is introduced in an incantatory mode:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold,
 three times
 The thrice concentrated self, having possessed
 The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
 Once to make captive, once to subjugate
 Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
 The meaning of the capture, this hard prize.
 (CP, 376)

In An Ordinary Evening in New Haven we also find that Stevens has extended the Bergsonian description of action beyond the immediate act of poetry. It now applies to the entire life of the imagination, the ability to construct cosmic systems, to perceive worlds of remote possibility. The process whereby negation generates creation becomes more than a theory of poetry; it is a way to talk about conscious life:

. . . life,
 As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
 In things seen and unseen, created from
 nothingness,
 The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the
 longed-for lands. (CP, 486)

The vital imagination and the moving progressions of consciousness are cast in the form of a voyage, a journey into the interior, in "The Sail of Ulysses," the

major work of Stevens' final period (OP, 99-105). This serious and sometimes extraordinarily beautiful poem was delivered at Columbia in May 1954, at the Phi Beta Kappa exercises that were held during the University's celebration of its two-hundredth Commencement. I note the occasion for this first reading in order to point out that, despite the dignity of the occasion and the serious nature of his subject--or possibly because of them--Stevens allowed his irrepressible penchant for whimsy to suggest the poem's title and to perpetrate at least one topical pun in the body of the work. The pun is in the idea of an "Eden conceived at Morningside" (canto VII), a reference to the University itself, located just west of Morningside Drive. The title may well be a playful recognition of the literal meaning of the words represented by the initials Phi Beta Kappa (for philosophia, bios, kubernetes): love of knowledge (philosophy) is the pilot, or helmsman, of life. The touch of whimsy, however, acts only as a sort of introductory grace note to the theme, for "The Sail of Ulysses" is an exploration of various modes of knowing, and the quest of Ulysses, "symbol of the seeker," is for significant knowledge of the self.

The poem's general structure emerges as a "passage"

through four different ways of obtaining knowledge.

Ulysses embarks upon his nocturnal journey guiding his boat "under the middle stars." His place of departure is a Cartesian point of crossing where being and knowing meet and are understood as mutually dependent referents: "As I know, I am and have / The right to be" (OP, 99). The excursions of analytic reason continue until the beginning of the third canto where they are succeeded by another cadence; here, we encounter intuitive knowledge, grasped directly by the creating imagination:

Thinking golden thoughts in a golden mind,
Loftily jingled, radiant,
The joy of meaning in design
Wrenched out of chaos. (OP, 100)

The rational voice now speculates on the "uncertain certainty" of past concepts of creation and considers a possible future where the sources of creation "are known." The thinking mind foresees a "freedom at last from the mystical," conceives "the beginning of a final order" in terms of a teleological abstraction, and contrives a new "absolute" in man's "right to be / As he is" (OP, 101). In the fifth canto, the rational voice comes to a full stop with the proposition "We come / To knowledge when we come to life." Another, more mysterious, voice now rises in counterpoint:

Yet always there is another life,
 A life beyond this present knowing,
 A life lighter than this present splendor,
 Brighter, perfected and distant away,
 Not to be reached but to be known,
 Not an attainment of the will
 But something illogically received,
 A divination, a letting down
 From loftiness, misgivings dazzlingly
 Resolved in dazzling discovery. (OP, 101-102)

The third voice speaks of "revealed" knowledge with the unmistakable overtones of mysticism. A sense of brilliant illumination, the passivity of the will, the experience of "something illogically received" is the experience recorded by the great mystics from Plotinus on down. There is often the added statement that the actual moment of ecstasy cannot be described, that it can be conveyed only in metaphor or in terms of what it is not. It is the immense moment of perfect lucidity, not achieved but received, that surpasses all known pleasure and is dynamic (ek-stasis) in nature. This is the knowledge revealed in oracles and expressed in prophecy, and, in canto five, the above passage heralds an apocalyptic vision of the future when "We shall have gone behind the symbols / To that which they symbolized. . . . Like glitter ascended into fire" (OP, 102).

By the end of canto five we have encountered three types of knowledge, moving from deductive reason to

aesthetic intuition into mystic insight. But the journey into the night represents a fourth mode of knowledge in itself, a via negativa that carries the seeker through "the crystal atmospheres of the mind" toward the dark origins of both knowing and being. The way of negation has been described in both philosophical and theological terms. Plotinus, in the third century, discusses it as a stripping away of all known quantity and quality; the spirit is directed toward a realm that exists beyond extension, shape or form, and the journey is painful and frightening. He describes the difficult process in the sixth Ennead:

The soul or mind reaching toward the formless finds itself incompetent to grasp where nothing bounds it or to take impression where the impinging reality is diffuse; in sheer dread of holding to nothingness, it slips away. The state is painful; often it seeks relief by retreating from all this vagueness to the regions of sense, there to rest on solid ground.¹⁰

In the sixteenth century, St. John of the Cross (Stevens' "Dark Juan" of "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home") speaks of the journey into negation as a search for God within the "caverns" of the soul. The Spanish monastic outlines the purpose of spiritual impoverishment in a treatise "Concerning the Direction of Contemplative Souls":

These caverns are the faculties of the soul: memory, understanding, and will. Their depths are proportionate to their capacity for great blessings; for they can be filled with nothing less than the infinite. By focusing upon what they suffer when void, we can comprehend, to some degree, the profundity of their joy and delight when they are filled with their God, for one contrary can cast light upon another.¹¹

The via negativa is an approach to knowledge that aims at discovery of the Sublime within the least familiar regions of the self. In "The Sail of Ulysses," this approach is suggested in a general way by the night journey, but it also threads through, and colors, the alternate modes of knowing. In canto II, for example, it is expressed in the reflection upon the state of "human loneliness, / A part of space and solitude, / In which knowledge cannot be denied," while the aesthetic imagination of canto III envisions the "quiet lamp" of divine creation "Enlarging like a nocturnal ray / The space in which it stands, the shine / Of darkness, creating from nothingness" (OP, 100). It is not until the eighth and final canto, though, that the way of negation is presented systematically as a series of steps.

The quest for the "sibyl of the self," in the

eighth canto, begins with a rejection of external beauty. Art is the "englistered woman," a "gorgeous symbol, seated / On the seat of halidom." Her wealth and majesty are sensual images that "pierce the spirit" in a realm of appearance and "delving show." The true shape of the sibyl is discovered in the next "step" when, by a descent into the self, one leaves behind the accumulations of sense perception. First recognition of the true sibyl is also the moment in which one recognizes that her worth derives from what is not attached to her; she represents no external value:

It is the sibyl of the self,
 The self as sibyl, whose diamond,
 Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth
 Is poverty, whose jewel found
 At the exactest central of the earth
 Is need. (OP, 104)

At the midpoint of the passage, the sibyl's shape which, like Plotinus' noetic soul, has been a "blind thing fumbling for its form," recedes into "nothingness," and we are brought to utter negation. From this dormant "nothing," however, a series of upward steps is fashioned. The only existent at this point is need, the "jewel found / At the exactest central of the earth," born out of what is not. And from need comes the seed of desire for that which will satisfy need:

. . . Need names on its breath
 Categories of bleak necessity,
 Which, just to name, is to create
 A help, a right to help, a right
 To know what helps and to attain
 By right of knowing, another plane.
 (OP, 104)

The rapid ascent from negation and need to "another plane" is completed with a change of perception. The "englistered woman" is now identified with the "inhuman more," the undefinable Sublime that dwells in human existence, both sensual and beyond the senses, both "known / And unknown" (OP, 105). The poem concludes with a recognition of something huge and "wholly other" engaging the individual consciousness while it pursues its own enigmatic course:

The great sail of Ulysses seemed
 In the breathings of this soliloquy,
 Alive with an enigma's fluttering . . .
 As if another sail went on
 Straight forwardly through another night
 And clumped stars dangled all the way.

In "The Sail of Ulysses," Stevens brings another, larger dimension to the voyage of discovery begun by a young Comedian in bright sunlight many years before. But we will leave this older voyager as he drifts through states of consciousness, navigating by the ancient light of clustered stars, for we can now sum up a few points.

Following a roughly chronological order, we have looked at a number of poems, each taken from a different

period of Stevens' work and all shaped by a very particular kind of passion. This type of desire has three distinguishing characteristics: it operates toward an ultimate transformation of the self; it leans to an extreme asceticism; and it tends to subordinate philosophical and theological concepts to a major erotic metaphor.

We note the intense desire expressed in these poems to come to knowledge of a Sublime, whether it is the experience of a mysteriously vital, "wholly other" Being, or a transcendent state of consciousness. As in "Ursule," desire itself acts as a mediating agent between the sensual and metaphysical realms, and so partakes of both natures. "Knowledge" of the metaphysical object of desire takes on the same connotation as the Biblical meaning of (carnal) knowledge; it involves not only union, but transubstantiation. "Knowing," then, is the state during which the desiring subject becomes one substance with the desired object, thus transforming the subject. Knowledge is the point where "vision and desire are the same."

The tendency to embrace asceticism is particularly marked in such poems as "The Sail of Ulysses," where the via negativa is established as the ultimate means of attaining the desired end. Though Stevens arrives at this

path through the gateway of Bergsonian philosophy, the path itself is a well-trodden one that stretches back past Christianity to classical times and Orphic practices. In Stevens' poetry, we find the ascetic tendency increasingly reflected in theme and lexis as we move from the early to the late work. Images of emptiness, winter, cold, snow, stark necessity, poverty, nakedness and need are indeed present throughout the body of the poetry, but the lexis becomes noticeably "stripped down" and spare in the later work, divested, too, of many of the idiosyncrasies and sophistications of the earlier periods. It is important to note, also, that the images of asceticism are presented with a neutrality and restraint that is a form of asceticism in itself; they are seldom connected with ideas of "good" and "bad," nor even with terms of pleasure and pain. Their effect is to reinforce a description of reality in which existence is perceived as a series of interrelated cycles, and where negation is understood to be a necessary end as well as an "immaculate beginning." It is precisely this deliberately impersonal mode of perception, with its attendant devaluation of the ego, that leads to the desired end. Rather than impose desire or attempt to possess the object of desire, one seeks to

empty the self of all but desire itself, "which nothing can frustrate," in order to receive the knowledge that is also love.

Finally, in Stevens' poetry as in the long tradition that precedes and nourishes it, the life of the mind and the imagination is given its strongest expression in a central erotic emblem of hierogamy, or sacred marriage. Those who are familiar with the intensive metaphors of courtship, union, and birth employed by the contemplative thinkers will recognize the same strain in poems such as "Study of Images II," whose concluding stanzas recall Plotinian discussions of love, harmony and centrality. In this poem, Stevens invents a continuum in which theoretical constructs assume the qualities of organic life, and where a theoretical situation--a "centre of images" where all possible entities coexist with their contraries--can be referred to in terms of "betrothal," "espousal," "breeding," "birth," and "marriage":

As if, as if, as if the disparate halves
Of things were waiting in a betrothal known
To none, awaiting espousal to the sound

Of right joining, a music of ideas, the burning
And breeding and bearing birth of harmony,
The final relation, the marriage of the rest.

(CP, 464-65)

What is being represented here, in the most general sense, is an invasion of the realm of idea by a powerful erotic element. It is this aspect of the poetry, taken together with the ascetic tendency and the urge for transcendence, that places a good part of the Stevens canon in alignment with a tradition of loving and knowing that stems from classical antiquity.

The idea of eros aiming toward knowledge of the sublime is given its first and most complex treatment in Plato's Symposium. With the Phaedrus, the Symposium remains the primary text on the relation of loving to knowing, and as it has continued to exert an influence on all subsequent meditations, one returns to the Symposium as the source-work on the metaphysics of desire. We have seen that Stevens' poetic tends to accommodate philosophic concepts as part of the essential fabric of poetry. His regard for Plato is well established by the time he has completed his student years at Harvard. "I must be careful to remember the things that are worth remembering," he notes in his journal at that time, and the entry continues: "I am going to get a set of Lowell's Plato as soon as I can afford it and use that as a sort of buoy" (LWS, 42). We know, too, that Stevens continued to closely

read the dialogues in his maturity, annotating the margins of the Benjamin Jowett translation.¹² In the poetry, Stevens' affinity with Platonic Forms and dialectic manifests itself in his use of the major metaphor to indicate an abstract reality, and in the discursive interchange between his several voices. His sense of the noble and the sublime is rooted in Platonic mythopoeic structures, and at times we find this influence surfacing in the prose essays, as when Stevens employs the central allegory of the Phaedrus in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Perhaps his strongest statement regarding the value of philosophy in general, and the Dialogues in particular, is to be found in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Here, the voyager of the early period reflects the young Stevens' journal entry, holding tightly to the "essential prose" as to a buoy:

He gripped more closely the essential prose
 As being, in a world so falsified,
 The one integrity for him, the one
 Discovery still possible to make,
 To which all poems were incident, unless
 That prose should wear a poem's guise at last.
 (CP, 36)

Stevens' response to the essential prose of Plato is as much a response to the "irrational" element in the dialogues as to their substance; his affinity for Platonic

thought is fed by a recognition of the poetic strain in Plato. More than any other dialogue, the Symposium deals with the contrast and relation of poetry to philosophy. It is significant, in this context, that Diotima's central exposition on the nature of love begins in dialectic, progresses through an allegorical teaching, develops epistemological concepts, and concludes with the closest thing to a rhapsodic flight that one finds outside the Phaedrus.

Diotima

Diotima's discourse in the Symposium is the dramatic culmination of six formal speeches delivered in praise of divine Eros. Within the larger structure of the dialogue, the exposition of the prophetess from Mantinea acts very much like the "wroughten cup" of the pastoral poets or the "Shield of Achilles" section of the Iliad (Book XVIII). It stands as an intricate and independent component of the larger work while providing both a focus for and a correspondence with the surrounding text. As a rhetorical "artifact" within a work of art and, again, because it is understood to be Socrates' speech, it differs markedly in approach, intent, argument, structural development and tone from the speeches preceding it (and the one

that follows). Its first and most obvious departure, however, concerns the nature and characteristics of love.

The idea of Eros as a powerful divinity is jettisoned from the start, in Diotima's speech, and love is reduced to the status of a "daemon," and a hungry, searching, poverty-stricken daemon at that. In his unappeaseable hunger for the beautiful, the wise, and the good, in his poverty and resourcefulness, and particularly in his function as a mediating spirit between what is most human and what is divine, Eros assumes the character of the philosopher. Indeed, according to Diotima's description, the love daemon bears close points of resemblance to both Socrates and herself. "He interprets between gods and men," she explains, "he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore in him all is bound together, and through him the arts of the prophet and the priest . . . find their way."¹³

It is worth noting here that the mythic figure called up by the Mantinean is not so much Aphrodite's errant child as the figure, winged at head and foot, of Hermes, the divine herald. The Hermes of Plato's time retained a number of characteristics from an earlier period when he was worshipped as a phallic deity; he represented

sexual energy, potency, fertility.¹⁴ In a later period he functions as messenger of the gods, but is also known as the divinely quick-witted thief. In his aspect of psychopompos (leader of souls), he guides human souls to the nether realm after death. Like Diotima's love daemon, he is the bridging agent who "spans the chasm" between the mortal and the immortal, and whose energy and mobility give him access to the highest and the lowest regions of the Greek cosmos. By assigning to Eros the attributes of Hermes, Plato has grafted a philosophic concept of love to a venerable stock, reconstituting the idea of desire from its religious and daemonic origins in the culture.

In order to make perfectly clear the medial nature and diverse characteristics of Eros, Diotima tells a story tracing his birth to the meeting of Penia (Poverty, Need) and Poros (Resourcefulness, Plenty) on the occasion of Aphrodite's birthday festivities. This little fable concerning the parentage of love, or, more precisely, the conditions which attend its birth, is of particular interest to us in connection with Stevens' repeated reference to the creation of something from nothing. Diotima tells the young Socrates how Penia surreptitiously gets a child from Poros who lies asleep in the garden,

teaching that a state of need contains desire within it that will move it toward wealth. Reduced to its most elementary statement, we understand that love is generated when not-having moves toward having. Stevens reflects this germinal condition when he tells us "Need names on its breath / Categories of bleak necessity," and echoes the terms of the Platonic allegory when he refers to that state "Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth / Is poverty."

Diotima's fable about the conception of Eros is situated between two explanatory analogues, the first drawn from epistemology and the second from poetry. Socrates' instructress in the art of love first illustrates the medial position of Eros by comparing it to the mean between ignorance and wisdom. It is like "Right opinion . . . which . . . being incapable of giving a reason, is not knowledge (for how can knowledge be devoid of reason?) nor again ignorance (for neither can ignorance attain the truth), but is clearly something which is a mean between ignorance and wisdom."¹⁵ Thus, at the very outset of Diotima's teaching a correspondence is established between the study of love in the Symposium and the "divided line" theory of knowledge expounded in The Republic (Book VI). The four stages of cognition are separated by "a line

divided into two unequal parts, one to represent the visible order, the other the intelligible."¹⁶ So does Stevens distinguish between the aesthetic and the noetic realms when he speaks of the "visible" and the "invisible." And as the dividing line of The Republic separates a lesser world of seeming and opinion from the greater knowledge, so are the "greater mysteries" of the Symposium divided from the "lesser mysteries" of love. F.M. Cornford notes the correspondence in his commentary on the theory of the "divided line" in The Republic:

The higher intellectual training now to be described is to detach the mind from appearances and individuals and to carry it across the boundary between the two worlds and all the way to the vision of the Good. It thus corresponds to the "greater mysteries" of which Diotima speaks in the Symposium, where Eros, detached from its individual object, advances to the vision of Beauty itself (the Good considered as the object of desire).¹⁷

The comparison that follows the allegorical fable of love's birth is the parallel drawn between poets and lovers. Diotima points out that poetry (poiesis) in its most general sense means "making," or creation: "All creation or passage of non-being into being is poetry or making."¹⁸ Poetry, as such, is a "complex and manifold" process, but the name of "poet" is reserved for those who

address themselves to that portion of the art which is concerned with music and meter. Similarly, she continues, one may say in a general way that "all desire of good and happiness is only the great and subtle power of love; but . . . the name of the whole is appropriated to those whose affection takes one form only--they only are said to love, or be lovers." By means of this second comparison, the bond of kinship between love and poetry that is so firmly established in the Phaedrus is early set forth among the complex series of ideas developed in the course of Diotima's exposition.

As a structural unit, the story about the origins of Eros provides a meeting ground for the pursuit of philosophy and the art of poetry. Although by the same structural design they stand as separate and contrasting approaches to knowing, the examples that flank the allegory are each identified with the love impulse. From the Phaedrus, we have the notion that a divine mania, or possession, is part of the determining nature of love and poetry, the gift of prophecy, and the practice of mystery religion. We should note that something of each of these four areas is reflected in the character of Diotima in the Symposium. And it is largely through Diotima's speech in

the Symposium that we come to understand that the practice of philosophy can also assume the aspect of a mania, sharing with the four forms of divine "madness" set forth in the Phaedrus a sense of possession that detaches one from all else and drives one in pursuit of a sublime unknown. Thus philosophy is also subject to possession and guided by inspiration, and Eros is said to be a philosopher.

Stevens addressed the question of the relationship between poetry and philosophy in "A Collect of Philosophy" (1951), and in the concluding section of this essay attempted to define the fundamental difference and the fundamental unity between the two forms. It is the ability to form concepts, he writes, that unites them, and specifies this ability as "a habit of mind by which it probes for an integration."¹⁹ It is in "the use to which they put their ideas" that the distinction lies. A bit further on, Stevens tackles the problem of "supremacy" which is, as we know, one of the major concerns of the Symposium:

The most significant deduction possible relates to the question of supremacy as between philosophy and poetry. If we say that philosophy is supreme, this means that the reason is supreme over the imagination. But is it? Does not the philosopher carry us to a point at which there is nothing left except the imagination? If we rely on the imagination

(or, say, intuition), to carry us beyond that point, and if the imagination succeeds in carrying us beyond that point (as in respect to the idea of God . . .), then the imagination is supreme, because its powers have shown themselves to be greater than the powers of reason. Philosophers, however, are not limited to the reason and . . . their ideas are often triumphs of the imagination. To call attention to ideas in which the reason and the imagination have been acting in concert is a way of saying that when they act in concert they are supreme and is not the same thing as to say that one is supreme over the other.²⁰

Stevens has often indicated that, for him, the practice of the poet's art is a spiritual and metaphysical act. At one point, he characterized the role of the poet as "the priest of the invisible" (OP, 169). From the above passage, we see that it is the two components of the "invisible" order--Stevens' familiar terms of "imagination" and "reason"--that must be brought to act in concert if either poet or philosopher is to reach the supreme goal. This brings us to consider an interesting aspect of the Symposium with respect to the symbolism that attaches to the figures of Socrates and Diotima.

We remarked earlier (p. 33) that Diotima's discourse is in reality Socrates' speech. Socrates introduces her character during an exchange with the poet Agathon, recalling from memory the instructress of his youth whom he describes as "a woman wise in [love] and in many other

kinds of knowledge."²¹ That a dialectical exchange is employed in a Platonic dialogue can occasion no surprise, although it is significant that Diotima begins her discourse at the point where Socrates leaves off, and in the same Socratic mode. What is unusual in the Symposium is that virtually the whole of Socrates' discussion of the nature of love is presented as the teaching of an oracular voice out of the past, and in terms of a recollection. I should like to emphasize the significance of true memory or "recollection" in Plato's theory of knowledge. Cornford puts it concisely that "all learning is the recovery of latent knowledge always possessed by the immortal soul."²² If we apply this principle to the characters in the Symposium, it suggests that the learning that Socrates says he has derived from Diotima is the recovery of knowledge always possessed by his own immortal soul. It suggests an even closer relation between Socrates and the prophetess than that of student and teacher in the art of love. Although she is introduced as a living woman with a location and a history, Diotima may also be understood as the immortal, and prophetic, component of Socrates' own nature.

That Diotima is meant to be understood in this symbolic sense is borne out in the final passages of her

discourse. She has completed her explanation of the "lesser mysteries," describing how Eros seeks completion in the realm of Becoming by the generation of children, the production of works of art, the founding of just institutions. The "bringing to birth" of these things provides the only immortality possible in the world of appearance; a limited continuance of self exists in one's offspring, or in the recognition accorded to one's works, or thought, after death. As she is about to move over the line that divides the greater mysteries from the lesser, however, and to explicate the ultimate object of Eros in the realm of Being, Diotima pauses to tell Socrates: "I know not whether you will be able to attain [the higher mysteries]. . . . But I will do my utmost to inform you, and do you follow if you can."²³ It has been pointed out that, as an historic character, Socrates represents the uppermost reaches of philosophic understanding, expressed in the Symposium by his easy grasp of the "lesser mysteries." In the figure of Diotima, Plato represents that element contained within mortal being that surpasses the rational, partakes of the mystical, and, above all, promises to mortal existence the accomplishment of its deepest desire: immortality.

In this context, we should note that Plato has provided Diotima with a dimension beyond any other character in the dialogue by causing her discourse to be four times removed, or directed through four other memories. The Symposium is built on a series of "framed" recollections: the whole dialogue is recounted by Apollodorus, who had it from Glaucon, who heard it from Aristodemus, who recalls Socrates' account of Diotima's words. Indeed, she stands so far from the other participants that we may very well come full circle and conjecture whether Diotima is not the unique expression of Plato's own voice, and her role of prophetess the vehicle by which Plato reveals his own mystical experience.

According to Diotima's teaching, each of the four manifestations, or stages, of love is aimed at fruition, a "bringing to birth in the beautiful." Beginning with physical union and the generation of children, each stage represents one possible sort of union and the product appropriate to that union in an ascending order of value. "The true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love," says the Mantinean, "is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty." Diotima's teaching of the "greater

mysteries" concludes with a description of the initiate's communion with beauty absolute in a deathless realm of Idea where he contemplates, and thus becomes one with, "the divine beauty . . . pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life." In her final passage she calls on the philosopher to "remember," that is, to account the prophetic revelation as part of his store of true knowledge:

Remember how in that communion only,
 beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he
 will be enabled to bring forth, not images of
 beauty, but realities . . . and bringing forth
 and nourishing true virtue to become the friend
 of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.²⁴

Cornford rightly comments that Plato here projects an experience that surpasses the purely intellectual, calling it "a conversion of every element in the soul by the last transfiguration of Eros."²⁵ And at that point, he suggests that the distinction between the metaphysical and the religious may become meaningless. Like Stevens' poet, the philosopher has become "the priest of the invisible." His communion with the Absolute is the kind of sacred union Stevens refers to when he speaks

Of right joining, a music of ideas, the burning
 And breeding and bearing birth of harmony,
 The final relation, the marriage of the rest.

The rite of hierogamy that becomes a central emblem in Christian mysticism is present in the Symposium in two forms. The idea first enters Diotima's discourse almost as a formal parody when Penia, the would-be mother of love, vulgarly wreaks her will on an insensate Poros who is sleeping off an overindulgence of nectar. That this farcical situation is meant to amuse as well as instruct is perfectly clear, and it serves to instantly dissipate the glamour woven about the figure of Eros by Agathon in the preceding speech. The second appearance of the idea of sacred marriage occurs, as suggested above, in the final passages of Diotima's speech. Here, it functions in a serious capacity; much as Diotima's portrayal of Eros calls up the potent figure of Hermes, thus joining an intellectual construct to its religious origins in the culture, so does her description of the mystic regions of contemplation call up the sacred rites celebrated at Eleusis. Cornford notes that the process of purification and the final revelation of the Eleusinian mystery religion are echoed in the prophetess's words:

At last by the strength gathered in these regions of contemplation, the soul becomes capable of a revelation that comes, if it comes at all, "suddenly." Plato here borrows from the Eleusinian mysteries the language of the Sacred Marriage and of the final revelation,

when the ancient symbols of divinity were disclosed to the purified initiate in a sudden blaze of light. The soul is united with the divine Beauty, and itself becomes immortal and divine.²⁶

The substance of Diotima's revelation is the "passage of non-being into being," which is the definition Plato has her give for poetry in general. It is also a realization of that "habit of mind" that "probes for an integration" which, for Stevens, is the fundamental bond between poet and philosopher. Stevens spoke of the philosophy of Leibniz as the "poem of Leibnitz," and of Schopenhauer's thought as the "cosmic poem of the ascent into heaven" (OP, 193). He will have approached the Platonic dialogues as poetic constructs, and understood them to be the great poems of the mind. And of all the dialogues, it is perhaps the Symposium that most nearly functions as a "poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (CP, 239).

Loving and Knowing: An Outline of the Tradition

In the Symposium, Plato established a systematic way to talk about the movement of desire from the physical to the metaphysical realm. Love of beauty is directed toward the apprehension of Beauty in its Ideal form, and

this is the necessary step that leads to contemplation of the highest Good. Contemplation of the Good is at once the ultimate knowledge available to human experience, the sum of all pleasure, the goal and end of all seeking. The erotic impulse is the vehicle by which one may approach this goal, but it is an erotic that has been educated to the greatest possible advantage. After Plato, the thinkers who were concerned with the idea of desire aimed at knowing remained indebted to the concept of eros developed in the Symposium. Some accepted Plato's model and some, like Aristotle, departed from it; some, like Plotinus and Augustine, joined to Plato's model concepts that were substantially opposed to it, and some attempted to Christianize it. But each progression of thought attached in some way to Plato's original model, and was in some way dependent upon it.

Each of Aristotle's treatises deals with a particular segment of human life and defines man according to the particular aspect being treated. Thus man is variously a political being, an ethical or social being, a logical being, an objectively observant being, a being with a soul, a being who creates, and so forth. The Metaphysics opens with still another definition of human nature, for

Aristotle begins his discussion in Book I with the observation that "All men by nature desire to know."²⁷ In the context of loving and knowing, it is interesting that the philosopher chooses the verb oregontai to express desire, rather than a term that connotes wishing or desiring in a more abstract sense. Oregontai also translates as "reaching for with the hand."

Aristotle's contribution to the theory of desire is centered in the nature and cause of motion. Unlike Plato, who sees the soul as self-moved and eros as an autonomous source of energy, Aristotle places desire in a secondary capacity, an accident of the First Cause. In Aristotle's scheme of things, the Initiating Principle, or God, is itself unmoved and self-contemplative. Eros is the involuntary response to the attraction of the Unmoved Mover who "produces motion through being loved."²⁸ It is this concept that Stevens calls up in The Auroras of Autumn when he joins the figure of the father as "master" to Aristotle's originating cause of motion:

Master O master seated by the fire
And yet in space and motionless and yet
Of motion the ever-brightening origin

Profound.

(CP, 414-15)

There is at least a hint of the compelling urge to grasp a noetic object in the Nichomachean Ethics (X.7), where Aristotle emphasizes the "pleasures of remarkable purity and duration" experienced in the "pursuit of wisdom." It is in the Metaphysics, however, that the theory of the Unmoved Mover--developed in the Physics to account for the motion of heavenly bodies--is extended to cover the motion of human desire and human thought. "There is something that moves without being moved," states the philosopher, "being eternal, substance, actuality. And the object of desire and the object of thought move in this way; they move without being moved. The primary objects of desire and of thought are the same."²⁹ And it is in Book VII of the Metaphysics that Aristotle describes the perfect integration of subject and object that occurs during contemplation (theoria), calling it the best and highest pleasure:

Thought [noesis] in the most complete sense thinks itself, because it participates in the object it is thinking of. That is to say, perfect thought apprehends and thinks its object in such a way that the thought and its object become one, and the thought becomes its own object. . . . to be active rather than to be receptive would seem to be the divine aspect of thought, and its "contemplative activity" [theoria] is at once its best and most highly pleasurable state.³⁰

Here again, in the contemplative vision, is that condition of perfect union, perfect knowledge, and perfect pleasure at which, in Stevens' phrase, "the point of vision and desire are one." We note, too, that Plotinus' cosmic construct, although largely built on Platonic concepts, is indebted to the above passage in the Metaphysics for its second "hypostasis," the Nous of Intellective Being that "thinks itself." A span of over six hundred years separates the lifetimes of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) and Plotinus (205-270 C.E.), the last great exponent of Greek philosophy. The difference between Plotinus's world-view and Aristotle's is at least as marked as the difference between Aristotle's philosophy and Plato's. But the pagan philosophers shared a number of fundamental beliefs, among them the belief that there is a "divine aspect of thought" innate in the human soul. They taught that this aspect dwelt in the noetic component of a tripartite soul, and that it corresponds in substance with the eternal Being of the cosmos. Eros, according to this mode of thought, is perceived as the agent by which the divine substance that is contained in human life is joined to its like substance in cosmic Being.

Early Christianity brought into Western thought a

concept of love distinct from that of classical antiquity. In contrast with Plato's upward-striving eros, the Pauline concept of agape (I Cor. xiii), introduced the idea of a downward-flowing beneficence proceeding from the Supreme Being and shed impartially on all below. In Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love,³¹ Anders Nygren traces the two modalities or "motifs" in terms of their influence on Christian thought. We note in passing that Nygren, speaking from a strictly Lutheran point of view, provides some insight into the nature of the belief that formed the religious background of Wallace Stevens' boyhood. According to Nygren, the concept of agape, i.e., the boundless, undemanding, universal love of God for man, is a more sublime form of religious expression than either the Hebrew regard for the Law, or the Hellenistic desire to reach and partake of the Highest Good. Christianity is "theocentric" and god-serving; the other forms "egocentric" and self-serving. Nygren calls eros "the most powerful fundamental religious motif of declining antiquity," and credits Plato with forging the eros principle into a doctrine of salvation. He comments of Plato that "it was he who gave the Eros motif a characteristic form, in which its meaning and structure are revealed with special

clarity; and . . . it was from this source that the Eros motif found its way, through Neoplatonism, into the later development of Christianity."³²

It was not until the third century that the eros concept began to filter into Christian theology, largely through the teachings of Origen (185-254). Born in Alexandria of Christian parents, Origen, like his pagan contemporary Plotinus, spoke out against the Gnostics, condemning a dualism that perceived the observable world as a manifestation of the forces of darkness and evil. As a theologian, he opposed Christian faith to Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, there are elements of both Gnostic belief and neo-Platonic thought in Origen's system of theology. The upward-striving path to the Godhead was a doctrine held in common by the various Gnostic sects that persisted well into the Christian era, and it was Origen who brought this Gnostic doctrine of salvation into a Christian context. Again, it is likely that Origen's allegorical interpretation of Scripture owed something to the writings of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (30 B.C.-50 C.E.), but it was Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs that brought an allegorical interpretation of the eros principle into Christian theology.

John M. Rist, in Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen, comments:

In treating of the culminating stage of the spiritual life, Origen continually reverts to the Platonic tradition. I refer in particular to the mystical and allegorical interpretation he gives to the Song of Songs. Origen is the first to teach that this poem of the love of the Bride for the Bridegroom is a figure of the Soul's desire for God.³³

Both the neo-Platonic and Gnostic strains in Origen's teaching were, of course, in direct conflict with a theology that held agape to be the one true expression of Christian love, and where the exposition of a doctrine of upward-striving eros could only be considered a remnant of paganism and an invitation to heresy. Nygren simplifies the complex synthesis of beliefs represented in the various cults, sects, and religious systems of Gnosticism by calling Gnosis "only another name for the Eros motif." His comment on the conflict between the two modes of love is a clear presentation of the orthodox point of view as to the irreconcilable differences of thought and belief that they reflect. Paul's Agape-hymn, says Nygren, is

a first encounter between the Christian Agape motif and the Hellenistic spirit . . . in the form of Gnosis. Gnosis, however, is only another name for the Eros motif. It is this fact above all that makes I Corinthians, xiii of such extraordinary interest. . . . Eros is the

soul's longing and yearning to attain to the blessed vision of the supersensible world and its beauty, while Gnosis is nothing other than this "vision of God" itself. . . . Paul decisively repudiates this love and this vision of God.³⁴

Plotinus (205-270) also regarded Gnosticism as a dangerous spiritual path, but for very different reasons. The major exponent of neo-Platonic philosophy adhered to Plato's principle of an upward-directed eros and a soul capable of positive self-motion. His polemic against the Gnostics (Enn. II) reproves Gnostic thought, among other things, for its lack of an ethic and the absence of any statement as to what constitutes virtue. And, as Hans Jonas points out in The Gnostic Religion,³⁵ he was entirely opposed to a cosmic scheme in which the soul and spirit, as well as the flesh, are "fallen" entities inclined to evil and where man, by definition, lives in a state of alienation from the Good. Plato's outline of the true order of ascent--"to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty" (see p. 43)--has little meaning in a system where earth has no beauty, and is conceived as the palpable manifestation of the forces of darkness.

Plotinus was a gifted mystic as well as a "systematic" philosopher. To his construct of the cosmos--

a series of emanations proceeding downward from a supernal One placed entirely beyond the realm of Being--he brought the dynamic of a Platonic eros. All things strive to join what is immediately above in the realms of existence. The human soul or, more accurately, the noetic element in the human soul may commune directly and ecstatically with the One by means of purification and meditative preparation. Like the Nous of Intellective Being that is brought into existence by the One, as the sun emanates rays of light, the human soul "looks" toward the One, desiring to rejoin the source of its being.

Plotinus himself led an ascetic life. Porphyry begins his biography of the philosopher with the observation that he "seemed ashamed of having a body," and for this reason would not allow a likeness to be made of himself. He quotes Plotinus' answer to one such request: "Is it not enough for me to have to carry around this image, in which nature has enclosed us? Must I besides transmit to posterity the image of this image as worthy of attention?"³⁶ Although the Gnostics earned Plotinus' condemnation for their contempt of the world and their refusal to recognize the presence of beauty and good in the natural realm, the philosopher appears to have had little

interest in the life of the senses. From Porphyry's brief sketch of his life, we have the picture of a man who, though considerate of the physical and material well-being of others, regarded his body as little more than a hindrance to the more interesting life of the mind and spirit.

