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WALLACE STEVENS:
THE MODERNIST AS TRADITIONAL

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ÖZET

Doktora Tezi

Wallace Stevens: Geleneksel Modernist

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Wallace Stevens şiiri ve estetiği hemen hemen tümüyle, belirli bir soru etrafında inşa edilmiş merkezi bir modernist paradigmanın bünyesinde yer almaktadır: tükenmiş bir geleneğin temeli üzerinde bir şiir ve bir kültür nasıl yeniden oluşturulabilir? Yenileştirme adına, modernist yazarlar çoğu zaman çok eskinin, miyadı dolmuş olanın, harap olanın, dayanılmaz derecede antika ve tuhaf olanın sunuculuğunu yaparlar. Çok eski olan, Modernist yazının motivasyonunun bir parçasıdır. T. S. Eliot ve Harold Bloom’a göre, yeni bir yetenek, klasikler arasına ancak geçmişi, geleneği en etkili ve yerinde biçimde ihlal etmenin karmaşık dramını yaşayarak girebilir. Ancak uyumsuz olan uygundur. Her dönemde hissedilebilen bir yenileştirme, gelenekten kopma arzusu olarak modernizm, sanatta ve toplumsal yaşantıdaki en geleneksel kültürel güdülerden biridir. Gelenekle modernizm arasındaki ironik, yıkıcı ve şaşılabilecek biçimde muhafazakâr dialektik budur işte.

Wallace Stevens yıkıcı biriydi, ve yıkıcı bir kişi olarak en geleneksel şairlerden biriydi. Stevens kendisi ve estetik projeleri için yer açmaya çalışan bir şairdi—radikal, anarşist bir şairdi—ve ayrıca Stevens kültürü oluşturup, onun devamlılığını mümkün kılan bir şairdi—sağlam bir muhafazakârdı, bir muhafızdı. Garip olan şu ki, radikalizmi muhafazakârlığından ayıramaz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şiir, Muhayyile, Romantizm, Modernizm

ABSTRACT
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Wallace Stevens wrote poetry and theorized almost entirely within a major modernist paradigm built around the question: how does one remake a poetry, and a culture, on the grounds of an exhausted tradition? In the name of renovation, modernist writers frequently become purveyors of the archaic, the obsolete, the ruin, the insufferably quaint. The archaic is part of the motivation for modernist writing. According to T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, the fresh individual talent joins the canon only through the complicated drama of violating the past, the tradition, most effectively and properly. Only the misfit is befitting. As the timeless desire to innovate, to break with tradition, modernism is one of the most traditional cultural impulses in art and social life. Such is the ironic, destructive and oddly conservative dialectic of tradition and modernism.

Wallace Stevens was a destructive character, and as a destructive character he is one of the most traditional poets. Stevens was a poet who cleared ground for himself and his aesthetic projects—he was a radical, anarchistic poet—and also a poet who made culture and its continuance possible—he was a staunch conservative, a conserver. The funny thing is, his very radicalism is part and parcel of his conservatism.

Keywords: Poetry, Imagination, Romanticism, Modernism

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THE MODERNIST AS TRADITIONAL**

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ABBREVIATIONS

- NA** Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. 1951.
- CP** Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. 1954.
- OP** Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*. 1957.
- L** Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. 1966.
- PM** Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*. (1966).

INTRODUCTION

The paradox of Wallace Stevens is that he is stretched between Romanticism and Modernism, partaking of both, and complicating both. Wallace Stevens' aim was the creation of a supreme fiction, that is, "a poem equivalent to the idea of God" (*L* 369). In an autobiographical note of 1954, he succinctly identifies the idea that dominates his poetry and that gives a teleological shape to his career. "The author's work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment" (*L* 820). The course of Stevens' poetic development can best be understood as a struggle to overcome the metaphysical limitations of a simple dualism and to achieve a poetic absolute.

In many passages of his letters, the "Adagia," and his essays, Stevens explicitly avows the transcendental character of his supreme fiction. Despite these avowals, his critics have been reluctant to acknowledge his visionary purpose and have chosen for the most part to explicate his poetry within the boundaries imposed by the dichotomy of reality and imagination. For example, Frank Doggett holds that "the concepts that are submerged in Stevens' poetry are usually some variation of the idea of the subject-object relationship" (Doggett, 1966, ix). Doggett argues that "there is no dialectic to support" these concepts and that "throughout Stevens' poetry, the only continuous strand of thought is a fundamental naturalism that is immediately apparent in the poems of *Harmonium*." J. Hillis Miller employs the same categories but transforms naturalism into nihilism. "After the death of the gods and the discovery of nothingness" Miller argues, "Stevens is left in a world made of two elements: subject and object, mind and matter, imagination and reality. Imagination is the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world with which imagination carries on its endless intercourse" (qtd. in Pearce, 1965, 145). This scheme is susceptible to simple inversion: "The nothing is not nothing. It is. It is being" (157). Joseph Riddel, adopting a perspective somewhere in between Doggett's naturalism and Miller's phenomenology, uses the same basic formula. He maintains that in Stevens' poetry "the images exist to relate the self to its world, not to any greater self or any transcendent world" (Riddel 1965, 32).

In later years, the standard dualistic paradigm has frequently been adapted to the rhetorical forms of poststructuralism. Miller and Riddel have both reformulated

their interpretations in deconstructive terms. Helen Regueiro's views may be taken to represent an intermediate phase in this process of adaptation. She argues that "the central concern" of all modern poetry is "the quest for wholeness" and that this quest always, necessarily fails. Poetry only "illuminates the dialectic" between imagination and reality that "it seeks constantly and unsuccessfully to resolve. ... Whether withdrawing into the enclosed space of the intentional creation or dissolving into the natural world, the poet stands blind and speechless in front of a reality he cannot reach or re-create" (Regueiro 9). By defining the motive force of Stevens' dialectic as an illusory telos, Regueiro reduces his poetic enterprise to an elaborate exercise in futility. The dynamic principle of this enterprise is only a blind impulse that is condemned to perpetuating its hopeless longing for closure. The inevitable step beyond this sort of interpretation is to attribute to Stevens himself a consciously deconstructive method. Paul Bové, among others, takes this step. He argues that Stevens "actively employs the telos-oriented quest metaphor against itself not merely to show that there is no center but to test in fiction various poetic and personal myths and metaphors in a world with no firm point of reference" (Bové 187).

Stevens' own view of his poetic enterprise answers neither to the reading based on a static dualism nor to the reading that converts this dualism into an ironic exercise in linguistic irresolution. In a letter of 1948, he declares, "I do not seek a centre and expect to go on seeking it. I don't say that I shall not find it or that I do not expect to find it" (*L* 584). The method of Stevens' seeking is, from first to last, dialectical—a ceaseless process of antithetical formulation, sublimation, and synthesis—but in his later poetry the nature of this dialectic undergoes a change. The two poles of the later dialectic are occupied by opposing metaphysical paradigms: on the one hand, the dualism of mind and reality that informs *Harmonium* (1923), and on the other hand, a transcendental unity of the mind and reality within the "mind of minds" (*CP* 254). From the dualistic perspective, fulfillment consists of a momentary rapprochement with reality; it is thus associated with what Stevens calls the poetry of normal life, that is, a poetry concerned with "the earth" and "men in their earthy implications" (*OP* 229). One of these earthy implications is that all the parts of the world constitute only an aggregate of discreet particulars; there is no principle of synthesis that would bind these parts into a "poem of the whole" (*CP* 442). From the

transcendental perspective, fulfillment consists of completed figurations of sentient unity. The kind of poetry that is written from this perspective is what, in his later terminology, Stevens calls “pure poetry,” and the elaboration of this mode constitutes the quest for a supreme fiction. If “The cancelings, / The negations are never final” (CP 414), there are nonetheless moments of supreme fulfillment within the quest, moments when, as Stevens says in “The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet” (1943), the poet writes a poem that completely accomplishes his purpose” (NA 53). In its simplest terms, Stevens’ purpose is to render himself the medium through which “the central mind” comes to knowledge of itself (CP 524).