The intensity of pleasure accorded by Aristotle to theoria, or contemplative activity, is expressed even more graphically in the writings of Plotinus. In the Enneads, too, we find for the last time the open interplay between sensual and ascetic experience that seems so natural to the pagan thinkers. And because Plotinus embraced an ascetic way of life by personal preference, the contrast between his thought and that which follows is doubly sharp. The erotic life has no connotation of sin or guilt for Plotinus, and may appropriately be used to convey sublime experience. In the first Ennead, for example, addressing his students as "lovers of the beauty outside of the sense," Plotinus does not hesitate to ascribe the sensations of "Dionysiac exultation" to the very experience in which the spirit removes from the body:

When you see that you yourselves are beautiful within, what do you feel? What is this Dionysiac exultation that thrills through your being, this straining upwards of all your soul,

this longing to break away from the body and live sunken within the veritable self? These are no other than the emotions of Souls under the spell of love.³⁷

Again, he will describe the lover's response to Beauty as a "wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight," pausing to emphasize that "for the unseen all may be felt as for the seen."³⁸ In this discourse on Beauty, Plotinus is drawing on the notably erotic imagery employed by Plato in the Phaedrus, specifically the passages that treat of the "recently initiated" lover's response to beauty. Neither Plato nor Plotinus attempts to divide the intellect from the emotion, in these passages; thought and feeling are understood to mingle in the experience described. We are reminded of the same quality of experience when Stevens speaks of:

. . . the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came.
(CP, 382)

And perhaps Plotinus' assertion that the "unseen" can be felt in much the same way that the "seen" is felt helps to read Stevens' declaration in Notes that:

It must be visible or invisible,
Invisible or visible or both:
A seeing or unseeing in the eye. (CP, 385)

Some of Stevens' strongest imagery, his notions of good and evil, of centrality, of poverty and negation, of the direction and end of desire, find remarkable parallels in the Enneads. For the student of Stevens, perhaps the most obvious parallel is Plotinus' repeated metaphor of the sun as the originating and illuminating principle that exists beyond the realm of Being, and which he also speaks of as the One, the Supreme, the Unity, the All, and the Good. The Good, says Plotinus:

must be unmoved, while all circles around it,
as a circumference around a centre from which
all the radii proceed. Another example would
be the sun, central to the light which streams
from it, irremovably; try all you will to
separate the light from the sun, or the sun
from its light, for ever the light is in the
sun.³⁹

The sun occupies more than a place in the title of "Sunday Morning," one of Stevens' best-known poems first published in Harmonium (1923). Canto VII calls up the vision of a pagan ritual in which a "ring of men" chant:

Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
(CP, 69-70)

Twenty years later, in the first section of Notes, Stevens reaffirms and expands the neo-Platonic conceit of the sun "not as a god, but as a god might be":

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.
(CP, 380)

Stevens' "inconceivable idea" of the sun is the basic oxymoron in the opening passage of Notes. It reflects the oft-repeated qualifications of Plotinus--and of the mystics in general--that knowledge of the primal entity cannot be communicated by the given meanings of words. For Plotinus, certainly, the One beyond Being is "inconceivable" in both of the senses employed by Stevens: its essence escapes accommodation to the language of reason, conceptual and logical terminology, and, as the First Cause, it stands prior to all creation and all conceptions; as the Source of Being, it is itself uncreated and unconceived. Rist suggests that Plotinus' theory of emanation derives from the allegory of the cave in The Republic and comments that the sun-metaphor is thus "common to many thinkers in the Platonic tradition."⁴⁰

It is the metaphoric use of the choir and the hymn, however, which joins the philosopher and the poet in a

community of expression that, for both of them, means a departure from Plato. Plotinus opens the Tractate on Beauty with an appreciation of the beauty of sound:

Beauty addresses itself chiefly to the sight, but there is a beauty for the hearing too, as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music, for melodies and cadences are beautiful.⁴¹

And in the Tractate on Dialectic he speaks of the sensitivity of the musician to tones and the beauty they convey. "All that offends against unison or harmony in melodies or rhythms repels him; he longs for measure and shapely pattern,"⁴¹ writes Plotinus. Stevens will echo this thought in the "Blessed rage for order" that commands the singer of Key West (CP, 139), or in the gentler cadence that opens "Peter Quince at the Clavier":

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the selfsame sounds
On my spirit make a music too. (CP, 89)

Stevens' repeated use of "hymn," "chant," "choral," and "choir" finds a resonance in one of the most vivid of Plotinus' metaphysical metaphors. In the sixth Ennead, the philosopher discusses the relation of the individual soul to the One beyond Being, comparing this relation to that of a choir to its conductor:

Thus a choir, singing in set due order about
the conductor, may turn away from that

centre to which all should attend; let it
 but face aright and it sings with beauty.
 . . . We are ever before the Supreme . . .
 but we do not always attend: when we look,
 our Term is attained; this is rest; this is
 the end of singing ill; effectively before
 Him, we lift a choral song full of God.
 . . . In this choiring, the soul looks upon
 the well-spring of Life, well-spring also
 of Intellect, beginning of Being, fount of
 Good, root of Soul.⁴²

As noted earlier, there is also an affinity of
 thought between the poet and the philosopher with respect
 to poverty, and the via negativa. Before moving on to the
 branch of Christian theology that derived a good part of
 its thought from neo-Platonic philosophy, we should take
 into account Plotinus' views of negation. In order to come
 to knowledge of the First Principle, he tells us, and to
 achieve the desired state of unity, "we must ascend to the
 Principle within ourselves."⁴³ The Unity, or the Principle
 that is prior to Being, is explained in terms of pure
 negation:

Generative of all, the Unity is none of
 all; neither thing nor quantity nor intellect
 nor soul; not in motion, not at rest, not in
 place, not in time: it is the self-defined,
 unique in form, or better, formless, existing
 before Form was, or Movement, or Rest, all of
 which are attachments of Being and make Being
 the manifold it is.⁴⁴

In the Tractate on Beauty, the ascent to "the Principle
 within ourselves" is similarly described as both an inner

journey and an upward path. The journey of the Lover to the perfect Beauty is seen as a progress into negation, a purification, a stripping away of the known. Those "lovers" who desire to attain the Good must take the solitary upward path of asceticism. And in the passage that follows, we find Plotinus, like Plato before him, referring to the rites of Eleusis and the sacred marriage contained in them:

It is for those who will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent: so, to those that approach the Holy Celebration of the Mysteries there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness--until, passing,, on the upward way all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold . . . the Source of Life and of Intellection and of Being.⁴⁵

Finally, the language of divine eros is once again used to describe the central moment of union, the point where vision and desire become one thing:

And one that shall know this vision--with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with This.⁴⁶

The thought of Origen and Plotinus exerted a strong influence on later Christianity. Although the teachings of both the pagan philosopher and the Christian aroused bitter

controversy and were subject to condemnation by the early Fathers of the Church, it was largely due to them that a Platonic eros principle entered into the seething melt of politics, religion, mysticism and philosophy that characterized the Alexandrian period, and out of which was precipitated a Catholic theology.

In the fourth century, a synthesis of the anabatic and catabatic forms of love was achieved by Augustine. Strongly influenced by Plotinus, Augustine effected a remarkable fusion of both eros and agape elements in a doctrine of caritas. The conflicting forms of love were resolved--to the extent that they could be resolved--in a concept of Grace that posited free will on the part of man as well as boundless love on the part of God. Because his writings are a cornerstone of Christian theology, it is perhaps ironic that Augustine provided the major channel through which a pagan eros principle was accommodated into Catholic thought. One can do little more than point out Augustine's contribution to the tradition of loving and knowing in this brief sketch, but we should not leave him without recalling a passage from the Confessions that proves him personally in the grip of Plato's erotic "daemon":

With an incredible fervor of heart, I
 yearned for the immortal wisdom, and I began
 to arise in order to return to Thee. . . .
 How I did burn, O my God, how did I burn
 with desire to soar from earth to Thee, and
 I knew not what Thou wouldst do with me.
 For with Thee is wisdom. But love of wisdom
 is in Greek called philosophy, and with this
 that book inflamed me.⁴⁷

The fourth century, besides producing the giant figure of Augustine, nourished a singular variant of the eros principle in the shelter of Christian monasticism. Methodius, for example, was a follower of Plato and Origen and he produced a Symposium after the model of the master. In this fourth century Symposium, however, the several encomia are in praise, not of divine Eros, but of Virginity. "Flying on the heavenward wings of Virginity," writes Methodius (and we have another echo here of the central allegory of the Phaedrus), "the soul can now mount up to God and enter in exulting into the bride-chamber."⁴⁸ Thus, carried along by neo-Platonic philosophy, and cast into Christian terms by Origen's commentary on the Song of Solomon, contributed to by Proclus in the fifth century and by the influential writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, Plato's eros principle travelled into the thought of the early Middle Ages. "We need hardly mention," comments Nygren acidly, "the disastrous part played by the Song of

Songs in assisting the identification of the Eros motif with the Christian idea of Agape."⁴⁹

Proclus was a pagan, a philosopher, and the chief representative in the fifth century of the mystical branch of neo-Platonism which developed from Porphyry, Plotinus' student, disciple and biographer. Proclus conceived eros as a "unifying and cohesive force" holding all things together. He envisioned this force as a "chain of love" that passed down from the highest spiritual sphere through the spheres of the lower gods, to choirs of angels, hordes of demons, hosts of heroes, and so forth, until it reaches the sphere of ordinary human souls. His "way of salvation" is reminiscent of the ancient mysteries of Eleusis and that of various Gnostic sects, being a three-part process involving purification, illumination, and union. The debt of Proclus to Plotinus' construct of the cosmos, the "Alexandrian world-view," should at least be noted in passing, as it should in any discussion of the Pseudo-Dionysius.

The actual identity of the man who wrote as "Dionysius the Areopagite" is not known, but for centuries the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius were taken to be the genuine expressions of an associate of St. Paul and, as

Nygren points out, "enjoyed almost canonical authority." The particular contribution of the Areopagite to speculative theology was not the idea of a soul aspiring to ecstatic union with the Divinity; that idea, as we have seen, was already fully present in the erotic-ascetic mode pursued by the early monastics. In his discussion of Dionysius, Nygren cites him and comments on the new element introduced into Christian thought:

What is new in Dionysius . . . is that he even applies this idea to the Deity itself. God is Eros, and this means that He who is the cause of all things "through the beautiful and good Eros towards everything, by reason of the overflowing fulness of Eros-goodness, goes out of Himself owing to the care He has for all existence, and becomes, so to speak, bewitched by goodness. . . ." Ecstatic love causes God to be drawn down to the lower world from the heavenly height where He is enthroned in absolute isolation from all else.⁵⁰

The "new" idea entering Christian thought by way of Dionysius was, in actuality, a concept that had been fully elaborated and long accepted as part of the theological machinery of Gnosticism. In the syncretistic context of Gnostic religion, the Pauline concept of agape is transformed back into eros as the driving force of the cosmos. Thus agape becomes an erotic "love-longing that draws the Divine down toward the lower world," as Nygren points out, and "the Divine love becomes the same as desire [epithumia],

or downright sensual passion."⁵¹

A school of speculative mysticism, then, developed steadily through the early centuries of Christianity, and although fed by the thought of Plato and the neo-Platonists, gathered part of its substance from Gnostic sources. Where the pagan philosophers had suggested the experience of sacred union to be a concomitant of the non-physical, non-mental, non-personal contemplation of ideal Form, the ultimate reach of the human soul was now represented by a sexual metaphor of marriage derived from the Old Testament, and symbolized the idea of personal redemption. In addition, the emphasis placed on chastity, virginity, and ascetic practices had taken on a far weightier dimension than the pagan notion of civilized self-restraint. And the notion of the supreme deity responding in kind to the passionate aspiration of a human soul had been writ large--with all due respect to "Ursule's" chronicler--in a number of books.

The trend of speculative mysticism reached its fullest, or perhaps one should say its most ardent, expression in the twelfth century in the schools of Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, and Richard of the Parisian monastery of St. Victor. St. Bernard,

founder of the Cistercian Order at Clairvaux, was an ascetic, a mystic, a man of works and, according to historians of the period, probably the most influential figure of his time. He was regarded on the one hand as a holy man, a saint, and a miracle-healer while, on the other, he almost singlehandedly brought about the disastrous second Crusade, wielding a political power and influence that far surpassed the Pope's. For some, he is chiefly remembered as the unrelenting persecutor of Peter Abelard, his equally brilliant contemporary and his adversary in theological matters. Abelard upheld the use of reason as a means of apprehending the Divine, and one school of thought thus considers him to be the father of Scholasticism. Bernard believed that the application of human reason has to be limited to the things discoverable by reason, and that faith alone was the means by which spiritual knowledge could be achieved. Bernard writes of Abelard that "being prepared to give a reason for everything, even those things which are above reason, he presumes both against reason and against faith."⁵²

Central to Bernard's writings are the sermons on Canticles and the essays on Loving God. In these works, the marriage of the Soul with the Logos seems--as in the

mystic union described by Plotinus--to radiate a significance beyond what might be ascribed to a rhetorical use of metaphor, or the employment of allegory as an interpretive device. Bernard writes of the experience, laying emphasis on its uniquely personal aspect:

A soul thus loving and thus loved will not at all be satisfied . . . either with that manifestation of the bridegroom which is made to many through his creatures, or that which is made to few through visions and dreams, unless by a particular privilege it may also receive him coming down from heaven, in the love and very marrow of its heart, and may have its beloved in its presence, not perceived but absorbed, not appearing but affecting; and no doubt the more delightful for being inward, not outward.⁵³

A certain similarity of substance may be discerned between Stevens' "interior paramour" and Bernard's description of the soul who "may have its beloved in its presence, not perceived but absorbed, not appearing but affecting."

They are both products of a contemplative mode of knowledge, and both occur in a central "inner space." Both have to do with an experience that is not only interior, but which ultimately "will suffice," and both are expressions of an "irrational" mode of arriving at knowledge of the sublime. G.B. Burch, in Early Medieval Philosophy, tells us that this mode was one of three approaches employed by medieval theology: "Besides the other two ways of seeking wisdom,

that of faith based on authority, and that of understanding based on reason, [the twelfth-century monks] teach a third way, that of intuition based on love."⁵⁴

Bernard sent a teaching missive to William, the abbot of St. Thierry, his follower, friend (and later, biographer), and staunch ally in the battle with Abelard. A series of "steps" were outlined in Bernard's letter, indicating the ideal conduct for monks of their Order. These Steps of Humility derived from a section of the Benedictine Rule and, like St. Benedict's practical instructions, were primarily directed to those who had chosen the monastic life. Bernard's Steps, however, wrought what Proclus had called an "Eros-chain" from the practical directives of Benedict, and were meant to establish an approach to spiritual union with God.

The pursuit of the "third way" of knowing is formulated in William of St. Thierry's axiom: Amor ipse intellectus est (Love itself is knowledge/mind). Etienne Gilson remarks of William's doctrine that "like Saint Bernard's, it developed entirely within the framework of monastic life. Secular schools teach profane love according to the Ars amatoria of Ovid; the choisters should be religious schools where divine doctrine is taught.

William's doctrine is also a science of love, but it differs from Saint Bernard's in the more important role the Augustinian doctrine of memory plays in it."⁵⁵ According to William, man contains in the most secret recess of the memory a noetic imprint of the Mind that created man in His image. This secret "memory" generates the ability to reason and is the point of correspondence between the deity above and the interior of the soul. Thus, as Gilson explains William's doctrine, "the love with which we love God shall coincide with the love he has for himself in himself and with which he loves himself in us." William's axiom, then, is based on a correspondence similar to that posited by Aristotle between the substance of the rational soul and the First Cause: the resemblance of the soul to God constitutes its knowledge of God. A like cast of thought is reflected in Stevens' observation that "The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created heaven were, as it happened, one" (OP, 176).

Dante referred to Richard of St. Victor in the Paradiso as "Richard, who in contemplation was more than man" (X.131, 2), and his writings provide a kind of spiritual Ars amatoria for the edification of those who followed the contemplative life. In an essay entitled

"The Four Steps of Passionate Love" (De quatuor gradibus violentae charitatis), Richard writes of ascending the "steep stairway of love" by "steps," or stages, which he designates "love betrothal," "marriage," "copulation," and "childbirth." The four steps signify a passage from "meditative desire" to "contemplative exaltation" to "joyous ecstasy," and culminate in a final stage of "compassionate action."⁵⁶ Burch explains the steps:

On the first the soul is wounded by love, so that it burns with desire for God; on the second it is bound by love, unable to free itself even for a moment from the thought of God; on the third it is given up to love so exclusively that all other affections are expelled and all actions whatever are impossible; on the fourth it is never satisfied, but eager to do and suffer all things for God's sake.⁵⁷

Evelyn Underhill cites Richard's treatise as "perhaps the most daring and detailed application of the symbolism of marriage" in the history of Christian mysticism and enlarges on the significance of the fourth and final stage. Richard, she says,

saw clearly that the union of the soul with its Source could not be a barren ecstasy. That was to . . . frustrate the whole intention of life, which is, on all levels, fruitful and creative. Therefore he says that in the fourth degree, the Bride who has been so greatly honored, caught up in such unspeakable delight . . . accepts the pains and duties in the place of the raptures of

love; and becomes a source, a "parent" of fresh spiritual life. The Sponsa Dei develops into the Mater Divinae gratiae. . . . This forms that rare and final stage in the evolution of the great mystics, in which they return to the world which they forsook; and there live, as it were, as centres of spiritual energy, the creators of spiritual families, the partners and fellow-labourers with the Divine Life.⁵⁸

Richard's fourth step, with its emphasis on fruition, makes it evident that Plato's concept of eros is fully present in the erotic-ascetic theology of the twelfth century. The fourth step of "violentae charitatis" directly echoes the fourth stage of "bringing to birth in the beautiful" as set forth in the Symposium; it parallels Diotima's injunction to "Remember how in that communion only" the initiate to the greater mysteries will be able to "bring forth, not images . . . but realities . . . and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may." The effect of the ultimate step is essentially the same for both pagan and Christian; as Plato ethically binds the philosopher to return to the cave after his experience of true vision, so, as Underhill points out, must the great religious mystic return to the world to participate in the general life.

Although Richard is obviously indebted to the

Platonic exposition of eros for his outline of spiritual development, like William and Bernard he derives his major metaphor of sponsa and Sponsus from Origen. These three French monastics, however, were largely responsible for converting the lyric eroticism of the Old Testament's Canticle of Canticles into orthodox Catholic thought as an emblem of spiritual love and knowledge. A century after the upsurge of speculative mysticism brought about by the influence of these men, Thomas Aquinas was using such terms as extasis, zelus, liquefactio, fervor, and fruitio to describe the love of man for God. It was Aquinas too who, in so far as it was possible, finally resolved the conflict in the Church between the school of Reason and the school of Faith, the same conflict we noted earlier in Bernard's opposition to Abelard.

According to one interpretation, Bernard was "a precursor of the later scholastic doctrine of faith and reason exemplified by Thomas Aquinas. . . . Bernard's victory over Abelard was the defeat of the old optimistic confidence in the intelligibility of Christian revelation and the triumph of the new discernment between what can be, and what cannot be, understood by human reason."⁵⁹ As noted above, another point of view holds Abelard to be the

founder of Scholasticism, and the true theological antecedent of Aquinas. Scholarship on Aquinas has made it fairly clear, however, that both schools of thought influenced the great thirteenth-century theologian; the bitter struggle between faith and reason was, in a sense, an agon contained within his own person. The story is told that when young Aquinas joined the Order of St. Dominic at Naples, his companions nicknamed him "the dumb ox," and that his tutor, being rather more perceptive, declared to the boys: "You may call him a dull ox, but he will give such a bellow in learning as will astonish the world." It was Aquinas who, condemning a doctrine of "double truth" as a false solution, contrived a synthesis of the divergent modes of knowing. ("Double-truth" was the idea that the conclusions of logic and natural philosophy constituted an order of truth separate from the postulates of faith.) And it was notably Aquinas who pressed Aristotle's thought into the service of Christian theology.

The difficulty of reconciling Christian faith with Aristotelian philosophy, in the thirteenth century, is discussed by Paul Kristeller in Renaissance Philosophy and the Mediaeval Tradition. "For Thomas Aquinas theology

was Christian, to be sure," comments Kristeller, "but philosophy was Aristotelian; and the question was not to substitute Christian for Aristotelian philosophy, but to determine their relationship and to reconcile them as far as possible."⁶⁰ Evidence of Aquinas' reconciliation between Christian theology and Aristotle's philosophy, as well as the synthesis he effected between the rationalist and mystical approaches to knowing, is present in the Seventh Article of the "Question on the Contemplative Life" in the Summa theologiae. Addressing the question, "Whether there is Delight in Contemplation?" Aquinas contrives in one passage to quote Aristotle, draw upon speculative theology, acknowledge Augustine, and interpret Scriptural revelation, the whole driven forward by an inevitable progression of logic:

Now contemplation of the truth befits a man according to his nature as a rational animal: the result being that all men naturally desire to know, so that consequently they delight in the knowledge of truth. And more delightful still does this become to one who has the habit of wisdom and knowledge, the result of which is that he contemplates without difficulty. Secondly, contemplation may be delightful by reason of its object, insofar as one contemplates that which one loves; even as bodily vision gives pleasure, not only because to see is pleasurable in itself, but because one sees a person whom one loves. Since, then, the contemplative life consists chiefly in the contemplation of God . . . it

follows that there is delight in the contemplative itself, but also by reason of the divine love.

In both respects the delight thereof surpasses all human delight, both because spiritual delight is greater than carnal pleasure . . . and because the love whereby God is loved out of charity (caritas) surpasses all love. Hence it is written: O taste and see that the Lord is sweet.⁶¹

In "Les Plus Belles Pages" (Parts of a World, 1942), Stevens muses on the duality present in Aquinas' thought; contrasting elements of the natural world with the life of the mind and spirit. Aquinas, who from the "dumb ox" of his student years, evolved into both the "Angelic Doctor" and the "Celestial Ox," exists here in both realms. "Nothing exists by itself," reflects Stevens, but:

The moonlight seemed to.

Two people, three horses, an ox
And the sun, the waves together in the sea.

The moonlight and Aquinas seemed to. He spoke,
Kept speaking of God. I changed the word to man.
The automaton, in logic self-contained,
Existed by itself. Or did the saint survive?
Did several spirits assume a single shape?

Theology after breakfast sticks to the eye.
(CP, 245)

Stevens, pointing to the disjunction between the "automaton, in logic self-contained" and the "saint," questions whether these elements may be resolved into "a single shape." His reference to Aquinas, who has had to

resolve for himself the problem generated by the modes of faith and reason, is, in a way, a reference to himself. For all his grinding of teeth at the Scholastic temperament, Stevens is similarly confronted with a problem of antithetical modes which he calls "Imagination" and "Reality," and is similarly engaged in a struggle to reconcile and, ideally, to integrate them. Gilson has suggested that "the specific distinction introduced by Thomas Aquinas between faith and rational knowledge was not understood by him as a separation," and he goes on to define the Thomist as "a man whose faith and knowledge grow into an organic unity because they both spring from the same divine source."⁶² In the sense that there is a tendency to trace disparate modes to a single and irreducible origin, Stevens may be said to have a touch of the "Thomist" about him.

Stevens also appears to share with Aquinas an unquenchable urge to discover "the res itself," to apprehend the nature of "the real." Both seek a final good that is veiled from ordinary perception, and both conceive an eros principle as the appropriate means to that end. Aquinas, in De veritate, reflects that "loving draws us more to things than knowing does, since good is

found by going to the thing, whereas the true is found when the thing comes to us."⁶³ Thomas Gilby, in an appendix to the Summa, interprets the statement as follows: "Love wants the substance, not the idea or form, the thing, not the thought of the thing. It is on this desire for the ultimate thing that St. Thomas founds his argument for the vision of God."⁶⁴ Again, Aquinas tells us that "the tug of real things on us is more strongly exercised through our love of them than through our knowledge," and goes on to relate the two modes in a characteristic synthesis: "knowing and loving are not twin things or acting causes, but a doubled expression of one and the same thing or substance. Not only are they rooted in a single subject, but also as specific activities they can enter into each other."⁶⁵ It is hard not to recognize in Aquinas what Stevens referred to as "a habit of mind by which it probes for an integration." We also note the equivalence between Aquinas' "tug of real things" and Stevens' desire for "the res itself."

It is this particular aspect of the eros principle--the desire to grasp "the object of the perpetual meditation," to approach the truth that lies both within and beyond physical reality--that is so strongly evidenced

in Stevens' poetic and which, perhaps more than any other single element, sets him apart from his contemporaries. Like his contemporaries, he confronts a world which has been subject to radical reinterpretation by Darwin, Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. Unlike Eliot, or later Auden, Stevens does not look for a resolution of the spirit within the confines of modern orthodoxy. For him, such an endeavor would constitute an escape into illusion, a negation of his own time and place, a movement away from the real. It is a return to a way of thinking, he tells us, "when bishops' books / Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that" (CP, 215). On the other hand, Stevens is equally ill at ease with the nature of the poetic developed by his friend and correspondent William Carlos Williams, who is also firmly planted in his own time and place. Unlike Williams, Stevens continues to be occupied with the Sublime as an essential component of human existence. He is a poet capable of meditating on "The human end in the spirit's greatest reach, / The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme / Of the unknown" (CP, 508) in one of the most moving elegies in English poetry; and in an age where--as he himself put it--"phrases about the unknown are quickly dismissed."

In an age "as harsh as it is intelligent," it is not easy to talk about the inward life without using the established language of theology or the lexis of modern psychology. As Paul Ricoeur has remarked, Freud's contribution stands as "a text in which our culture is expressed and understood."⁶⁶ But Freudian hermeneutics does not concern itself with a theological concept of the divine in human existence; there is "sublimation" but no Sublime. The language of theology, on the other hand, is exclusively concerned with the divine, and, in its pre-psychoanalytic frame, is competent to express various aspects of man's spiritual life. Attached to the language of theology, however, is the set of beliefs for which the language was developed, so that the use of a particular word, phrase, or image invokes a network of connotation over which one has very little control. By the time Stevens was a young man he had moved away from the theological dogmas of his childhood. In middle life, he wrote to his wife that his associates might not understand that a particular site of worship was unimportant to him, and that they might "object to my worshipping the principle of things" (LWS, 219). It is clear that Stevens had more to contend with than attempting to put his ideas or

subjective experience into a concrete form. He had also to contend with a lexis that would either express more than he wished to express or, by avoiding its use entirely, deny him the expression of his "irrational" voice.

Stevens' need to express his experience and thought in an authentic way, his search for the "fresh and the strange," is indeed reflected in his early period as either a general avoidance, or an ironic use, of the language of theology. It is probable that the high regard in which Stevens held William James was at least partly generated by the philosopher's ability to probe deeply into the life of the spirit in a language removed from the tenets and dogmas of religion. Along with James, Santayana was teaching at Harvard during Stevens' formative years at the university, and it may well have been Santayana who provided the young poet with an alternate language. The great exponent of aesthetics continued to exert an influence on Stevens' thought throughout his lifetime, and it was in terms of aesthetics that Stevens could most freely express experience outside the scope of the pragmatic life.

It may have been Santayana's influence, too, that turned Stevens to the Platonic dialogues during his student years at Harvard. As suggested earlier, the dialogues will

have stimulated not only the aesthetic and the rational elements of Stevens' nature, but the contemplative or mystical strain as well. It is at the University, the "academy of fine ideas" that Stevens first confronts the metaphysical aspect of desire, expressing it later as the relation between "Plato, the reddened flower, the erotic bird." As we have seen, the contemplative strain develops slowly in the course of Stevens' poetry, and seems to emerge most clearly when the poet is sure that he is expressing exactly what he wishes to express, and nothing more. On occasion, however, the long tradition of loving and knowing that nourishes Stevens' thought will take him by the hand, as it were, and, disregarding his self-consciousness, draw him to itself:

Her hand composed him like a hand appeared,
Of an impersonal gesture, a stranger's hand.
He was too conscious of too many things

In the first canto of the final canticle.
Her hand took his and drew him near to her.
Her hair fell on him and the mi-bird flew

To the ruddier bushes at the garden's end.
Of her, of her alone, at last he knew
And lay beside her underneath the tree.

(CP, 271)

NOTES FOR CHAPTER I

¹Wallace Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Opus Posthumous (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 227.

²Ibid., p. 228.

³Ibid., Adagia, p. 161.

⁴Origen, The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies, trans. R.P. Lawson (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, Longmans, Green & Co., 1957), pp. 29-30.

⁵Ibid., Bk. 3.8, p. 198.

⁶George Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 87.

⁷Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), p. 72.

⁸Op. cit., "The Irrational Element in Poetry," p. 222.

⁹Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, trans. A. Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), pp. 322-23.

¹⁰Plotinus, The Enneads, trans. Stephan MacKenna (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1962), 3rd ed. (VI.9.3), p. 616.

¹¹St. John of the Cross, "Concerning the Direction of Contemplative Souls," in Renaissance Philosophy: The Transalpine Thinkers (New York: The Modern Library, 1969), p. 384.

¹²Interview with Holly Stevens, New Haven, November 1, 1976.

¹³Plato, Symposium, in The Dialogues of Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), Vol. I, p. 328.

¹⁴H.J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Mythology (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1959), pp. 145-46.

¹⁵Op. cit., Symposium, p. 327.

¹⁶F.M. Cornford, trans., The Republic of Plato (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 224.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁸Op. cit., Symposium, p. 330.

¹⁹Wallace Stevens, "A Collect of Philosophy," Opus Posthumous, p. 196.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 200-201.

²¹Op. cit., Symposium, p. 327.

²²F.M. Cornford, Plato's Theaetetus (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), pp. 27-28.

²³Op. cit., Symposium, p. 334.

²⁴Ibid., p. 335.

²⁵F.M. Cornford, "The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's Symposium," in The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays, ed. W.K.C. Guthrie (Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 78.

²⁶F.M. Cornford, Principium Sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1971), p. 86.

²⁷Aristotle, Metaphysics, I.i, in The Works of Aristotle Translated into English, ed. W.D. Rose (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), Vol. VIII.

²⁸Ibid., VII.7.

²⁹Ibid., VII.7.

³⁰Philip Wheelwright, Aristotle: Selections (New York: Odyssey Press, 1935), p. 101.

³¹Anders Nygren, Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953).

³²Ibid., pp. 162-63.

³³John M. Rist, Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen (University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 202.

³⁴Op. cit., Nygren, pp. 142-43.

³⁵Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 2nd ed. rev.; especially see Bk. III, Chap. II, "Virtue and the Soul in Greek and Gnostic Teaching," pp. 266-81.

³⁶Plotinos' Complete Works, trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (London: George Bell & Sons, 1918), Vol. I, p. 5.

³⁷Op. cit., MacKenna, p. 59 (Enn. I.6).

³⁸Op. cit., MacKenna, p. 59 (Enn. I.6).

³⁹Ibid. (Enn. I.7.1).

⁴⁰Op. cit., Rist, p. 74.

⁴¹Op. cit., MacKenna, p. 37 (Enn. I.3.1).

⁴²Ibid., p. 622 (Enn. VI.9.8, 9).

⁴³Ibid., p. 616 (Enn. VI.9.3).

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 617 (Enn. VI.9.4).

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 61-62 (Enn. I.6.7).

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 62 (Enn. I.6.7).

⁴⁷St. Augustine, Confessions, III.iv.7. The book referred to is Cicero's Hortensius.

⁴⁸Op. cit., Nygren, pp. 420-22; from Methodius, Symposium, viii.12.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 230.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 583.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 304-307.

⁵²Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux: The Steps of Humility, trans. G.B. Burch (Harvard University Press, 1950), Appendix B, "Bernard's Criticism of Peter Abelard's Theology," p. 270.

⁵³G.B. Burch, Early Medieval Philosophy (New York: King Crown Press, Columbia University, 1951), p. 98.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 102.

⁵⁵Etienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 167.

⁵⁶Op. cit., Burch, Early Medieval Philosophy, pp. 100-101.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁸Op. cit., Underhill, Mysticism, pp. 139-40.

⁵⁹Op. cit., Burch, "Bernard's Criticism," p. 274.

⁶⁰Paul Oskar Kristeller, Renaissance Philosophy and the Mediaeval Tradition (Pennsylvania: The Archabbey Press, 1966), pp. 39-40.

⁶¹Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, trans. and ed. Thomas Gilby (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), Vol. 46, pp. 43-45; (2a-2ae. 180, 7).

⁶²Etienne Gilson, Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 78.

⁶³Op. cit., Aquinas, Summa theologiae, Vol. I, Appendix 10, p. 128.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 128.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 126.

⁶⁶Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation, trans. Dennis Savage (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. xi.

CHAPTER II

THE INTERIOR PARAMOUR: A WOMAN WITH
THE HAIR OF A PYTHONESS

"Bethou, bethou, bethou me
in my glade"
(CP, 394)

"Bethou is the spirit's
own seduction"
(LWS, 238)

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

And you. Only we two may interchange
 Each in the other what each has to give.
 Only we two are one, not you and night,

Nor night and I, but you and I, alone,
 So much alone, so deeply by ourselves,
 So far beyond the casual solitudes,

That night is only the background of our selves,
 Supremely true each to its separate self,
 In the pale light that each upon the other throws.
"Restatement of Romance"
 (CP, 146)

Stevens' complex figure of the "interior paramour" is perhaps the single most important key to the erotics of his poetry, but it is also the most elusive. In its largest sense, the Paramour embodies the idea of desire aimed at creation, for the figure dwells at both the source and end of the poetic act; it can represent both "Desire & the Object" (OP, 85) at once. The presence summoned up in "Restatement of Romance," however, is clearly something more than a figurative device; the unnamed "you" seems an intimate part of, but also apart from, the speaker's self. A closer inspection raises a question as to the voice in the poem. Who is actually doing the talking? Is it the poet, or are we hearing the voice of his obscure Paramour? The chiasmus that occurs at the center of the poem, inverting the sixth

and seventh lines, also stands as its semantic center and structurally reinforces the idea of two discrete entities who retain their discreteness in the act of merging. "Not you and night" is not an analogue but a mirrored image of "Nor night and I," and the initial "Only" of line six reflects the terminal "alone" of line seven--while at the same time it plays on "one-ly" with respect to "we two." Indeed, the speaker in "Restatement of Romance" so mingles with the one spoken to that--grammatically speaking--there is the impression of a "dual" number, a sense of "two-together-as-one" that is generally not possible in the singular and plural. Stevens refers to this mode of conversation with his Paramour as "those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours" (NA, 67). We will hear this voice that speaks in a "second person dual" most clearly in the "Final Soliloquy," but the quality of it adheres to the various transformations of the Paramour throughout the poetry. And, as we begin to consider the appearance of this "separate self" in the poetry as a whole, it becomes increasingly clear that, like Roethke's flexible inamorata,¹ Stevens' interior paramour has "more sides than a seal."

Although Stevens himself does not give the figure

a specific name, and refers to it occasionally as "nameless," he invests his Paramour with a range of epithets that suggest a compound, even Protean nature. She is the oracular "woman with the hair of a pythoness" (NA, 29), and like Ariadne, the "inexplicable sister of the Minotaur" (NA, 67). But while Stevens' "sister of the Minotaur" may, like her legendary forbear, provide the clue to the journey out of the labyrinth, she herself is "half beast and somehow more than human" (NA, 52). In the poetry, she is the echoic "Sister and mother and diviner love" of fictive music. Partly compounded of memory, she is essential consciousness, "mother of us all, / The earthly mother and the mother of / The dead" (CP, 432). She is the noeud vital: the "green queen" with a Marvellian "green mind" (CP, 339) who "walks among astronomers" (CP, 223), but is also "this king's queen" (CP, 461). In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" she is invoked with bitter irony as "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds," but elsewhere she is the serene image "that was mistress of the world" (CP, 460), and the genetrix from whom first motion and first existence proceed: "Moving and being, the image at its source" (CP, 223). Like Shelley's epipsyche, she is "A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror" (CP, 460); like Plato's Diotima,

she is "the sybil of the self" (OP, 104); like Saint Bernard's yearning anima she is "the spouse, the bride" (CP, 396) and "the desired . . . sleek in a natural nakedness" who, dovelike, exists in "The Hermitage at the Centre" (CP, 505); like Blake's Divine Human Imagination, she is "the maker of the song" she sings, and the "single artificer of the world / In which she sang" (CP, 129). Finally, she is the curiously tripartite "One" of fictive music (CP, 87); the separate self "that speaks, denouncing separate selves" (CP, 441); the ambiguous "lover that lies within us" (CP, 394).

In the fourth Canto of "A Primitive Like an Orb" (CP, 440-43), the Paramour exists as a subliminal presence in a discourse concerning the "lover," the "believer," and the "poet":

. . . the clairvoyant men that need no proof:
 The lover the believer and the poet.
 Their words are chosen out of their desire,
 The joy of language, when it is themselves.
 With these they celebrate the central poem,
 The fulfillment of fulfillments.

Stevens' allusion to the Song of Songs, which is remotely audible in "chosen out of their desire," becomes explicit quotation in "fulfillment of fulfillments." These verbal echoes underscore the parallel drawn between the "clairvoyant men" and the poet-singer of Canticles who is

also a "lover" and a "believer." The reference prepares for the emergence of the Paramour in Canto six as the ardent "mate of summer." Here, she is the incorporeal counterpart of the body of things, whose reflective aspect is in some way inseparable from the primary source of warmth and light. In this Canto, the "central poem" and "the world" become interchangeable yet mingled elements:

. . . each one the mate
Of the other, as if the summer was a spouse,
Espoused each morning, each long afternoon,
And the mate of summer: her mirror and her look,
Her only place and person, a self of her
That speaks, denouncing separate selves, both one.

Elusive as she is, her characteristic epithets and the particular contexts in which she appears make it evident that Stevens' Paramour is neither a passive Petrarchan love-object nor a moth-eaten "muse" who traditionally strikes from above and without. One should note that Stevens is extremely sparing in his use of the term "paramour"; it occurs only four times in the complete poetry, and only once--in the title of the poem with which this study concludes--as the "Interior Paramour." It is, however, this revealing appearance in the title of a very late work which allows us to assume that Stevens is using "interior paramour" as a generic term; it serves to denote the central element of creation on the one hand, and on the other, to indicate

its manifold and subjective character. As we have seen, the figure is at once erotic, noetic, active, internal and female; she is alternately regal, sublime, and covert. While her identity remains something of a mystery, her presence pervades the poetry and her aspects extend to the prophetic, the mythic and the metaphysical as well as the literary.

It is the half-ironic, half-reverent invocation in the early "To the One of Fictive Music," coupled with his essay on "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" that has led a number of readers to refer to the figure as "Stevens' muse."² Thus labelled to the general satisfaction, she is tactfully ignored; one has the impression that critics have gently refrained from commenting on the incongruous presence of a "muse" in the equipment of a twentieth-century poet. Now there is not the slightest doubt that Stevens fully intended the resonance in "To the One of Fictive Music." And because he is a poet who delights in ambiguity and the polyvalent, and for whom word-play amounts almost to an addiction, the idea of fictive music extends not only to a muse, but to musing as thinking, pondering, reflection, and by ramification to the amusement (and bemusement) of the "laborious weaving" which attends "our feigning with

the strange unlike" (CP, 88).

The "strange unlike" is a positive value for Stevens, similar to the value with which he weights the terms "unreal" and "irrational." Again, in the "strange unlike," we have a characteristic which, with minor variations such as "the unfamiliar," and "the other," Stevens repeatedly connects with the figure of the Paramour. Although she is always understood to be a part of the self, she is an unpredictable element, and in this sense, unknowable. She is the internal being that corresponds to the "freshness and strangeness" so sought by the poet (OP, 228), and who at times is perceived as that rare "revelation of something 'wholly other' by which the inexpressible loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched" (OP, 237). Stevens' fullest description of his "muse" is the description of a creature who is both "enigma and mask," and it constitutes the closing passage of "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet":

Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur, enigma
and mask, although I am part of what is real,
hear me and recognize me as part of the unreal.
I am the truth but the truth of the imagination
of life in which with unfamiliar motion and
manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech
in which your words are mine, mine yours.

(NA, 67)

One notes a radical departure from the traditional idea of the muse, in the above passage, and the potent figure called up in "To the One of Fictive Music" departs from convention in several respects, as a close look at the first stanza will prove:

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
 And queen, and of diviner love the day
 And flame and summer and sweet fire, no thread
 Of cloudy silver sprinkles in your gown
 Its venom of reknown, and on your head
 No crown is simpler than the simple hair.

As noted above, Stevens invokes a trinity in this poem, which he addresses as "One." Her triple aspect as mother, sister, and divine beloved probably relates her more to a pre-Classical Goddess figure than to any single Heliconian muse. "Diviner," used twice in the stanza, carries the sense of augury and of that exceptional penetration of vision which is clairvoyance. Indeed, this "diviner love" with her crown of simple hair bears a close resemblance to a "woman with the hair of a pythoness" and, in the third stanza, appears to be the genesis of that which "sees and names" and "apprehends." Again, in the closing couplet of the poem she is asked, not to provide inspiration from without, but to restore imagination within.

Unlike the unnamed "you" in the later "Restatement of Romance," the One of fictive music is given the suggestion of an earthly body with "clearest bloom," "simple hair," and a "pale head." But it is a form paradoxically clothed in an unearthly beauty and perfection that is "out of our imperfections wrought." Surrounded with "flame and summer and sweet fire," the One of fictive music is as sensual and physical as she is metaphysical and conceptual. In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens singles out The Faerie Queene as an example of a poem which, in time, "comes to possess the reader" (NA, 50). It may be that the closest analogue to Stevens' figure in earlier English poetry is the equally mysterious, equally nameless, and equally radiant "fourth grace" who illuminates the Spenserian vision of art in Book Six.

But Stevens' invocation raises the One of fictive music from among the "sisterhood of the living dead" so that both a figure and a modality exhumed from the poetry of the past come to exist again in a partly ironic present. In this, Stevens follows the Romantics back to Blake who, in his farewell "To the Muses," accuses the Fair Nine of "forsaking Poetry" and withdrawing into the four elements of the natural world:

Whether in Heav'n ye wander fair,
 Or the green corners of the earth,
 Or the blue regions of the air,
 Where the melodious winds have birth;

Whether on crystal rocks ye rove,
 Beneath the bosom of the sea
 Wand'ring in many a coral grove,
 Fair Nine, forsaking Poetry!

How have you left the antient love
 That bards of old enjoy'd in you!
 The languid strings do scarcely move!
 The sound is forced, the notes are few!³

In the final stanza, Blake draws attention to an "antient" love-bond between the bards of old and the muses, so that these muses, too, are understood to be "paramours."

Blake's complaint served, in a way, as an epitaph for the classical Nine, for it formally placed them in the realm of the "living dead" which is, of course, the heritage of every poet. When Stevens assigns his "diviner love" to the "living dead," however, it not only suggests his affiliation with a literary tradition but also directs one to a duality inherent in his Paramour.

Stevens' understanding of language as an organic living instrument and his preoccupation with the notions of philosophy are both evidenced in his figure of the Paramour. To illustrate, Stevens comments in the Adagia that, for him, "French and English constitute a single language" (OP, 178), and as some critics have noted, his

affinity for French painting and tapestries, French thought and belles lettres will often shape the metre, rhythm, syntax and lexis of his own verse. His habit of interweaving the two languages is readily apparent in his choice of the term "paramour" to indicate the creative entity who dwells within, and who is not only "other" but "together with" and "part of." In these three distinct divisions, however, Stevens' Paramour reaches past her French-English lineage to a Greek model, for she derives these particular attributes from Plato's Soul of the Universe as set forth in the passage on the Creation in the Timaeus. "The body of heaven is visible," Plato tells us, "but the soul is invisible, and partakes of reason and harmony," and he goes on to discuss the composition, the motion, and the responses of the soul:

And because she is composed of the same and of the other and of the essence, these three, and is divided and united in due proportion, and in her revolutions returns upon herself; the soul, when touching anything which has essence . . . is stirred through all her powers to declare the sameness or difference of that thing and some other; and to what individuals are related, and by what affected, and in what way and how and when, both in the world of generation and in the world of immutable being.⁴

As we find in "Restatement of Romance," Stevens' Paramour is also composed of "the same and of the other and of the

essence," and the voice in the poem is also stirred to declare the sameness and the difference of the two selves, and to state how they "are related, and by what affected." Moreover, Stevens' use of a seeming oxymoron, the "living dead," to express a context for the One of fictive music is not only consistent with his idea of the Paramour, but also suggests Plato's revolving Soul who touches both "the world of generation" and the "world of immutable being." If we trace the etymology of the term "paramour," the connection should become clear.

A "paramour," in current usage, is the "illicit partner of a married man or woman." According to Partridge,⁵ the term enters Middle English as par amur, par amour, or paramur, and from the fourteenth century on continues as paramour in both French and English, carrying with it its old French (adverbial) meaning: "with love" or "by (means of) love." But amor forms the central element of the word, and just as the Latin substantive contains mor-, or the root term for "death," so does the French derivative carry mour(ir) within amour. If the "death" element is separated from the rest of the word, the term paramour becomes para-mour, which, with a prefix derived from the Greek, gives the additional meanings of "beside death," "alongside of

death," "aside from death," and finally, "beyond death." Now there is nothing new or unusual in the idea that eros and thanatos are closely related; what is significant in Stevens' selection of the term paramour, I think, is that the word is not only able to express the kinship of love and death in two languages simultaneously, but that it can also suggest the idea of existence beyond mortality. In paramour, Stevens has a word which conveys the cyclical sense of "the world of generation," or the world of death contained within love, while in conjunction with that meaning there is the additional connotation of an atemporal vitality, a life "aside from" or "beyond" the realm of loving and dying. Thus, like Plato's invisible Soul, Stevens' Paramour also exists in the "world of immutable being."

As noted above, Stevens is sparing in his use of the term. Of the four times it occurs in the poetry, two are from the earliest period of publication (once in The Comedian as the Letter C and once in "Last Looks at Lilacs," both published in Harmonium in 1923); the third occurrence is in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," published in Owl's Clover in 1936. In "Mr. Burnshaw," the death element contained in the term is strongly manifest. And, unlike

the earlier poems where the term appears fleetingly, "Mr. Burnshaw" develops as a conversation poem, a dialogue between the speaker and "Mesdames," the "celestial paramours." In a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens explains that the paramours in this poem "are all the things in our nature that are celestial" (LWS, 367). But the "celestial paramours" of the second Canto are also singers of the "living dead" as they chant their "sibilant requiems" and a "mortal lullaby":

Come, all celestial paramours,
Whether in-dwelling haughty clouds, frigid,
And crisply musical, or holy caverns temple-toned
Entwine your arms and moving to and fro,
Now like a ballet infantine in awkward steps,
Chant sibilant requiems for this effigy.
Bring down from nowhere nothing's wax-like blooms,
In a mortal lullaby, like porcelain. (OP, 47)

The delicately rosy suggestion of the muses in "To the One of Fictive Music" here blossoms into what is almost a danse macabre; the sibylline/sibilant requiems accompany a frigid and awkward chorus that performs a halting parody of its original's gracefully ordered steps. The atmosphere is weighted with Beaudelairean correspondences, unmistakable in "holy caverns temple-toned," and the pallor of "wax-like blooms" becomes the visual equivalent of the "pittering sounds" produced by these spectral sisters in their twilight realm. As the passage continues, a change occurs:

Then while the music makes you, make, yourselves,
 Long autumn sheens and pittering sounds like sounds
 On pattering leaves and suddenly with lights,
 Astral and Shelleyan, diffuse new day.

Like Blake's Fair Nine, Stevens' "celestial paramours" are absorbed into the phenomenal world, dissolved in the dying year's "long autumn sheens," their song fading into hollow "sounds like sounds / On pattering leaves." But "suddenly" the sounds transform into "lights" as an other-worldly image of the "youth as virile poet" arises, "Astral and Shelleyan," and the paramours are reassimilated into the mortal figure to "diffuse new day." This passage encapsulates a notion of the Romantic as both a "style" of poetry and a mode of perception that Stevens discusses in an essay published nearly twenty years after Owl's Clover. "Two or Three Ideas" opens with, and several times returns to, a line quoted from Beaudelaire's "La Vie Antérieure" from Fleurs du Mal: "J'ai longtemps habité sous de vastes portiques." Stevens observes that "The idea of an earlier life is like the idea of a later life, or like the idea of a different life. . . . part of one's inherited store of poetic subjects. Precisely, then, because it is traditional and because we understand its romantic nature and know what to expect from it, we are suddenly and profoundly touched when we hear it declaimed by a voice that says:

"I lived, for long, under huge porticoes" (OP, 203).

Toward the close of the essay, Stevens has moved from subjective response to a general theory of the Romantic as a self-renewing mode of perception:

The romantic . . . has a way of renewing itself. It can be said of the romantic, just as it can be said of the imagination, that it can never effectively touch the same thing twice in the same way. It is partly because the romantic will not be what has been romantic in the past that it is preposterous to think of confining poetry hereafter to the revelation of reality. The whole effort of the imagination is toward the production of the romantic. When, therefore, the romantic is in abeyance, when it is discredited, it remains true that there is always an unknown romantic and that the imagination will not be forever denied. (OP, 215)

Following Stevens' discussion in "Two or Three Ideas," we can assume that each "renewal" or return of an imaginative mode that can "effectively touch" us, or what is about us, is a "restatement of romance." It is the reappearance of what Stevens calls an "unknown romantic." In "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," the reappearance of the "unknown romantic" can be traced in the transformations of the "celestial paramours," and particularly in the changing moods of their dance, as the poem unfolds. Stevens comments on the passage quoted above (p. 104) that the paramours "are compelled by desire . . . even in their requiem for the effete . . . to diffuse new day. The music

makes them. The astral and Shelleyan lights are not going to alter the structure of nature" (LWS, 367). The "Shelleyan lights" may not alter the structure of nature but, for Stevens, they can renew and reinform our perception of the structure of nature as part of the imaginative process. Thus, the idea of evolution is linked with the Romantic tradition in a subtle alteration of the tradition itself. To illustrate, Stevens' "autumn" passage in "Mr. Burnshaw" can be compared with Blake's song "To Autumn" in the early Poetical Sketches.⁶ Although Blake's poem is more genial in mood, and indeed, has a note of the Spenserian pastoral about it, it is similarly concerned with the passing of the year, the poet's ability to generate song out of death, and the transformation of the muses into lusty "daughters of the year" who perform the circular dance of the seasons:

O Autumn, laden with fruit, and stained
 With the blood of the grape, pass not, but sit
 Beneath my shady roof; there thou may'st rest,
 And tune thy jolly voice to my fresh pipe;
 And all the daughters of the year shall dance!
 Sing now the lusty song of fruits and flowers.

The topos of Autumn has not changed appreciably in the interval between Blake and Stevens or, in Stevens' phrase, the "Shelleyan lights" have not altered the structure of nature. What does seem altered, in

"Mr. Burnshaw," is the perception that the poem, the poet, and the natural world are bound in a complex interrelation. In canto IV of "Mr. Burnshaw," Stevens conjoins the celestial and terrestrial elements of both nature and poetry, and instructs his "paramours" in a credo that is striking in its ambiguity:

Mesdames, one might believe that Shelley lies
Less in the stars than in their earthy wake.

Veiled by the funereal sense of the lines, by which we understand that the mortal voice is brought to silence in the grave, is a second meaning that hints at immortality. The ulterior meaning pivots on "lies / Less in the stars" and on the three possible readings of "wake." As "lie" can be interpreted as both a "fiction" and a "resting," one can draw from the lines the idea that poetic fictions have more truth (lie less) in a celestial context, or sublime sense, than what is taken to be objective reality; the importance of bodily death is diminished. In "earthy wake," there is the sense that the terrestrial globe is but the trail and residue of celestial spheres; the sense of a formal period of mourning after a death; a sense of the reawakening of the earth. This last reading compels a return to the original understanding of the lines, and a reevaluation of what has been understood: the figure of Shelley is plucked

from the Beyond to take its place as the vital poet of earth. His immortal, or celestial, life becomes dependent upon mortal being. And in fact, for Stevens, earth and the inescapable knowledge of mortality is always the essential, the "difficult inch":

Always and always, the difficult inch,
On which the vast arches of space
Repose, always, the credible thought
From which the incredible systems spring,
The little confine soon unconfined
In stellar largenesses. (OP, 103)

Stevens tells us that "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" is concerned with "adaptation to change," that the statue itself is not a symbol of art but "a manifestation of the civilization of which it is a part." It has no meaning, he goes on, not because it is old, but because it is "irrelevant, hence dead, a dead thing in a dead time. It will be replaced, as part of incessant change" (LWS, 366). The paramours in "Mr. Burnshaw" are the agents of evolutionary, or positive, change, for as we find in canto VI, "the birds of chaos are not always sad nor lost / In melancholy distances," and "change composes, too, and chaos comes / To momentary calm." At this point, Stevens puts the central question that has to do with fear of change to "all the things in our nature that are celestial." He asks the paramours: "Shall you / Then, fear a drastic

community evolved / From the whirling, slowly and by
 trial?" In canto VII, immediately following, the paramours
 are urged to action, and they are painted as they might be;
 they are fully alive here, and their dance is a kind of
 transport. They are transported, too, to a larger circle
 than the cycle of the year:

Dance, now, and with sharp voices cry, but cry
 Like damsels daubed and let your feet be bare
 To touch the grass and, as you circle, turn
 Your backs on the vivid statue. Then,
 Weaving ring in radiant ring and quickly, fling
 Yourselves away and at a distance join
 Your hands held high and cry again, but cry,
 This time, like damsels captured by the sky,
 Seized by that possible blue.

The paramours are in the ascendent here; not only does the
 pronomial "your" or "yourselves" take the initial position
 in several of the lines, which is unusual for Stevens, but
 the passage reverberates with internal rhyme. Minimal
 end-stopping and terminal verbs of extreme motion and
 sharp sound impart a quality of abandon to the architecture
 of the dance. The passage culminates in a violent seizure;
 the paramours become creatures of the aether and are
 clothed in shining darkness:

As if your gowns were woven of the light
 Yet were not bright, came shining as things come
 That enter day from night, came mirror-dark,
 With each fold sweeping in a sweeping play.

The statue is destroyed in this final canto, and in a last transformation, the paramours--like the figure of Shelley--are brought from a "possible blue" to the "breathing earth" and then swept up in the same sensual and metaphysical fires that surround the One of fictive music. Here, the paramours have evolved to the point where they suggest "the idea of a different life," to a time

. . . when, at last, you are yourselves,
Speaking and strutting broadly, fair and bloomed,
No longer of air but of the breathing earth,
Impassioned seducers and seduced, the pale
Pitched into swelling bodies, upward, drift
In a storm blown into glittering shapes, and flames
Wind-beaten into freshest, brightest fire.

These are Blakean fires recalling the daemonic energies of Los, and the furnace out of which new form and new expression arise. And from Stevens' earliest period to the final work, these are the fires that signal both prophetic vision and the primal energy of creation. We find them, for example, in the early "Nomad Exquisite" (CP, 95) in the final lines: "So, in me, come flinging / Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames." They appear in the late Sail of Ulysses (OP, 102) to signify a possible future when civilization has evolved to its apogee, "Like glitter ascended into fire." It is the bluely burning "amorist Adjective aflame" in The Man with the Blue Guitar.

(CP, 172), and the fire that flames from the "burning body" of the "contemplated spouse" in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (CP, 395). In Credences of Summer (CP, 373), it is the vision of the res itself, "the very thing" seen with hottest fire of sight" that burns "everything not part of it to ash." And in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (CP, 509), the visionary and upward-directed energy of "A Light on the candle tearing against the wick / To join a hovering excellence" is made explicit in the immediately following: "Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible."

Stevens' early portrait of his Paramour as the One of fictive music describes a queenly being whose attributes associate her with the sun, rather than the moon. Not only does "no thread / Of cloudy silver" sprinkle in her gown, but she emanates "the day / And flame and summer and sweet fire." Here again, there is an echo of Spenser, who celebrates Elizabeth, his "Faerie Queene," as both "Sunne of the world" (Bk. VI.X.xxviii) and "The Queene of Loue" (Proem: Bk. IV.iv). The celestial paramours of "Mr. Burnshaw," the "impassioned seducers and seduced," are translated in the final passage into "glittering shapes, and flames / Wind-beaten into freshest, brightest fire." In an earlier passage, however, they appear as figures of

darkness, threshold creatures, "shining as things come / that enter day from night . . . mirror-dark." We are given a brief glimpse of the dark side of Stevens' Paramour, in this passage, and it presents a sharp contrast to her fiery aspect.

Although the dark and bright aspects of the Paramour are both related to the season of summer and sensuous heat, the dark is spatially associated with the South, and the southern night. Where the bright side of the figure is compounded of rose and gold and tints of flame, the other face is black--"black but comely" as is Solomon's Shulamite. Connected as it is with summer warmth and southern climes, the quality of black, for Stevens, is neither an absence of color nor a lack of light but an erotic and enveloping ambiance that is rich with anticipation and limitless possibilities. It is the medium of conception, the "essential dark" in The Man with the Blue Guitar (CP, 172), and its voice can be heard in the whispering of the lover in "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night":

Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear.
Use dusky words and dusky images.
Darken your speech. (CP, 86)

Stanza II of "Six Significant Landscapes" (CP, 73) reveals, rather than conceals the presence of the dark Paramour:

The night is of the color
 Of a woman's arm:
 Night, the female,
 Obscure,
 Fragrant and supple,
 Conceals herself.
 A pool shines,
 Like a bracelet
 Shaken in a dance.

The dark face of the Paramour brings us back to the term itself for it would appear that the relevance of paramour, for Stevens, turns on still another homonymic value: the final syllable can be heard as "-moor." Partridge, again, traces the English word Moor (for a North African Arab) from the Old French, and French, More, a variation of the Latin Maurus which is akin to the Greek Mauros, the personification of mauros, meaning "very dark." It is possible, too, that Stevens is playing on the adjective amauros, which gives the additional meanings of "dark, dim, dusky, faint, obscure, unknown." It should be noted, here, that Stevens had some grounding in the classical languages; his secondary schooling at Reading Boys High School consisted of the "classical course" which he completed in the June of 1897 (LWS, 13). Ten years later, in a letter dated April 9, 1907, we find the young Stevens translating a quotation from the Latin for his wife-to-be, and in the same letter (LWS, 101), telling her

of his feeling for Greek civilization which, he says, is derived from "fragments of poetry that have been preserved, and from statues and ruins, and a thousand things, all building up in the mind a noble conception of a pagan world of passion and love of beauty and life." In another letter to Elsie written two years later, Stevens more specifically discusses "the fragments of Sappho" (LWS, 130). And in 1926, nearly thirty years after completing the "classical course," Stevens is still recalling the fragments of Sappho, for on December 23 of that year he writes to Harriet Monroe that Christmas "is like Sappho's evening; it brings us back to the fold" (LWS, 248).

Like "Sappho's evening," then, Stevens' Paramour can be dusky, domestic, and passionate, and as we have seen, the figure is often associated with or made to personify night. In "Restatement of Romance," for example, night exists as a third side of the triangle, a voiceless entity that imparts a mysterious dimension to the dialogue concerning identity, difference, and being. In an earlier poem, the poet is a "scholar of darkness" who invokes his Paramour as the personification of night:

Donna, donna, dark,
 Stooping in indigo gown
 And cloudy constellations,
 Conceal yourself or disclose

Fewest things to the lover--
 A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,
 A pungent bloom against your shade. (CP, 48)

Hesiod tells us that "black Night" first bore Aether (the bright upper atmosphere) and Day, both of whom "she conceived . . . from union in love with Erebos."⁷ For the "scholar of darkness," too, communion with the dark Paramour generates bright images, but the figure as Night possesses still another aspect for Stevens, and another color. On the one hand she suggests physical sensuality; she is "black and comely" and her mystique is one of concealment: she will "disclose / Fewest things to the lover." Her alternate aspect embodies a metaphysical erotic, and the ambient color of Night then turns from black, violet, and indigo, to green. In "The Candle a Saint" (CP, 223), the "green dimension" of the figure is paramount, and we find that her mode is no longer concealment but revelation. The cosmic presence summoned up here has, in fact, something of the divine mania about her; she shares the same starry madness as the "clairvoyant men," the lovers, the believers, the poets, and the astronomers. The poem follows entire:

Green is the night, green kindled and apparelled. 116
It is she that walks among astronomers.

She strides above the rabbit and the cat,
Like a noble figure, out of the sky,

Moving among the sleepers, the men,
Those that lie chanting green is the night.

Green is the night and out of madness woven,
The self-same madness of the astronomers

And of him that sees, beyond the astronomers,
The topaz rabbit and the emerald cat,

That sees above them, that sees rise up above them,
The noble figure, the essential shadow,

Moving and being, the image at its source,
The abstract, the archaic queen. Green is the night.

Stevens is describing a noetic "first principle" in the noble figure whom he mythologizes as "the abstract, the archaic queen." Here, as elsewhere in the poetry,⁸ his use of "archaic" approximates the Greek 'APXH', a noun of the first declension feminine that denotes a primary principle, or an origin, and carries a secondary meaning of supreme power, sovereignty, dominion. Like the candle in the title, Stevens' "archaic queen" rises as an archetype of human consciousness, and the spirit of conscious thought is echoed in the poem in her "moving and being." As the "essential shadow," the "image at its source," and the green night itself, she reflects Marvell's overwhelming reduction of all consciousness, and all being, to "a green

thought in a green shade." Again, what I have called the "metaphysical erotic" that determines the color of Stevens' night is the same erotic one finds in Marvell's Garden, where

No white nor red was ever seen
So am'rous as this lovely green.⁹

The rocking-to-sleep motion of "The Candle a Saint" develops from a series of syntactic and lexical repetitions that suggest a lullaby, and a lullaby's near-hypnotic effect. Consciousness exists here as a generator of phantasms, the thoughts and images that arise in the timeless zone that lies between wakefulness and sleep. In a much later poem, the dark Paramour appears as the principle of conscious thought on still another threshold, the "syllable between life / And death." And of the "forms of dark desire" that inhabit "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (CP, 432), she is the only one that is given a voice. The poem is a meditation on death, and in the first canto, death is experienced as a cessation of consciousness. Sleep and Peace are introduced as brothers, two "forms" who move among the dead. The third "form" also moves from the dead with a quiet murmur, but of a sudden becomes:

. . . she that in the syllable between life

And death cries quickly, in a flash of voice,
Keep you, keep you, I am gone, oh keep you as
My memory, is the mother of us all,

The earthly mother and the mother of
The dead. Only the thought of those dark three
Is dark, thought of the forms of dark desire.

Here again, like Plato's Soul, Stevens' Paramour bestrides two realms: the "world of generation" and the realm of "immutable being." One might conceivably read a Freudian eros-thanatos conflict into this passage, but only if one understands "death" as a form "of dark desire." I should be extremely hesitant, however, to apply this principle to Stevens' poetry in general. Stevens spoke of Freud as "one of the great figures in the world" (OP, 219), and held him in regard as the thinker who "has given the irrational a legitimacy that it never had before." The "death-wish" (an erroneous but popular reduction of Freud's theory of instincts--and a term not used by Freud) does not interpret any part of Stevens' poetry, nor does it constitute the recognition that occurs in the above passage. The convolutions of syntax in these lines, and the resulting contortions of meaning, make the possessor of the voice that "cries" an enigma with several "masks." Is she "masked" as death in the phrase: "death cries quickly"? Does she put on the

semblance of "memory," to be understood for a moment as a Mnemosyne who is not only the mother of the muses, but of "us all"? When one unwinds the syntax, or "unmasks" the speaker, a "she" is revealed who contains memory as part of her, who is thus the mother of both the living and the dead, and whose flashing appearance is connected with "thought" and "dark desire." She is, in effect, Stevens' dark Paramour in her darkest guise. Her hovering presence among the dead suggests, too, that the "owl" in the sarcophagus is an Athenean owl; the power, elegance, and wisdom of the deathless goddess is symbolized by the raptor that hunts in the dark.

We have remarked that Stevens' approach to the Romantic is a notion of intellectual and spiritual evolution. In "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," for example, he will muse:

And yet it is a singular romance
This warmth in the blood-world for the pure idea.
(CP, 256)

Stevens' figure of "the abstract, the archaic queen" as the embodiment of a noetic principle has its antecedents in philosophic thought, in the history of "pure idea." To find the intellectual principle embodied in a female form, however, one must by-pass Christian theology and return

past the Noys of Bernard Silvestris¹⁰ to the Nous of Plotinus, and to Plotinus' exposition of Aphrodite Ouranos as the Intellectual Principle; one should note the character of Diotima in Plato's Symposium, and its continuity with Parmenides' intellectual principle, the Goddess in The Way of Truth. Indeed, one should probably go back to the figure of the divine Tetractys which formed the core of Pythagoras' mystical mathematic. Because of limitations of space, and because the scope of the material demands an independent study to develop it properly, a single example must serve to establish a background for Stevens' "archaic queen." And because a metaphysical erotic is involved, in that the "abstract" queen is yet a Paramour, I will cite Plotinus' discussion of Aphrodite Ouranos, in the third Ennead on "Love." Basing his discussion on the ideas set forth in the Symposium, Plotinus comments that the existence of divine love is supported by theologians (by which he means Orphic teachers), and by Plato. An exposition follows:

The Heavenly Aphrodite . . . who is no other than the Intellectual Principle--must be the Soul at its divinest: unmingled as the immediate emanation of the unmingled; remaining ever Above, as neither desirous nor capable of descending to this sphere, never having developed the downward tendency, a divine Hypostasis essentially aloof, so unreservedly an Authentic Being as to have no

part with matter--and therefore mythically "the unmothered"--justly called not Celestial Spirit but God, as having no admixture, gathered cleanly within itself.¹¹

Here, again, one notes the similarity between Plotinus' Nous, as "the unmothered" Hypostasis who personifies "pure idea," and the Aristotelian concept of the Prime Mover or First Cause that "thinks itself." In Description Without Place (CP, 339-46), Stevens meditates on "seeming" and "being," and construes both as the emanations of a "major mind." One is reminded of Aristotle's observation in the *Metaphysics* that "all that can be talked about may be said to exist," an observation which indicates a major departure from Plato's clear distinction between the realm of "seeming" and the realm of "being." Stevens' meditation follows the Aristotelian line of thought, but it also sees the major mind as a "green queen." And in Description Without Place, one finds a thematic repetition of the Paramour in "A Primitive Like an Orb," as the "mate of summer" whose "mirror and her look" are "her only place and person" (see p. 94). In Description, too, the "metaphysical erotic" implicit in the color green extends to sunlit, as well as night visions. In canto I, the "green queen" is both nameless and voiceless although she presides as the creating center of "the world around her." The canto

unfolds as a sort of "Progress" of the imaginative soul:

It is possible that to seem--it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.

Thus things are like a seeming of the sun
Or like a seeming of the moon or night

Or sleep. It was a queen that made it seem
By the illustrious nothing of her name.

Her green mind made the world around her green.
The queen is an example . . . This green queen

In the seeming of the summer of her sun
By her own seeming made the summer change.

In the golden vacancy she came, and comes,
And seems to be on the saying of her name.

Her time becomes again, as it became,
The crown and week-day coronal of her fame.
(CP, 339)

The "green queen" is a Romantic figure, in Stevens' sense of the term; a "singular" entity whose very form expresses "warmth in the blood-world for the pure idea." She is drawn with the "lineaments of desire," to use Blake's phrase. Her world, and her reality, is composed of a network of relationships between three major areas: perception, existence, and expression. She represents an "irrational" or extraordinary reality that is experienced only when these areas attain a proportionate and delicate balance. This kind of triangulation, according to Shelley,

is the essence of poetic relationships. "To be a poet," he says, "is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression."¹² Stevens' "green queen" balances delicately between intellectual and aesthetic being and the principle of natural cycles and becoming, for "Her time becomes again." Like the sun, she is an "example" of both "seeming" and "being." The reality that she embodies can be grasped only when the constituting imagination works in concert with the constituting intellect, or that use of the intellect wherein, as Shelley puts it, one "regards the relations of things simply as relations." In the second canto we learn that the "style / Peculiar to the queen" is a mode that connects the vision of the eye to the vision of the mind, and that both "Such seemings are the actual ones":

The lesser seeming original in the blind

Forward of the eye that, in its backward, sees
The greater seeming of the major mind.

(CP, 340)

Stevens' "green queen" is as nameless, or unnameable, as the golden vacancy she comes to inhabit. As the creature of "seeming," she is a reflective entity, but as

a creating spirit, a "green mind," she stands at the center of "being." In her reflective aspect, the Paramour here is reminiscent of the "mate of summer" whose "mirror and her look" are her defining qualities. This reflective aspect takes on a greater depth, is, perhaps, enlarged to a "greater seeming of the major mind" in a later poem. "A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror" (CP, 460-61), draws together the ideas of seeming and being in a mimetic description of consciousness. The mirror here is

A glass
The sun steps into, regards and finds itself.

In "A Golden Woman," too, the sense of touch becomes one of the ways by which one may establish contact with the Paramour. The opening tercet, couched as a proposal, is a tentative reaching for origins, and specifically the origin of conscious thought:

Suppose this was the root of everything.
Suppose it turned out to be or that it touched
An image that was mistress of the world.

The "image that was mistress of the world" is a sublime image of consciousness while the reflecting glass is a figure that signifies the ability of conscious life to both see and be itself. As in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," death is a shattering of awareness, the loss of reflective consciousness:

Dark death is the breaking of a glass.
The dazzled flakes and splinters disappear.

The sublime aspect of the Paramour continues to exist,
however, for "the images, disembodied, are not broken."
And like the "One" of fictive music whose head is crowned
with simple hair, or the "green queen," who wears a
"coronal" and "crown," these images too have "their
glittering crown":

Of the most beautiful, the most beautiful maid
And mother.

In Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, "the mother of us all"
is given her emblematic name in the fourth canto of "It
Must be Abstract," while the celestial and terrestrial
realms are made reflections of one another:

And Eve made air the mirror of herself,
Of her sons and of her daughters. They found
themselves
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;
And in the earth itself they found a green.
(CP, 383)

In the "green queen" who "made the world around
her green," and in Eve who, out of the air, creates a
"mirror of herself," we come, finally, to the element of
active creation that is central to Stevens' Paramour. As
noted in a previous chapter, Plato's prophetess, in the
Symposium, explains that poiesis is the act of bringing

into being: "All creation or passage of non-being into being," says Diotima, "is poetry or making."¹³ Both the sense of Diotima's words and the vatic quality she imparts to the making of words is echoed in "Large Red Man Reading" (CP, 423-24). Here, a character of the "blood-world" calls up the wraiths of characters out of the past, but laughs, of a sudden, when he describes:

The outlines of being and its expressings, the
 syllables of its law:
Poiesis, poiesis, the literal characters, the
 vatic lines.

Stevens' Paramour becomes visible as the genius of poiesis in one of his best known poems. As the Homeric epic begins with an invocation to the "Goddess" to "sing" the tale that is to follow, "The Idea of Order at Key West" (CP, 128-30) introduces the creating spirit in its opening line:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.

Although the Paramour in "Key West" is as nameless as her other manifestations, her striding presence introduces her as Stevens' "genius of the shore," and her voice is heard as a sort of sung continuo that accompanies the voice of the speaker throughout the poem. Here too, the Paramour is divested of her "mask": "The sea was not a mask. No more was she." She stands revealed as the essential

creative element. In one sense, she is also a "golden woman in a silver mirror" because her image is a reflection of the poet's inner being, as well as an archetype of creation. But the inner spirit is externalized in "Key West"; she has stepped out of the mirror to stride along the edge of the sea, and it is her voice that gives order and meaning to the natural world:

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.

In the fifth stanza, the "genius" of the Paramour is made explicit: she is the source of invention with the ability to provide significance to the "meaningless plungings of water and the wind." Solitary, like the "One," she imparts measure and harmony to sky and sea:

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Stevens' interior Paramour takes many shapes; her color changes from flame and gold to black to luminous green, and ranges over the entire spectrum of celestial hues. She can be clothed or naked, masked or revealed; a

subliminal presence dimly perceived or a striding, robust creature whose utterance satisfies the maker's "blessed rage for order." She is the erotic center of Stevens' poetry; whether half-beast or somehow more than human, whether her erotic is pure sensation or a manifestation of the divine, the Paramour's figure embodies the transformations of creative energy. She exists in the poetry as a "dual person," an expression of both self and other. Like Plato's Diotima, Stevens' interior paramour is at once the "unfamiliar " and the familiar "sybil of the self." She is the intended spouse, the life-giving mother, the most intimate lover and sister. And although Stevens' vision of the paramour is that of a woman possessed of a certain style and elegance, it is also a figure possessed by divine mania and prophecy. "For all poets," says Stevens, "address themselves to someone and it is of the essence of that instinct . . . that it should be to an elite, not to a drab but to a woman with the hair of a pythoness" (NA, 29).

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

¹"Light Listened," from The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1975), p. 205.

²Babette Deutsch, Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 3rd ed., pp. 101-102.

³William Blake, "To the Muses," in The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 408-409.

⁴Plato, Timaeus in The Dialogues of Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), Vol. II, p. 18.

⁵Eric Partridge, Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 14.

⁶Op. cit., Blake, p. 401.

⁷Hesiod, Theogony, trans. H.G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 86-87.

⁸See, for example, "Things of August," VIII (CP, 494).

⁹Andrew Marvell, "The Garden," in The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell, ed. H.M. Margoliouth (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 2nd ed., Vol. I, p. 48.