Although many of Stevens’ critics have recognized that his poetry has some kind of affinity with Romanticism, most would agree with Walton Litz that Stevens unequivocally rejects “the mystical transcendence of the old romantic” (Litz, 1977, 130). The transcendental element in Stevens’ later poetry has not, however, gone altogether unnoticed. Three of Stevens’ most prominent critics—Harold Bloom, Joseph Riddel, and Roy Harvey Pearce—have commented on it, and they offer divergent opinions about its significance in Stevens’ work as a whole. Bloom and Riddel both argue that the primary, dominant motive in Stevens’ poetry is the “composition of self.” (The primacy of “the self” is also a leading theme in James Baird’s study of Stevens. Baird maintains that Stevens “will not accept a transcendental reality” [Baird 1968, 74]). In his analysis of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942), Bloom argues that Stevens’ supreme fiction “will turn out not to be poetry or a poem but, as in Emerson, Whitman and Wordsworth, to be a poet, to be a fiction of the self.” However, in reference to a poem of 1948, “Saint John and the Back-Ache,” Bloom remarks, “Saint John is the Transcendental element in Stevens himself, the apocalyptic impulse that he has dismissed for so long but that will begin to break upon in his reveries in ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’ and ‘The Rock’ and then will dominate the poems composed from 1952 through 1955” (Bloom 1976, 206, 208). Riddel locates the supposed irruption of transcendentalism somewhat earlier in *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). Segregating this volume, he suggests that “critics could dismiss this kind of poetry, for it is not after all what poetry is supposed to be unless that poetry is apocalyptic or symbolistic; unless, that is, the poetry deals with transcendence rather than, as Stevens claimed, the human”

(Riddel 1965, 225). Roy Harvey Pearce, in his early work on Stevens, felt that the transcendentalism of the later poetry was “a kind of disease ... It is wanting to have God’s mind” (Pearce 1965, 123). In a later essay, Pearce announced a decided shift in sympathy (Pearce 1980, 295). Pearce delineated a purposeful, dramatic progression in the development of Stevens’ later poetry.

In his pursuit of a visionary fulfillment, Stevens situates himself within a central Romantic tradition. The normative mode of Stevens’ visionary poetry is that of the Romantic sublime—both the elegiac sublime associated with Keats, Tennyson and Whitman, and the sublime of celestial grandeur associated with these three figures and with Wordsworth, Shelley, and Emerson. The influence of George Santayana—poet, philosopher, and Stevens’ mentor at Harvard—sometimes mingles with that of the Romantics, but Santayana’s philosophy is not fundamentally transcendental; it is a philosophy of skeptical aestheticism. At the beginning of Stevens’ career, the Romantic visionary tradition seems already to have exhausted itself. The course of Stevens’ career thus inverts the historical progression of Romanticism and describes a cycle from the modernist repudiation of a visionary tradition to the renewal and continuation of that tradition. In much of his early poetry, Stevens attempts to find what will suffice within the attenuated Romanticism of a fin de siècle aestheticism. Most of the poems in *Harmonium* presuppose that the disclosures of sensory perception are all we know on earth and all we need to know. In “Sunday Morning” (1915), Stevens seeks to demonstrate that lyric naturalism may stand in place of the heaven that has been vacated by the Christian God. The failure of this effort reveals itself in “The Comedian as the Letter C” (1922), the first of Stevens’ long poems that synthesize a whole era of his imaginative life. Crispin, the comedian, realizes in his poetic progress the logical extreme of Stevens’ metaphysical premises in *Harmonium*, and he concludes in silence. Assuming a stance of ironic detachment, Stevens traces his protagonist’s gradual absorption into common material reality. Crispin explicitly commits himself to an anti-Romantic ethos, and when Stevens returns from his silence (1923-1930) to poetry he consciously begins to orient himself to the creation of “a new romanticism” (L 350). The term “a new romanticism” becomes essentially equivalent to the term “a supreme fiction”; by describing his visionary goal as new Romanticism, Stevens both

signals the historical lineage of the supreme fiction and also designates the modal, affective range of the themes, images and poetic structures that constitute this fiction. Through his own articulations of the Romantic sublime, Stevens offers a sophisticated interpretation of the Romantic visionary tradition.

In his effort to create a new Romanticism, Stevens draws heavily from the major figures of old Romanticism. In Peter Brazeau's oral biography of Stevens, the composer John Gruen reports,

He told me that he didn't know what his poetry meant at times, that he really had to think hard as to what he really meant by that image or that phrase or that word. He talked about submersion, about words being submerged and then rising out, that they seemed to have been hidden and then revealed themselves. (Brazeau 1983, 207)

If Stevens was not always certain about what his poetry meant, he might have been equally uncertain of its derivation. Many of the echoes of Kant, Tennyson, Emerson, and others in Stevens' poetry may well be cases of "submersion." At other times, Stevens' allusive echoes seem consciously designed to define his position in relation to that of his predecessors, either to oppose them or to align himself with them. In "Evening without Angels" (1934), for example, he seems to be directing a conscious polemic against Shelly's "Mont Blanc." In "A Primitive Like an Orb" (1948), his theme, imagery, and diction are overtly Emersonian. Whether consciously or unconsciously constructed, the subtext of allusions in Stevens' work enriches and illuminates the primary text. Like the robe of peace after death in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (1947), Stevens' poetry has

The whole spirit sparkling in its cloth
Generations of the imagination piled
In the manner of its stitchings. (*CP* 434)

The purposeful creation of the complex set of metaphysical hypotheses, mythic motifs, and dialectical structure that constitutes the supreme fiction emerges very gradually in Stevens' work. In *Ideas of Order* (1936), he makes considerable progress toward reconstructing the Romantic sublime; nonetheless, many of his doctrinal declarations in this volume reiterate Crispin's assumption that "his soil is man's intelligence" (*CP* 36), and in those poems—such as "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1934)—that suggest a transcendental presence, he refrains from explicitly transcendental formulations. In "Owl's Clover" (1935-6), he laboriously articulates

the elementary premises of the supreme fiction, and he produces the figure of the “subman,” a personification of the subconscious as a source of archetypal images. Although the subman disappears after “Owl’s Clover,” it marks an important stage in the development of Stevens’s theory of pure poetry as a poetry of mythic vision. In “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), an essay written to accompany a reading of “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens begins to formulate the theoretical prepositions that will govern his later development. He elaborates the opposition between pure and normal poetry, and he identifies the motive of pure poetry as the desire “to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God” (*OP* 222).

The fulfillment Stevens seeks is a poetic vision of the supreme spirit creating space and time and manifesting itself in each creative act of human consciousness. Within this spirit, all oppositions—between mind and material reality, here and there, then and now, signifier and signified, and the individual and the whole—are resolved in a “pure principle” of sentient relation (*CP* 418). The pure principle animates “The essential poem at the centre of things” (*CP* 440) that generates the appearances both of phenomenal reality and of poetry. To write poetry that figures forth this generative source is to construct a paradoxical mediation between the conditions of conscious human existence—a consciousness that exists only through limitation and distinction—and a perfect universal presence that both embodies and transcends these limitations. Such poetry is “A difficult apperception” (*CP* 440), and the moments of fulfillment within this quest can never be preserved in the form of stable doctrinal constructs. They nonetheless constitute touchstones for the spiritual and aesthetic authenticity of Stevens’ “new romanticism.” It is in the nature of the supreme fiction that it cannot be “fixed” (*NA* 34), but for all that, “it is not / Less real” (*CP* 418).