¹⁰George D. Economou, The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). See especially Appendix: "A Summary of Bernard Silvestris' De mundi universitate," pp. 151-58; see also Theodore Silverstein, "The Fabulous Cosmogony of Bernardus Silvestris," MP, LXVI (1948), 95-98.

¹¹Plotinus: The Enneads, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1962), 3rd ed. (III.5), p. 193.

¹²Percy Bysshe Shelley, A Defense of Poetry, in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 499-500.

¹³Plato, Symposium, op. cit., Jowett, Vol. I, p. 330.

CHAPTER III

TUMBLERS AND TENEMENTS

"Jocund his Muse was, but
his life was chaste"

Robert Herrick,
"The Pillar of Fame"

In the Seminary at Soissons there is a thirteenth-century manuscript, finely illuminated in red, gold, and blue, whose text is a collection of "miracle" tales. These stories were translated from the Latin into Middle French by Gautier de Coinci, a monk of St. Médard, near Soissons. One of the tales, set in the Bernardine monastery at Clairvaux, concerns a minstrel or jongleur who, having entered the Order with no other skill, performs his somersaults, his juggling tricks and tumbling arts in secret before the altar of the Blessed Virgin. This daily service takes place in a crypt seldom visited by the other monks, and there the jongleur sets aside his monkish garb and, clad in a light undergarment, worships his Lady with various skillful vaults. During this performance he pauses only to invoke the Queen of Heaven's blessing, and to beg her to accept his secular and unorthodox efforts as a token of loving reverence. The scene in the dimly-lit chapel is described in rich detail:

Then commenced he his merry play, leaping
 low and small, tall and high, over and under.
 . . . he knelt upon his knees before the
 statue, and meekly bowed his head. "Ha!" said
 he, "most gracious Queen, of your pity and
 your charity scorn not this my service."
 . . . Afterwards he did the French vault, then
 the vault of Champagne, then the vaults they
 love in Brittany, then the vault of Lorraine
 . . . and then the Roman vault . . . and then,

with his hands before his brow, danced daintily before the altar, gazing with a humble heart at the statue of God's Mother. . . . Then he walked on his two hands, with his feet in the air, and his head near the ground. He twirled with his feet, and wept with his eyes. "Lady," said he, "I worship you with heart, with body, with feet and hands, for this I can neither add to nor take away. Now am I your very minstrel. Others may chant your praises in the church, but here in the crypt will I tumble for your delight."¹

The tumbler's activities are discovered, before long, by a fellow monk who hastens to the abbot, imparts the startling information and is commanded, in turn, to hold his tongue until the abbot can see the spectacle for himself. Together they hide in the crypt, and the abbot does indeed observe the antics of the jongleur who again tumbles and dances for his lady's mirth and delight. When, streaming perspiration, the exhausted acrobat sinks to the ground in a near-faint, the two watchers are treated to a miraculous vision. They behold the Queen of Heaven herself descending from the vault of the crypt: "She was more beautiful than the daughters of men, and her vesture was heavy with gold and gleaming stones. In her train came the hosts of heaven, angel and archangel also. . . . Then the sweet and courteous Queen herself took a white napkin in her hand, and with it gently fanned her minstrel before the altar. Courteous and debonair, the Lady refreshed his neck, his body and his brow."

In another version, the two watchers see the Queen of Heaven appear in the statue's place, and are stricken with awe and trembling as she descends from the pedestal, approaches the prone figure, and takes up the hem of her shining gown to wipe his brow.

The charm that lies in the tale of Le Jongleur de Notre Dame is certainly to be found in the contrast between High Courtesy, the subdued fervor of the monastic life, and the libertine quality of the Troubadour. All of these elements combine to give the "miracle" its poignance and point, and the tale thus accomplishes its teaching purpose: it is an exemplum of the glory of faith and the value of humility. But there is a further teaching to be gathered from the tale of the juggler, at least as profound as the literal directives concerning faith and humility. The allegorical significance of the tale, and its underlying teaching, might be stated as follows: With love, one may court the sacred by means of the profane and be accepted--even touched--by the Divine. The story of the tumbler and his Lady, then, introduces still another aspect to the erotics of Stevens' poetry by way of its allegorical content. For although the courteous and debonair Lady of the thirteenth century is conceived as both an Image and a

powerfully exteriorized "Paramour," one can yet apply her lover's words to Stevens' comic and satirical side: "Others may chant your praises in the church, but here in the crypt will I tumble for your delight."

Stevens' comic bent is too pronounced to avoid recognition. With two exceptions, however, there has not been much critical attention directed to the humorous element in Stevens' art. Of the two studies that specifically deal with Stevens' humor, Daniel Fuchs' The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens is largely concerned with the poet's mannerist techniques, his tendency to "dandyism," while Vendler, in On Extended Wings, gives us a concentrated study of the ironic structures in the longer poems.² As one can see, these studies show a considerable distance between possible approaches to Stevens' expression of the Comic, while they also represent highly individual responses to it. In point of fact, the greater part of Stevens' humor falls somewhere between the two poles established by Fuchs and Vendler, but though there has been a great deal of critical interpretation devoted to Stevens' work in recent years, there has so far been no attempt to grapple with either the range or the complexity of his wit.

While continuing to trace the erotics of Stevens'

poetry, this chapter will focus on the poet's sometimes "cryptic" humor as (1) a playful manifestation of erotic energy, or libido, (2) a method of attack against corrupt or outmoded institutions, and (3) a form of "courting" the Sublime. Freud proposed that various forms of humor can be understood as expressions of eros, and his work on the relation of wit to the unconscious³ will help to elucidate some of Stevens' most powerful satire. But Freud himself has repeatedly declared his indebtedness to Plato, and most particularly to the concept of eros developed in the Symposium: "the all-inclusive and all-preserving Eros of Plato's Symposium."⁴ Perhaps even more noteworthy for the purposes of this chapter, we find that Freud returns again and again to one particular section of the Symposium, the mythic invention "which Plato put in the mouth of Aristophanes,"⁵ and in Beyond the Pleasure Principle he takes the trouble to tell the story over again. Freud's exposition of wit was written five years after The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), but it so relates to the discussion of erotics in the prior work that it acts, in an integral way, as an appendix to the Interpretation. And when Freud presents humor in close relation to a discussion of eros he is indeed following the model established by

Plato. Again, because the three aspects of Stevens' humor that we are dealing with are equally present in the Symposium, it should be helpful to recall Aristophanes' contribution to the Dialogue.

Plato assigns Aristophanes' speech to the exact center of the Symposium, and one remembers that the comic poet achieves this position comically: he has suffered an attack of hiccoughs which renders him incapable of coherent speech and which thrusts the physician's speech ahead of the dramatist's. Each discourse in the sequence of speeches in the Symposium reflects both a new approach and a widening of the understanding which adds to the general knowledge of love. Aristophanes' tale of the split-asunder beings who yearn for a former state of wholeness is more than a novel approach; it represents a radical enlargement of the subject under discussion. We should note, too, that in Aristophanes' discourse as in Diotima's--and only in these two--love is conceived as a primal energy rather than an anthropomorphic deity, or an unbalance of the "humours." Partly in consequence of this shared conception, Aristophanes' bizarre invention is the one formal discourse in the Symposium that competes with Diotima's great exposition--in the power of its imagery, its capacity to define the

undefinable, in its memorability.

It is the Comedian's speech, in the Symposium, that Plato devotes to the nature of human yearning, and the only one fully concerned with the potency of yearning as such. Again, grotesque as the images in Aristophanes' speech are, and should be, it is the one speech (including that of Eryximachus) that insists upon a physiological basis for human affections. It accords to desire and the passions a somatic immediacy that, ironically enough, the physician's dry analysis does not provide. Thus, the Aristophanic moment remains with us as the "second heart" of the Symposium, and Plato's central placement of the Comedian's speech is not only significant in itself--revealing a deep-seated understanding of the relation between humor and eros--but foreshadows the concluding statement of the Dialogue.

When Alcibiades, clothed in the mantle and wreath of Dionysos, and his revellers have fallen into a stupor, we come to the closing scene--and final proposition--of the Symposium. Here, Plato restates the essential bond between erotic energy and the creation of poetry and drama. He has Socrates continue to mediate the evening's discussion with Agathon and Aristophanes when the others have either

left the party or succumbed to the oblivion that is the second gift of both Eros and Dionysos. The primary gift, that of invention, production--and revelation--is also the shared province of love and wine. In retrospect, we seem to see Eros and Dionysos blend one into the other and become shadow-images of the same daemonic force. As the dawn begins to break, and the Dialogue ends, the philosopher is heard to observe that "the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also."⁶ The goblet of wine shared by the three having wrought its "second gift," the dramatists drop off to sleep with the rest, while the philosopher quietly tucks them in and leaves for the baths. We are left pondering the theoretical notion of a unity between the tragic and comic visions of art, the idea that both tragic and comic forms spring from a single erotic source. But we are also struck with a suspicion that Socrates is perpetrating a joke, for he has raised a perfectly practical notion too, suggesting that a sufficiency of wine will inevitably reduce both the genius of comedy and the genius of tragedy to the same drowsy oblivion. Thus the dignity that Plato lends to the comic dramatist's conception of eros is matched, in the end, by

the humor implicit in the tragic poet's loss of consciousness. Philosophy sallies forth, barefoot as usual, to meet the new day and so indicates its humble superiority over tragedy and comedy alike.

Stevens, as much as Freud, is indebted to the Platonic construct which makes humor one of the expressions of eros. Probably the simplest way to approach the erotics of Stevens' humor is to take note of his various comic personae--as the Comedian, as Crispin, as fat Jocundus, as the tender, entertaining, or mocking jongleur, but also as the provocateur who specializes in shock tactics and "satanic mimicry." Seen as a manifest form of erotic energy, Stevens' celebrated "gaiety of language" becomes a species of flirtation, and word-play a type of love-play; one hears him serenade with accents of tender mockery, or indulge in ironic self-mockery; one also finds him bitterly satiric, at times, and savagely destructive, using language and image as a battering-ram, and the comic spirit as an instrument of war. In this last, aggressive, aspect, Stevens is closer to Plato than to Freud, for Freud puts destructive impulses in the province of an aggressive instinct, while Eros supplies the opposed urge toward unity and life. Plato, on the other hand, uses parody,

irony, and satire in the Symposium (as elsewhere) precisely to achieve unity and life: in Aristophanes' comic myth, in Diotima's parodic tale of the origins of love, and in Socrates' ironic demolition of Agathon's lyric rhetoric, Plato deploys erotic energy to destroy--or, if one prefers, to "deconstruct"--non-viable opinions so that his upward-directed eros may overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of its object. Plato is employing aggressive humor as part of his machinery to arrive at knowledge of the Sublime, and in this, Stevens follows a Platonic model.

In his more playful poetry, Stevens uses the figure of the jongleur to characterize the fleshly and flexible, the animate and the vulnerable: all that changes swiftly. In Credences of Summer (CP, 376-77) the tumbler is the soul of entertainment and excitement and, like "the trumpet of morning," a herald. Here, he is multiplied by thousands to suggest a cosmic entertainment that is also a "merry play":

The trumpet of morning blows in the clouds
and through
The sky. It is the visible announced,
It is the more than visible, the more
Than sharp, illustrious scene. The trumpet
cries
This is the successor of the invisible. . . .

. . . the resounding cry
Is like ten thousand tumblers tumbling down
To share the day.

This bright lucidity, the penetrating clarity of sound and sight, belongs to a stage-setting where the tumblers are gay "personae of summer." The jongleur becomes an expression of mockery, rather than delight, in The Man with the Blue Guitar (CP, 178), and instead of being infinitely multiplied, he grows to ominous and Titan proportions. Like Atlas, he carries the world; but instead of supporting it on his head he twirls it upon his nose. Gaiety turns into grotesquerie, and lucidity is exchanged for a whirling blur:

He held the world upon his nose
And this-a-way he gave a fling.

His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi--
And that-a-way he twirled the thing.

Sombre as fir trees, liquid cats
Moved in the grass without a sound.

They did not know the grass went round.
The cats had cats and the grass turned gray

And the world had worlds, ai, this-a-way:
The grass turned green and the grass turned gray.

And the nose is eternal, that-a-way.
Things as they were, things as they are,

Things as they will be by and by . . .
A fat thumb beats out ai-yi-yi.

The jongleur here is a grinning jester, a demiourgos who performs in the theatre of the absurd. Through him, a ceaselessly spinning world proliferates all that has been,

is, and will be "by and by," without end and without change. Here is the philosophy of meaningless becoming, a theory of existence which demands that the senses perceive only that "the grass turned gray." In such a cosmos "the nose is eternal," but the juxtaposition of a "fat thumb" to that nose seems to indicate Stevens' response to the notion of an "existential absurd." Again, the sudden advent of rhymed tetrameter and doggerel rhythms in this canto lends support to the thumb-on-nose character of the verses. But these verses contain a form of self-mockery as well, for the poet becomes a jester here himself, a "fat Jocundus" (CP, 197) who twirls the world (whirled) about in this very poem. The thumb-on-nose, then, may also be read as an attitude struck before a glass, though the image is grossly magnified.

Self-mockery takes on a distinctly Ovidian flavor in the early "Bantams in Pine-Woods" (CP, 75-76) where the bantam cock corresponds to a near-universal sexual symbol. As a slightly off-color genre piece, "Bantams" compares rather favorably with a similar effort by Robert Graves, entitled "Down, Wanton, Down!"⁷ For purposes of comparison, we extract the first two stanzas of Graves' ditty:

Down, wanton, down! Have you no shame
That at the whisper of Love's name,
Or Beauty's, presto! up you raise
Your angry head and stand at gaze?

Poor bombard-captain, sworn to reach
The ravelin and effect a breach--
Indifferent what you storm or why,
So be that in the breach you die!

Stevens' contribution is less of a lyric, and less
Cavalier, but it, too, contains a note of Elizabethan
imperiousness and it opens with a similar flourish:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

The double sense of the Chieftain's name points on the one
hand to a preoccupation with the ability to function--
"Iff-u-can"--which calls up precedents in satiric-erotic
verse (see, for example, the sixteenth-century "A Choice
of Valentines" of Thomas Nashe) and, on the other hand,
proclaims the function itself--"I-ffucan." Stevens
proceeds, after the opening couplet, to launch imprecations
at the little rooster:

Damned universal cock, as if the sun
Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.

Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
Your world is you. I am my world.

You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,

Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos.

Although, with Graves' piece, the tone of "Bantams" oscillates between impetuous irritation, strict instruction, and amusement, Stevens is making a more complex statement. Not only can we see a bright bird in the woods, in the literal sense, but the "damned universal cock" has theological implications for Stevens (which will be discussed more fully when we come to "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws"). We should note, however, the erotic quality of "Pine-Woods," in this poem, for "pine" is not only the erect and phallic tree, but a word that Stevens repeatedly plays on for its sense of yearning and desire. The "Chieftain" himself is clearly a metamorphic entity in "Bantams," transformed in the space of a single couplet from a "ten-foot poet" into an "inchling." And it is surely the voice of "fat Jocundus" here who so bitterly bewails his own unwieldy girth, and who observes so ironically of the egocentric Chieftain that his "blazing tail" turns the sun "blackamoor" by contrast. Here, too, we find the jester connected with the fleshly and flexible, the animate and vulnerable, and with swift change.

The opening verse of "Bantams in Pine-Woods" fairly crackles with sounds of the letter "C," a phonetic signal to the reader that the comic spirit is abroad. Stevens

explains his disposition to use these sounds for comic effect in a commentary on The Comedian as the Letter C:

Now as Crispin moves through the poem, the sounds of the letter C accompany him, as the sounds of the crickets, etc. must have accompanied St. Francis. . . . The sounds of the letter C include all related or derivative sounds . . . X, TS, and Z. . . . You have to read the poem and hear all this whistling and mocking and stressing . . . going on in the background, or, as a lawyer might say it, "in, on or about, the words."⁸

As John N. Serio has noted in a recent publication, The Comedian as the Letter C can be read as "a semi-autobiographical account of [Stevens'] early development."⁹ If the Comedian can be understood, among other things, as a portrait of the poet as a young man, then Stevens' assumption of the character of Crispin in the Comedian is a playful but disparaging comment on his own poetic endeavors. Ronald Sukenick, in Musing the Obscure,¹⁰ has obtained the French connection of the name from Joseph Riddel: "He is a valet from Bordeaux whose name derives from the comic valet of seventeenth-century French drama, and he is associated with a long and various tradition of the figure of the harlequin." Sukenick is surely right to connect Stevens' Crispin with his precursor in French drama, for Stevens drew deeply from the French literary tradition. But Stevens had another Crispin to draw upon from Latin

letters. In the Satires of Horace, Crispin is "that ass Crispinus," a character drawn from life.¹¹ Niall Rudd describes him as "an obvious target" and goes on to list his drawbacks: "his doctrinaire idealism . . . his lack of social graces, and his eccentric pose disqualified him from serious consideration. Also from an aesthetic standpoint his sermons were deplorable, being long-winded, overheated affairs with as little art as his own doggerel verses."¹² I think it likely that Stevens is identifying his comedic voyager at least as much with Horace's long-winded poseur as with the theatrical figure of the harlequin. If he is, it seems more than a piece of splendid sophistry; it clearly suggests another nose-thumbing in the mirror.

In the first canto of the Comedian, Stevens announces that "man is the intelligence of his soil." We never learn whether the "soil" in question is good earth or "dirty linen," for the poet promptly removes his hero from his earthy matrix, only to launch him upon a cliché sea of doubt. The nature of man in general, and of the hero-as-clown in particular, now unmistakably takes on the aspect of Horace's "bleary-eyed" but sententious Crispinus:

. . . the Socrates
 Of snails, musician of pears, principium
 And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig
 Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,
 Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea
 Created, in his day, a touch of doubt.
 (CP, 27)

Once embarked, the Sea of Doubt develops into a Sea of Troubles for the young pilgrim as a storm blows up. One descends now from high allegory to straightforward metaphor, for the sea is in fact a sea of words. The wind splits its substance into "clickering syllables" while Crispin "was washed away by magnitude." The storm ended, our mariner floats in a Coleridgean waste, "a wordy, watery age," and the rise and fall of the wind, the gently slapping waves, take on both a lethal and Lethean quality:

Here, something in the rise and fall of wind
 That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,
 A sunken voice, both of remembering
 And forgetfulness, in alternate strain.

Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved.

The modern Crispin is similarly dissolved in the vacant windiness of words, and he continues to drift in a briny quiescence, "a merest miniscule in the gales, / Dejected his manner" until nothing remains of him but "some starker, barer self / In a starker, barer world." At this point, the "hallucinating horn" sounds again, but it has now materialized into a trumpet that blares a sardonic voluntary:

Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried
 Celestial sneering boisterously.¹³ Crispin
 Became an introspective voyager. (CP, 29)

The "hallucinating horn" has apparently had a powerful effect, however, for Stevens' autobiographical hero has barely given himself over to "introspection" in the space between one stanza and the next when he comes up with a remarkable discovery:

Here was the veritable ding an sich, at last,
 Crispin confronting it, a vocable thing,
 But with a speech belched out of hoary darks
 Noway resembling his, a visible thing. (CP, 29)

Upon confronting the (veritable) ding an sich face to face, as it were, Crispin fancies himself now a realist: "The last distortion of romance / Forsook the insatiable egotist." Indeed, the apparition of the Kantian noumenon as a vocable, visible sea-monster has the effect of elevating Crispin, briefly, to the same status as the sea, and the young man shares for a time "the old age of a watery realist" (CP, 28).

Even a cursory look at Book I of The Comedian as the Letter C shows a wry sort of self-evaluation in progress. Along with the persona of Crispin as "introspective voyager," however, one hears a narrative voice that comments now and again in a mildly-detached, instructive tone, but a tone that also contains a certain amount of

conservative amusement. This is the voice that observes in precise Horatian accents: "Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved." Stevens' "Horatian" impulse extends beyond the Comedian into a number of short pieces and sections of the longer poems. It is most audible when he is poking mild fun at himself, and others, or when he is being "instructive." Horace's Satires are "conversation pieces," saturae and sermones cast in hexameters, and these urbane and rational expositions contain "portraits, documents, anecdotes, scenes, and colloquial exchanges" of life in Augustan Rome.¹⁴ Stevens appears to have admired Horace from the early years. Perhaps he responded to the urbanity or the rational spirit, or perhaps it was the inquisitive streak or the gentle Stoicism of the Roman that appealed to the young Stevens. A journal entry from the fall of 1907 (LWS, 104) places Horace before Catullus in the poet's esteem, and is worth quoting here. The entry is a series of notes "made at the Astor Library":

Catullus is not illimitable. One or two of the "Carmina" are the things commonly known. The one on the death of his brother with "ave atque vale" and this:

Odi et amo, quare id faciam, fortasse, requiris,
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

(I hate and I love. Wherefore do I so, peradventure thou askest, I know not, but I feel it to be thus and I suffer.)

This has been quoted as an incomparable expression of that state of mind. But it is hardly so. It is the state of mind that is incomparable. Most men, who can, quote Latin in such cases. Some pedants would quote Latin to say "Good morning." . . . It seems that scholars debate the balance of merit between Catullus and Horace--and generally between the poets of the Republic and those of the Augustan age. I favor the Augustans.

We should note here that Stevens probably includes Ovid (whose Art of Love he read during the summer of 1903)¹⁵ in his list of preferred Augustans.

Stevens was twenty-eight years old at the time of the journal entry which is dated "after September, 1907." At this period, he was living in New York and attempting to establish himself in the practice of law. "I am intent on getting something of consequence, and it seems to be impossible," he writes (LWS, 105). The entry at the Astor Library is made during a three-month period of enforced "idleness" which ended on November 6 with a "temporary situation." The Comedian as the Letter C (Harmonium, 1923) was completed some fifteen years later when Stevens had not only arrived at a position of "consequence" in his profession, but had acquired the beginnings of a reputation as a poet, and was well settled into married life. In short, the Comedian is the work of a man who is in, or approaching, "the middle of the journey of our life." And although

Stevens himself would not wish to exalt the Comedian beyond its proper measure by undue comparison, we should also recognize that the poet is pointing to a grand concept of comedia in the title of the poem.

If there is evidence of a major conflict imbedded in The Comedian as the Letter C, the conflict is manifest as a clashing of modalities. On the one hand, Stevens is working with the idea of an epic quest, a voyage that strikes echoes from both Homer and Virgil, but a voyage that--as Comedy--only achieves a sublime goal in Dante. On the other hand, Stevens has imposed a set of limitations on his poem that includes the necessity to abandon concepts that do not speak to the present, or to reinterpret traditional modes to the most truthful description of here and now. Indeed, the very title of The Comedian as the Letter C contains the germ of the conflict, for it not only refers back to a Dantean concept of the Comedic epic, and with it, the possibility of reaching the Sublime, but it clearly instructs the reader to consider contemporary man--and the poet himself--a mere collection of comic noises: the sounds of the letter "C." The conflict, and the limitations, suggest why Stevens selected Horace for guide and mentor on this journey, why he chose the gentle satirist

for Crispin's "Vergil." For the hero's progress in this miniature epic is made possible only with a pilot who reduces the venture to realistic proportions by imparting to it a clear note of mockery.

Turning to a much later poem, we find the note of mockery employed in ironic evaluation of others, rather than the self. In Description Without Place (Transport to Summer, 1947), Stevens moves from a meditation on a theory of fiction as "seeming" to a discussion heavy with social and political implications. Canto IV of Description places under inspection the creators of two political ideologies: Nietzsche and Lenin. And, keeping in mind Stevens' general aversion to Socialist thought and principles, it is interesting, I think, that his treatment of Lenin in this poem, although ironic, is almost sympathetic, while the passage dealing with Nietzsche is threaded with barbed judgments and subtle obscenity. I am going to work back from Lenin to Nietzsche in discussing this section so that the contrast Stevens makes between them will be clear in retrospect, and because the treatment of Nietzsche merits some further attention.

Lenin, "on a bench beside a lake," and Nietzsche, studying a "deep pool" in Basel, both find in the medium of

reflection an ideological vision. Lenin, who "was not a man for swans" or "chariots," reflects on the "decadence of those silences" and conceives the destruction of a regime whose decadence and elegance, both, are symbolically expressed as a ballet production. The reference to a Lac des Cygnes in this canto is to a theater-piece as seen through the eyes of a revolutionist: it is the art of an imperial system of government and the product of "decadent" tastes; its illusory content and Gothic setting reflect the illusory nature of aristocratic pretensions. Thus, as Lenin muses by the lake:

All the chariots were drowned. The swans
Moved on buried water where they lay. (CP, 343)

The father of the Russian Revolution absently continues to feed the swans on the lake, however, with bread from his pocket, even as the enchanted swans in his mind's eye flee to "remoter reaches" and "distant beaches":

The eye of Lenin kept the far-off shapes.
His mind raises up, down-drowned, the chariots.

And reaches, beaches, tomorrow's regions become
One thinking of apocalyptic legions.

The "Lenin" passage, as noted above, constitutes the second half of the fourth canto. The first half is given over to Nietzsche who also sits quietly, "gildering the swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution" (CP, 342).

Stevens' sequence in the canto follows the chronology of historic events, for the prophet of revolution and apocalyptic wars, the theorist, precedes their effective agent, the activist. The element that joins the thought of the two men in this passage is the notion of "decadence," and it should be noted that Nietzsche uses the French decadence throughout his writings.¹⁶ But, although both ideologists point to decadence as a present evil, they diverge sharply as to the sources of that decadence, and Stevens' contrasting treatment of the two is partly based on this divergence.

Contrary to Benamou, Kessler, Vendler, etc., who attribute to Stevens an undilute Nietzschean elitism, or credit him with unmixed enthusiasm for the philosophy of of the Übermensch,¹⁷ Stevens himself regarded these elements of Nietzsche's philosophy with extreme caution. There is most certainly evidence of familiarity with Nietzsche's thought in Stevens' work. For example, the second line of the celebrated couplet in Esthétique du Mal: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur" may well be a direct or indirect reference to The Gay Science, Nietzsche's masterpiece of style. Also in Esthétique, Stevens' concept of a "too, too

human god, self-pity's kin" brings to mind both the title of Human, All-Too-Human (the work that signalled Nietzsche's break with Wagner over the production of Parsifal) and, in a more general sense, Nietzsche's devaluation of Christianity such as one finds in The Anti-Christ or The Genealogy of Morals.¹⁸ In the same poem, there is an obvious reference to both the content and title of The Birth of Tragedy in the passage beginning: "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" (CP, 319). Stevens, however, does not share Nietzsche's beliefs with respect to the sources of social "decadence," nor his fury with the Hebraic foundations of the Christian ethic. It is no Nietzschean voice that calls out, in "The Sun This March":

Oh! Rabbi, rabbi, fend my soul for me
And true savant of this dark nature be.¹⁹
(CP, 134)

There is also, for those who will take Stevens at his own word, the seemingly casual summation of Nietzsche in a letter written to Henry Church (LWS, 431-32), in which Stevens notes:

I am very much interested in your preoccupation with Nietzsche. In his mind one does not see the world more clearly; both of us must often have felt how a strong mind distorts the world. Nietzsche's mind was a perfect example. . . . Perhaps his effect was merely the effect of the epatant. The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of

focus. Nietzsche is as perfect a means for getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink.

The fourth canto of Description Without Place develops from the thought immediately preceding it in the third. Here, Stevens proposes with some irony that the various systematic methods that have been formulated to account for--or describe--human existence resemble the mythologies concerning the sometimes inexplicable, sometimes childish Olympians: "But the integrations of the past are like / A Museo Olympico, so much / So little our affair." In this third canto, Stevens postulates a change to come, "a change immenser than a poet's metaphors," springing from the genius of a germinating mind:

. . . a mind as yet unknown,
The spirit of one dwelling in a seed,
Itself that seed's ripe unpredictable fruit.
(CP, 341)

In the fourth canto, Stevens juxtaposes the Nietzschean "revery" to the seminal imagination and its potential of ripe, though unpredictable, fruit. But here the seminal imagination is negatively represented; it is circularly self-involved, intent on fruitless motion, and Stevens couches this activity in terms of a theoretical masturbation:

Nietzsche in Basel studied the deep pool
Of these discolorations, mastering

The moving and moving of their forms
In the much-mottled motion of blank time.

His revery was the deepness of the pool
The very pool, his thoughts the colored forms,

The eccentric souvenirs of human shapes,
Wrapped in their seemings, crowd on curious crowd,

In a kind of total affluence, all first,
All final, colors subjected in revery

To an innate grandiose, in innate light,
The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool.

Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias
In perpetual revolution, round and round.
(CP, 342)

Opposed to the mind and eye of Lenin, whose vision sends a flight of swans to distant beaches and "remoter reaches," that is, beyond itself, is the inward-directed, self-aggrandizing vision of Nietzsche. Stevens emphasizes the idea of inward-directed thought in the "in revery" of line ten, and the repetition of the syllable "in" in line eleven of the passage. In the opening couplets, the "discolorations," the "mastering," the "moving and moving" of forms, and the "much-mottled motion" join with the plosives in "Basel" and "blank" to convey the suggestion of metaphysical Onanism. Further on, we find that the "innate grandiose" radiating from the eccentric and egocentric

"sun of Nietzsche" serves only to gild and glorify "swarm-like manias." No fruit comes of the Nietzschean reverie but only a "perpetual revolution" as the daydream revolves round and round upon itself. One notes again Stevens' affinity with Blake (see pp. 14-15), this time with Blake's concept of negative "selfhood," that intense engagement with the self that constricts the creative capacity. It is, perhaps, just this stricturing attitude that Stevens refers to in "A Collect of Philosophy" (OP, 187) when he uses the poetry of Nietzsche to illustrate the difference between "a poetic way of writing" and "ideas that are inherently poetic conceptions":

When I say that writing in a poetic way is not the same thing as having ideas that are inherently poetic concepts, I mean that the formidable poetry of Nietzsche, for example, ultimately leaves us with the formidable poetry of Nietzsche, and little more. In the case of Bergson, we have a poetry of language which made William James complain of its incessant euphony. But we also have the élan vital.

Stevens' comic spirit is undeniably one that "laughs through the mind," to use Meredith's phrase,²⁰ but the broad frame of Stevens' humor can be discussed most usefully with reference to Henri Bergson's vitalist/mechanist oppositions. In Laughter,²¹ Bergson treats of the public function of comedy as a social

corrective. In the context of comedy, the élan vital corresponds to the spirit of animation, originality, and grace. Mechanistic behaviors, on the other hand, correspond with matter rather than spirit, and--like the machines they emulate--tend toward repetitive motions, automatism and, ultimately, to rigidity of form. As we have already seen, the figure of the jongleur in Stevens' poetry generally conforms to the Bergsonian ideal of animate grace and élan. In The Man with the Blue Guitar, however, the figure moves into the "mechanist" camp, for the jongleur there has rigidified into a stationary entity who concentrates on whirling the world about in ceaseless, repetitive motion. Similarly, the figure of Nietzsche in Description Without Place is presented as a figure without motion, although the philosopher's mind swarms with repetitive circularities in "perpetual motion, round and round." But although Stevens clearly makes Nietzsche the butt of mockery in this poem, his most biting satire is directed, not at human objects, but at brittle ideologies, rigid institutions, and dogmatic beliefs.

Stevens' use of comic elements to indicate polarities of good and evil also tends to follow a Bergsonian model. In Laughter, for example, Bergson

distinguishes between "irony" and "humour" as, respectively, expressions of the ideal and the real. The ideal, in this scheme, has the ability to uplift while the real appears to describe existing evil:

Irony is emphasised the higher we allow ourselves to be uplifted by the idea of the good that ought to be: thus irony may grow so hot within us that it becomes a kind of high-pressure eloquence. On the other hand, humour is the more emphasised the deeper we go into an evil that actually is, in order to set down its details in the most cold-blooded indifference.²²

Bergson is here connecting the expressions of comic art with ethical values. It would be well to point out, however, that his discussion of wit in these terms--although of an entirely other order than Freud's--in no way conflicts with Freud's understanding of the relation of wit to the life of the unconscious. Bergson is, of course, involved in the philosophic dimensions of wit, and working in this dimension, can conceive the comic spirit as both exposing the depths of **iniquity** and preparing to scale the heights in search of the sublime.

In Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, the "irony that may grow so hot within us" is compressed into phrases that drum out the idea of the possible, the "idea of the good that ought to be":

It is possible, possible possible. It must
 Be possible. It must be that in time
 The real will from its crude compoundings come.
 (CP, 404)

The intensity of this incantation is succeeded by a flight of irony, in Bergson's high sense of the term, for Stevens now allows himself to be "uplifted" into converse with an Angel. This is an ironic Angel, in any sense of the term, who brings to mind the Reversing (or devilish) Angel conceived by Blake in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.²³ In Blake's "Memorable Fancy," an Angel comes to warn the poet of eternal damnation and leads him to the edge of the pit of torment. The Angel thereupon suspends himself in a fungus "which hung with the head downward into the deep," and together they behold "the infinite Abyss, fiery as the smoke of a burning city." The Angel eventually climbs up from his station, leaving the poet, who then fancies himself "sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon light hearing a harper who sung to the harp." Upon encountering the Angel a second time, the poet reverses their roles. He leads the heavenly messenger of doom into a church, opens the Bible, "and lo! it was a deep pit, into which I descended driving the Angel before me." The episode ends with the Angel complaining, "thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed," to which

the poet most profoundly responds: "We impose on one another."

Stevens tells us, in Notes, that the imposition of a belief or system is not the discovery of a truth: "To impose is not to discover" (CP, 403). Like Blake, Stevens also cautions his Angel to "Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear / The luminous melody of proper sound." Most important, as in Blake's ironic episode, Stevens' encounter with the Angel is a shared experience, a mode of interchange between "the fiction of an absolute" and the creator of supreme fictions. Canto VIII of Notes (Book III) plays with the possibilities of such an interchange:

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,
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
Forgets the golden centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or I that experience this?
(CP, 404)

This harping Angel, who "plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory" (the pun on "pluck" as "courage" is interesting here), possesses the same sublime mobility as the tumblers who herald the morning. He "leaps downward

through evening's revelations" and he is the creature of the same "lapis-haunted regions." But his flight, his harp, his wings, and the song--or "air" itself--are the poet's own "experience" so that high irony here, encapsulated in the final question, verges on the sublime. The sense of a "golden destiny," the whole quattrocento coloration of the stanza, the "motionless motion" of the flight, suggest a vision of the sublime, not reduced or rejected, but brought down from above to be made one with the leaping imagination that has brought it into being. We will return to this highest manifestation of the comic spirit as comedic irony when we look at the "Ozymandias" section of Notes, but for the moment let us consider its function as "humour" (in Bergson's usage) with respect to present evil.

As noted above (p. 160), Bergson's description of comedy assigns an ethical value to both irony and humour, and in this scheme "humour is the more emphasised the deeper we go into an evil that actually is, in order to set down its details in the most cold-blooded indifference." In Freudian terms this is tendentious humor, or humor that serves a purpose. In Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud sets forth the two ruling "purposes" of

tendentious wit:

Where a joke is not an aim in itself--that is, where it is not an innocent one--there are only two purposes that it may serve, and these two can be subsumed under a single heading. It is either a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defense) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure).²⁴

Whether one chooses to classify it under Bergson's "humour" or define it as an expression of Freud's "tendentious" wit, it is certain that a significant portion of the erotic energy in Stevens' poetry is marshaled toward a destructive end. Again, as suggested earlier, Stevens' most biting satire is directed, not at individuals, but at institutions and ideologies. An authentic "restatement of romance," or an evolution of thought and expression, cannot occur until non-vital forms of thought and outmoded forms of expression have been either entirely recast or forcibly discarded. Thus, a sometimes violent deconstruction must be effected before a new and valid description of reality can take shape, and the act of poetry must then become a destructive act. In "Poetry is a Destructive Force" (CP, 192), for example, the mind of the poet in the poem is "like a man / In the body of a violent beast," and in "Man and Bottle" (CP, 238), we find the mind deployed as an engine of war:

The mind, to find what will suffice destroys
Romantic tenements of rose and ice.