In *Parts of a World* (1942) and *Transport to Summer* (1947), Stevens both elaborates the mythic motifs that give form to the supreme fiction and also develops the metaphysical dialectic through which it is to be realized. In *Parts* he establishes his visionary goal as the poetic realization of “essential unity” (*CP* 215), and he opposes this ideal to the pluralistic belief that “Words are not forms of a single word. / In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts” (*CP* 204). Words that are forms of a single word would constitute an intellectual structure that contains both the external

world and the sub-intellective or “irrational” components of experience. Many of the motifs that illustrate Stevens’ conception of essential unity originate in the earlier poetry, but it is in *Parts* that Stevens decisively undertakes to fashion “The great structure” (CP 502) of the supreme fiction, a structure that is self-referential, self-qualifying, and all-inclusive.

Most of the poems in *Parts* and *Transport* are in some sense notes toward a supreme fiction. Although many of these notes move “toward” Stevens’ visionary goal chiefly by defining the dialectical negations in response to which he articulates his conception of the supreme fiction, the dominant movement is always one of synthesis with the ever-expanding pattern of themes and motifs that culminates in the visionary mythology of *Auroras*. *Transport* contains both his finest realizations of the poetry of normal life and also his most advanced preparations for a poetry of mythic vision. In *Transport* he surveys virtually the whole range of visionary images: for example, the giant, the diamond crown, the archaic queen, white light as the radiance at the “centre of all circles” (CP 366), the circle, the book, the stars, music, and the “breath” of the spirit. In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” “Description Without Place” (1945), and other poems, he expounds his theory of “belief” in “The fiction of an absolute” (CP 404). In three major poems written in 1947 and early 1948—“The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” “The Auroras of Autumn,” and “A Primitive Like and Orb”—Stevens gathers together the ideas and images of a poetic lifetime, and he fashions these materials into a comprehensive mythology of life, death, and the imagination. It is in these poems that he penetrates most closely to what he calls “the ultimate intellect” (CP 433). In his later poetry, Stevens continues to oscillate between the modes of pure and normal poetry, and in his figurations of pure poetry he reflects on and re-creates the resolutions of the major visionary poems. The Romantic sublime constantly threatens to invert itself into nihilistic vacancy, and Stevens must often take refuge in tragic sublimations of Romantic grandeur. He cannot surpass his former achievements, and, beginning with “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949), the necessity of repetition within “a dwindled sphere” (CP 504) becomes a source of passionate frustration for him.

Stevens’ poetry and prose constitute an intellectual drama and a commentary on that drama. Although most of Stevens’ better critics have assumed that his poetry

is in some sense “philosophical,” the precise weight to be given to the “ideas” in his poetry remains a matter of some perplexity. For example, while Frank Doggett explicitly focuses his discussion on the philosophical content of Stevens’ poetry, he deprecates the intrinsic significance of this content. He warns against any effort to discover “a body of philosophic doctrine” in the poetry, and he argues that “the concepts that emerge from long reading of the poetry of Stevens are so slight and so basic that any elementary course in philosophy ... could yield all of them” (Doggett 1966, viii). Even if we concede the justice of these observations, it is still necessary to consider Stevens a serious philosophical poet. His poetry is philosophical not because the metaphysical hypotheses it contains are strikingly original but because they are elemental. Stevens’ poetry subsists within a genuinely philosophical atmosphere where a metaphysical perspective crucially influences the quality of experience. The dualistic and transcendental paradigms are not for Stevens merely hypotheses propounded for the sake of their dialectical potential; they are primary modes of being. While they are susceptible to modification and elaboration, Stevens responds to them, at any given moment, with the kind of immediacy with which he responds to the weather, and indeed, they often find their symbolic correlatives in metaphors of the sky, the air, and the light.

In a letter of 1948, Stevens remarks that “there is nothing that I desire more intensely than to make a contribution to the theory of poetry” (*L* 585). The essays written between 1936 and 1951 answer to this desire, and the theory of poetry that emerges most distinctly from these essays is one of a visionary Romanticism. In the development and exposition of this theory, Stevens is hampered both by occasional lapses in discursive clarity and by difficulties inherent in the theory itself. As in his poetry, he sometimes confuses the dualistic and the transcendental conceptions of the world, and he is not always clear about the metaphysical status of “reality.” At times, the transcendental conception cannot be properly articulated within the forms of rational discourse. In “A Collect of Philosophy” (1951), Stevens declares that the function of “cosmic poetry” is to “make us realize that we are creatures, not of a part, which is our everyday limitation, but of a whole for which, for the most part, we have as yet no language” (*OP* 189). Accordingly, as Steven says in “The Relations between Poetry and Painting” (1951), “The theory of poetry ... often seems to

become in time a mystical theology” (NA 173). The referent of a supreme fiction is an object that is no object; it is an illimitable presence that contains all other objects. No simply mimetic theory of poetic figuration can account for the problematic interaction between the poetic artifice and the “reality” that is both its source and end. The presence to be depicted in this artifice is not a stable set of relations but the very principle of relation itself. Any definition of this principle must acknowledge simultaneously the ceaseless activity of the principle as process and its equilibrium as the continuous unity of all process. That is, every definition must implicitly contain its own paradoxical negative and so suspend itself in a constitutive ambiguity. Despite the confusions and difficulties that attend Stevens’ visionary enterprise, he does “arrive at the end of my logic” (L 861), and in his essays he identifies the basic terms and principles that constitute this logic.

Stevens’ first sustained effort at expository prose on poetry is the 1936 essay “The Irrational Element in Poetry.” Stevens’ chief purpose in “The Irrational Element” is to identify the essence of poetry. He establishes his own definition of pure poetry as a modification of the definition given by the Abbé Bremond, a Jesuit theologian who “elucidated a mystical motive” for the writing of poetry (OP 221). “In his opinion, one writes poetry to find God.” In contrast to this strictly religious definition, Stevens declares that “pure poetry is a term that has grown to be descriptive of poetry in which not the subject but the poetry of the subject is paramount” (OP 222). By “the true subject” Stevens probably means the descriptive, narrative, or expository content of a poem. By “the poetry of the subject” he probably means the purely aesthetic effect of sound and imagery. In a letter of 1935, he remarks that “when *Harmonium* was in the making there was a time when I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in pure poetry, as it was called. I still have a distinct liking for that sort of thing” (L 228). In the same letter, he remarks that the opinion that his poetry is “entirely without ideas” seems “ridiculously wrong.” The fin de siècle opposition between moralism (content) and aestheticism (form) survives in Stevens’ thinking. In another letter of 1935, he contrasts “pure poetry” with “didacticism.” Although he declares that “my real danger is not didacticism, but abstraction,” he concedes that “abstraction looks very much like didacticism” (L 302). More decisively, in one of

the “Adagia,” he contrasts pure poetry with both didacticism and philosophy, and he urges himself to “seek those purposes that are purely the purposes of the pure poet” (this adage is from the early 1930s; *OP* 157).