By "romantic tenements," Stevens means aesthetic and spiritual values that have been purged of their immediacy and remain standing as mere holdings, tenets and testaments. In Esthétique du Mal, a "capital negation" proceeding from the intellect (capita as "head" or "mind") destroys Satan "in his tenement," which in this context is the edifice built by theology: "the logicians in their graves . . . the worlds of logic in their great tombs" (CP, 325). In general, the major targets of this aggressive strain in Stevens' poetry are theological dogmas, sentimental or trivialized notions of the Romantic, and, as in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," popular or pedestrian "art." These can all be classed as expressions of the dogmatic, and Stevens--who is himself dogmatically insistent on the need for plasticity--attacks them as rigid, mechanical, and opaque forms. The current of humor that develops out of this aggressive strain in the poetry is a cryptic but powerful expression of tendentious wit. On occasion, we find ourselves confronting a regimented world, or set of circumstances, that stands in direct opposition to the realm of the jongleur. Instead of the fleshly and flexible, the agile and changeable, we are met with the immovable, the mechanistic, the determined, the unchanging.

The "too, too human god" of Esthétique du Mal is transformed into a brazen and merciless emblem in "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" (CP, 82). Here, in a savage caricature, the Paraclete of Trinitarian doctrine becomes the "parakeet of parakeets," a "perfect cock":

Above the forest of the parakeets,
A parakeet of parakeets prevails,
A pip of life amid a mort of tails.

(The rudiments of tropics are around,
Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind.)
His lids are white because his eyes are blind.

He is not paradise of parakeets,
Of his gold ether, golden alguazil,
Except because he broods there and is still.

Panache upon panache, his tails deploy
Upward and outward, in green-vented forms,
His tip a drop of water full of storms.

But though the turbulent tinges undulate
As his pure intellect applies its laws,
He moves not on his coppery, keen claws.

He munches a dry shell while he exerts
His will, yet never ceases, perfect cock,
To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock.

This blind, immobile--yet menacing--bird who "broods there and is still" while his "pure intellect applies its laws" perches above a somewhat rusty Eden. In the "forest of the parakeets" one can expect to hear an endless echo, the repetition and empty mimicry of sounds that have lost their original significance. Stevens has designed this "perfect

cock" in parodic contrast with the divine Being that hovers over the opening passage of Paradise Lost. It stands in direct opposition to that Spirit who:

. . . from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And mad'st it pregnant.²⁵

In contrast with Milton's mighty Spirit whose "brooding" brings forth First Creation from the Abyss, the Bird with the coppery, keen claws exists as a "pip of life" amid a detumescent "mort of tails." Against the maternal character of "mighty wings outspread / Dove-like," Stevens sets a peacock-like parakeet who, in a pluming and phallic display, deploys "his tails . . . Upward and outward." A "pip of life" is utterly ironic, for "pip" can be read as "a disease of poultry, hawks, etc., marked by thick mucous in throat and often by white scale on tip of tongue." The "pip" explains why the Bird is songless as well as sightless. Again, a "pip" can be "a short, high-pitched sound, usually mechanically produced," and we find this mechanical "life" repeated in the idea of the Bird's hollow food. The "dry shell" that he munches is a "tenement" of sorts, the empty remains of something once organic, a husk now devoid of its original inner kernel. The "mort of tails" bears rehearsing too, in this context, for "tails" can be heard

as "tales," and "a mort of" connotes "a great amount or number of" (tales or mythoi). One might suggest that the multiple divisions of the Church are represented by the separated feathery tails which flourish "Panache upon panache" in "green-vented forms." This "perfect cock" who "moves not," this unmoved Mover who "exerts / His will, yet never ceases," continues to flare against the bleached, bone-like "sun [Son]-pallor" of the Church, "his rock." And here the term "mort" lends a further meaning, for its sense in hunting terminology is "the sound of a death-note," relating it to the "dry shell" that remains of the edifice of theology.

Although the Bird continues to exert a death-grip in a realm that is "not paradise," Stevens is clearly attacking the institution it represents with the utmost cynicism. It is unlikely that Stevens intended his tropical cock to be understood as "pure principle," as one interpretation has it, that "lives a more vital life than does the mortal and transitory existence."²⁶ Stevens is not bewailing "mortal and transitory existence" in this poem. He is attacking the institution represented by the parakeet-Paraclete with the sardonic knowledge of one who has been bred within the institution. A more suitable

framework by which one may read the poem is, perhaps, Freud's enumeration of the objects of "cynical" jokes which he lists toward the end of his survey of tendentious humor:

The object of the joke's attack may well be institutions, dogmas of morality and religion, views of life which enjoy so much respect that objections to them can only be made under the mask of a joke and indeed a joke concealed by its facade.²⁷

"The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" announces its comic intention in a title that repeats the "whistling and mocking" sounds of the letter "C." In what should be recognized as a tour de force of cynical humor, it displays every aspect that Freud classifies under the rubric of "tendentious" wit. Stevens' caricature of the Paraclete is openly hostile, subtly obscene, certainly blasphemous and--in its parodic representation of a thing by its opposite--absurd. The "coppery keen claws" in this poem are, in a very real sense, the poet's own. Thus,

The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind,
As the mind, to find what will suffice, destroys
Romantic tenements of rose and ice.
(CP, 239)

Stevens' attitude toward formal religion, his impatience with ritual observance emptied of spiritual depths, was hastened perhaps by his association with George Santayana. Certainly he maintained an admiration for the

philosopher and a sympathy with his philosophy throughout his life. In a late essay entitled "Ultimate Religion," Santayana proposes an alternate form of worship to that found within the Gothic walls of the Church. Santayana outlines a religion "after the manner of Socrates," and a teleology wherein the erotic soul "vanishes" into its ultimate object of worship, or, as Stevens puts it, disappears "like glitter ascended into fire" (OP, 102).

In Santayana's vision:

There would not be a universe worshipped, but a universe praying; and the flame of the whole fire, the whole seminal and generative movement of nature, would be the love of God. This love would be erotic; it would be really love and not something wingless called by that name. It would bring celestial glimpses not to be retained, but culminating in moments of unspeakable rapture, in a union with all good, in which the soul would vanish as an object because, as an organ, it had found its perfect employment.²⁸

This vision of the Platonic progress of desire, which derives the innate potential of the soul from the manifest potential of the body, is reflected with some poignancy in Stevens' early "Anatomy of Monotony":

The body walks forth naked in the sun
And, out of tenderness or grief, the sun
Gives comfort, so that other bodies come,
Twinning our phantasy and our device,
And apt in versatile motions, touch and sound
To make the body covetous in desire
Of the still finer, more implacable chords.
(CP, 108)

The "implacable chords" refer not only to an unappeasable desire for unknown experience, but to a quality of experience that is "unplaceable" in terms of body alone. Similarly, in Description Without Place, Stevens develops the idea of "seeming" as an extraphysical sense, a "knowledge incognito":

Even the seeming of a summer's day,
Is description without place. It is a sense

To which we refer experience, a knowledge
Incognito, the column in the desert,

On which the dove alights. (CP, 343)

This summer atmosphere which, in Description, is connected to the idea of knowledge both unknown and in disguise, is also connected to the idea of the naked and the covert in Extract From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas. Here too, as in Description, desire extends into the realm of "seeming," beyond the knowledge acquired by cognition, beyond, even, what is thought "real":

Where is that summer warm enough to walk
Among the lascivious poisons, clean of them,
And in what covert may we, naked, be
Beyond the knowledge of nakedness, as part
Of reality, beyond the knowledge of what
Is real, part of a land beyond the mind.

(CP, 252)

A number of familiar "motifs" are discernible in the passages quoted above. These include references to

summer and the sun, to desire, to seeming and being, to knowledge of the unknown, and to oppositions of nakedness and cover. Along with the image of "the column in the desert / On which the dove alights," all of these elements are woven into canto VIII of "It Must Change" in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction. This is the section that Stevens referred to as "the poem about Ozymandias" in a letter to Henry Church (LWS, 429-32), and the last poem we will be concerned with in this chapter. In the same letter, dated December 8, 1942, Stevens briefly discusses the "theory latent" in Notes, remarking that it develops from the notion that "the essence of change is that it gives pleasure." He then touches on the question of fiction "as an extension of reality":

If we are willing to believe in fiction as an extension of reality, or even as a thing itself in which we must believe, the next consideration is the question of illusion as value. Under the name of escapism this is one of the problems that bothers people. The poem about Ozymandias is an illustration of illusion as value. (LWS, 431)

In contrast with these slightly diffident, dry phrases that have to do with theory and values, the "poem about Ozymandias" itself fairly blazes with a peculiarly Stevensian irony. The character of Ozymandias, as we know, is borrowed from Shelley, and Stevens' use of the name

demands that his poem be read in relation to Shelley's sonnet. Shelley's poem is a classic of ironic treatment; it emphasizes the transient nature of power and past glories, and the impotence of once-mighty institutions. As Stevens will have noted, however, Shelley's poem is itself cast in an "antique" mold, a Petrarchan form, and we know from Shelley's *Ozymandias* too that--aside from the desert in which the broken monument lies--the most permanent value is the knowledge of character communicated through time by the sculptor: "its sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things." Thus "the hand that mocked them" will survive until the form it has wrought crumbles into the desert sand.

In canto VIII of "It Must Change," the one phrase given to describe Ozymandias is patently ambiguous. He is an "inflexible / Order," and the idea of an unbending Order can have both negative and positive connotations for Stevens (see "Connoisseur of Chaos," CP, 215). We should note, too, that while the "poem about Ozymandias" is a narrative account of a particular interchange, or perhaps of a particular moment in the history of Aesthetics, it takes the form of a conversation and the burden of discourse is invested, not in Ozymandias, but in the "contemplated

spouse" who comes to confront him. And in the figure of Nancia Nuncio there is more than immediately meets the eye. For one thing, the Annunciation implied in the name turns out to be a paradoxical sort of revelation. As the poem unfolds, we find that although the announcement of the message is accompanied by a "strip-tease" in the finest Burlesque tradition, the substance of the message is that there is no such thing as nakedness. Again, though Stevens introduces Nancia Nuncio as a woman, the inflections of the bisexual name and the symbolism implicit in the messenger's characteristics suggest that the "contemplated spouse" is something more than a woman. She is, it would appear, an hermaphrodite. A look at the passage should be helpful at this point, for in it we are introduced to one of the most baffling, the most ambivalent, the most erotic and, at the same time, one of the most sublimely comic figures in the whole of Stevens' poetry:

On her trip around the world, Nancia Nuncio
 Confronted Ozymandias. She went
 Alone and like a vestal long prepared.

I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
 And laid it on the sand. As I am, I am
 The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
 The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,
 Beyond the burning body that I bear.

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
 Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
 Order, saying that I am the contemplated spouse.

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
 In its own only precious ornament.
 Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.

Clothe me entire in the final filament,
 So that I tremble with such love so known
 And myself am precious for your perfecting.

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
 Is never naked. A fictive covering
 Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.
 (CP, 395-96)

In her circling "trip around the world," and in her vestal or virginal quality, the figure corresponds to the moon. Like the lunar satellite, her light is reflected light, suggested here in the sparkle of jewels and the bright glow of gold. Her "nakedness" is complete when she is "divested of bright gold." On the other hand, the "burning body" is clearly a solar symbolism, and its erotic quality stands in counterpoise to the idea of constraint that surrounds the "vestal long prepared." By the end of the third stanza, then, we find that characteristics of the two heavenly bodies that exert most influence on the earth are made to coincide in the body of the "contemplated spouse." Her name, divided into two parts, also represents two distinctive sets of characteristics. Nancia has a feminine inflection, but also suggests a

"nancy," an effeminate or homosexual male. Nuncio has a masculine ending, and its literal meaning is that of a Papal ambassador or emissary. But the name begins with "nun," which introduces the idea of the chaste bride, as well as the notion of her "veil." Thus, Ozymandias is confronted by a figure whose name is replete with theological implications, whose gender is curiously dual, and who refers to herself as the "contemplated spouse." The term "contemplated spouse" is the most loaded designation of all, for it points directly to the Song of Songs, to the Bridegroom of Hebrew allegorical exposition, the Sponsus of Christian theology. The ambivalence Stevens assigns to the gender of his emissary is a reminder, too, that the Bridegroom is the object of contemplation of both monk and nun, of both male and female aspirants to spiritual marriage. But it should be noted that, although the "spouse" in this passage is a self-announced object of contemplation, no wedlock--mystical or otherwise--appears to take place.

If one considers the vows undertaken by the nun, one finds that Nancia Nuncio is engaged in methods almost directly opposed to the binding principles by which the Bride of Christ approaches the consummation of spiritual

desire. The figure appears "like" a vestal, but her strip-act suggests neither chastity nor modesty; her excursion into poverty merely preludes a demand for spiritual riches; against obedience, she poses insistent commands. Again, she announces herself as the ultimate object of contemplation although her name indicates that she is the instrument of a higher power. As such, she represents one sort of "illusion as value," for she is a mimetic rendering of what Stevens has called, in Esthétique, "the genius of the body," which is an aesthetic of great power and beauty but which demands "the spirit's diamond coronal" for its completion. In her eagerness to divest herself of all ornament, Nancia Nuncio is a presage of the figure in the later Sail of Ulysses who has become the prophetic "sibyl of the self." While "illusion as value" still requires the jewel of great spiritual price, the "sibyl" already possesses it, for it is she:

. . . whose diamond
Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth
Is poverty, whose jewel found
At the exactest central of the earth
Is need. (OP, 104)

There are a number of subtle affiliations between Nancia Nuncio as the spirit of illusion and Stevens' "sibyl of the self," but the overriding connective is the idea of

need. Both figures are associated with a barren terrain, although one is an internalized space while the other is an exterior landscape. For Stevens, the image of the desert in which nothing remains but ironic traces of past greatness is a piece of Romantic real estate that still possesses a good deal of value. Shelley's "Ozymandias" is indeed a "holding" from the period of vital Romantic poetry, but, as it also establishes the landscape of a monumental irony, it can hardly be considered a "tenement" in Stevens' sense of the term, and thus escapes the impulse to destroy. It is a landscape that may be revisited, a holding that continues to be used. Shelley's desert of time is revisited, for example, by Swinburne in "The Triumph of Time" (itself an ironic echo of a Shelleyan antecedent). A romaunt of love and death is set like a tiny "wroughten cup" within the larger frame of Swinburne's poem, and its setting--like Stevens' landscape for "the poem about Ozymandias"--is "a land of sand and ruin and gold":

There lived a singer in France of old
 By the tideless dolorous midland sea.
 In a land of sand and ruin and gold
 There shone one woman, and none but she.²⁹

Swinburne characteristically infuses the scene with wild and death-dealing passion. His shining woman, in the realms of gold, figures chiefly as the deliverer of the death-kiss to

the Troubadour poet of old; but the erotic energy Swinburne invests in the "land of sand and ruin" is picked up and continued in Stevens' treatment of the Romantic desert topos.

As suggested above, the appearance of Nancia Nuncio before an "inflexible Order" in canto VIII of Notes corresponds to the idea of "the column in the desert / On which the dove alights" in Description Without Place. Both passages convey the sense of an Annunciation, and, following the thought along, of an immanent divine impregnation. This is a theme that Stevens has treated with something less than high seriousness. In a poem entitled "The Dove in the Belly" (CP, 366), for example, an insouciant "Selah, tempestuous bird" greets the bird who "builds his nest" in the belly, while a brazen "oh, brave salut! / Deep dove" terminates the poem with the firing of a charge, and suggests at the same time that the "Deep dove," who is sardonically addressed in the vocative, is behaving like a "slut." In "the poem about Ozymandias," Nancia Nuncio is also burlesquing a serious concept, perhaps with greater virtuosity, certainly with greater sophistication. But she just as certainly represents the Bridegroom, and the idea of divine impregnation, so that we are led to wonder if

contact between Ozymandias and the "contemplated spouse" will bear fruit. Stevens does not solve the mystery, but does provide a clue to its resolution in the final stanza of the passage.

The omission of a comma in the first line of the last stanza makes it impossible to know who is delivering the final statement. It might be read: "Then, Ozymandias, said the spouse" with Nancia Nuncio as speaker. Or it might be, "Then Ozymandias said: the spouse, the bride / Is never naked." Is it the "monument" or the spirit of "illusion as value" who speaks here? Is it an "inflexible Order" or the urgent desire that visits it? Is it the "column" in the desert, or the "dove" who alights on it? Or, as the ambiguous phrasing suggests, is this a pair that, of necessity, must speak in unison in the final discourse? In a way, Stevens himself is the emissary who confronts the monument of Romanticism. Is not the poet "announcing" here his own discourse with the Romantic tradition, and, through intentional irony, his own "assumption" of the Romantic temper?

Stevens' handling of the Ozymandias theme thus appears more an energetic "revisitation" than a "misprision," as Harold Bloom suggests.³⁰ Perhaps Stevens would say that,

even "with his vast accumulation," Bloom's interpretation is largely a way to "protest / And speak of the floridest reality" (CP, 366). However that may be, it is clear that Stevens--like Swinburne--can still derive aesthetic energy and stimulation by returning to the Shelleyan monument. And, if the body of Romantic poetry stands in its entirety as an "inflexible Order," the androgynous Nancia Nuncio is eminently flexible, exquisitely plastic, and it is her "burning body" that supplies the vital element to the desert scene. The weaving together of theological and aesthetic strands, in this passage, foreshadows the belief that Stevens expresses many years later, when he speaks of the theory of poetry embracing both a "mystical theology" and a "mystical aesthetic" (NA, 173). The power of the Ozymandias passage, however, derives, not from its emblems or its allegorical content, but--as in Swinburne's poetry--from its infusion of erotic energy. It is clear, too, that the point of the passage is sharpened by irony, that its very sensuality is made vivid by the comic impulse that accompanies it. The passage stands, in a way, as a tribute to the Aristophanic moment in the Symposium: it is a sublimely comic representation of eros couched in physical images; it portrays yearning while it hints that physical

completion must be short-lived; it points away from itself toward a metaphysical completion.

The Ozymandias passage in Notes utilizes a standing habitation, a still-vital body that differs from the hollow "tenements" that Stevens is urged to attack. As we have seen, Stevens can play the provocateur to some effect in poems like "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," and sections of Esthétique du Mal and Description Without Place. In the Ozymandias section of Notes, and in his colloquy with the Angel in the same poem, however, Stevens reverts to the virtuoso trickery of the "sleight-of-hand man" (CP, 222), and returns to the graceful play of the jongleur who vaults for his Lady in the crypt. Like the jongleur's "merry play," Stevens' comedic efforts display an accomplished skill and agility. But closer still to the operations performed by Gautier de Coinci's medieval tumbler-turned-monastic, Stevens' secular virtuosity is rendered up as a loving offering to a sublime object.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

¹Aucassin and Nicolette and Other Mediaeval Romances and Legends, trans. Eugene Mason (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1910), pp. 53-56; see also Of the Tumbler and Our Lady and Other Miracles (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966), pp. 3-33, and esp. Introduction.

²Respectively: Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963); and Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

³Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, from 1953, hereafter referred to as S.E.), Vol. VIII.

⁴Sigmund Freud, "The Resistances to Psycho-analysis," S.E., XIX: 218.

⁵Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, S.E., XVIII:57-58; see also Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, S.E., VII:136.

⁶Plato, Symposium, in The Dialogues of Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), Vol. I, pp. 344-45.

⁷Robert Graves, "Down, Wonton, Down!" in Collected Poems: 1955 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1955), p. 118. For a seventeenth-century specimen of the genre, see John Donne, Satyre I, "Away thou fondling motley humorist," in The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne, ed. Charles M. Coffin (Modern Library, 1952), pp. 90-93.

⁸Samuel French Morse, Wallace Stevens (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 131.

⁹John N. Serio, "Stevens' Affair of Places," in The Wallace Stevens Journal (Spring 1978), Vol. II, pp. 26-32.

¹⁰Ronald Sukenick, Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 47.

¹¹Horace, Satires, I.I. 120-21; "Iam satis est: ne me Crispini scrinia lippi / conpilasse putes, uerbum non amplius addam." See also I.3.139; I.4.14; II.7.45.

¹²Niall Rudd, The Satires of Horace (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 133.

¹³There is possibly a Homeric reference in these lines. The contrast between useless human speech ("pipping sounds") and the overwhelming noise of the sea, and most particularly the use of the term boisterous reflects Iliad, Bk. I.34: "βῆ δ' ἀκέων παρὰ Θίνα πολυφλοίσβοιο Θαλάσσης."

¹⁴The Satires and Epistles of Horace, trans. Smith Palmer Bovie (University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 3.

¹⁵Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), #74, p. 65.

¹⁶R.J. Hollingdale, trans. Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1968), Introduction, p. 9.

¹⁷See, for example, Michel Benamou, "The Symbolist Imagination," in The Act of the Mind, eds. Pearce and Miller (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 105; see also Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 207.

¹⁸Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1956), pp. 168-69.

¹⁹Stevens writes to Renato Poggioli: "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 some use of it for human purposes" (LWS, p. 786, #871).

²⁰George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," in Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956), p. 47.

²¹Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in Comedy, as above.

²²Ibid., p. 143.

²³William Blake, "A Memorable Fancy," in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, in The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 40-41.

²⁴Freud, Jokes, pp. 96-97.

²⁵John Milton, Paradise Lost, in The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), p. 212 (Bk. I:19-22).

²⁶Sukenick, pp. 212-13.

²⁷Freud, Jokes, pp. 108-109; see also pp. 114-15. Also see René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 143-78, for an alternate interpretation of violence as "mimetic desire."

²⁸George Santayana, "Ultimate Religion," in The Philosophy of Santayana, ed. Irwin Edman (The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 590.

²⁹Algernon Swinburne, "The Triumph of Time," in The Poems of Algernon Swinburne (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), Vol. I, p. 44.

³⁰Harold Bloom, Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), and A Map of Misreading (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

CHAPTER IV

EROTICS OF PLACE: MY FLUENT MUNDO

"L'anima amante si slancia fuori
del creato, e si crea nell'
infinito un Mondo tutto per essa"¹

"A poet looks at the world," says Stevens, "as a man looks at a woman" (OP, 165). This sense of erotic relation between poet and place is nowhere so explicit, or so intense, as in the later poetry when Stevens addresses the physical world around him. The twenty-sixth canto of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven (The Auroras of Autumn, 1950) sums up a brilliant orchestration of blowing winds, changing light and color, "eloquent" mountains, and a shivering, dark-gleaming sea:

. . . These lineaments were the earth,
 Seen as inamorata, of loving fame
 Added and added out of a fame-full heart.
 (CP, 484)

One might account for the quality of intimate attachment in these lines by pointing to Stevens' familiarity with the region, and to the sense of possession felt by the inhabitant for his own territory. In an essay written in 1955, the year of his death, Stevens speaks of his adopted region:

The man who loves New England, and particularly the spare region of Connecticut, loves it precisely because of the spare colors, the thin light, the delicacy and slightness and beauty of the place. . . . I was not myself born in the state. It is not that I am a native, but that I feel like one. (OP, 295-96)

Toward the end of the little piece, he comments on what it means to return home to this area where he has lived and

worked most of his life. "It is a question of coming home," he says, "to the American self in the sort of place it was formed."

But Stevens apparently has the ability to "feel like a native" in more places than one. The immediacy of his response to physical terrain can spring as much from a "speaking" mountain in New Hampshire (see "Chocarua to Its Neighbor," CP, 296) as from the "eloquent" eminences that border the Long Island Sound; it may attach to the valley haying scenes of a Pennsylvania boyhood, or to the "venereal soil," the tropical atmosphere, the phosphorescent beaches of the Florida Keys. Just as important, Stevens' response to the physical world is not always limited to local terrain. He not only "feels like a native" in his adopted Connecticut, but considers himself at home in the world. Early on, in The Man with the Blue Guitar (1936), we find Stevens declaring planetary citizenship:

I am a native in this world
And think in it as a native thinks,

Gesu, not native of a mind
Thinking the thoughts I call my own,

Native, a native in the world
And like a native think in it.

(CP, 180)

The world as a whole is "seen as inamorata" in the final canto of Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (1942), and the opening stanza records a gentle epiphany as Stevens uncovers, and affectionately names, the great round globe of earth:

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
How is it I find you in difference, see you there
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?
(CP, 406)

Here the note of teasing familiarity, the tone of assurance one might attribute to a native who belongs exactly where he is, turns to the moody questioning, the shy uncertainty of the lover who is more possessed than possessing. In the stanzas that follow, the "Fat girl" becomes less and less a physical phenomenon. She is "familiar yet an aberration"; she is conceived in a maternal or housewifely character, "strong or tired, / Bent over work, anxious, content, alone" but remains "the more than natural figure." Finally, she melts into a wraith-like presence:

You

Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational
Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
That's it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling.

By the final stanza of the canto the change is "quite completed," but the change itself, and the nature of the

completion, are of a different sort than what appears to be contemplated in the opening verses. The change involves a bridging movement from an exterior to an interior realm, and the completion is one of continuance rather than resolution or termination. "They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne," the poet observes wryly to his companion--now the "soft-footed phantom"--and in the passage that concludes the canto he calmly combines affection and intellect, rational and "more than rational" modes of understanding, outer and inner cosmic realms:

We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.
(CP, 406-407)

"Mundo," here, reflects the physical world invoked earlier as "Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night," but the term is chosen to imply interior space as well as exterior surroundings, for mundo suggests "mind" along with "world." Thus, "my green, my fluent mundo" indicates the versatile mind and the changing world as a related pair. After the stop, the revolving globe becomes completely interiorized and, in the final line, continues its characteristic motion in a space that Stevens has elsewhere referred to as "the

crystal atmospheres of the mind" (OP, 102). The sensuously "moving contour" of the earth, in the first stanza, also contains a double sense that is carried to the end of the passage. "Moving" indicates emotion as well as motion, and the emotional response of the first stanza continues as the generator of poetry and thought in "the fiction that results from feeling," and, in the last stanza, as the agent of recognition when, "flicked by feeling . . . I call you by name."

It is probably already apparent, even from the few passages given above, that a discussion of the "erotics of place" in Stevens' poetry must inevitably include ideas of motion and change. Again, while the response of the poet to a given place emerges as perhaps the most intensely personal expression of eros in the poetry, it is notable that the response is wholly dependent on solitude. And although the poet's solitude seems to be "troubled" at times (to use Stevens' own word), at other moments it nurtures profound feelings of union and fulfillment. Like his "Fat girl" turned matron, Stevens can be "anxious, content, alone." We are reminded of the wistful observation in the Adagia which, in a way, serves as an apologia for Stevens' intense response to place: "Life is an affair

of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (OP, 158). Finally, and most intricate of all, there is the notion of place itself which must be defined according to the several senses it assumes in the poetry. As we have seen in the final canto of Notes, Stevens can slip uncannily from the description of concrete, physical terrain to an abstract metaphysical space, or an interior realm of imagination, intuition and emotion. In addition to physical and metaphysical topographies, Stevens can also feel comfortably situated in a literary topos (literally place) such as the "desert of time" discussed in the preceding chapter which Stevens visits with such erotic energy. Other topoi that function as both concrete places and "subjects" are fairly recurrent in the poetry. There is the mountain, treated as both a literal and a figurative "rock," whose function as a topos is particularly evident in Credences of Summer, canto VI.² There is the city, where Stevens walks "the metaphysical streets of the physical town" (CP, 472), and the topoi of West and East, North and South that Stevens uses as both geographic locations and directional emblems. The most recurrent and the most familiar of Stevens' major topoi are, of course, the seasons which indicate states of mind

and spirit--the "neurosis of winter" or the "genius of summer" (CP, 482)--as well as the ordered changes of nature. Summer, too, can become a "place" for Stevens, a place to which one may retire for quiet meditation. All of these "places" are connected, in the poetry, with desire of one sort or another. Also in connection with the erotics of place, we will consider the topos of the Cosmic or World Tree, as Stevens uses it in "Holiday in Reality." And, should it seem perverse to bend the idea of place into such ungeometric shapes when dealing with a poet who celebrates "The Plain Sense of Things," one must remember that the same poet, in the same period, also produced "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain."

Stevens' sense of intimacy with the physical world bespeaks an "affair" of long standing. But it is also an intensely private affair which seems best to have been nurtured in solitude. A letter to Elsie, written eighteen months before their marriage, gives some idea of Stevens' response to a late March terrain. He describes the feelings that attend a solitary walk through the woods near East Orange, and the things he sees in an early tramp "before breakfast":

There was pussy-willow everywhere--and mud and mist, today. The wind drove the mist in sheets

over the fields. . . . I found a new road through the woods. . . . Once I stopped and smelled the earth and the rain and looked around me--and recognized it all, as if I had seen the face of my dearest friend. . . . The sheets of mist, the trees swallowed up at a little distance in the mist, the driving cold wind, the noisy solitude, the clumps of ice and patches of snow--the little wilderness all my own, shared with nobody, not even with you--it made me myself. It was friendly, so much deeper than anything else could be. (LWS, 98-99)

This full-hearted communion in the cold, wet, "noisy solitude" of a March woods produces a sense of sufficiency and wholeness: "It made me myself." But it is equally an experience that can be shared "with nobody, not even with you," as Stevens tells the women he plans to marry. The moment of quickened recognition Stevens describes, when he looks at what is around him and "recognized it all as the face of my dearest friend," is explained more publicly thirty-six years later in a lecture delivered at Mount Holyoke, in 1943. Here, Stevens speaks of an epiphanic moment "when we look at the blue sky for the first time . . . not merely see it . . . but experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry."³ In the phrases immediately following, Stevens describes the connection he experiences between exterior and interior terrain. What one sees in the surrounding landscape, he says, is "a

geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there--few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings" (NA, 65-66).

The intensity of Stevens' response to the "physical poetry" around him develops from this connection between inner and outer space; it depends upon an umbilical linkage between self and cosmos. In The Poetics of Space,⁴ phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard discusses personal and cosmic space in terms of "intimacy" and "immensity." And just as Stevens weds motion to descriptions of place and space, Bachelard treats of both motion and spatiality in defining "this activity of poetic spatiality that goes from deep intimacy to infinite extent, united in an identical expansion."⁵ Such "expansion," says Bachelard, can best be expressed in poetic image and metaphor; spatial qualities of intimacy and immensity and the sense of "growth" that attaches to them are of another order than the "intuitions" of geometry. Thus, exploring the "dialectics of outside and inside," Bachelard points to the divisive nature of geometrically defined space, and to the structured separation implicit in this order of definition: "Outside and inside form a dialectic of

division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything."⁶ The barriers of geometric definition prevent one, he says, from sharing the subtler intimacies, the boldest flights of the poetic imagination: "We must be free as regards all definitive intuitions--and geometrism records definitive intuitions--if we are to follow the daring of poets . . . who invite us to the finesses of the experience of intimacy, to 'escapades' of imagination." Finally, to return to Bachelard's exposition of "intimate immensity," which illuminates Stevens' vision of the harmonious union of two orders, we come to the deeply erotic quality that dwells in the "immensity" experienced in solitude. "It would seem," says Bachelard, "that it is through their 'immensity' that these two kinds of space--the space of intimacy and world space--blend. When human solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical."⁷ It is just this solitude of which Bachelard speaks that, paradoxically, allows the full and undilute experience of desire while engendering, at the same time, a significant sense of union. And it is, perhaps, a solitude of this nature that underlies Stevens'

"trouble," his ongoing "affair of places," and which imparts a profoundly erotic quality to his poetry of earth.

The umbilical linkage between self and cosmos, between interior and exterior landscapes, and the quality of desire engendered in solitude are all thematically represented in "Holiday in Reality" (CP, 312-13), published in Transport to Summer, 1947. The poem is divided into two cantos, the first set in an enclosed public structure, a static edifice, and the second in a space that is both private and cosmic, and conceived as a garden instinct with motion. Canto I locates us in an art gallery where paintings of another climate are on display. As the poet moves from landscape to seascape, his meditation focuses on the value of subjective reality as it manifests itself in the particular coloration, the unique perception, that informs each painting. Each artist, reflects the artist of words, "knew that to be real each had / To find for himself his earth, his sky, his sea." But the poetic consciousness finds it suddenly "impossible to breathe at Durand-Ruel's" and breaks out of the gallery and its painted scenes.

Although the gallery is an enclosed and rigid structure, it is a place specifically designed to

facilitate passage--like the plateia, or broad "street" from which the term "place" is derived. The gallery stands as a realm of fixed perspective, color, form; each scene is fixed on canvas, each landscape hangs immobile on the walls. Each is a fabrication of "reality," the mimetic rendering of a natural--but foreign--landscape. Departure from the gallery represents flight from an aesthetic conceived and fixed outside the self.

Canto II creates an atmosphere where one can "breathe," a familiar atmosphere in Stevens' poetry where natural imagery reaches out to embrace both aesthetic and cognitive realms. Here is a realm where Bachelard's two "immensities" are equipresent, where the "belly" and the "root of the tongue" refer equally to the urgency of the senses and the desire experienced in mind and spirit. Here too, there is an image and a metaphor drawn from the natural world, similar to the mountain in Credences of Summer, which expresses the unification of seemingly opposed orders. In "Holiday in Reality," the season of spring is the metaphor of unbroken connection, and the erotic turn of the second canto evolves from the idea of spring as a compound and fluid agent of passage. As a topos, Spring traditionally indicates youth, first green,

renewal of vigor and burgeoning desire. The Judas-tree, referred to in the first line of the canto, is found in conjunction with spring in a poem of the early period. In "Poems from 'Primordia'" (first published in January 1917), the tree is located in the south and the season is again seen as an agent of passage. The ploughman's furrows portray:

The spring about him:
 Compilation of the effects
 Of magenta blooming in the Judas-tree
 And of purple blooming in the eucalyptus--
 Map of yesterday's earth
 And of tomorrow's heaven. (OP, 9)

The Judas tree (Cercis siliquastrum) blooms very early in the spring, has rounded, heart-shaped leaves of a glossy texture, and clusters of rose-purple flowers. The North American red-bud (Cercis canadensis), which is the variety that Stevens will have been familiar with since boyhood, flowers at the same time as the dogwood, we are told, "in the woods of the east from Pennsylvania southward," and is the "only native tree with this flowering-cherry color."⁸ This is a native tree, and it is worth noting that it blooms with a color that has always symbolized passion. We turn to a garden, now, that is peculiarly "native" to Stevens. The second canto follows in its entirety:

The flowering Judas grows from the belly or
not at all.

The breast is covered with violets. It is a
green leaf.

Spring is umbilical or else it is not spring.
Spring is the truth of spring or nothing, a
waste, a fake.

These trees and their argentines, their dark-
spiced branches,
Grow out of the spirit or they are fantastic
dust.

The bud of the apple is desire, the down-
falling gold,
The catbird's gobble in the morning half-awake--

These are only real if I make them so. Whistle
For me, grow green for me and, as you whistle
and grow green,

Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin
And I taste at the root of the tongue the
unreal of what is real.

This last line reflects something of the near-surreal imagery, in the Adagia, of "The tongue is an eye" (OP, 167). But the erotic current that drives through the second canto of "Holiday in Reality" derives its force from more than a surreal, or even a symbolist use of synaesthesia. Couched within the natural imagery of the passage is a complex web of allusion, its strands drawn from poetry, myth, and theology--each of which can in some sense represent a type of "unreal of what is real." The work of the stanza is to create a "breathing space," and

Stevens here constructs a plane of subtle connections where the breath courses between the evocation of erotic energy in past sources and the present experience of that energy. In counterpoise to the long sweep of coupled verses--most of them hexameters--are the halting, almost jolting, assertive measures that shape the rhythm of the first half of the canto. The rhythm grows increasingly sustained as the passage passes the half-way point, and the canto moves to a culmination that combines the most intimate tactile imagery with a metaphysical, even mystical, immensity.