Stevens suggests that the advantage of pure poetry, a poetry of images and music alone, is that it gives “a sense of the freshness or vividness of life.” In “The Irrational Element,” he places himself among “those who seek for the freshness and strangeness of poetry in fresh and strange places” (*OP* 228). At the time of this essay, Stevens drives toward an exclusive identification of the imagination with the subconscious, and he sets the imagination in radical opposition to the unpoetic conscious intellect. He suggests that “the irrational element is merely poetic energy,” and he explains that he is obsessed with the irrational because “we expect the irrational to liberate us from the rational” (*OP* 219, 226). In “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens embodies the irrational in the figure of the subman, “The man below the man below the man, / Steeped in night’s opium, evading day” (*OP* 66), and he explicitly elevates this figure above the authority of the conscious intellect:

We have grown weary of the man that thinks.
He thinks and it is not true. The man below
Images and it is true.

Stevens yields authority to the subman because he is the source of archetypal images, the consciousness within an ancestral memory buried in the mind. The subman is “born within us as a second self, / A self of parents who have never died” (*OP* 67).

In canto ten of “Esthétique du Mal” (1944), Stevens will use the Jungian term *anima* to describe “the child of a mother fierce / In his body, fiercer in his mind, merciless / To accomplish the truth in his intelligence” (*CP* 321). In a letter of 1909, Stevens divulges a new insight into a conception that he claims has “always” been a part of his thought:

Music, stirring something within us, stirs the Memory. I do not mean our personal Memory... but our inherited Memory, the Memory we have derived from those who lived before us in our own race, and in other races, illimitable, in which we resume the whole past life of the world, all the emotions, passions, experiences of the millions and millions of men and women now dead, whose lives have insensibly passed into our own ... It is a memory deep in the mind, without images, so vague that only ... Music, touching it subtly, vaguely awakens ... What one listens to at a concert ... is not only the harmony of sounds, but the whispering of innumerable

responsive spirits ... momentarily revived, that stir like the invisible motions of the mind wavering between dreams and sleep. (*L* 136)

Although Stevens will eventually alter his belief that this memory subsists “without images,” music remains a fundamental element of his visionary experience. His application of music to the idea of an ancestral memory may have been suggested to him in part by Emerson’s discussion of inherited genetic characteristics as fate: “In different hours a man represents each of several of his ancestors, as if there were seven or eight of us rolled up in each man’s skin ... and they constitute the variety of notes for that new piece of music which his life is” (Emerson 1904, 10). In his commentary on “Sombre Figuration,” Stevens declares that “the future must bear within it every past, not least the pasts that have become submerged in the sub-conscious, things in the experience of races” (*L* 373).

In “The Irrational Element,” Stevens’ preoccupation with the imaginative functions of the subconscious begins to merge with his aestheticism and to give it new depth. At the same time, this preoccupation complicates the conflict between his aestheticism and his tendency toward the abstractive or “didactic.” While his conception of the subconscious as the source of mythic images continues to exert a potent influence on his poetry, in his later work the influence of “the man below” is reunited with that of the conscious, reflective intellect. In his letter of 1940 commenting on “Sombre Figuration,” Stevens remarks that in this poem the imagination “is treated as an activity of the sub-conscious” (*L* 373). Later, in 1945 and 1946, he will declare that “if people are to become dependent on poetry for any of the fundamental satisfactions, poetry must have an increasingly intellectual shape and power” and, further, that “supreme poetry can be produced only on the highest possible level of the cognitive” (*L* 526, 500).

In short, “The Irrational Element” exhibits self-contradictory confusion. The tendency to abstraction Stevens had earlier mentioned as a danger converges with the aestheticism to which it was formerly opposed, and the result is a makeshift form of Platonism that holds the balance against his exaggerated irrationalism.

While it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. (*OP* 222)

The words *harmonious* and *orderly* evoke the aesthetic ethos of *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*. Four years after “The Irrational Element,” in a memorandum on poetry to Henry Church, Stevens writes:

The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will neither adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing. (*L* 378)

These alternatives mean the same thing for Stevens himself in that by adapting the idea of God to our different intelligence, he provides a substitute for the traditional idea.

In 1936, Stevens has established the two poles between which the later propositions of his visionary poetry will be compounded. At one pole there is the Platonic impulse toward intellectual order, and at the other the Romantic impulse toward a common center of sublimity—order and mystery. Soon, Stevens turns his attention to the distinction between pure and normal poetry. The poetry of normal life, a poetry of sensual immediacy, flourishes within a dualistic view of the world. In “Credences of Summer” (1946), the opposition between the mind and reality results in a shock of satisfied recognition; the external world is a rock, “the visible rock, the audible, / The brilliant mercy of a sure repose” (*CP* 375). Pure poetry, in contrast, presupposes and articulates a transcendent principle of pure sentient relation that comprehends both the mind and reality within the unity of “the central mind” (*CP* 524). Insofar as there is a difference of subject matter in pure and normal poetry, one might say that in normal poetry there is more concern for personality and for the relation of the self to the social and political world. In “Of Modern Poetry” (1940), Stevens says of poetry that

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war. (*CP* 240)

Pure poetry takes as its subject “the forms of thought” that are also the forms of phenomenal reality (*CP* 432). The ultimate purpose of pure poetry is to give figurative form to “the essential poem at the centre of things” (*CP* 440). In many of his major longer poems, Stevens not only alternates between these two modes but

also mingles their tonal affects. The dominant tonality of normal poetry is that of a robust delight in the physical world, and the dominant tonality of pure poetry is that of a passionate absorption in the Romantic sublime. Stevens frequently reformulates this modal polarity in his prose, and the dialectical interplay between these two modes provides the main thematic structure for all of the later volumes of poetry.

In an address to the Poetry Society of America in 1951, Stevens defines pure poetry: "In one direction poetry moves toward the ultimate things of pure poetry; in the other it speaks to great numbers of people themselves, making extraordinary texts and memorable music out of what they feel and know" (*OP* 240). What Stevens means by "the ultimate things of pure poetry" he discloses in "A Collect of Philosophy," also written in 1951: "The idea of God is the ultimate poetic idea" (*OP* 193).

The equivocal manner of Stevens' enunciations of purpose in "The Irrational Element" stands in striking contrast to the confidence with which he articulates the spiritual role of the poet in "A Collect of Philosophy." These two essays are separated by a period of fifteen years, and the tonal and doctrinal contrasts between them can be measured out in stages through the essays written in the interim. Stevens' next two prose works are "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941) and "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (1943). In both these essays, Stevens is preparing the ground for the "supreme effort" that it is "inevitable" that he should make (*L* 445).

In "The Noble Rider," Stevens' affirmations remain obscure; he speaks of a "nobility which is our spiritual height and depth," but he declares that "nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible" (*NA* 33). After a series of declarations about what he is not thinking of, he openly avows that he is "evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed" (*NA* 34). In "Virile Poet," though he swaddles his objective in an elaborately cautious syntax, he is far more explicit about what constitutes our spiritual height and depth. He introduces his topic by remarking on the "sense of liberation" a poet feels when he writes a poem that "completely accomplishes the purpose of the poet" (*NA* 50). To describe this feeling, he edges up to a "state of elevation" by means of a series of conditional hypotheses: "If ... we speak of liberation ... of justification ... of purification ... the experience of the poet

is of no less a degree than the experience of the mystic" (NA 50). In defining the quasi-mystical quality of this experience, Stevens again resorts to a conditional sentence structure, and he takes further precautions by juggling the mood and tense of his verbs.

If we say that the idea of God is merely a poetic idea, even if the supreme poetic idea ... the feeling ... of a perfection touched ... if we say these things and if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in His seat in heaven in all His glory, the poet himself ... would have seemed ... a man who needed what he had created, uttering the hymns of joy that followed his creation. (NA 51)

After he has announced his purpose, Stevens describes in a much more direct way the program he has undertaken to enable himself to achieve it. "Having elected to exercise his power to the full and at its height ... he may begin its exercise by studying it in exercise and proceed little by little, as he becomes his own master, to those violences which are the maturity of his desires (NA 63). "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," written the year before "Virile Poet," is one such exercise. In a letter of 1946, three years after this essay, Stevens writes that "this is a time for the highest poetry" (L 526).