In the opening lines, earth is the prone woman whose breast is "covered with violets" and from whose navel sprouts the flowering tree. One is reminded of the seductive opening lines of Donne's The Extasie: "Where, like a pillow on a bed, / A Pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest / The violets reclining head, / Sat we two, one anothers best."⁹ The conjunction of spring violets with a woman's breast, however, echoes into a body of amorous lyrics more distant, even, than Donne. It appears in the Sapphic fragment (42²) in which the poetess ranges her aging flesh against the freshness of the younger woman whose breast, she says, is "a violet" (τὰν ἰόκολλον).¹⁰

The flowering Judas-tree of Stevens' opening verse

suggests the idea of the World Tree that is rooted in the omphalos, or navel, of the earth. According to most mythologies, there is a well-spring located in or near the roots of the Tree that signifies the flowing source of all life, all vital being. The branches of the Tree are visited by a bird of shining plumage who generally represents the sun, and more particularly, the movement of the sun. The Tree, with its roots running deep beneath the surface of the earth and its branches supporting the heavens, is an archetype of the cosmos as a living organism. For Stevens, however, "a great tree is a symbol of fixity, permanence, completion," as he writes to Hi Simons (LWS, 444), and he adds that it is "the opposite of a 'moving contour.'" Stevens uses the image of the World Tree in Owl's Clover, canto V, where evening is compared to "a budding yew." As the night gathers,

It would become a yew
Grown great and grave beyond imagined trees,
Branching through heavens heavy with the sheen
And shadowy hanging of it, thick with stars.
(OP, 45-46)

In Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (canto V of "It Must Change"), we come upon a cartoon or comic strip version of the Tree, now planted in "An island to the South" next to a pineapple as big as a mountain. And down there, as the

poet gaily sings:

And là-bas, là-bas, the cool bananas grew,
Hung heavily on the great banana tree,
Which pierces clouds and bends on half the
world. (CP, 393)

Like the mountain in Credences of Summer, the figure of the World Tree is phallic rather than female, and--also like the mountain--it acts as an emblem of connection between celestial and terrestrial realms. In "Holiday in Reality," an ironic quality is imparted to both the mythic Tree and the mythic Bird, for the "catbird's gobble," although it attaches to the sun-image of "down-falling gold," is redolent of mimicry and mockery, while the Judas-tree (originally the "tree from Judea," as indicated by the French name for the tree: L'arbre de Judée) in popular legend is the tree from which Judas Iscariot hanged himself, and thus it conveys the idea of betrayal and lonely death. Stevens' "down-falling gold" and the bird-song it generates recalls another Sapphic fragment, however, this one concerning the cricket who "pours down a sweet shrill song from beneath his wings, when the Sun-god illumines the earth with his down-shed flame outspread."¹¹

The "fantastic dust" that terminates the sixth line of the canto joins with the idea of desire and the "down-falling gold" in the seventh line to call up the legend of

Danae of Argos.¹² Danae's story is, in a way, a mythic representation of the "dialectics of outside and inside." Shut up in a brazen (or stone) tower by her father, who hoped to avert an oracle that Danae's son should be the cause of his own death, the maiden was visited in love by Zeus himself who appeared to her daily in the tower as a shower of gold. In Stevens' poem, the allusion to Danae's lover is in part an allusion to the god-like ability to undergo transformation while preserving an essential nature--the same sublime quality that the "moving contour" of the physical world has for the poet. It is an allusion, too, to the idea of shared desire between mortal and immortal, a theme that runs through Stevens' poetry from the early "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges" to "The World as Meditation" in the late period. But, just as the catbird whistles a cadence that is part mockery, the down-falling gold is a reminder of death as well as generation. The gold at the end of line seven has its terminal sense, and a very literal one in a world of natural cycles; the "down-falling gold" is the autumnal fall that follows the budding apple and growing-green of spring. And in some sense, this death, and this fall, is the betrayal implied by the Judas-tree.

In the center of the canto, however, we are told that these silver-dappled trees with their dark-spiced branches "grow out of the spirit or they are fantastic dust." The following line, which begins the second half of the passage, effects a transition from poetic and mythic images to theological emblems. The garden setting, the apple tree, the bud of desire, the idea of down-fall cannot but strike the chord of paradise lost, the reach for immortal knowledge, the mingled themes of sensuality and innocence. But these emblems of the spirit, and the literal presence of tree, bird and bud, "are only real if I make them so." By a directing consciousness that "constructs" these worlds--an active Kantian construction of "reality"--the poet connects his thought and feeling, his ability to conceive images and generate song, with both the realm of spirit and the physical world. In one sense, the holiday becomes a Holy Day, in reality, for the created garden permits an experience of the spirit. But the holiday is a real holiday too, because this garden to which the poet retires is--like his March woods--"a little wilderness all my own, shared with nobody." Here is a place where one may rest, relax, and feel entirely at home, although it is also a place where one may easily be

touched, as Stevens notes in a later poem:

By the hand of desire, faint, sensitive,
the soft
Touch and trouble of the touch of the
actual hand. (CP, 476)

As the canto moves toward its climax, the "breath" of living song, of the poem as it comes into being, is "realized" in the repeated imperative to "whistle," to flourish and "grow green."

The shared desire of mortal and immortal for union, implicit in the shower of "down-falling gold," is carried with all of its sexual coloration into the final couplet:

Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin
And I taste at the root of the tongue the unreal
of what is real.

Here, in two lines, and with striking economy, the various strands drawn from theology, myth and poetry--from all inspired thought and language--are joined together in a central physical being. In Chapter I (pp. 4-9), I discussed the significance of arrows and quiver in Christian allegory and legend in reference to Stevens' "Madame Ste Ursule." Briefly, the arrows of desire figure in Origen's allegory of the soul's yearning for the Bridegroom, and the Bridegroom's desire for the soul. In Stevens' portrait of Ursula, the good Lord in His Garden--like the poet in

"Holiday in Reality"--sought "New leaf and shadowy tinct," but when he hears Ursula's mingled song and prayer: "He felt a subtle quiver, / That was not heavenly love, / Or pity." The "intangible arrows" of the later poem similarly represent shafts of desire as they "quiver and stick in the skin." The union of physical and metaphysical elements is explicit in the "intangible" arrows that pierce a tangible integument.

The Judas-tree of the opening line, that is rooted in the body of earth, finds a physiological correspondence in the "tongue" of the closing line, with its "roots" in the human body, its "taste buds" and its "well-spring" of salivary ducts. The erotic character of the tree is carried over to the intimate physical functions of the tongue; its sensual capacity as an instrument of tactility and taste on the one hand, and of speech on the other. The macrocosmic aspect of the World Tree is reflected too, in the sense of "tongue" as "language," and the flowering of the tree continues in the idea of the flowering of language in expressed thought, song and verse--all of which either create, or reach out to "the unreal of what is real." Thus, the Tree--the mythic emblem of "world space"--and the tongue rooted in the body of man are joined in Stevens'

metaphors of tree and spring. The tree is a vertical emblem that corresponds to fixed Being, independent of time (similar to the "palm at the end of the mind" in "Of Mere Being," OP, 117-18), while the spring doubles as the well-spring of the mythic tree and the horizontal, or cyclic, passage of the seasons. In both senses, the metaphor of spring indicates continuity, process, renewal, Becoming. Stevens' double use of the term is reflected in the third and fourth lines of the canto. Each line contains the word twice, the initial "Spring" capitalized, and the repeated "spring" in lower case. Finally, both cantos of the poem illustrate conditions of solitude, and it is the condition of solitude that generates the erotic yearning in the poem, its sense of "the touch and trouble" of desire. But it is a solitude that acts also to generate a place where one may "breathe," where exterior and interior terrain seem to flow together, where "the space of intimacy and world space blend."

"Holiday in Reality" shows the extreme ease with which Stevens can travel between physical and non-physical domains. It would be a disservice, however, to suggest that the physical world is anything less than Stevens' first "inamorata." In canto XV of Esthétique du Mal,

composed in the same period as "Holiday in Reality," Stevens firmly declares his belief that all experience is dependent on primary physical existence:

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel. (CP, 325)

The major of what we feel is derived from the concrete physical world: "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" (CP, 534). The "green corn gleaming" of Esthétique becomes a field of sun-baked hay in Credences of Summer, in a particular valley remembered from a Pennsylvania boyhood:

One of the limits of reality
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,
Baked through long days, is piled in
mows. It is
A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.
(CP, 374)

The "rock of summer," in Credences, "cannot be broken" because, although it serves as a figure of unbroken connection between Becoming and Being (like the Tree in "Holiday"), it is primarily a literal mountain. This, for Stevens, is its first "truth," and it is the literal aspect of the mountain that lends truth to the "rock" as a metaphor:

It is the visible rock, the audible,
 The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
 On this present ground, the vividest repose,
 Things certain sustaining us in certainty.
 (CP, 375)

As Harold Bloom has pointed out in Wallace Stevens:
The Poems of Our Climate, Stevens' image of the Rock is
 chosen to carry a heavy weight of meaning. "We have seen
 the culmination of the image in Credences of Summer, VI,"
 says Bloom, "where the rock explicitly is made equal to,
 but not the same as, the Christian emblem of the truth,
 and where it is identified with the visible and the
 audible of summer."¹³ Bloom's reading, though admittedly
 brief, is sensitive to the manifold symbolisms of the Rock
 throughout the poetry, and aware that the image is a
 vehicle which serves to join exterior and interior domains.
 But Stevens is particularly careful, in canto VI of
Credences, to rest his figure on "this present ground."
 Despite the load of meaning carried by the Rock, "it is
 not / A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage. / It is
 the visible rock." As in The Sail of Ulysses, canto VII,
 we are returned from the abstract to the concrete, from the
 general to the particular, from the metaphysical to the
 physical. The world which can be perceived by means of
 the senses remains, with all the "touch and trouble" of

physical life, the essential "present ground." It is always, for Stevens, "the difficult inch, / On which the vast arches of space repose" (OP, 103).

We come back, then, of necessity, to the point at which we began the discussion of the "erotics of place" in Stevens' poetry: his deep-rooted love of the land. Stevens aspires to world citizenship, as we have seen, and cultivates sophisticated, cosmopolitan attitudes, but when all is said and done, he is an American poet, living, working, writing in America. He is neither entirely an urban, nor entirely a rural, nor yet again, entirely a suburban poet; his attention encompasses them all. His work took him to distant parts of the country, to the Midwest and the South, and his early vacations from work found him in Key West. Impressions from the Pennsylvania years crop up regularly in the poetry, and it is to these scenes of boyhood and young manhood that Stevens imparts an affection that is almost unique in the canon. Here is memory mixed with desire, sentiment without sentimentality, the warm glow of remembrance tinged with nostalgia. "He possessed a familiarity with his region that a discerning native alone can boast," says Thomas F. Lombardi in "Wallace Stevens: At Home in Pennsylvania."¹⁴ Lombardi points out

that when Stevens was a young man, "in the area of Reading no gradual transition was discernible as one traveled from city to country. Where the city ended, the country abruptly began." He describes the young Stevens' solitary rambles in the countryside, and his particular affinity for the mountains. In conjunction with the poet's figure of the Rock, the passage is revealing:

Many of the country roads that Stevens traveled wound high into the mountains, where he was always comfortable. . . . At times, he would climb the Pinnacle--the highest point of the land to the north bordering the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. Occasionally he walked the miles to Morgantown, which he described as a road that "winds toward distant upland spires"; alone or with friends he would scale Pulpit Rock, above Hamburg, via the Blue Rocks, afterwards meandering downward through hill-sides thick with spruce. When Stevens was not hiking to the tops of mountains or hills, he was trekking below them, through McKnight's or O'Reilly's Gap, or simply wandering down the Great Valley. Even though he lived most of his years away from home, he forever yearned to be "stalking the hills" in Pennsylvania.¹⁵

Lombardi notes too that Stevens, at this time, "described himself in a peculiarly Whitmanesque manner," and quotes from a 1906 journal entry: "alone on an up-and-downish road, in old clothes [quick with the rain and the cold]" (LWS, 86). It is not until Harmonium in 1923, however, that we find the poet Stevens identifying himself with the most American of poets. The cryptically entitled

"Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" is a celebration of poesy and prophecy in Stevens' own land, the land of the "western day." The Whitmanian "I," the sweep of line, the themes of sea and song join to produce a genuine statement of poetic heritage, while it also echoes the sort of personal experience described above:

Not less because in purple I descended
 The western day through what you called
 The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
 What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
 What was the sea whose tide swept through me
 there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
 And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
 I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
 Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
 And there I found myself more truly and more
 strange. (CP, 65)

The same prophetic mood is established and the same poetic heritage is claimed in the opening stanza of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (CP, 150), and one suspects that the traditional sun/son resonance is being played upon here:

In the far South the sun of autumn is passing
 Like Walt Whitman walking alone 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.

Joseph N. Riddel points out, in "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens: Functions of a 'Literatus,'" that "Stevens has been an articulate spokesman of the poet's essential identity with his native soil."¹⁶ This connection with the land, Riddel suggests, "is not simply nostalgic or sentimental, but is rather basic to his epistemological theory of poetry." Riddel distinguishes between Whitman as Transcendentalist and Stevens as Skeptic which produces, for him, their "irresolvable difference." Both, says Riddel, "celebrated poetry as a reconciliation of opposites and thus an articulated experience of symbolic and ultimately divine import. Their irresolvable difference lies in Stevens' skepticism, which rejects transcendental answers . . . and finds, in sympathy with Santayana, resolution in an aesthetic view of life." Although Riddel's points are carefully made (and the study a thoughtful one), his approach tends to dismiss the strong suggestion of poetic lineage that one finds in the stanzas quoted above. Again, although Riddel's essay is still the most sensitive and informed study bearing on Stevens' relation to Whitman, it does not take into consideration those moments in the poetry when Stevens is skeptical of his own skepticism. Riddel does, however, stress the vatic

tendency in the poetry of both Stevens and Whitman--and it is here that the distinction between Transcendental and Skeptic ceases to have much meaning. Prophecy is the "madness that comes from the gods," as Plato tells us in the Phaedrus, and, as such, is closely linked with inspired religion and the madness of love. And, indeed, Stevens' claim to poetic lineage with Whitman is based on two major affinities: both are chanters and prophets, and, for both, the native land is an erotic body of immense dimensions--both physical and spiritual--and contact with the native body generates a response of the flesh and spirit alike. Clearly, this is a very different inheritance from that bequeathed, for example, by Stevens' French parent, Beaudelaire.

The erotic land, for Stevens, is not only his first inamorata; it acts continually to renew his problematic "affair of places." And the "affair" encompasses a major part of the land, beginning with an "inherited garden" in Pennsylvania, moving from the Carolinas to Indian River and Florida's Venereal Soil; embracing Stars at Tallapoosa as well as Loneliness in Jersey City, traveling from Key West to Tennessee to the Arcades of Philadelphia, from Norfolk to Hartford and New Haven; passing Dutch Graves in Bucks

County to embark on a final voyage, a passage down the
River of Rivers in Connecticut. For the lover of native
soil, passion and affection come most easily,

For easy passion and ever-ready love
Are of our earthy birth and here and now
And where we live and everywhere we live.
(CP, 395)

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

¹From the epigraph to Shelley's Epipsychidion, taken from an essay on love by Emilia Viviani: "The soul in love thrusts itself out of the created, and creates in the infinite a world for itself, and for itself alone."

²See Harold Bloom's brief but excellent survey of the figure of the Rock in Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 343-45.

³Wallace Stevens, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in The Necessary Angel (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), p. 65.

⁴Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: The Orion Press, 1964).

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁸Hugh Johnson, The International Book of Trees (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1973), p. 211.

⁹John Donne, The Extasie, in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry, ed. Miriam Starkman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), Vol. I, p. 54.

¹⁰Sappho, Frag. 42² (Ox. pap. 1231.9), Lyra Graeca, ed. and trans. J.M. Edmunds (London: William Heinemann, 1922), Vol. I, p. 212; Edmunds translates, "her of the violet-sweet breast."

¹¹*Ibid.*, Sappho, Frag. 94¹, p. 252.

¹²Ovid, Metamorphoses, IV.

¹³Bloom; see Chapter 13, "The Rock and Final Lyrics."

¹⁴Thomas F. Lombardi, "Wallace Stevens: At Home in Pennsylvania," The Wallace Stevens Journal (Spring 1978), pp. 13-17.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 14-15.

¹⁶Joseph N. Riddel, "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens: Functions of a 'Literatus,'" The South Atlantic Quarterly, LXI, No. 4 (Autumn 1962), pp. 506-520.

CHAPTER V

VALLEY CANDLE AND THE ARCHANGEL OF EVENING

"Thou fair-haired Angel of the Evening,
 Now whilst the sun rests on the mountains, light
 Thy bright torch of love--thy radiant crown
 Put on, and smile upon our evening bed!"

William Blake
 "To the Evening Star"

"At their flaming head he westward trooped it like
 that chosen star which every evening leads on the
 hosts of light."

Herman Melville
Moby Dick

"I am the archangel of evening and praise
 This one star's blaze.
 Suppose it was a drop of blood."

(CP, 504)

In the high west there burns a furious star.
 It is for fiery boys that star was set
 And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them.
 The measure of the intensity of love
 Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.
 (CP, 14)

The evening star rises as a potent symbol very early in the Stevens canon. As it appears and reappears, continuing through the very late poetry, it accumulates a cluster of meanings about its focal point: "the measure of the intensity of love." Measure, intensity and love extend into concepts of time, distance, and regeneration, while an additional complex of meanings attaches, in Stevens' poetry, to the location of the evening star in the western quadrant of the sky. The star appears increasingly to stand as an archetype of first creation, a representation of cosmic order that reaches back to mythic and religious origins. The idea of amorous passion crosses a metaphysical boundary, at one point, to signal the presence of a Platonic "Good," the most sublime--if most distant--manifestation of eros. "Measure," repeated in exact sequence in the stanza above, indicates quantity and limit, but also leads to the idea of time itself and, in a later poem, to permanent renewal in time. Finally, the appearance of the star in the "high west" is a portent of promise. West is a "Key" direction for Stevens and

throughout the poetry it is associated with prophecy, with the possible future, and with the idea of a "promised land." Thus, the evening star coincides with themes of a wondrous birth, immortality and the renewal of being, while the appearance of the star in the west suggests in a more particular sense a rebirth of poesy and thought--and the spirit of liberty that attends it--in the land that marks the westwardmost limit of its "progress."¹

As one moves through the poetry, a correspondence begins to emerge between the first light to appear in the evening sky and the domestic lamp or candle that is lit by human hands at the onset of dark. Stevens recognizes a sublime quality in the celestial "fires," a perceivable and repeated manifestation of a cosmic impulse that produces light and measure out of original and limitless dark. The fire struck by human hands is not, for Stevens, so much the Promethean gift stolen from the gods to become the illegitimate possession of mankind, but an indication that the same creative spirit that dwells in the cosmos dwells also in the human body. The equivalence of star-fire and man's fire exists in the poetry from the earliest period of publication, but it is not "spelled out" until the final poems of The Rock. In "A Quiet Normal Life"

(CP, 523), for example, Stevens constructs a present place in a present time where a man sits quietly in his own house, his own room, in his own particular chair, meditating in a familiar, domestic scene. And in this "cosmos," man himself is proof of the sublime: "There was no fury in transcendent forms. / But his actual candle blazed with artifice." The "actual candle" blazing with artifice is a Dedaelian flame, here, as well as an actual fire. It refers not only to the creation of poetry and all inventive art, but to that sublime impulse in the individual that corresponds to the principle of creation.

The planet that blazes so furiously in stanza V of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (quoted above) conforms to the traditional topos of the Evening Star as both Hesperus, the western luminary, and Venus or Aphrodite, the amorous beacon of lovers. For the lyric poets, the western "star" continues to signify the "bright torch," the "radiant crown" of the goddess of love. Its appearance signals the completion of the day's activities and invites to love-play during the hours of dark. Stevens himself, as noted in a previous chapter, refers in a letter to the Sapphic Fragment that invokes the genius of evening (LWS, 248): "Evening Star that bringest back all that lightsome Dawn

hath scattered afar, thou bringest the sheep, thou bringest the goat, thou bringest her child home to the mother."²

Blake's ode "To the Evening Star"³ (see epigraph for the opening lines) follows the traditional themes, but emphasizes that the appearance of the Angel of Evening signals a beginning of activity rather than an end. As against Sappho's pastoral image of domestic animals returning to the fold, Blake introduces beasts of prey roaming the night, and with them, the theme of violence and bloodshed. In point of fact, Blake's ode to the Evening Star closely follows the themes established in the Homeric Hymn, "To Aphrodite."⁴ The "gold-crowned" goddess of the classical Hymn is invoked as "laughter-loving" Aphrodite (*φιλομειδής*), or Aphrodite who "loves to smile," and Blake twice requests the Evening Star to smile, once "upon our evening bed," and then "on our loves." (Shelley, too, translating the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, sings of "golden Aphrodite, / Who wakens with her smile the lulled delight / Of sweet desire" and of "laughter-loving Venus" who "from her eyes / Shot forth the light of a soft starlight smile."⁵) The Homeric Hymn relates how the goddess of love has no power over Artemis, "the huntress with shafts of gold," for the virgin huntress associated

with the moon loves not love, but "archery and the slaying of wild beasts in the mountains."⁶ The theme of wild beasts pursues the "laughter-loving" goddess too, however, for as she travels, continues the Hymn, "After her came grey wolves, fawning on her, and grim-eyed lions, and bears, and fleet leopards, ravenous for deer." But the influence of the goddess "put desire in their breasts, so that they all mated, two together, about the shadowy coombes."⁷ When Blake, too, calls up the violence and bloodshed that follows in the track of the evening star, he is contrasting the darker elements of animal passion with an opposite warmth and serenity:

Smile on our loves; and while thou drawest the
Blue curtains of the sky, scatter thy silver dew
On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes
In timely sleep. Let thy West Wind sleep on
The lake; speak silence with thy glimmering eyes
And wash the dusk with silver.--Soon, full soon,
Dost thou withdraw; then the wolf rages wide,
And the lion glares through the dun forest,
The fleeces of our flocks are covered with
Thy sacred dew; protect them with thine influence!

The identification of the first star of evening with the goddess of love occurs long before the classical period. Lyric poesy inherited or absorbed the symbol from preceding ages of Goddess worship. Throughout the ancient Near and Middle East, in Sumer and Babylonia, in Minoan Crete, among Hebrew and Canaanite tribes before the

Monarchic period, the evening star and the starry night sky were associated with a primal Goddess and worshipped from hill and mountain top (and from the roofs of houses, as the Old Testament tells us) as a manifestation of her aspect as the erotic principle, as Progenetrix, as First Creator of all life.⁸ By the time that Babylonian astronomy had begun to apply a precise mathematics to the forecasting of eclipses (about the middle of the fourth century B.C.),⁹ a legion of male deities had long superseded the Goddess. Her celestial aspect, personified in the Egyptian sky-goddess, Nut, became subordinate to an identification with earth and her aspect as a fertility principle assigned to the underworld and the crops--both originally the province of the male (see Egyptian Geb and Osiris, Middle and Near Eastern Tammuz, Dumuzi, Attis, Adonis, early Greek Ploutos, etc.)¹⁰ As is to be expected, the older forms of worship that mirrored a natural cycle of birth, death, regeneration--and which ritually celebrated the holy marriage from which all these proceeded--continued to survive and exert influence on superimposed forms of worship; and the ancient regional names of deities generally continued in use, even if bent to new aspects.¹¹ The cognate names of the Goddess in the

Near and Middle East included Anat, Isis, Ishtar, Ashera, Astarte, and Ashtaroth, and these names clung to the "star" originally associated with her worship in pre-IndoEuropean ages. The Greeks, comparative newcomers to the region, conceived the planet as a male deity--Hesperos at evening and Phosphoros in the morning--although the names themselves were essentially descriptive. Mary Orr has pointed out, in her valuable study of early astronomical systems,¹² that it was only during the classical period that Greek natural philosophy renamed the planet to accord with the designation of older indigenous cultures, and only after Greek learning had become fully acquainted with the highly developed astronomy of the Egyptians and Babylonians:

We find the Greek descriptive names of the planets were changed for names of the Greek deities which are believed to correspond with the Babylonian gods and goddesses who presided over the planets. . . . Plato . . . is the last to use commonly the name of Phosphor for the planet which henceforth was known as Aphrodite among the Greeks, and Venus among the Romans, corresponding with the Babylonian Ishtar.¹³

One might conjecture, however, as to the derivation of asteros, the Greek generic term for "star," and wonder if it does not relate directly to the various cognate names of the ancient Goddess. Similarly shrouded in forms of worship long past is the concept of the heavens as a

galaxy, with the great arc of stars we call the Milky Way, and that the Greeks knew as galaxias kuklos, the "milky circle."¹⁴ The Greek gala, for "milk," and the Latin lactam, derived from the genitive, galaktos, both suggest an early concept of the heavens expressed in the idea of a "Milky Way." Given the primal nature of the Goddess worshipped in ancient cultures, it is as likely as any other interpretation that the starry bodies afloat in the night sky were conceived to be the divine milk of the Mother of all life. In the Christian era, one still finds the celestial aspect of the Goddess "bleeding through" superimposed forms. The designation of Mary as "Queen of Heaven" is often given graphic illustration by the stars clustered about the Madonna's head, while among her many epithets, Stella Maris is no less graphic.

Although the erotic aspect of the Goddess was either suppressed or diffused by later theologies, she continues to exist in the poetry of the Evening Star as the luminary of love, a guide to direction, and a signal of beginnings. As Stevens observes in "Martial Cadenza" (CP, 237), the star can be accounted a clue to the beginning of time itself: "Itself / Is time, apart from any past," and its appearance, in the same poem, marks "sudden time

in a world without time." Stevens is making no departure from western thought in this idea, for generations of poets have been taught from childhood, in the first chapter of Genesis, that evening not only precedes morning, but that evening marks the beginning of a unit of time: "And the evening and the morning were the first day." And what better signal of both evening and morning than the planet that heralds both?

I have ventured, if briefly, into the mythology of the star of evening and morning in order to lay some foundation for Stevens' use of it as a symbol of cosmic order and an archetype of first creation. In the very early poetry, however, Stevens makes a deliberate attempt to invoke the star in its morning aspect, at least, as "the thing itself" without any mythic or symbolic overtones. Unlike the poems concerning the star at evening, which Stevens generally invests with an erotic stimulus and a subjective response to the erotic influence, "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" (CP, 18) hails the "ancient star" on a distinctly impersonal plane. Among the "nuances" present, one notes an ideal set forth having to do with unique and independent expression. The "star" is an incandescent entity, sufficient unto itself, and it is notably distant

from human affairs:

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

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

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.

In Musing the Obscure, Ronald Sukenick rightly describes this passage as the representation of "an alien reality, utterly nonhuman."¹⁵ It is, says Sukenick, like Crispin's "veritable ding an sich," a reality "about which he cannot generalize, which is impervious to abstract thought, and onto which he can neither impose meanings nor project his own identity." Sukenick is stating in these phrases a powerful Lucretian or Epicurean element in Stevens' vision of the nature of things. This is a philosophy that admits the possibility of divine beings, but assumes that they carry on a purely impersonal existence, unconcerned with the human world. It is the Lucretian impulse, too, that fosters a desire to break away from the accretions of myth, superstition, and the symbolic representations that surround natural phenomena, to detach the thing from whatever has been imposed upon it, and to see it "nakedly" for what it is. This impulse runs through the very late

poetry, either counter to, or parallel with, the idea of man's direct relation to the sublime. In Credences of Summer, for example, the desire to detach all extraneous values from a given thing is stated emphatically:

Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
 Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
 Burn everything not part of it to ash.
 (CP, 373)

The desire to divest the archetypal thing of the various forms it assumes, the interpretations that adhere to it, is a positive force throughout the poetry. It is the good that attaches to the idea of poverty, even of barrenness, for only when all extraneous matter is stripped away can "reality" be perceived or sensed, and essential significance measured or felt. Thus, in Credences II, Stevens is impelled to look at the sky "without evasion by a single metaphor. / Look at it in its essential barrenness / And say this, this is the centre that I seek" (CP, 373). Just so, in the much earlier "Martial Cadenza" (CP, 238), the evening star, invoked as the physical representation of time itself, appears, not as "the symbol but that for which the symbol stands."

How, then, does one reconcile the two modes that exist simultaneously throughout the canon, the one bent on objective distance, and the other on subjective relation?

How does one account for the symbolic values that accumulate about a particular entity or "text"--in this case the evening star--as one advances through the poetry, when Stevens repeatedly asserts a positive need to detach from "secondary readings" of the text? I think that there is no easy solution to this conundrum. Stevens' need to reshape his "credences" to fit the contemporary "nature of things" is the result of his dismissal of theories of creation and existence he was brought up to believe. It reflects a similar need to reconstitute a significant, and credible, description of existence on the part of Stevens' contemporaries, and, indeed, of several generations following Stevens'. To return to "the thing itself" can procure, for Stevens, a revelation of great subjective value. One can discover, for instance, as Stevens has described it, that one is living "in the center of a physical poetry" that reflects one's own ability to think and feel. But physical or non-physical, the cogent revelation for Stevens is the knowledge that one can experience a "poetry," or an exquisitely wrought form, in human existence--if only momentarily. In addition, the attempt to experience "the thing itself" is a dual act for Stevens; one must achieve objective distance while maintaining subjective awareness.

The ability to "distance" from the human condition, the "Lucretian impulse," is the peculiar ability of a sophisticated human consciousness, of cognitive thought. Yet, the very ability to conceive an "alien reality, utterly nonhuman" is precisely the indicator of the human condition: it is only in humanity that the concept of the inhuman exists. Thus, Stevens can perceive the distance and the otherness of the evening star or the morning star, but he must also realize that his own ability to "distance" in order to perceive it creates a co-response between observed and observer. And as soon as a correspondence is drawn, the way is open to analogy, allusion, metaphor, symbol, and myth. But the associations develop from a "primary reading of the text" instead of being culled solely from the poetic intuitions of others.

Just a little after "Nuances," we find Stevens playing with the notion of correspondence between the attributes of stars and men, and examining the idea of distance. "Stars at Tallapoosa" (CP, 71-72) opens with arrowlike "lines" connecting the celestial bodies: "The lines are straight and swift between the stars." As the poem unfolds, both the celestial and terrestrial hemispheres become criss-crossed with "lines" until one has the

impression that a vast map has been unrolled, revealing something very like a medieval hermetic system of the cosmos. Again, although the diction is spare and contemporary, the universe in the poem is reduced to the four basic "elements" of medieval science: water, earth, air, fire. It is almost as if the poem is reaching back past the divisive complexities of modern thought to the beginnings of inquiry and the fundamental concepts which originated from it.

The terrestrial hemisphere in the poem is represented by "sea-lines" and "earth-lines," seen here as "moist," "lax," and "lethargic." In Stevens' terms, as in early systems of physics, the sublunary elements are "mingled," or corruptible, and the lines of demarcation between them--as between earth and sea--are not sharply distinguished:

Wading the sea-lines, moist and ever-mingling,
Mounting the earth-lines, long and lax, lethargic.

The "star-lines" drawn between the unmoving celestial bodies are unmingled, "undiverging," and thus apart from the terrestrial elements in their very nature. The stars are creatures of air and "brilliant" fire; their "bright-edged and cold" vectors are rays of incredible velocity. And with the idea of light-rays and momentum, Stevens returns

to present knowledge and begins to draw a correspondence between star and man. These bright-edged rays correspond to purpose and direction in human life, just as the "lines" that are "flying and falling" from the stars correspond to purpose-laden "lines" of verse, and the "bright-edged" light to the vision of the poet:

The melon-flower nor dew nor web of either
Is like to these. But in yourself is like:
A sheaf of brilliant arrows flying straight,
Flying and falling straightaway for their
 pleasure.

The idea of "pleasure" acts as a catalyst, however, for as it occurs and is repeated almost immediately, in the final stanza, the bright-edged and cold becomes tinged with the erotic pleasure of the senses. Motion becomes an agent by which cold is transformed into heat, and we are suddenly reminded that stars are, in actuality, blazing suns. The pleasure of "falling and flying" now takes on a distinct sexual connotation although the correspondence between man and star remains firm. In the final stanza, the "pleasure" of stars becomes the vehement pleasure of young organic bodies:

Their pleasure that is all bright-edged and cold;
Or, if not arrows, then the nimblest motions,
Making recoveries of young nakedness
And the lost vehemence the midnights hold.

"Stars at Tallapoosa" traces resemblances between the inner and outer cosmos, pointing up man's dual being in "elemental" physical images. Stevens is at pains to forge connecting "lines" in this early poem and a correspondence is achieved here that will continue in the later poetry. Both man's relation to other bodies, he suggests, and his distance from other bodies, is reflected in the very composition of the universe. But the poem also suggests that there is a further relation between the dual aspects of man; thus Stevens connects the cold, crystalline fires of stars--of "distanced" objective thought--with the hot "vehemence" of earthly passion.

This double dimension of a passion both fleshly and celestial emerges most clearly in the poetry of the evening star. Named for the goddess of love, the star symbolizes the Platonic and neo-Platonic recognition of the double aspects of Aphrodite, her manifestation as the sexual and the sublime. Stevens early sets forth the double aspects by which the goddess was worshipped in Greece and from which Greek philosophy drew its distinction between the physical and the metaphysical qualities of love: the goddess is both Aphrodite Pandemos, "of all the people," and Aphrodite Ouranos, "of the sky" (these epithets reflecting

her kinship with ancient systems of worship). Stevens' early "Homunculus et La Belle Étoile" (CP, 25-27) opens by introducing the "sea-born" goddess, Aphrodite Pandemos, who works influence on "all the people" with--in Stevens' purview--a slight twist of irony:

In the sea, Biscayne, there prinks
The young emerald, evening star,
Good light for drunkards, poets, widows,
And ladies soon to be married.

This "good light" engenders fertility in the natural world: "By this light the salty fishes / Arch in the sea like tree-branches," and acts as a directive, a "conductor," to the act of love:

This light conducts
The thoughts of drunkards, the feelings
Of widows and trembling ladies,
The movements of fishes.

But we learn shortly thereafter that "this emerald" also "charms philosophers," and a meditation follows during which the "vulgar" and slightly ironic aspect of the goddess gives place to her twin self as Aphrodite Ouranos. To the "charmed":

She might, after all, be a wanton,
Abundantly beautiful, eager,

Fecund,
From whose being by starlight, on sea-coast,
The innermost good of their seeking
Might come from the simplest of speech.

It is a good light, then, for those
 That know the ultimate Plato,
 Tranquillizing with this jewel
 The torments of confusion.

The "Belle Étoile" shines with a "good light" that reflects both the potent erotic stimulus of the goddess of love, and the ultimate erotic "good" of Plato. She is "abundantly beautiful, eager, / Fecund," and powerful, the primal Venus that Lucretius depicts so tellingly in the Proem to his great philosophical poem, but she also symbolizes the perfection of the soul in a union with eternal Idea.

Having set forth the two-fold nature of Aphrodite as the Belle Étoile, the organizing principle of life--the central "design"--Stevens returns us in the final lines to a pragmatic look at the human condition--this time divested of any stray gleam of irony. Even divine love, he seems to suggest, is merely a "tranquillizer" for the pain and confusion that remain the constants of existence.

The pain and confusion that characterize earthly life in general are present, too, in earthly passion, but earthly love also includes the idea of "vehemence" or violence. The violence that attaches to love is represented, in mythology, by the alliance between Venus and Mars, a mutual--if adulterous--attraction between the goddess of love and the god of war.¹⁶ Hesiod tells us that

the goddess of love is indeed born from the body of heaven, but that her very birth is the result of murder and bloodshed.¹⁷ Beginning a history of patricide that is to be repeated and repeated again in Greek myth, Cronos has dismembered his father, Ouranos, with a "great long sickle with jagged teeth." The Theogony records how the son "swiftly lopped off his own father's members [genitals, *μηδέων*] and cast them away to fall behind him," and *μηδέων* describes the fall of blood as a fertilizing agent: "And not vainly did they fall from his hand; for all the the bloody drops that gushed forth Earth received." The birth of Aphrodite follows immediately on the act of bloodshed in the sequence of the passage, and her name, meaning "foam-born" (*αφρός*), explained:

And so soon as he [Cronos] had cut off the members with flint and cast them from the land into the surging sea, they were swept away over the main a long time: and a white foam spread around them from the immortal flesh, and in it there grew a maiden. . . . Her gods and men call Aphrodite, and the foam-born goddess and rich-crowned Cytherea, because she grew amid the foam, and Cytherea because she reached Cythera . . . and Philommedes because she sprang from the members.

The violence of war, the themes of murder and bloodshed, enter into Stevens' later poetry of the Evening Star, but they are veiled and softened by the element of

distance. In this context, "Martial Cadenza," published in 1942 during the Second World War, and the postwar "One of the Inhabitants of the West," first published in The Nation in 1952, become natural companion pieces. In both, the references to martial conflict and blood occur in a deliberately "tranquillized" context. In both, the point of view takes on the distance and detachment--as well as the "intensity"--of the star about which the poems are focused. In both, the idea of time exists independently of current time, whether it be time of war or time of peace, and both relate thematically to an idea that Swinburne expressed as "A Vision of Spring in Winter."¹⁸ Swinburne's April lyric is also a night vision in which the dim-lit heavens "listen" to the earth and keep a "watch" on bare winter woods:

They watch the dawn of slender-shapen limbs,
 Virginal, born again of doubtful death,
 Chill foster-father of the weanling spring.

"Martial Cadenza" (CP, 237-38) develops a curiously positive vision of peace and regeneration in the context of a war-torn world. The poem is cast as a meditation on time, time measureable and time unmeasureable, and the meditation revolves on the notion of time within time. Of the poem's four stanzas, the first and fourth have to do

with peace and life in the present and in a possible future, while the enclosed stanzas deal with armed conflict, both of the past and in the present time. The first stanza opens on a note of promise for the future, and the evening star is seen as an emblem of promise:

Only this evening I saw again low in the sky
 The evening star, at the beginning of winter,
 the star
 That in spring will crown every western
 horizon,
 Again . . . as if it came back, as if life
 came back,
 Not in a later son, a different daughter,
 another place,
 Still walking in a present of our own.

In stanza two, time itself stands suspended; a clash of arms creeps silently into the meditation, and ghostly armies stand fixed in a mute defeat:

It was like sudden time in a world without time,
 This world, this place, the street in which I was,
 Without time: as that which is not has no time,
 Is not, or is of what there was, is full
 Of the silence before the armies, armies without
 Either trumpets or drums, the commanders mute,
 the arms
 On the ground, fixed fast in a profound defeat.

Stanza three opens with a question that serves to separate the star from earthly conflict on the one hand, but, on the other, acts to contradict the idea of distance by suggesting a correspondence between the "constant fire" of the star and the holocaust occurring on the planet beneath:

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.
 Yet it is this that shall maintain--Itself
 Is time, apart from any past, apart
 From any future, the ever-living and being,
 The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire.

The key term in the preceding stanza is "apart," repeated three times. Its first use is almost blatantly ambiguous, for it can be taken to mean that the star "appeared to be separate from," or that it "seemed to be a part of" what is happening on earth. The second and third repetitions are a subtler form of paradox because, although the "apart from" construction tends to swell the distance between star and world, time past and time future also dissolve in distance and we are returned in stanza four to present time, present place. Time is no longer in suspension; it has been created anew:

The present close, the present realized,
 Not the symbol but that for which the symbol
 stands,
 The vivid thing in the air that never changes,
 Though the air change. Only this evening I
 saw it again,
 At the beginning of winter, and I walked and
 talked
 Again, and lived and was again, and breathed
 again
 And moved again and flashed again, time
 flashed again.

Here, in what is probably as close to an ecstatic passage as one will find in all of Stevens, a man shares the

"ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire" of star-being. This moment in the poem, the "present realized," has the quality of a mystic illumination; the sense of the last line is a mystical apprehension--the man, like the star, is time ever-present, flashing again and again in a constant renewal of being. The "constant fire" of the third stanza is reflected in the fourth in the "symbol stands," reinforcing the analogy made between the star, man's symbol, and man himself.

The regularly spaced "again," flashing out seven times in the final period, emphasizes a subjective sense of personal renewal, repeated in time, while it also suggests the repeated appearance of "the vivid thing in the air" over the seven days of the week. There is a ring of victory in "Martial Cadenza" that contrasts with the "profound defeat" that attends the idea of armed combat, and Stevens' title encapsulates this idea of war. Cadenza, in music, means a brilliant flourish, a solo passage of high technical virtuosity, but the term also indicates the act of falling. Although the idea of a plummeting fall attaches in mythology to Hephaestos or Vulcan, to Lucifer, and to Man himself, here the cadenza is specifically "martial." In counterpoint, then, to the elements of

peace, vitality, renewal, and union that Stevens imparts to the evening star as Venus, the goddess of love, are set ideas of violence, defeat, "blank" and "silent" existence, and the plummeting career of Mars, god of warriors and armed camps.

The indwelling vision of peace in time of war is a pastoral vision that can be traced past the Eclogues of Virgil to the paradigm epic of war itself. Simone Weil, whose writings were referred to by Stevens on at least one occasion,¹⁹ has pointed to the ethical and domestic values contained in the pastoral passages of the Iliad. There is a sharp distinction in treatment, she notes, between the hard objectivity applied to scenes of battle, and the lyric tranquility of the pastoral similes embedded in the battle scenes. "All that has no part in war," observes Weil, "all that war destroys or threatens, the Iliad envelops in poetry; this it never does for the facts of war."²⁰ Stevens follows this priority of values in his own poems of the war. He does not sing the glory of arms and the man, of heroic deeds and martial victory. He pointedly avoids the strain of martial valor in his "Examination of the Hero in Time of War" (OP, 83-84). Indeed, in "Examination," Stevens quotes the Iliad directly,

referring to a section of the great design on the Shield of Achilles in Book XVIII. In this book, distinguished for its sharp alternation of scenes of peace and episodes of violence, gold-encased gods lead young townsmen away from their village and families. They are about to set a treacherous ambush for the enemy, and the scene on the Shield foreshadows the actual episode by which the ensnarement of the Wooden Horse occasions the fall of Troy. In the Pope translation of the episode engraved on the Shield, the departure of the young men, full of bold assurance, is couched in terms of loss to their families:

Their wives, their children, and the watchful
band
Of trembling parents, on the turrets stand.
They march; by Pallas and by Mars made bold:
Gold were the gods, their radiant garments gold,
And gold their armor: these the squadron led.²¹

Stevens' "Examination of the Hero in Time of War" was published in 1941, the year of America's entry into World War Two. His stanzas portray young men fatally urged to death, but who wish to bear themselves bravely, regardless of "gods that were praised in goldness / And triple chime." In the "Examination," pathos surrounds the valorous wish of the young men, and their departure for the wars becomes mere "obedience to Ananke":

They had hardly grown to know the sunshine
 Before the sun brought them that destruction
 And with it, the antiques wishing
 To bear virile grace before their fellows,
 Regardless of gods that were praised in goldness
 And triple chime . . . The self-same rhythm
 Moves in lamenting and the fatal
 The bold, obedience to Ananke. (OP, 83)

But Stevens, although inclined to turn a meditative and pacific eye on the unspeakable "facts of war" during the time of war, will, with true Stevensian perversity, refuse to condemn bloodshed as an unqualified evil in his poetry of the postwar period. Thus, just as "Martial Cadenza" develops a theme of peace in time of war, a promise of pastoral regeneration dwelling within the context of martial conflict, so does "One of the Inhabitants of the West" hint at a reverse side to the coin. In what is perhaps the most enigmatic poem of his late period, published during the peace and burgeoning prosperity of the years immediately following the war, Stevens introduces the idea of bloodshed in the context of peace. This poem, with its structure of a text within a text, its hovering sense of a miraculous nativity, and its controlled and quiet reference to the war, illuminates the very center of a "pastoral text" with a single, vivid, drop of blood. The poem follows in its entirety:

Our divinations,
Mechanisms of angelic thought,
The means of prophecy,

Alert us most
At evening's one star
And its pastoral text,

When the establishments
Of wind and light and cloud
Await an arrival,

A reader of the text,
A reader without a body,
Who reads quietly:

"Horrid figures of Medusa,
These accents explicate
The sparkling fall of night
On Europe, to the last Alp,
And the sheeted Atlantic.

These are not banlieus
Lacking men of stone,
In a well-rosed two-light
Of their own.
I am the archangel of evening and praise
This one star's blaze.
Suppose it was a drop of blood . . .
So much guilt lies buried
Beneath the innocence
Of autumn days."

"One of the Inhabitants of the West" presents a general concept as its framing principle: subject to intuition, a given "text" will "explicate" itself, whether the text is the poem at hand, the star appearing in the firmament, or the history of human conflict it "reads" beneath it. In this sense, the archangelic voice has a triple ring. It is not the voice of the poet, but of his

divine intuition, the "mechanism" of angelic thought; it is the voice of the poem, the immediate "text," declaring its own birth; it is the voice of the evening star, a singular entity among other singular entities, appearing in the west as a true portent. The poet assumes a mediating role here as "priest of the invisible" (OP, 169), and his divinations are an attempt to "read" the significance of the "text" as the star "reads" it.

Again, as in other "star" poems, "Inhabitants" is concerned with notions of objective distance and subjective relation, part of the dual character Stevens accords to the evening star. The poem moves from a tranquil, almost cerebral, vision that is entirely disembodied, to a "text" that nearly defies explication but which serves to establish a correspondence between the distant "blaze" of the star and an organic drop of blood. And with the introduction of the quoted "text," the vision embodies itself in "horrid figures" which can be read as either the postures of the gorgon, or the stony figures of those who have gazed directly upon her. The relation of the star's blaze to the drop of blood, the context of horror and violence implied by the Medusa figure, the impending sense of arrival or birth, and the reference to a rosy light all

echo the birth of Aphrodite out of an act of bloodshed and dismemberment.

Although "Inhabitants" obviously develops with no intention of "demystifying" the substance of its text, its phrases refer one back to older texts while preserving the sense of mystery intact. Stevens' "horrid figures of Medusa" can be understood, in one sense, as "men of stone" who stand outside the social and domestic center of life, for banlieus means the territory "outside the walls, but within the legal limits, of a town or city." Here one finds the reverse of "La Belle Étoile," as the organizing principle central to the life of the city. The martial implication of the term derives from the French ban, for "command," and lieue, for "league." There may well be an echo of Vergil, too, in Stevens' choice of "horrid" for the modifying term that would reinforce the martial references in the "text." Stevens' schoolboy edition of the Aeneid will, in all probability, have had a note at the foot of the first passage of the epic, recording the lines that opened the Aenid through the Renaissance:

"But now of the horrid arms of Mars and the man I sing"
 (At nunc horrentia Martis / Arma virumque cano).²²

Frank Doggett, in Stevens' Poetry of Thought,

interprets the "well-rosed two-light" as an "image of the two elements of consciousness--perception and conception,"²³ basing his reading on Schopenhauer and the philosophy of "Will and Idea." Doggett's reading is not without insight, but he is working within a frame of body/mind dichotomy--with the positive accent on the mind--and thus he fails to recognize either the prophetic mode of the poem, or the potency and value that Stevens accords to the physical basis of existence. The dual light does indeed indicate double aspects of existence, but it is "well-rosed" because both body and mind are positive in themselves, and "well-risen," and, again, because "rose" is the color that tradition attaches to the goddess of love, as well as the blooming flower associated with her figure. The light is a "two-light" because it indicates both a celestial blaze and terrestrial blood, the burning of both spirit and flesh. Philosophically, or perhaps aesthetically, Stevens' "two-light" involves the sort of blazing "sight" that Santayana describes in the Soliloquy entitled "Cross-Lights":

Each living being is a sort of sun to itself;
 this spark within me, by whose light I see at all,
 is a great sun to me; and considering how wide a
 berth other spiritual luminaries seem to give me,
 I must warm myself chiefly by my own combustion,
 and remain singularly important to myself. This

importance belongs to the humour of material existence . . . it vanishes in so far as my little light burns clear, and my intent flies with it to whatever objects its rays can reach, no matter how distant or alien. Yet this very intelligence and scope in me are functions of my inward fire: seeing, too, is burning.²⁴

Santayana's collection of Soliloquies appeared in 1922, one year before the publication of Harmonium, and Stevens appears to share Santayana's ideas of distance from, and relation to, "other spiritual luminaries" and objects, "no matter how alien." The "inward fire" that makes "seeing, too" a "burning" is the same ardent desire that Stevens expresses in Credences: "Let's see it with the very hottest fire of sight. / Burn everything not part of it to ash." And just as Santayana declares the "sun within" to be the light by which he recognizes distant luminaries, so does Stevens recognize a correspondence between the blazing star in the heavens and the "spark" of individual life.

The major "text" that illuminates "One of the Inhabitants of the West" is, of course, the text of Christianity. One must pick one's way with some delicacy here, for as Bloom has noted (see Chapter IV, p.210), Stevens' references to the emblems of Christianity generally suggest values that are equivalent to "but not the same as" the theological values. In "Inhabitants," the star and its

"pastoral text" is in itself a "guiding light" that makes manifest the occasions of Advent and Nativity. The establishments that "await an arrival," the sense of shepherd and flock in "pastoral," the announcement of the archangel, all indicate a scene of blessed birth; and the star that appears in the western sky takes on the guiding and prophetic quality of the star that shines so wonderfully over Bethlehem. But although themes of a blessed birth and miraculous rebirth are central to the peaceful context of the poem, they are paralleled throughout by themes of violence and death in the "text within the text." Violence surrounds the "horrid figures of Medusa," while death appears with the sparkling stars in the "fall of night," and moves from the morgue-like figure of the "sheeted Atlantic" to the burial of ancient guilt in the declining year. The "drop of blood" alone--like "Christ's blood in the firmament," so supplicated by Marlowe's Faust--is the "supposition" that implies both life and death, peaceful existence and an act of violence. The most direct echoes of the Christian lexis are the references to "guilt" and "innocence" with which the poem concludes. In the final lines, the sense of autumn as "fall" attaches the idea of innocence and guilt to the mythic fall from grace,

but the terminal placement also suggests the decline of the ideas themselves.

Although the "text" of Christianity is undeniably present in "Inhabitants," Stevens is reading it in the spirit of the Romantics, particularly Blake and Shelley. The spirit of Blake is summoned up, not only in the near-verbatim quotation from the ode to the evening star, the "Angel of Evening," but in the prophetic character of the poem and the idea of guilt buried beneath innocence, which reflects a Blakean conception of innocence and experience. Just as important, Stevens' reference to blood, guilt, and innocence draws some of its meaning from Shelley's evaluation of Christianity in The Defense of Poetry. In the Defense, Shelley characterizes poetry as the faculty which contains within itself the seeds of its own regeneration, and of social renovation. In Shelley's view, Christianity--and, in particular, the era of chivalry--represented a period of "utter anarchy and darkness," and the Romantic poet dilates on "the evil produced by these systems."²⁵ In "Inhabitants," both the sudden blaze of the star out of darkness, and the generative drop of blood that corresponds with it, reflect Shelley's description of the enlightenment that has appeared out of the "dark" age: "But mark how

beautiful an order has sprung from the dust and blood of this fierce chaos! How the world as from a resurrection . . . has reassumed its yet unwearied flight into the heaven of time."²⁶ Stevens reads the text more quietly, but what the man-star, poet-priest sees in the moment of divination is a confluence of flesh and spirit in which peace, beauty, order are regenerated out of violence and confusion, light out of dark. And because man and star are also linked by dual aspects of distance and relation, they further reflect an idea of social order in the poem: each exists as a unique entity, for whom "seeing, too, is burning," while each appears among others in time, as one among the many inhabitants of the west.

The "explication de texte" that Stevens perceives in the night sky in "One of the Inhabitants of the West" is hinted at in an earlier poem, first printed in 1939. In "The Woman That Had More Babies Than That," the "text" is heard as a lullaby; it becomes the "explanation at night," and an ancient maternal character presides over this "explanation" of the nature of things:

The old men, the philosophers, are haunted by
that
Maternal voice, the explanation at night.
They are more than parts of the universal machine.
Their need in solitude: that is the need,
The desire, for the fiery lullaby. (OP, 82)

The singer of the "fiery lullaby," the explicator of the obscure text, in the 1939 poem, is "not the mother of landscapes," or an earth-mother figure, but she who responds to the inquiring mind, "of those / That question." The singer takes on more and more human qualities as the poem develops, but retains a supernatural dimension. She is present, says Stevens, in familiar domestic scenes:

. . . in the crackling summer night,
In the Duft of towns, beside a window, beside
A lamp, in the day of the week, the time
before spring,
A manner of walking, yellow fruit, a house,
A street. She has a supernatural head.
(OP, 83)

The maternal presence "beside / A lamp" in "The Woman That Had More Babies Than That" is as domestic and "natural" as it is supernatural and all-pervading. It stands counter to the Lucretian concept which attributes distance to deity and divine disinterest in human affairs. Stevens' invocation of the maternal presence with its "fiery lullaby" echoes the closing lines of Blake's ode to the Angel of Evening. There is the same sense of a protecting influence, covering things over with a fleecy blanket of warmth: "The fleeces of our flocks are covered with / Thy sacred dew; protect them with thine influence!"

As we have seen, both distance and the blaze of

passion exist simultaneously in poems that center in the evening star, while the star that symbolizes the goddess of love also contains "nuances" of her watchful and beneficent aspect, qualities of tenderness and concern. The connection of the simple and domestic with the numinous and supernatural occurs at an early point in the canon and continues as a major theme in the poetry. And whether it develops out of a meditation on the paternal or the maternal, or as an analogy to the creative self, Stevens establishes a direct correspondence in the early period between the star that first appears in the evening sky and the lamp or candle lit at twilight.

As one progresses through the canon from the early to the very late poetry, however, the flame that represents human consciousness, life, spirit, creative invention, undergoes a change. The light that in "Valley Candle" (CP, 51) "burns alone" in the dark, only to be snuffed by the wind, slowly grows into the sustained--and shared--radiance that illuminates "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (CP, 524). The candle comes more and more to light up familiar home-like objects, and to relate to both a genetic and aesthetic heritage. In poems of the final period, candle-flame and star-fire seem to partake of a

common substance, while both possess a quality of warmth that contrasts strongly with the cold-edged fires of the early period. "Valley Candle," for example, published in Harmonium in 1923, sets forth an existential vision of mortality and isolation in six stark lines:

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.

Does Stevens' "immense valley" refer to the Psalmist's "valley of the shadow of death" or the Prophet's "valley of decision" where "the sun and the moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining" (Joel, III:14-15)? Perhaps it recalls, too, the Great Valley in Pennsylvania, the home of Stevens' forebears and the scene of his boyhood wanderings. In the poem, the inevitable wind acts twice, once to snuff out the life-flame, and again to dissipate the "image" or memory of the individual and his works. Stevens' "wind," here, is a figure of Ananke similar, in this sense, to the wind of history in Eliot's "Gerontion."

By the time of "The Man With the Blue Guitar" (1936), the threatening quality of the "huge night" has been replaced by a positive "essential dark," and the

correspondence of star above and candle below develops from a concept of eros: the "amorist Adjective aflame" (CP, 172). Out of this context of flaming blue the stars appear in daylight:

First one beam, then another, then
A thousand are radiant in the sky.

Each is both star and orb; and day
Is the riches of their atmosphere.

The central couplet of the canto spans from celestial radiance to the lights below, and calls up ancestral memory in a "German chandelier." In the verses that follow, the distance between the numinous and the familiar is also abridged:

One says a German chandelier--
A candle is enough to light the world.

It makes it clear. Even at noon
It glistens in essential dark.

At night, it lights the fruit and wine,
The book and bread, things as they are.

Still later in the canon, the candle is again a "night-light" and in its glow an archaic presence is discerned. In "The Candle a Saint" (1942), we come once more upon the maternal figure Stevens associates with the starry night sky. The candle shines in a "green" night, in this poem, and the spirit that presides over the universe is another, more abstract aspect of the "young emerald" who

appears as the Belle Etoile. In "The Candle a Saint," it is a primal maternal presence that "walks" the night, "green kindled and apparelled." Stevens envisions her as "the abstract, the archaic queen," a figure both "noble" and celestial, and defines her as "the image at its source." The sense of a "fiery lullaby" pervades this poem, too, as "she that walks among astronomers" moves "like a noble figure, out of the sky, / Moving among the sleepers" (CP, 223).

By the final period of The Rock, the original span of distance between star-fire above and candle-flame below has diminished to the point of disappearing. Both celestial and terrestrial fires have come to symbolize a life substance possessed in common by mortal man and immortal being. "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (CP, 508) employs the symbol of the candle-flame as life spirit in a figure of consubstantiation. At the moment before death, the "inward fire" that Santayana speaks of in his own soliloquy becomes, in Stevens' lines,

A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

In "Prologues To What Is Possible" (CP, 515-17), composed in the same period, the meditation again turns upon the "celestial possible." This time, however, Stevens is dealing, not with his aesthetic heritage as in the previous poem, but with a "self" contained within "that had not yet been loosed," although it is a self that has been "suddenly increased" by "hereditary lights." The life-flame that burned isolate in the dark of "Valley Candle" reaches out, in "Prologues," to touch and embrace all things that are beginning anew. The closing passage brings together things of great magnitude with those of equally great fragility, and resolves in a chord of immense tenderness. The individual spirit in this prologue to becoming is a flickering light, the "smallest lamp," that recognizes its kinship with other luminous beginnings. It adds to the vocabulary of "what is real," says Stevens,

The way some first thing coming into Northern
trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
The way the earliest single light in the
evening sky, in spring,
Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by
adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals its
unexpected magnitudes.

At the last, in "Final Soliloquy," star and candle have indeed joined into one bright beacon; the mortal and

immortal elements have come together, and the light has ceased to flicker. Now the old "scholar of one candle" has become one with his "furious star," and its burning sight, and the huge night no longer threatens. Now it is possible to see the whole of what is real and, in "Final Soliloquy," the poet-priest and lover finally observes the star-candle through the eyes of his paramour:

How high that highest candle lights the dark.
(CP, 524)

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

¹For an encapsulation of the "progress of poesy" theme, see Geoffrey Hartman's essay on "Blake and the Progress of Poesy," in Beyond Formalism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 193-205; see also Hartman's "Evening Star and Evening Land," in The Fate of Reading (University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 147-78, for a very different perspective on the star symbolism.

²Sappho (Frag. 192²), in Lyra Graeca, ed. and trans. J.M. Edmunds (London: William Heinemann, 1922), Vol. I, pp. 284-86. Scholarship on the Fragment suggests a parallel epithalamic line as the next verse in the sequence: "Even so tonight bring thou home the bride to the bridegroom" (see n. pp. 286-87).

³William Blake, "To the Evening Star," from Poetical Sketches, in The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, eds. Erdman and Bloom (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1970), p. 402.

⁴"To Aphrodite," in Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homeric Hymns, trans. H.G. Evelyn-White (London: William Heinemann, 1964), pp. 406-27. (This is the lengthier of the two Hymns to Aphrodite, a narrative poem, as against the second which is more an extended invocation.)

⁵Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Homer's Hymn to Venus," in Shelley's Poetical Works, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 703.

⁶Op. cit., "Hymn to Aphrodite," 11.16-18.

⁷Ibid., 11.68-74.

⁸For identification of "star" with "goddess" in pre-Classical times, see Larousse World Mythology, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), p. 57 (note illustration), and p. 67 (Babylonian boundary stone); the Jewish Encyclopedia has an excellent article on early star-worship among the Hebrew tribes, under that heading, and a history of its proscription; also see Deuteronomy 4:19, II Kings 17:16, Jeremiah 19:13, Ezekiel 8:16. For early goddess-worship among Hebrew and

Canaanite tribes, see Raphael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess (New York: Ktar Publishing House, Inc., 1967), pp. 17-18, 35. See also Cretan seal impression in Erich Neumann's The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype (Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 273 (although Neumann, following Jungian archetypes, characteristically avoids the celestial aspect of the Goddess. By selective means, he emphasizes only the fertility traits, dwells upon her fierce and malignant aspects, her connection with earth and beasts, and generally superimposes on early systems of worship a set of gender characteristics developed much later, and still prevalent. Indeed, Neumann's only mention of the celestial aspect of the Goddess is slipped, perforce, into his section on "The Lady of the Beasts," and none of the illustrations in his well-illustrated book so much as hint at the celestial aspect, though many exist.)

⁹Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, The Fabric of the Heavens: The Development of Astronomy and Dynamics (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 24-26; 39-40.

¹⁰Representations of Nut and Geb can be found in the New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology (London: Paul Hamlyn Publishing Co., 1955), pp. 11, 12; see also E.O. James, Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958), pp. 37-48; note p. 41 for explication of Osiris as a fertility and earth principle: "the corn-god from whose body grain sprouted." For a concise and lucid explication, based on Frazer, of the earth gods and the rituals pertaining to them, see Jessie Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1957), Chapter IV, "Tammuz and Adonis," pp. 34-51, esp. 37-38.

¹¹See Martin P. Nilsson, Minoan-Mycenean Religion and Its Survival in Greek Religion (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1950) for a careful, scholarly study on the influence of indigenous forms of worship on superimposed forms.

¹²M.A. Orr, Dante and the Early Astronomers (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1969 [first published in 1913]).

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁴Eric Partridge, Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (New York: Macmillan, 1966); see lactam, p. 333.

¹⁵Ronald Sukenick, Musing the Obscure (New York University Press, 1967), pp. 50-51.

¹⁶See Ovid, Metamorphoses, ed. and trans. F.J. Miller (London: William Heinemann, 1916), Vol. I, Book IV, 11.169-89.

¹⁷Hesiod, Theogony, op. cit., Hesiod, pp. 92-94.

¹⁸Algernon Charles Swinburne, "A Vision of Spring in Winter," in The Poems of Algernon Swinburne (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), Vol. III, p. 94.

¹⁹See Stevens' late essay, "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" (NA, 174).

²⁰Simone Weil, Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks, trans. E.C. Geissbuhler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); see Chapter IV, "The 'Iliad', Poem of Might," p. 50.

²¹Iliad of Homer, trans. Alexander Pope (New York: A.L. Burt, Publisher, n.d.), p. 429.

²²Vergil, Aeneid (in Loeb ed., 11.1^d-1; in Renaissance texts, 11.4-5).

²³Frank A. Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), pp. 152-53.

²⁴George Santayana, "Cross-Lights," in Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), pp. 23-24.

²⁵Percy Bysshe Shelley, A Defense of Poetry, in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), pp. 506-507.

CHAPTER VI

FINAL SOLILOQUY: ELEGY AND EPITHALAMION

"Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
And what I must doe then, thinke now before."

John Donne

while its voice speaks out, as in the earlier "Restatement of Romance," not in the apparent plural--"we two together side by side"--but in a much older expression of the dual person--"we two together as one being." Of all the love poems in the Stevens canon, and among the various erotic modes contained in it, "Final Soliloquy" alone is free of yearning and desire, unconcerned with either metaphysical destruction or physical violence. It presents neither an existential detachment nor a comedic sublime. "Final Soliloquy" is a discourse concerning "the intensest rendezvous," an encounter between subjective selves that have resolved "into one thing / Within a single thing," and the no-longer-objectified Being that surrounds that whole: it concerns an ultimate and profound union.

The initial placement of "Final," in the title, suggests that Stevens is using the term in its causal or Aristotelian sense of "entelechy," or fulfillment. As the Final Cause contains within it all other causes--including the Formal, or the innate potential of a thing--so does Stevens' placement of "Final" convey the idea of beginning contained in ending, of potentiality inherent in fulfillment. Thus, the paramour's dual "soliloquy" reinforces the idea, so familiar by the time of the late poetry,

that the conscious experience of man is not only apart from but essentially a part of the natural cyclic order of things.

Although "Final Soliloquy" is structured as a theoria, a contemplative review of knowing and being, and although it involves both theological and mystical concepts of poverty and "ultimate good," it stands essentially as a love poem. The erotic principle that illuminates "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" is central to the poem, manifesting itself as love of the self, selfless love, and finally, transcendent love. Expressing it as the "miraculous influence," Stevens places a sublime form of love in a central location within the frame of the poem; it generates ideas of light, warmth, power, and good that course through the tight-woven fabric. By means of the "miraculous influence," a single light grows to illumine the whole of darkness, "small reason" reaches out to touch a "central mind," emotion, perception, and thought are joined, the "world imagined" transforms into a celestial dwelling, obscurity is exchanged for knowledge, good becomes God-in-man, solitude becomes companionship. There is a harmony in this poem that recalls the closing phrases of George Herbert's Prayer (I):

Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
 The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
 Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the
 souls bloud,
 The land of spices; something understood.¹

Stevens composed "Final Soliloquy" at the age of seventy-one, in 1950, the same year "The Sick Man" was first published, and both these poems share something of the elgiac lyricism that pervades Stevens' tribute to George Santayana, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome." Although "The Sick Man" is cast more in a dirge measure than the largo of the other two, there is a high seriousness, even a solemnity about these poems, a cadence of the tolling bell, a music they have in common, a sense of ultimate harmony. All three are set in a room that is a "dwelling," or "living in," that ranges from a closed compartment in the mind, to the human body, to an actual room, to the house and--in "The Sick Man" in particular--the nation and the world, to finally encompass the cosmos. All three are chiaroscuric poems, concerned with brights and darks, heavily invested with illumination and shadow. All three hint at a "celestial possible" that involves a translation of human consciousness, or the human spirit, from a mortal state to a state beyond mortality. None of these poems suggest a conversion or a return to religious

orthodoxy, but rather a reach of the individual spirit to whatever object of the spirit may be required for a sense of sufficiency. Indeed, two years after "Final Soliloquy," Stevens writes with gentle irony: "At my age it would be nice to be able to read more and think more and be myself more and to make up my mind about God, say, before it is too late, or at least before he makes up his mind about me" (LWS, 763). It would seem that Stevens retained to the end his rational, sceptical outlook on life as well as a stoic attitude toward death. It seems equally clear, however, that he continued in his old age to think of himself as a poet, well aware of his own spiritual depths.

Although the poet is subject to age and time, his Paramour is not. She is the inner "self" that has to do with imagination and memory, creation and "more than rational" knowledge, inspiration and new vitality. As noted in Chapter II, she is the mediating element. She is not made of "corruptible" fabric and thus she can be understood as the instrument by which one attains the state beyond time, and beyond mortality. She is the equivalent of that "Instrument" that Donne must "tune" with meditation as he comes to the door of "that Holy roome" in his penultimate Hymn ("Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse").²

In Donne's "Hymne," the hope of new life after death is couched in the familiar terms of East and West, employing the conceit of the flat map which, if the outer edges are brought together, joins mortal to immortal existence:

What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the Ressurrection.

For Stevens, West is always the realm of possibility, the direction of prophecy, the location of the first bright evening star. In "The Westwardness of Everything" ("Our Stars Come From Ireland," II; CP, 455), he echoes Donne's thought by conceiving a cosmic renewal implicit in the seeming motion of the stars: "An east in their compelling westwardness." But although Stevens relates both west and evening to the idea of new beginnings, whether it be the life of art, or of thought, or of spirit, it is the Paramour who remains the instrument of personal renewal. As both the mediating element and the "lover that lies within the self," Stevens' Paramour most closely resembles the sponsa of the speculative mystics, the soul as bride. And it is in speculative theology, too, that one first finds the elegiac mode mingled with the epithalamic, for only with Christianity does the moment of death become one with the moment of sublime, and eternal, union between

sponsa and Sponsus.

"Final Soliloquy" is similarly concerned with "the intensest rendezvous," and thus similarly presents a marriage-hymn sung in the shadow of immanent death. The quality of spiritual union in "Final Soliloquy" is the same quality with which mystical theology imbued the Song of Songs, and it is the same loving union that Saint Bernard, for example, preaches from his death bed. George Bosworth Burch, discussing Bernard's life and thought, comments on the theologian's eighty-fifth sermon on Canticles, his last complete work. "Preaching from the text, By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth [Cant. 3.1]," says Burch, Bernard "summarized his whole philosophy in three words: The soul seeks the Word [Quaerit anima Verbum] and then described seven reasons why the soul seeks the word."³ Bernard's explanation regarding the soul in search closely parallels the concepts involved in "Final Soliloquy":

The soul seeks the Word in order to yield to it for correction, to be enlightened by it for knowledge, to rely upon it for virtue, to be reformed by it for wisdom, to be conformed to it for beauty, to be married to it for fecundity, to enjoy it for bliss.

In "Final Soliloquy," the idea of yielding and surrender is contained in the twice-repeated term, "rendezvous."

Beyond the immediate sense of an appointment, and its particular meaning of "love-tryst," Stevens is drawing on its derivation from Rendez-vous, "Give yourselves up!" It takes very little translation to apply this military sense of yielding oneself up to concepts of death and marriage. Again, Stevens' "miraculous influence," like Bernard's loving Verbum, works to produce enlightenment, knowledge, reliance, security, virtue or good, to "reform" or reshape towards wisdom, to generate an experience of bliss, and beauty, and a promise of fecundity. And in "Final Soliloquy," as in Bernard's philosophy, it is only because "we are poor," and somehow become humble, that the compound soul is able to receive "a warmth, / A light, a power, the miraculous influence."

In this curiously moving poem of his late period, Stevens for the first--and last--time allows the Paramour to speak with her own voice. It is notable, too, that given the full burden of discourse, the Paramour within speaks for the whole being in all its aspects. It is as if Stevens has recorded, in "Final Soliloquy," the final stage of a progression. The "One" of fictive music, the abstract "archaic queen," the "golden woman in a silver mirror," the inspired singer of "Key West," the "woman with

the hair of a pythoness," the "desired" who lives in the "hermitage at the centre," are all reflected in the Interior Paramour. In "Final Soliloquy," however, she is no longer the imagined entity that, in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (CP, 394), is "the lover that lies within"--which carries the sense of a fiction that may deceive, in "lie," as well as a lover who reclines. The Paramour in the late poem speaks in a voice compounded of thought and feeling, intuition and imagination: "We feel . . . a knowledge . . . in the mind." She has attained, with her voice, the position of seer and truth-teller who can both comprehend and express significance in existence. In terms of mutuality and interconnection she describes "an order," a design in the nature of things. And it is in the Paramour's voice that Stevens expresses a rare moment of sufficiency in the poetry, for at the completion of her discourse one finds that "being there together is enough."

The voice of the Interior Paramour speaks out, in "Final Soliloquy," for much the same reason that the voice of Diotima--his "instructress in the art of love"--speaks the discourse of Socrates in the Symposium. The Paramour's discourse is also an "instruction" having to do with an ultimate, transcendent experience, and although the word

"love" does not once appear in the body of the poem (though it is liberally sprinkled throughout the canon as a whole), the idea of love seems the more compelling for its very absence. By withholding the term itself, Stevens avoids definition and the limitations that definition imposes; love thus becomes the timeless Idea, the undefinable, boundless principle of union, the "ultimate good" that, both in the Symposium and in "Final Soliloquy," exists as the direct object of eros. As noted in Chapter I (pp. 40-42), Diotima's exposition of love in the Symposium develops as an oracular revelation. She is conceived as the immortal and prophetic component of Socrates' own nature, and one may very well conjecture that the voice of Diotima is the expression of a mystical element, and a poetic element, in Plato's nature, interior as this element may be. In "Final Soliloquy," the Paramour is also the explicator of ultimate union, is similarly the prophetic and immortal component of a single nature, and, like Diotima's, the message is one of high promise while the substance of her discourse concerns the Sublime. Stevens' Paramour corresponds in several ways, then, to the rational or "intellective" element that classical philosophy perceived as the immortal component of a tripartite human

soul, while the figure of the paramour as lover also reflects the soul-as-bride of speculative theology.

It is not really helpful, I think, to define Stevens' Paramour as Mary Arensberg does, in "Wallace Stevens' Interior Paramour,"⁴ as a mental or emotional aberration, a "schizoid self." Nor does it add much to the interpretation of this element in Stevens' poetic to consider the Paramour a mere "syntactic event" (Arensberg is here referring to Michael Beehler's critical approach⁵) or "an illusion, constructed within a linguistic hall of mirrors." Nor, if we recognize the Paramour to be an essential and integral part of the self, can we think of her as "an invented fiction" that is "generated from within the poet's own psyche," for the Paramour appears to be the poet's psyche. Again, Arensberg accepts without question Harold Bloom's reading of the poem, in Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate, which has it that "poet and muse are about to be so joined that every remaining poem will be a dialogue of one."⁶ Bloom, as usual, extracts for us the essential point of what is happening in "Final Soliloquy," but he is hasty in his reading of the time sequence. The poem is cast in an immediate present and not once does it depart from the here and now.

In addition, the pronomial elements--"we," repeated six times, "ourselves," repeated twice, coupled with "together" and the resolving of the many and the two into "one," which occurs twice--make it clear that the components of the self are not "about to be" joined, but are already joined. The voice of the Paramour speaks for an already integrated entity during a timeless present moment of union.

Arensberg also refers to J. Hillis Miller's article on "Stevens' 'Rock' and Criticism as Cure,"⁷ which leads her to apply therapeutic principles of psychodrama to a theory of the Paramour. Arensberg seems content, here too, to take Miller's idea of a "shadowy psychodrama involving the difference of the sexes" as an appropriate foundation for an interpretation of Stevens' poem. Here again one finds an interpretation that is based on the influence of "anxiety," on a philosophy of the emotional imbalance of an age that blurs into the psychoanalytic area of mental disorder. Such readings are inevitable in a school of criticism which "diagnoses" poetry as the symptom of a disease, which relies on borrowed terms of "repression" and "sublimation" to express acts of invention and creativity. Such a reading allows small place for an

anima that exists as an integral component of the self. Nor can a "clinical" reading begin to address the quality of spirit implicit in Stevens' Paramour.