Stevens' poetry involves both the human and the divine, and it simultaneously employs metaphysical abstraction and archetypal symbolism. In an essay of 1948, "Imagination as Value," Stevens seeks to define the essence of poetry, and the definition he gives implicitly provides a rationale for the major visionary poems of 1947 and 1948. He suggests that "the life of the imagination" consists in the effort "to satisfy, say, the universal mind, which, in the case of a poet, would be the imagination that tries to penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world" (NA 144). In "Two or Three Ideas" (1951), Stevens offers an evocative analysis of mythology, and he explains how a poetry of mythic vision enables the poet to fulfill "a spiritual role" in the modern world (OP 206). He proposes to discuss the kind of response one must feel at the death of the gods, and he professes, for the sake of simplicity, to "speak only of the ancient and the foreign gods" (OP 205). In fact, what he describes is the "experience of annihilation" at the death of the Christian God and his sacramental entourage (OP 207). "To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to

disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing” (*OP* 206). By merging his culture’s god(s) with those of the ancient world, Stevens can generalize about the recurrent experience of lost faith; and by distancing himself with the pretext of discussing a remote calamity, he can illustrate, in a manner at once dispassionate and poignant, the experience he refers to with more reticence in a letter of 1940: “My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all bought up to believe. Humanism would be the natural substitute, but the more I see of humanism the less I like it” (*L* 348). The cause Stevens assigns for the death of the gods is the emergence of “a different aesthetic” in which “the difference was that of an intenser humanity” (*OP* 212). The result of this change was, first, that “it left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents,” so that each man had “to resolve life and the world in his own terms” (*OP* 207). In “Sunday Morning” (1915), Stevens had declared that we live in an “island solitude, unsponsored, free” (*CP* 70), and within this solitude the terms of resolution he had proposed were those of an intenser humanity. “Divinity must live within herself: / Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow” (*CP* 67). The course of Stevens’ poetic development confirms that the more he saw of this kind of humanism the less he liked it. In “Asides on the Oboe” (1940), he declares that “It is a question, now, / Of final belief” and that “It is time to choose” (*CP* 250). The choice he makes is not to renounce all gods but to fashion new ones. In “Two or Three Ideas,” he seeks to explain and justify this choice. He argues that if the old gods have proven themselves by their death to be nothing more than “a definition of perfection in ideal creatures,” then the poet retains as their legacy the capacity for making new definitions of perfection in ideal creatures of his own imagining (*OP* 212). The gods are the “personae of a peremptory elevation and glory”; they are those companions we create because they are “at least assumed to be full of the secret of things” and “in any event bear in themselves ... the peculiar majesty of mankind’s sense of worth” (*OP* 208).

So long as Stevens was content to define pure poetry in purely aesthetic terms (music and images), he had no pressing need to reflect on the relations between poetry and philosophy. Once he begins to redefine pure poetry as a spiritual quest, he

must directly confront the issue of conceptual content and defend the claims of poetry, as against those of philosophy, for cognitive supremacy. His method for accomplishing these purposes is, on the one hand, to form a rapprochement between poetry and philosophy by establishing their community of metaphysical interests and, on the other hand, to elevate poetry as a more complete form of knowledge. In “Virile Poet,” Stevens sets philosophy and poetry on an equal footing. They both seek “truth,” and both imagination and reason are necessary compliments of any “complete” idea (NA 42). Having established this equation of aim and complementarity of function, Stevens goes a step further and designates poetry as “superior” (NA 43), but he has not yet found any cogent way of validating this claim. He says that the pleasure of the imagination is “the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation” (NA 58).

The degree to which Stevens felt the feebleness of his resort to sensationalism may be measured by the violence with which, in “Imagination as Value,” he swings back the other way. He quotes Ernst Cassirer’s characterization of Schelling’s Romantic theory of the imagination. “‘The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is forever perfecting itself’” (NA 136). Stevens endorses this view of the imagination, which he dubs “the imagination as metaphysics” (NA 138), and he singles out as its essential feature the drive to abstraction. “The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction” (NA 139). The greatest threat to this achievement is “the romantic,” which subsists in “minor wish-fulfillments” and “is incapable of abstraction.”

Stevens’ designation of his nemesis as “the romantic” is confusing; the opposite of “the romantic,” the imagination as metaphysics, is precisely what Cassirer calls “romantic thought” (NA 136). In the letter in which Stevens recalls identifying “pure poetry” with “images and the music of verse,” he implicitly concedes that such poetry could be designated “decorative” (L 288). In one of the “Adagia,” he says that “romanticism is to poetry what the decorative is to painting” (OP 169). When, therefore, in “Imagination as Value,” he indicts the romantic because it “belittles” the imagination, he is implicitly repudiating his former association with an attenuated form of Romanticism.

In "A Collect of Philosophy," Stevens returns to "the question of supremacy as between philosophy and poetry" (*OP* 200). Imagination is superior to reason, but only insofar as it makes use of reason. At the same time, philosophers are granted a degree of poetic status in that "their ideas are often triumphs of the imagination." The conclusion, then, is not that either reason or imagination alone is supreme, but that "when they act in concert they are supreme" together (*OP* 201).

In conceiving of poetry as committed to meaningful statement, Stevens unavoidably involves himself in the question of poetic belief. In dealing with this question, he consistently assumes that absolute belief, that is, a belief in the absolute validity of any proposition, is obsolete. He believes that the single most distinctive feature of the modern mind is its recognition that all propositions are hypothetical, approximate, conjectural. In a letter of 1940, Stevens remarks that "the history of belief will show that it has always been in a fiction" (*L* 370). Belief has always been an adherence to fictional constructs, but it is only in the modern world that this fact has been recognized. It is to the older, naïve form of belief that Stevens is referring when he says that "poetry does not address itself to beliefs" (*NA* 144). Poetry does not pretend to give an incontrovertible, factual account of supreme beings and supreme truths, but it does seek to figure forth man's experience of apprehending the divine. It is in this sense that though poetry is fictive, "the incredible is not a part of poetic truth. On the contrary, what concerns us in poetry ... is the belief of credible people in credible things" (*NA* 53). Stevens' distinction between the two kinds of belief is at work beneath the seemingly paradoxical definition of modern man with which he concludes "A Collect of Philosophy": "It is as if in a study of modern man we predicated the greatness of poetry as the final measure of his stature, as if his willingness to believe beyond belief was what had made him modern and was always certain to keep him so" (*OP* 202). To believe beyond belief is to employ poetry as the medium of a provisional knowledge of an ultimate spiritual reality. The existence of any such reality is not itself subject to logical proof. It is a poetic hypothesis, and its value as a hypothesis can be measured only by its effect. For Stevens, "the idea of God is the ultimate poetic idea" (*OP* 193) because it most fully satisfies the poetic need for a complete figurative synthesis. It is, as Stevens often says, a product of "desire." Although mythic-poetic figurations are "full of the secret of things," they

can never invest their secret with the status of a belief that is “final” in the sense of a fixed, dogmatic conviction in theoretical principles.

In a letter of 1945, Stevens declares that “for me the most important thing is to realize poetry,” and he defines this need as “the desire to contain the world wholly within one’s ... perception of it” (*L* 501). Short of solipsism, the only way in which Stevens can contain the world within a poetic construct is to conceive of both external reality and the individual mind as dependent elements of “the universal mind.” Stevens’ supreme fiction as the poem that fashions an image of God—“the central mind”—validates this image by attributing it to the creative agency of God himself. As Stevens puts it, in one of the “Adagia,” “The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created heaven were, as it happened, one” (*OP* 176).

The fulfillment that Stevens proposes to himself in his supreme fiction is to become the medium through which God achieves knowledge of himself. Stevens begins to draw toward this conclusion in “Virile Poet,” where he declares that “an idea of God,” if it satisfied both reason and imagination, “would establish a divine beginning and end for us” (*NA* 42). It is in this essay, also, that he identifies his quest as a determination to find “a center of poetry, a *vis* or *noeud vital*” (*NA* 44). He explains the source of “that sense of the possibility of a remote, a mystical *vis* or *noeud vita*” by describing “the way a poet feels when he is writing ... To describe it by exaggerating it, he shares the transformation, not to say apotheosis, accomplished by the poem” (*NA* 49). In one of the “Adagia,” he is less diffident: “1. God and the imagination are one. 2. The thing imagined is the imaginer. ... Hence, I suppose, the imaginer is God” (*OP* 178). Stevens’ formulations of these principles probably draw support from similar formulation in Emerson. In “Nature,” Emerson defines “Ideas” as “immortal necessary uncreated natures,” and he argues that “no man touches these divine natures, without becoming, in some degree, himself divine” (Emerson 1904, 56). The hedging phrase “in some degree” would have found a responsive ear in Stevens. In “The Over-Soul,” Emerson is more direct. “The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God” (Emerson 1904, 292). For Stevens, “the imaginer is God” because in writing poetry the poet shares in the sentient principle that creates the world and that achieves self-recognition in human thought. This is

the idea that Stevens in “Imagination as Value” adopts under the title “the imagination as metaphysics,” the idea that “the true work of art, whatever it may be, is not the work of the individual artist. It is time and it is place, as these perfect themselves” (NA 139).

CHAPTER ONE

A DECREATIVE POETICS

1.1. PEARCE AND REGUEIRO

“We keep coming back and coming back / To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns / That fall upon it out of the wind” (*CP* 471). Lines like these set the tone for much Stevens criticism. The critic, like Stevens’ protagonist, seeks the “poem of pure reality”. The dialectic of the imaged and the real is not resolved in the poem but dissolved by an “eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing, without reflection”. Imagination takes on “a nocturnal shine” (473). The reflected light of the imagination is devalued in favor of direct intuitive perception.

This “decreative” approach reacts against early studies—William Van O’Connor’s *The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens* (1950) and Robert Pack’s *Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought* (1958), for example—that see Stevens as a celebrant of poetic imagination, and to later books by Riddel and Doggett that explore philosophical and poetical assumptions defining the creative/aesthetic dimension in Stevens. Setting the opposing standard, *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1965), edited by Pearce and Miller, and Pearce’s *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961) find Stevens skeptical of the imagination’s validity—a prophet of postmodernism, writing at the limits of language, exposing, with metaphorical ironies, the inadequacy of metaphorical imagination. Poetic language is turned back by the opacity of the external and the ferocity of the subconscious internal. The extreme of this view, developed in Regueiro’s *The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens* (1976), sees the imagination wholly discredited in the later poetry: Stevens, to overcome subjective obscurations, performs various mental and linguistic gymnastics that thwart the imagination, making possible a revelation of “the things themselves.” The poet becomes a de-creator inscribing an anti-poetic poetry.

Stevens’ essay “The Relations between Poetry and Painting” supplies the central terminology for decreative criticism:

Simone Weil says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our

revelations are not revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. (NA 174)

Decreation appears to advocate a counter-creativity, the destruction of poetic structures for the sake of disclosure.

Pearce offers a seminal analysis of decreative processes: “The poet as decreator apprehends reality as it has been before (if ‘before’ can be used in a dialectical and not a temporal sense) it could be overcome and transformed by the poet as creator” (Pearce, 1961, 412). Here decreation opens onto the “thing-in-itself” as logically prior. Pearce distinguishes Stevens’ later poetry: “At the end Stevens wants to conceive of confronting reality directly, not as it might be mediated by formal elegancies of words. Poetic form is made to negate itself and to point to an ultimate vision beyond the poems” (382). Stevens as decreator becomes a kind of inverse transcendentalist: “Where Emerson was driven in the end to postulate a nature beyond nature, a supernatural, Stevens would postulate a reality within reality, an intranatural, or an infranatural” (413).

Frank Kermode, focusing on Weil’s use of the term “decreation,” argues that it is an act of “renunciation, considered as a creative act like that of God. God could create only by hiding himself. Decreation implies the deliberate repudiation (not simply the destruction) of the naturally human and so naturally false set of the world: we participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves” (Kermode, 1968, 75). Kermode’s explication subverts the creator. In Stevens’ poem “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” (CP 496), the “angel of reality” proclaims:

I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash.

The angelic figure ushers us beyond recalcitrant, landlocked images so that we experience the fluidity of the earth’s own speech. The surface of the poem seems to repudiate the human and privilege a non-human truth/reality. And certain of Stevens’ prose comments encourage this reading, though not without complication:

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

Without denying that “we live in a world of the imagination,” Stevens affirms that contact with reality is “the great blessing” of life. But as with the controversial question of decreation, the significance here of Stevens’ figurations—the “angel,” the “great blessing”—depends on the eccentric coordinates and compass of “reality.” He says elsewhere about “Angel Surrounded”: “The point of the poem is that there must be in the world about us things that solace us quite as fully as any heavenly visitation could” (*L* 661). Reality, as conveyed by the angel, is the earthly, the close-at-hand, necessarily appropriated by poetry which fulfills the role recommended in section V of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: to “take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns” (*CP* 167). The angel, agent of vision personifying the refreshment that our glimpse of reality may provide, distinguishes itself from the reality it brings into view; yet the decreative process—an essential clearing away—takes place in the “sight” and “hearing” of the angel. Existing through the sensibility of a being created by imagination, the experience which is the “great blessing” is, “like meanings said / By repetitions of half meanings,” not unmediated or extrahuman. Although the angel is the angel of reality, not of imagination, it functions as surrogate of an imagination which transcends egocentrism. As creative/decreative center, the angel figures an ascendant form of our own vision, simultaneously displacing the “stubborn, man-locked set” of ordinary vision and its metaphysical accomplice, the all-pervasive vision of the Absolute. The angel of reality shows us a world without “concealed creator” (*CP* 296).

Eleanor Cook, in “The Deceptions of Wallace Stevens,” maintains that Stevens is “turning Weil’s term to his own uses, in a decreation of her decreation, or a borrowing back of religious terms for secular usage” (Cook 1980, 46). Weighing the metaphysical implications of Stevens’ usage, she defines his redefinition of the word: “Decreation in Stevens’s essay is seeing the schema of the world move from a schema of something that is created—a world issued, say, by divine fiat from the

Logos—to a schema of something that is uncreated” (46). The recognition that decreation deconstructs theocentric assumptions underscores the relatedness of “decreation,” “the uncreated,” and “our own powers.” If, as in Stevens’ “modern reality... of decreation,” the idea of God is itself decrelated (as in “the idea of God is the ultimate poetic idea” [*OP* 193]), what remains is our own improvisational sensibility. Imagination becomes the ultimate uncreated—thus Stevens’ conclusion: man’s truth is the final resolution.