It is interesting, in this context, that Stevens' Interior Paramour exists as a contemporary anima-figure who--if one examines her various characteristics--stands counter to a Jungian concept of the anima. In a Jungian archetypal reading, the anima is a "projection" of the "mother imago," which extends into the image of "the daughter, the sister, the beloved, the heavenly goddess, and the earth spirit Baubo."⁸ The anima, according to Jung, is the image of the feminine that exists in the male psyche and which represents the universal characteristics of the feminine in all places and at all times. In his exposition of the anima, in Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self, Jung stresses the universality of his "projection":

Every mother and every beloved is forced to become the carrier and embodiment of this omnipresent and ageless image which corresponds to the deepest reality in a man. It is his own, this perilous image of Woman.⁹

This "perilous image of Woman," says Jung, "stands for . . . loyalty . . . she is the vital compensation . . . she is the solace . . . the great illusionist, the seductress." Again,

Jung emphasizes that his "archetype" is not "an invention of the conscious mind, but a spontaneous production of the unconscious." The equivalent archetype for woman, in this theory, is the animus, an image of the father in the psyche of the daughter, and Jung invests the masculine "imago" with the quality of "reason or spirit." Woman is "compensated by this masculine element," as Jung believes, and he goes on in his exposition of anima and animus to reduce the ideas of both the masculine and the feminine into two opposed "projections" which involve masculine rationality, on the one hand, and feminine sensuality on the other:

The animus corresponds to the paternal Logos
just as the anima corresponds to the maternal
Eros.¹⁰

In an essay on "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship," Jung contends that "Woman has no anima, no soul, but she has an animus," and reiterates his theory that "the anima has an erotic, emotional character, the animus a rationalizing one."¹¹ Finally, in the section on the anima and animus in the Phenomenology of the Self, Jung contradicts his former explanation of the anima as a "projection" developed within the masculine psyche, and firmly plants the characteristics of the male anima in Woman as her "true nature" in an attempt at a general division:

I use Eros and Logos merely as conceptual aids to describe the fact that woman's consciousness is characterized more by the connective quality of Eros than by the discrimination and cognition associated with Logos. In men, Eros, the function of relationship, is usually less developed than Logos. In women, on the other hand, Eros is an expression of their true nature, while their Logos is often only a regrettable accident.¹²

It is neither appropriate nor necessary, in a study of Stevens' erotics, to comment on the relative value of Jung's theory of anima and animus, expressive of a Victorian propriety in which "men think" and "women love," nor to raise questions about what "imago" a girl-child might derive from her mother or the boy-child from his father--which is a question Jung does not address. It is certain, however, that the rigid gender distinction that Jungian psychology honors as an "archetype," and which Jung sets forth as a universal truth, asserting it to be "the deepest reality of a man," does little to provide an understanding of Stevens' Interior Paramour. As noted in Chapter II, the Paramour is indeed an erotic presence, but this presence is manifest throughout the poetry as a "separate self" who is at once erotic, noetic, prophetic, active, creative, cognitive, internal and female, while her aspects are alternately regal, domestic, sublime, abstract, and covert. She is as mysterious and powerful

as Jung conceives the anima to be, but the variety of her attributes, and in particular the noetic or cognitive qualities she manifests set her directly counter to the Jungian theoretical construct. Jung's classification is, of course, a stereotyping of general human traits into rigid gender oppositions. The danger in accepting such gender divisions as "archetypes" in a critical reading of poetry, such as Maud Bodkin attempts in Archetypal Patterns in Poetry,¹³ for example, is the danger of imposing a "grid" on a given work that can alter or twist the original sense and intent of the work. Thus, one finds a thoughtful critic like Michel Benamou lightly imposing the Jungian "grid" on Stevens' *Paramour*. "Her invisibility," says Benamou, "her closeness to plural men, and her voice designate her as a collective anima projection of the masculine unconscious. . . . Jungian psychology accounts rather well for this voice."¹⁴ But how, with a Jungian approach, does one account for a *Paramour* who is at once creative, rational, intuitive, erotic and emotional? who is both the creature of dark and the illuminator of darkness? In sum, Jungian readings cannot fully address Stevens' *Paramour*, just as "repression" and "anxiety" do not quite explain the gift of poetry.

The idea of male and female "collected" together "Out of all the indifferences, into one thing: / Within a single thing" occurs before "Final Soliloquy," in the poetry, and the notion of androgyny is expressed in the canon in several forms. Before going on, however, one should note the connotation of "prayer" in the term, "collect," and both the privative and copulative senses of the in- that prefixes "indifferences." A "collect" refers to a short prayer of the Common Prayer Book, especially "one of those appropriated to days or seasons and read before Epistle and in morning and evening prayer." Stevens is playing, in "Final Soliloquy," on the same liturgical meaning that attaches to the "Collect" in the title of his late essay, "A Collect of Philosophy" (OP, 183-202). The generation of an integrated androgynous entity "out of all the indifferences" is a work of "the miraculous influence," and this union "in difference" represents the telos of the erotic principle. In "The Irrational Element in Poetry" (OP, 216-29), Stevens explains that he is using "the word irrational more or less indifferently, as between its several senses" (OP, 229). The term "indifferences," in "Final Soliloquy," similarly indicates several senses, including unconcern--or lack of anxiety--and

non-differentiation, with the prefix acting as a privative, while the copulative sense suggests a sharp differentiation. What emerges is the idea of sameness and distinction wrapped together "within a single thing," in this case, a single word, and Stevens here sets forth a far more complex idea than the notion of "a shadowy psychodrama involving the difference of the sexes."

The "single shawl" that is "wrapped tightly around us," in "Final Soliloquy," is a more sheltering cover, more opaque, thicker and warmer than the veil that covers the "contemplated spouse" in the Ozymandias section of Notes. The "bride" in Notes is "never naked," we are told, for "a fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP, 396). In "Final Soliloquy," both bride and bridegroom "rest" together in final peace, in ultimate union, and since they "are poor" they are finally naked. Unlike the couple in Notes, who represent "illusion as value," the couple joined in "Final Soliloquy" is bare of illusion. Poverty, here, indicates humility of spirit--the "jewel found at the exactest central of the earth" (OP, 194). In keeping with the idea of spiritual poverty and its reward, the shawl that provides comfort and warmth also surrounds the collected selves with a mood of

ecstatic possession: "Wrapped" carries the sound of "rapt" and the sense of "enraptured," both seized and filled with pleasure.

As noted earlier, the concept of an androgynous entity occurs well before "Final Soliloquy." The notion of a two-aspected unity is contained in the figure of the "contemplated spouse" in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, and in the dual symbolism implicit in Stevens' poetry of the evening star. In Notes ("It Must Change," VIII), Nancia Nuncio is given definition by both moon and sun symbolisms; her name carries the gender inflections of both sexes. As the announcing messenger, her figure reflects the masculine presence of the Archangel of the Annunciation, while her self-announced potential as the "contemplated spouse" connects her with the "Bridegroom" of mystical theology (although her apparent sex equally declares her to play the role of the "Bride"). It is clear that the person of Nancia Nuncio, sublimely comic as it may be, proclaims a fusion of the aesthetic and mystical elements in Stevens' poetic. As the living representative of "illusion," she is both muse-like and seminal, both feminine in presentation and masculine in potentia, and thus describes the holistic character of the creative.

The evening star in Stevens' poetry also exists as a manifestation of the erotic and the Sublime, and the "first light of evening" also possesses dual aspects of gender. The star that burns so intensely in the "high west" (CP, 14), that "in spring will crown every western horizon" (CP, 237), that shines tranquilly as "the westward evening star" (OP, 110), is Hesperus, the western luminary, whose presence announces itself as "the archangel of evening" in "One of the Inhabitants of the West" (CP, 504). In "Inhabitants," the "archangel of evening" is a designation that refers, not only to the evening aspect of the planet that the Greeks recognized as Hesperus, but implies its morning aspect as the Prince of Darkness in the Hebreo-Christian mythos. The planet that "rises" in the evening sky is the same morning star that signifies the fallen archangel, Lucifer, whose name means "light-bringer." In Isaiah (14:12), the Satanic character of the morning star is strongly evident: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" But just as Stevens' "archangel of evening" calls up the Prince of Darkness as well as the birth of the Prince of Peace, his western star continues throughout the canon to symbolize the erotic presence of the goddess of love. She is the "Belle Étoile"

who shines upon the earth as Aphrodite Pandemos and in the heavens as Aphrodite Ouranos. She is the "young emerald," the "good light," the Étoile that expresses a design that centrally orders social existence, as well as a manifestation of the creative principle that produces all things and that stands as "time / Itself" in "Martial Cadenza" (CP, 237-38), at the very beginning of time. Stevens' "first light of evening" represents the primary eros principle of the cosmos, flashing again and again in an eternal recreation of first light. And, as discussed in Chapter V, the "furious star" that burns as the external manifestation of love, and creation, and "fecundity," corresponds to the candle-flame in man, the interior light of the psyche. Thus, Stevens carries the androgynous character of the "star" into the androgynous character of the principle of creation in man, and so links the immortal element in man to the immortal Being of the cosmos. It is not strange, then, that the voice of the Paramour sounds the imperative to "Light the first light" for it is meant to echo the first great imperative, and the first of all words spoken: "And God said, Let there be light, and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). In its very first line, then, "Final Soliloquy" reflects the sceptical

sense of Stevens' comment in the Adagia: "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!" (OP, 167). But the first verse of "Final Soliloquy" expresses too the less sceptical, and perhaps more thoughtful, notion also set forth in the Adagia (OP, 172), the idea that "God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)."

The element of "fecundity" that Saint Bernard attributes to the soul in union with its divine object-- "to be married to it for fecundity"--is present in "Final Soliloquy" in the form of genitive structures. The poem begins, as noted above, with the idea of first generation, while a process of creation, growth, development--and transformation--stands as the thematic core of the poem. Syntactically speaking, the "ins" and "outs" of "Final Soliloquy" are revealing. "In" is repeated eight times, counting "into" and "within," and it is evenly distributed through the poem from its first appearance in the initial line to its final use as the initial element of the terminal line. From this context, the three genitive statements develop: "out of all the indifferences," which ends the first third of the poem, and the parallel clauses,

"Out of this same light, out of the central mind," which introduce the third and final section. From the first to the closing lines, the genitive forms exist in a context of interiority, conceived, not as oppositions, but as forms that are dependent both on context and on inter-relation. In essence, the syntax of "Final Soliloquy" is repeating the same thought that Bernard confines to a theological context but which reflects the physiological workings of eros: fecundity is the result of inner union.

The triadic structures on which the poem is built are characteristic of Stevens' later period, but in "Final Soliloquy" the triadic forms are particularly pronounced and have particular significance. Indeed, it is just conceivable that the three-syllabled "Paramour" in the title contains a tongue-in-cheek reference to the "Paraclete" of Trinitarian doctrine, who is the third and most mysterious Person of the Holy Trinity. The stanzaic unit of "Final Soliloquy" is the tercet, while the turnings of the poem divide it into three groups of paired stanzas. In its very structure, then, the poem supports a concept that involves a known duality and a third, unnamed, entity that either coexists with the dual being or is the product of it. This concept, and the triadic form that both

contains and expresses it, begins to manifest itself early on in the canon in what I will call, for the purpose, a "habit of parataxis."

As one moves through the Stevens canon, one comes almost to anticipate an habitual paratactic device by means of which Stevens will refer to men and women in linked but separate clauses, accompanied by a sequential clause referring to a third entity, often children or lovers. For example, in The Man with the Blue Guitar we find the following sequence:

Women become
The cities, children become the fields
And men in waves become the sea.
(CP, 170-71)

A little further on in the canon, "Of Modern Poetry" speaks of "an invisible audience" which experiences an emotion "as of two people, as of two / Emotions becoming one." In the sequence of the final verses, the poem itself is the third entity; satisfaction, says Stevens, can be found in

. . . a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.
(CP, 240)

In Credences of Summer, I, Stevens observes

. . . these fathers standing round,
 These mothers touching, speaking, being near,
 These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass.
 (CP, 372)

In the fifth canto of Credences, the sequence moves from "The queen humble" to "the bristling soldier" to "the land's children," each appearing after an alternate line of description. Later yet, in The Auroras of Autumn, V, one notes the habitual parataxis cropping up in a domestic scene:

The mother invites humanity to her house
 And table. The father fetches tellers of tales
 And musicians who mute much. muse much, on
 the tales.

The father fetches negresses to dance,
 Among the children. (CP, 415)

And even later, we come upon "Heaulmiette" who, born in the New World, is

Mistress of an idea, child
 Of a mother with vague severed arms
 And of a father bearded in his fire.
 (CP, 438)

The examples given above show that a triadic structure based on gender differentiation exists in Stevens' poetry from at least the middle to the late period. The separate but related clauses attribute an individual value to each entity, while each is given an equal space in which to exist. Stevens is formulating a statement about

human values and the relation between men and women, in these structures, that becomes a foundation for the holistic or androgynous character he attaches to creativity and productivity. Again, as one finds, in "Of Modern Poetry," the idea of "Two people, as of two / Emotions becoming one," there is a strong suggestion implanted in Stevens' use of parallel structures that fusion between two "selves" or two beings is productive only when each is a distinct and fully differentiated individual.

The loving union in "Final Soliloquy" is the final fusion of two such differentiated "selves" that have long been intimate. The preparation for this merger into a dual being is a contemplative action, and the nature of this preparation is described in "The World as Meditation" (CP, 520-21) composed in the same period as "Final Soliloquy." In "The World as Meditation," the Penelope figure contemplates a final union with her husband, the bridegroom who has for so long remained apart from her:

She has composed, so long, a self with which
to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she
imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend
and dear friend.

The concept of the lover, in "Meditation," is a close approximation of the Greek philos, "friend and dear friend,"

in which the erotic and the affectionate elements are inseparable. Again, Penelope's projected desire to become a unity of "Two in a deep-founded sheltering" materializes into a reality in "Final Soliloquy" where the two selves are "collected . . . into one thing," and where the "shawl" of credence, or faith in "ultimate good," is wrapped tightly round the joined pair. Thus desire, which is the ruling aspect of "The World as Meditation," becomes attained desire in "Final Soliloquy," a projected possible becomes an existing reality, and the narrative voice of "Meditation" is exchanged for the "dual" voice that speaks for both selves.

"Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" constructs a delicate monument in praise of love, but the loving union expressed in the poem is one conceived at the approach of death. The eros of "Final Soliloquy" has joined with its object to become one with the "miraculous influence" that orders the whole of life and illuminates the dark that surrounds conscious life. In the moment of the "intensest rendezvous," self merges with self, mortal life joins with immortal Being, love and death become a unity. The voice of the Paramour chants the Requiescat in a "room" which is at once the place of final rest, the

marriage-chamber of ultimate union, a metaphysical space in which immense potential is contained in fulfillment. It is a room where the erotic is one with the sacramental, and where, in both the elegiac sense and the epithalamic, "being there together is enough."

NOTES TO CHAPTER VI

¹George Herbert, "Prayer (I)," in The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 51.

²John Donne, "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," in Seventeenth Century English Poetry, ed. Miriam Starkman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), Vol. I, p. 109.

³George Bosworth Burch, Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux: The Steps of Humility (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 108-109.

⁴Mary Arensberg, "Wallace Stevens' Interior Paramour," The Wallace Stevens Journal (Spring 1979), Vol. III, pp. 3-7.

⁵Ibid., the reference is to Michael Beehler's "Meteoric Poetry: Wallace Stevens' 'Description Without Place,'" in Criticism, XIX (1977), pp. 241-59.

⁶Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 359.

⁷Op. cit., Arensberg, the reference is to J. Hillis Miller's "Stevens' 'Rock' and Criticism as Cure," in Georgia Review, XXX (1976), pp. 1-28.

⁸C.G. Jung, "The Syzygy: Anima and Animus," in Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self, in The Collected Works of C.G. Jung (Princeton University Press, 1968), rev. ed.; Vol. IX, Pt. II, pp. 12-13.

⁹Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 14.

¹¹Ibid., "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship," in The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol. XVII, p. 198.

¹²Op. cit., "The Syzygy," p. 14.

¹³Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination (Oxford University Press, 1963).

¹⁴Michel Benamou, "Art, Music, Angels and Sex: A Note on the Shorter Poems of The Auroras of Autumn," in The Wallace Stevens Journal (Spring 1978), Vol. II, pp. 3-9.

CODA

"Final Soliloquy" stands as a culminating work in the Stevens canon. In form, in voice, in modality, and in meaning, this poem of the very late period--set in a timeless "now," a space that is both intimate and immense--conveys the sense of a final union, final integration, final sufficiency, and final significance. The Paramour's dual "soliloquy" is a rare telic moment in the poetry; it marks the fulfillment of an ongoing erotic quest.

Far from being "severely repressed," as Harold Bloom has suggested, the erotic impulse finds a varied and powerful expression throughout the Stevens canon. The ability to recognize the several manifestations of eros in the poetry is the result of a simple readjustment of focus: the priority of "influence" on Stevens is a lens that must be widened from a narrowly Freudian interpretation of sexuality to embrace what is essentially a Platonic description of the direction, the progress, and the ultimate goal of eros. With a Platonic schema, it becomes possible to recognize the transformations of the love-drive in the poetry and to note the various guises it assumes. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, eros not only shapes and structures a poetic, but alters its mode of expression to conform to the various aspects of Stevens'

nature--to inform the often opposed modes of thought and perception that compose his dialectic. I have shown, however, particularly in Chapter III, that a Platonic model of eros in no way conflicts with or nullifies the Freudian interpretation. Indeed, the diversity of Stevens' poetic demands a flexibility of approach and, as Samuel French Morse has observed, the complexity of Stevens' nature must be considered in any evaluation of the poetry. "The pragmatist and the idealist--the poet and the romantic, the man who delights in 'make believe'--were inseparable in him," says Morse, and he points out that this very diversity is "one source of his poetic achievement as well as of his 'failures.'"¹ In a study concerned with Stevens' erotics, Morse's warning against a reductive reading of the poetry is particularly useful: "To separate the poet from the pragmatist, and his poetry from its quotidian context is ultimately to belittle him and his work."

Whether the erotic impulse reveals itself as desire aimed at the unknown, as energy bent on destruction, as the ascetic urge toward negation or as a yearning for sensual fulfillment--or whether it manifests itself as a drive toward mythopoeic creation and re-creation--eros, in Stevens' poetry, is primarily directed at the sublime. For

Stevens, experience of the sublime may be an apprehension of divinity, or, to use his own phrase, the achievement of "existence on an exquisite plane" (OP, 180), i.e., the accession to an extraordinary level of consciousness and perception which is somehow unitive in nature. And, whether Stevens equates this experience with Plato's idea of ultimate "Good," or recognizes its similarity to a neo-Platonic concept of union with the "One," or with a theological notion of the soul's marriage with God, the notion is essentially the same. It involves the participation of the individual in the eternal Being of the cosmos, and its abiding attraction is the promise of some sort of immortality. As I have shown in Chapter I of this study, the eros dynamic in Stevens' poetry tends to bend philosophic, theological, and aesthetic matter to its service in its quest for a sublime object. Thus, philosophy, theology, and art become three aspects of the same path, for Stevens, while desire remains the motivating agency of all three. This fusion of modes is set forth explicitly in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction:

The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher
Appoints man's place in music, say, today.
But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.
(CP, 382)

Like Shelley and Swinburne before him, Stevens has frequently been tagged a "pagan" with reference to his search for an aesthetic, or poetic "faith," that will fill the place of a--for him--non-vital Christianity. As often as not, the term "pagan" is used, in this context, as a sort of shorthand to suggest Stevens' association with Santayana, or to align him with the burning credo of Pater. There is no question as to the very real influence of both Pater and Santayana on Stevens' formulation of an aesthetic, any more than one would question the influence of Bergson in Stevens' theory of the Romantic as a mode of creative evolution. But the "paganism" attributed to Stevens is one that belongs to the Victorians. It implies rebellion against specifically Victorian institutions and is thus limited in its applications. The appellation leaves Stevens with a tincture of "decadence" that fits in well with an assessment of him as a mannerist, an "easy philosopher" experimenting with words, but it makes no indication of the search, the peculiar struggle, the conflict so evident in the poetry. There is indeed a "pagan" quality to Stevens' poetry, but it emanates from a hungry eros that--like Plato's barefoot, ambitious daemon--sends the poet hunting for meaning in both the beauty and

violence of nature, and then beyond the physical world to the beginnings of philosophic and religious thought.

Although the physical world is truly an "inamorata" for Stevens, it is an inamorata who holds the key to something beyond the purely physical. The "words of the sea" demand to be "ordered"; they offer something to be discovered just beyond the threshold of the material plane. The "maker" in his rage for order comes to an intuition of the physical world as the keener "Words" of a primary Maker:

Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.
(CP, 130)

Thus, Stevens shares with poets before him a mystical sense of identification between poet-as-maker and the divine Principle of creation.

In Stevens, then, we have a contemporary poet who is not only a rational man, often inclined to scepticism, but a man who states that he worships "the principle of things" (LWS, 219). He is a poet acutely tuned to the pragmatic level of existence who nevertheless requires transcendent experience. These need not be incommensurate attitudes, for, to use broadly Aristotelian terms, if a man is a rational animal, he is also a reverent animal. Plato has shown, both in the Phaedrus and the Symposium,

that the capacity for reverence is closely connected with the desire for a love-object. The capacity for reverence is in itself enough to initiate the search for an appropriate object, and in itself generates a demand for expression. The exploration of a spiritual dimension is never, for Stevens, a retreat into "fuzzy mysticism"; rather, it reveals his deep accord with William James' thesis: man possesses a capacity for experience that extends beyond the limits of the pragmatic world.

One might best define Stevens' "paganism," and explain the genuinely religious feeling in both these pragmatic Americans, by referring to a similar combination of traits in Aristotle, the inventor of formal logic. Werner Jaeger, commenting on Aristotle's dialogue On Philosophy, notes the philosopher's concern with the dimension of the spirit during his middle years:

He was well aware that even the most gifted logic can never attain to that irresistible force of the inner conviction which arises out of the inspired presentiments of the soul. Nobody in the ancient world ever spoke more beautifully or more profoundly about the personal and emotional side of all religious life than Aristotle during the years when religion was the central problem in his mind.²

Jaeger might as easily be referring to the poet as the philosopher when he observes that Aristotle, "when he was

preparing to discuss the divinity of stars . . . spoke of the feeling of awe in the presence of that which is higher than man." And Jaeger concludes: "He recognized that inner composure is the essence of all religious devotion." Stevens' figure of the evening star similarly involves the idea of the star as a physical manifestation of the divine. It is not only a supernal "measure of the intensity of love," but a figure that stands at the center of a contemplation on both the distance and the correspondence between what is human and what is divine. Aristotle perhaps most strikingly exemplifies an ability shared in common by the classical philosophers; an understanding that there is no conflict between rationality and reverence, that both are components of the human soul. It seems to me that Stevens' "paganism" lies in that same ability.

It is Stevens' "pagan" attitude toward eros, which honors both the sensual and sublime aspects of love--and desire itself--that most importantly distinguishes his poetry from the poetry of his contemporaries. Freud proposed that the difference between classical and contemporary views of love developed out of a major shift of emphasis:

The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt

lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honor even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuse for it only in the merits of the object.³

Stevens is manifestly closer to "the ancients" in his understanding of the erotic life than he is to Eliot, for instance, or Auden, or Williams or Pound, or even to Yeats. His poetry of the evening star brings Stevens closer, in this sense, to Lucretius, whose invocation to Venus describes the potency and magnitude of the force that "alone guidest the cosmos." Stevens, too, celebrates an erotic life-giving principle, the generative cause of all being and all art. In accord with the pagan attitude toward eros, Stevens can celebrate the positive physicality of the burgeoning spring, as he does in "Holiday in Reality" (CP, 312), as well as the sheer presence of desire. Both metaphysical and erotic values are expressed in Stevens' blossoming spring, where "The flowering Judas grows from the belly or not at all." In contrast, Eliot, in "Gerontion," presents the season of passion as "depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas," while the "instinctual activity" honored for its own sake, as Freud says, by the ancients, becomes in The Waste Land a

despicable and trivial "jug jug jug jug jug jug." Nowhere in Eliot does one find a holy quality imparted to the sexual act, as one finds in Stevens' "The Hand as a Being" (CP, 271), which reflects both the sacred and erotic tonality of the Canticles.

The search for a sublime form of love, in the later poetry of both Eliot and Auden, is a movement away from erotic love. For both, the search has culminated in a return to Christian orthodoxy, and for both, sublime love centers in an anti-erotic, asexual concept of agape. Neither is moved to associate sublime love with erotic passion, as Stevens is, nor with a sensual female object, as Stevens does. On the contrary, the hope is to escape the bondage of erotic passion entirely, and to participate in a gift of grace that is conceived as distinct from the erotic life. There is clear opposition between this Pauline concept of God's agape, and the love of God that Santayana sets forth along Platonic lines: "This love would be erotic; it would be really love and not something wingless called by that name."⁴ Stevens, following Santayana, similarly traces a continuity between the erotic and the sublime.

There is no question as to the presence of eros, or

its purely sensual aspect, in the poetry of William Carlos Williams. Stevens' early appreciation of Williams grew from their shared conviction that authentic expression, for an American poet, must derive from the particularity of an American "here and now." The statement of a poetic that opens the preface to Paterson--"Rigor of beauty is the quest"--is a formulation that relates easily to Stevens' own poetic purpose, and suggests the discipline that both men believed must attend the development of a new poetry. In Paterson, however, the "rigor of beauty" shapes an austere vision that comes increasingly to stand as a celebration of the "masculine" virtues. Beauty is the beauty of courage and splendid feats, while the focus of love reflects the attachment of male for male that one finds in the heroic epic. The real tenderness in Paterson is directed toward the daredevil who leaps over waterfalls, and in some sense, the act by which he challenges death is mirrored in the ejaculatory nature of the falls. One may assume that, for Williams, both the physical act and the symbolic or sexual dimension of the act are fraught with danger. This sense of danger, attaching both to the death-leap and the idea of "instinctual activity" associated with it, leads one to suspect that Williams' equivalent

of an "interior paramour," in Paterson, will be the poetess of Book III who is "dying of loneliness." It will be an isolated paramour who is forced to communicate by mail, and whose communication is an expression of anguish at the distance that the poet has placed between them.

Williams' Asphodel, That Greeny Flower is a much longer poem and more ambitious in scope than "Final Soliloquy," but it is also a love-death lyric composed in the final period:

Approaching death
 as we think, the death of love
 no distinction

any more suffices to differentiate
 the particulars
 of place and condition.⁵

Asphodel mingles tenderness, nostalgia, and memorable passion, its poignance emotionally heightened by the faint tone of the confessional that threads through it. Against the sense of promise that pervades "Final Soliloquy," and the integration it denotes in "being there together," Asphodel dwells on the end of love while the dissolving of the "particulars of time and place" suggests the disintegration that follows mortality. This is a matter very different from the dissolution of gender differences that signals the moment of inner union in "Final Soliloquy." Williams is

careful to preserve a necessary difference between the sexes right through the late poems of Journey to Love (1955), and his women seldom stand convicted of virtue or honor. In Asphodel, the sublime Helen is reduced to that amoral "She" whose "public fault" took on epic dimensions. In the passage that precedes the Coda, in the same poem, one finds lines reminiscent of Stevens:

Are facts not flowers
and flowers facts

or poems flowers
or all works of the imagination
interchangeable?

Which proves
that love
rules them all, for then

you will be my queen
my queen of love
forever more.⁶

One feels, though, that the final sentiment is less than convincing, though truly sentimental. In "Classic Picture" from the same late period, there is the same sharp distinction drawn in Paterson, separating masculine nobility and beauty from feminine deception and immorality: a woman's head is "not made as a man's / an ornament / in itself." The very thought of tangled tresses leads Williams to "acknowledge" that "an unkempt head of hair, / while not as repulsive as a nest of snakes, / is repulsive enough /

in a woman." In contrast, Stevens' image of "a woman with the hair of a pythoness" is surrounded with strange beauty, erotic energy, and an aura of prophetic truth.

Both Eliot and Williams were guided by Ezra Pound whose influence shaped, to a considerable extent, the poetry of an era. Both absorbed Pound's directives with respect to the formulation of a contemporary poetry, a voice and style for the age. Pound's love for the romantic lyric is fully apparent in The Spirit of Romance,⁷ which rambles contentedly from Arnaut Daniel and twelfth-century Provencal canzoni, past Dante, to the Latin poets of the Cinquecento. But though Pound is early drawn to the love-lyric and the medieval romance, his own poetry displays a ravished eros--if one is thinking in terms of an "interior paramour." Like Williams, Pound can chant with open tenderness of the brother, the mate, the male companion. The Christ-figure becomes the "Goodly Fere" in Pound's ballad, a lover of masculinity as against mankind. In the "Homage to Sextus Propertius," eros is converted into a species of literary amorousness, although even in the act of "homage," one finds an expression that is curiously self-centered. It is an "I come first" assumption of the poetic mantle, and in "Propertius," Pound invokes scenes of

Dionysiac self-immersion, "Grecian orgies," and the pulsations of the dance, all the while declaring the presence of a love that places the subject strangely before the object.

Pound's philosophy of eros is encapsulated in "Mauberly" where the "mandate / Of Eros" is "a retrospect," an eros that is almost entirely invested in a literary past. Both this retrospective view and the sense of his own poetic voice as the immediate focus of love extend into Pound's love-death poetry. This is not the poetry of elegiac culmination that one finds in "Final Soliloquy" or even in "Asphodel," but a poetry of love for the dead--a kind of necrophiliac relation with the past. Pound's version of the "interior paramour" is both less vivid and more dramatic than Williams', and, in a way, far more perverse. Pound has embalmed his Paramour. She is the wrapped mummy in "The Tomb at Akr Çaar," while the poetic voice in this erotic, ironic, finely-chiseled piece of necrophilia has become the disembodied ka of a body that has been dead--but loved--for over five thousand years:

I am thy soul, Nikoptis. I have watched
 These five millennia, and thy dead eyes
 Moved not, nor ever answer to my desire,
 And thy light limbs, wherethrough I leapt aflame
 Burn not with me nor any saffron thing.⁸

In Pound's delicate appreciation of the portraiture "Of Jacopo Del Sellaio," one again finds his interior paramour framed in retrospect:

This man knew out the secret ways of love,
No man could paint such things who did not know.
And now she's gone, who are "The Isles" to me.

And here's the thing that lasts the whole
thing out:
The eyes of this dead lady speak to me.⁹

In Pound's poetry, as in Stevens', eros is directed toward a sublime object. Pound, however, cannot recover the sublime; it exists in the past as a "dead" body of art, while the poet seems inordinately aware of the "eyes" of the past watching him. Of necessity, the eros drive in Pound's work must produce either frustration or resignation, for the object is forever out of reach. The age demands a new expression, a rift with the past; thus the desire to merge with the beloved object betokens, for Pound, a love that is both unattainable and forbidden.

In a very different way, frustrated desire is a major theme in the poetry of Yeats. Unlike Pound's languishing eros, unrequited love, in Yeats, generates immense creative energy throughout the canon. Again, as in Stevens' poetic, a sublime object is seen as attainable and coexistent with the poet. The erotic element in

Yeats's poetry is fully alive, and its sensual power more fully evident than in any poet who follows him. There is also, however, the desperation that accompanies unrequited love, so that Freud's "instinctual activity" appears in the poetry of Yeats as an act of sexual violation.

"Leda and the Swan"¹⁰ presents an epic rape that contains far-reaching political and historic overtones, conveys an ars poetica and, at the same time, represents the erotic drive as a majestic, overwhelmingly divine impulse. If one takes the Maud Gonne-Leda/Helen figure as the Yeatsian equivalent of an "interior paramour," then the sonnet depicting the seizure of Leda by the metamorphosed god also depicts, in microcosm, the workings of eros in Yeats's poetic. Although great power and beauty attend the act by which the immortal impregnates the mortal woman, the act of force is a presage of future violence. The seed of that union must inevitably repeat the act of seizure and mastery in ongoing cycles of war and destruction. Here Yeats, unlike Stevens, binds the idea of passion to ideas of power and subjugation, while his subjective "paramour," the composite figure that represents his poetic anima, undergoes a change between the middle and late periods. The seeming passivity and fragility of Leda, the

outspoken lust of Solomon's active young "witch" are superseded, in the late period, by the earthy, eccentric, independent and intriguing character of "Crazy Jane."

Love itself, however, continues through all transformations of the poetic anima to assert itself as an active/passive dynamic, a politically reflective relation of power and mastery over elements rendered helpless in bondage. Thus Yeats, the unparalleled lyricist of his era--like Jacob struggling with the angel--is engaged in an ongoing conflict with his unrequited eros. He continues to relate eros and violence so that the act of love remains an act--not of willing union--but of mastery.

There is a significant contrast, then, between the nature of the erotic element that informs the Stevens canon and the various expressions of love in the poetry of his contemporaries. As the major criticism has shown, Stevens draws deeply from the romantic tradition, the French symbolists and the meditative schools, but he also stands in the mainstream of American poetry. Like the country of its origin, Stevens' poetry presents a complexity of heritage and a mingling of traditions, as well as a native turn of mind. Stevens' wit, for example, mirrors the subtle word-play of both French and English aesthetic forbears, but as

often expounds the "dead pan" or "poker-face" vein of humor that seems the special province of the American comic spirit, and which finds its most pointed expression in the work of a Clemens, a Benchley, a Thurber, a W.C. Fields, and a Chaplin. It has taken a Stevens, though, to inject this peculiarly American art of humor into the vein of poetry. Stevens' satire also reflects a native mode, for his engagingly democratic darts fly at Continental institutions and American foibles alike. Like Whitman before him, Stevens' lyric voice is at its purest when he is singing and celebrating his native land. Like Whitman's, too, Stevens' celebration of earth and sky and sea is, in essence, an American Song of Songs; it marks a spiritual integration of the poet with the beloved erotic body.

Although the nature of eros in Stevens' poetry separates his work in, I think, the most important way from his contemporaries', his particular type of "paganism" links him with a line of English poetry that goes back to Spenser. The poets in this line share the same qualities that constitute Stevens' "paganism," however far apart they may be in time, background, individual mode or designated "school." Whether the poet is Elizabethan, Romantic, Victorian or Modern, whether he is considered "metaphysical,"

"prophetic," or "decadent," the line that begins (in English poetry, at least) with Spenser, runs through Donne and Marvell, jumps from Blake to Shelley and Swinburne, and crosses an ocean to continue in Whitman and Stevens, manifests the same "pagan" characteristics. For each of these poets, morality is a directive in which the spiritual and aesthetic elements are inseparably fused; each accepts--either consciously or intuitively--a Platonic description of the eros principle; each recognizes a confluence of the sensual and the sublime, and tends to regard both aspects of eros with reverence. None of these poets divide love into strictly opposed categories of "sacred" and "profane," so that a profoundly "pagan" erotic energy courses through the poetry of all of them. It is with these poets, whose eros is devoutly pagan--although some, at the same time, are devoutly Christian--that Stevens can most profitably be aligned.

The sort of love poetry that Wallace Stevens writes would not be possible without his vision of the Interior Paramour as a Diotima figure, as the spouse most worthy of courtship, and as a true resource of the self. This vision at work in Stevens' mind and imagination directs the erotic energy in his poetry along intricate paths. His

understanding of the creative spirit of the universe as an androgynous principle derives from his own journey toward the interior "sibyl of the self" and it is this journey, this experience, that enables the poet to invest his psyche with a "dual" being, and a voice that will finally speak the unification of differentiated parts. It is by means of this instrument--an Interior Paramour who embodies the intellective, the prophetic, the erotic and the sublime--that Stevens' sense of reverence finds a connection with the principle of creation that has continued to exist for him as the supreme possibility, the necessary fiction by which one can live one's life. Stevens' theory of poetry encompasses, as he himself has put it, a "mystical theology" and a "mystical aesthetic," both of which are grounded in the erotic life. It is the complex character of his sibylline Paramour, however, that renders some of his love poems enigmatic, and a few sublime.

NOTES TO CODA

¹Samuel French Morse, "Harold Bloom's Vast Accumulation" (an evaluation of Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate), in The Wallace Stevens Journal (Fall/Winter 1977), Vol. I, p. 103.

²Werner Jaeger, Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development (Oxford University Press, 1967), 2nd ed., pp. 159-60.

³Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. VII, p. 149 (fn. added in 1910).

⁴George Santayana, "Ultimate Religion," in The Philosophy of Santayana, ed. Irwin Edman (The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 590.

⁵William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," Book II, in Pictures From Breughel and Other Poems (New York: New Directions Books, 1949), p. 162.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁷Ezra Pound, The Spirit of Romance (New York: New Directions Books, n.d.), rev. ed.

⁸Selected Poems of Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions Books, 1957), p. 15.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁰The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 211-12.

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