Stevens’ resolution, relying on imaginative generation, projects past the obsolete and discordant. He writes in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”: “All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence” (*NA* 17). Formerly vigorous, now faded, mythical imaginings that once “sufficed,” as Stevens says in “Of Modern Poetry” (*CP* 239), having been decrelated, are so far replaced only by fragmented, pedestrian mythologies. This is the decreative tenor of modern reality. Riddel says about “Of Modern Poetry” that it describes “a world from which the old gods have disappeared—or have, as Stevens says elsewhere and everywhere, become fictions” (Riddel, 1980, 309). Riddel’s negative association of fictionality with the outmoded evades Stevens’ premise that the gods were fictions all along (*L* 370). This is not to de-emphasize their original relation to reality; as conditions shifted, however, that relation was dissipated. Stevens assumes that “imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real” (*NA* 6); and on this basis, “it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality” (*NA* 22). The opening lines of “Of Modern Poetry” describe a Stevensonian decreation/creation:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set, it repeated what
Was in the script.
Then the theater was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir. (*CP* 239)

“What will suffice” is the formula for an originaive contemporary fiction. There was a time, Stevens postulates, when our truths—the fictions of the age (in conjunction with the “realities” of the age)—seemed pre-established; that time is past. The

difficult task of “modern poetry” is to compose fictions sufficient for a “decreative era.”

Pearce takes into account the inevitable relation of decreation to creation: “What is reduced/negated is not the world, reality, but rather the imagination itself. Such a reduction/negation is however, only temporary, a way on to a further stage; in the course of projecting the decreative process, the imagination discovers ‘the precious portents of its own powers’” (“Toward Decreation,” 289). Pierce’s reading rests on the putative antagonism between imagination and reality, incongruent with Stevens’ notion of their “interdependence” (NA 27)—the necessary intimacy on which, for Stevens, the cycle of decreation and creation depends.

Stevens’ poem “So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch” (CP 295) describes an artwork for which “The arrangement contains the desire of / The artist.” Regueiro says about the poem: “The sculpture is an intentional structure, created in an act of consciousness, not of reality. It is not reality that the artist reveals in his creation, but himself” (*Limits of Imagination* 186). As Stevens suggests in the “Adagia”: “The subjects of one’s poems are the symbols of one’s self or of one of one’s selves” (OP 164). If poetry has a mimetic function, it reflects the affluent world of the poet rather than an objective external. Like painting or sculpture, poems, too, are intentional structures, and this particular poem, taking intentionality as its subject, effects a double turning: artwork-artist and poem-poet. The poem retains a measure of its own likeness in the described work of art. That work, too, has a subject, of whom the poem says, “She is half who made her”; she is “Born ... at twenty-one, / Without lineage or language.” These lines show that we should consider her not as an imitation of an actual woman but as a newly created object. She has no history, as things of the real world do. And she has no language to speak except that given by her creator; her form itself, as gesture of the artist, is that language.

The poem’s last six lines open a schism between what appear as art (the created) and nature (the seemingly uncreated).

One confides in what has no
Concealed creator. One walks easily

The unpainted shore, accepts the world
As anything but sculpture.

The world in which we confide is a world which seems to be simply what it is, with no assumption of concealed teleology; it is “anything but sculpture.” We feel at home on “the unpainted shore.” For Regueiro the lines imply that although the artist finds himself in his creation, he is cut off from the external reality which lies behind it. He is, in her words, “denied access” to reality (186). But the effect of the inverted *trompe-l’oeil* in the poem is to incorporate the schism into the work. Having scrutinized the art form and having drawn us to the expanse of its opposite (nature), Stevens’ fictive form takes possession of both.

To get at the thing
Without gestures is to get at it as
Idea. She floats in the contention, the flux

Between the thing as idea and
The idea as thing.

The idea “without gestures” is ideality in a rarefied Plutonic sense; the artwork, by contrast, leads particularly to the abstraction—thus “floats in the contention.” The artist’s gesture is an act by which idea becomes object; his task is to render “idea as thing.” The persona, as viewer (or critic), reverses the process. Northrop Frye writes: “In the greatest art we have no sense of manipulating or dominating nature, but rather emancipating it” (“The Realistic Oriole” 172). Stevens’ convolution emancipates by staging a confrontation between concealment and revelation. The forms of art must inscribe their own provocative dimensionalities. By “studying the fictive world” (*OP* 167), “poetry increases the feeling for reality” (*OP* 162); not an unmediated reality but, in Henry James’ phrase, the “air of reality” (*Theory of Fiction* 35).

“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” assumes that “to impose is not / To discover” (*CP* 403); and such discovery involves more than immediate perception. The reality which interests Stevens is neither the undiscoverable “thing-in-itself” nor the empirically “given.” It is, as least in part, “A definition with an illustration, not / Too exactly labeled” (*CP* 443)—a signification discovered through the synthesizing gesture of the artist. Stevens pursues this line in “Notes”:

To discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible. (*CP* 403)

To “discover” an order in the world is to find a significance that is not “ready-made” (either by nature or through the Logos)—that can be said to exist only when apprehended. “Finding” such “major weather”—a poetic order—is not at all the imposition of a “reasoned” order. Ratiocination imposes/presupposes; the poetical discovers/refreshes.

Stevens says that “to confront fact in its total bleakness is for any poet a completely baffling experience. Reality is not the thing but the aspect of the thing” (*NA* 95). For Stevens, “fact destitute of any imaginative aspect whatever” is irrelevant to “poetic truth” (*NA* 60).

For Stevens the structure of reality confounds our usual categories of objective, subjective, and intersubjective. By this, the poetry accomplishes something of what Merleau-Ponty, speaking of Cézanne, claims for painting: “Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—a painting mixes up all our categories in laying out its oneiric universe of carnal essences, of effective likenesses, of mute meanings” (“Eye and Mind” 263). Stevens’ “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” advocates a similarly acute anti-rationality: “There are so many things which, as they are, and without any intervention of the imagination, seem to be imaginative objects” (*NA* 60). Stevens’ uses of “imagined” and “real,” unlike the sharply delimited usages of decreationist criticism, escape the reductiveness of “reasoned” order: the imagination (that is, “the sum of our faculties” [*NA* 61]) “makes its way by reason of” a reality already infused with the subjective/intersubjective. Section III of “Description without Place” (*CP* 341) offers:

Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne
Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon,

To Nietzsche in Basel, to Lenin by a lake.
But the integrations of the past are like

A Museo Olimpico, so much
So little, our affair, which is the affair

Of the possible: seemings that are to be,
Seemings that it is possible may be.

Calvin, Anne, Neruda, Nietzsche, and Lenin were innovators of the real; things became as they made them in their “seemings”—their “integrations.” Aspects of these transformations persist in the disposition of the present—as materials for some new possibility by which the present can become our own, shaped by contemporary innovations.

Stevens says in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”: “The poet ... creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (*NA* 31). Poets—along with philosophers, politicians (or political thinkers), theologians—effect the reality of the age, and beyond, through fictions that affect the truth of the way we feel: “thought / Beating in the heart” (*CP* 382). In the “generations of Thought” (*OP* 103), one fiction, or matrix of fictions, displaces another; the outmoded, once seen as such, dis-integrates, making way for the viable and what will be seen, for a time, as the veritable. As Stevens puts it, writing to Henry Church in 1942, “The first step toward supreme fiction would be to get rid of all existing fictions” (*L* 431)—an exposition perhaps related less to modernist/postmodernist anti-poetics than to Samuel Johnson’s dictum that “the first care of the builder of a new system, is to demolish the fabricks which are standing” (7:99).

If in Stevens’ view past fictions must be substantially cleared for the sake of the more relevant, it is also true that in order to achieve the most relevant—most “central”—reality, even our most current fictions must be cleared or consolidated for the sake of that one which can comprise our newly present reality. In this remaining fiction, “the real” will be discovered—a reality which in the creative cycle will become a base for future fictions:

It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute—Angel,
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound. (*CP* 404)

“Reality” is revealed as fictional, but not because it falsifies: the structure of the “real” is bound up with the figural structurings of thought. This process of discovery penetrates beyond the chaos of discordant fictions/realities, the cacophony of unharmonious sound, to that center at which the “luminous melody of proper sound” emerges against a background of silence. The fictional form progresses from “crude compoundings” to a kind of rapport. This is the innovated transcendence in which imagination has come to be seen as part of the reality discovered—leaving us floating, we might say, like “So-and-So Reclining in Her Couch,” “in the contention, the flux, / Between the thing as idea and / The idea as thing.”

In “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight” (*CP* 430), “this effect (the colors of roses) is a consequence of the way / We feel and, therefore, is not real, except / In our sense of it,” and “Our sense of these things changes and they change.” This is reality’s complication. The quality of the perceiver’s attention merges with sunlight and the seeming factuality of the roses, and from the complex interaction a correspondingly complex experience of reality arises: “black reds, / Pink yellows, orange whites.” Though the poem tells us, paradoxically, that the roses appear “far beyond the rhetorician’s touch,” this too is only a seeming. The idiosyncrasies of one’s rhetorical touch inhere in the perception, producing the multiplied effects of the way “we are two that use these roses as we are.”

Of the imagination Stevens says in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”: “The imagination colors, increases, brings to a beginning and end, invents languages, crushes men and, for that matter, gods in its hands ..., it rescues all of us from what we have called absolute fact” (*NA* 61). But if “imagination is the only genius” (*OP* 179), “reality is the spirit’s true center” (*OP* 177). Though not the “thing itself,” reality, as a varying mixture of the objective/subjective/intersubjective, subsisting in the present, is not reduced to a function of the moment’s imagination: “the real is only the base. But it is the base” (*OP* 160). This fundamental aspect of reality appears in section IV of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (*CP* 469).

Reality is the beginning not the end,
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals.

It is the infant A standing on infant legs,
Not twisted, stooping, polymathic Z.

The poem identifies reality as the source, or starting point: “the beginning not the end”—“naked Alpha”; while “the hierophant Omega,” that is, human reality seen in its fuller complexity, possesses “luminous vassals” which have not accrued to Alpha’s naïve self. Although the nakedness of Alpha might seem to represent reality as “thing-in-itself,” the status of Alpha-as-beginning inexorably related it to its end. In the progression from Alpha to Omega the beginning is already appropriated by the reality of its end, just as the nature of the beginning destines the configuration of the end. Unlike the decreationist notion of the “thing itself,” the reality of naked Alpha is a signification in relation to Omega—an infant participant in the development of new interpretations. Omega’s luminous vassals assemble from imaginative illumination which “adds nothing, except itself.” Stevens, metaphorizing the shapes of the Letters, has us notice the configurative kinship between A and Z: Z is a “twisted, stooping” version of the three bars that shape the body and “infant legs” of A. The cycle from Alpha to Omega (or from A to Z) images the creative/decreative cycle: the possibility inherent in the naked Alpha becomes a world confirmed—clothed with innovative interpretation (Omega)—then, as maturity degenerates into obsolescence, returns to Alpha. “Basic” reality without the timely attendants which the “genial” imagination provides is a prelude from which Omega will arise, but just as surely, no developed conception of reality will continue to suffice. Thus, “Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end.”

The cycle renews itself in the “poem of pure reality” suggested by section IX of “An Ordinary Evening” (*CP* 471):

We keep coming back and back
 To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
 That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

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

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
 Transfixing by being purely what it is,
 A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
 Of simple seeing, without reflection.

Using this passage, Michel Benamou draws a comparison between Stevens and Mallarmé: “For exactly opposite purposes Stevens and Mallarmé sought a poetry ‘untouched by trope or deviation’: Mallarmé because he despaired of transposing the world materially into words, Stevens because he hoped to return to the real—‘straight to the object. ... At the exactest point at which it is itself’” (*Symbolist Imagination*, XV). For Benamou, Stevens’ “real” is the “thing itself.” But Stevens’ compounding forces the question: at what point is the object precisely itself? The lines, for a moment, let us believe that the point is “naked Alpha”; as the poem continues, however, we learn that it is Omega, the hierophant, the priest who initiates us into the mystery. Although the poem speaks of a desire for “the object,” it is the object seen “through the certain eye”—“certain” not by afterthought but by a comprehension accompanying the act of perception (“sight and insight” [*CP* 473]). Benamou maintains: “Mallarmé seeks a land of the mind beyond reality; Stevens a land beyond the mind, as part of reality” (92); but as the remainder of the section IX makes clear, the mind is very much a part of that “hierophant” experience of reality of which the poem speaks:

We seek
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

Everything, the spirit’s alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,

The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.

These lines disclose the broadest structure (and Stevens’ broadest usage) of reality. In this comprehensive definition the contemplated “real” takes in the imaginations’ present genius (“the spirit’s alchemicana”) as well as the subjective/intersubjective background (“the spirit that goes roundabout / And through”); it is the expansive, inclusive concept of the real described in “Notes”:

The things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate. (*CP* 403)

Dislocating this fuller context, one finds in the poem indication that imagination inevitably distorts: the “poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or

deviation.” Vendler, believing that Stevens, as he enters the later stages of his poetic career, distrusts imagination, argues:

Rebelliously, the imagination continues its chromatisms, but by now Stevens is living in distrust of its variegation, and senses a possible madness resulting from a wholesale and licentious imaginative dispensation, where anything is beautiful is you say it is, and oak leaves are hands, if the poet chooses to make that metaphor about them. (*Extended Wings* 147)

Vendler is not alone in considering the imagination as a source of distortion. Regueiro, for instance, believes that the later Stevens recognizes “that the imagination transforms and destroys the real, leaving in its place painted strawberries and constructed pineapples” (*Limits of Imagination* 11). The imagination, in spite of, or even because of, its constructive function, becomes a destructive or degenerative agent. Regueiro, with particular attention to “Metaphor as Degeneration,” sees the result of imaginative processes—represented metonymically by metaphor—as an emptying out of meaning: “Instead of finding in metaphor a generation of reality, the poet sees ‘metaphor as degeneration’ (*CP* 444), always altering the object and undermining the possible experience” (179). Similarly, Hyatt Waggoner reads the poem as literally asserting that “metaphors do not tell the truth” (*American Poets* 440), and Hines suggests that “the poet announces in ‘Metaphor as Degeneration’ the demise of metaphor” (*Later Poetry* 248). Stevens says in that poem:

It is certain that the river

Is not Swatara. The swarty water
That flows round the earth and through the skies,
Twisting among the universal spaces,

It is not Swatara. It is being.
That is the flock-flecked river, the water,
The blown sheen—or is it air?

How, then, is metaphor degeneration,
When Swatara becomes this undulant river
And the river becomes the landless, waterless ocean? (*CP* 444)

To maintain that the poem finally portrays metaphor “as degeneration” misses the irony of the extravagant rhetorical question that finishes the passage. By way of the experimental “metaphor as degeneration,” Stevens activates its opposite. The poem traces the way the actual (the river), by incorporating into the metaphorizing

structure of thought, becomes a symbol for a deeper sense of the nature of things. Redirecting the poem's orientation toward its title, the lines intimate that, since an ordinary river like the Swatara through metaphor becomes the river of "being," which "flows round the earth and through the skies," then metaphor is decidedly not degeneration but a maturation from "infant A" to "polymathic Z"—"naked Alpha" to "hierophant Omega." As if to specify the complications of his language, Stevens tells us, "Originality is an accentuation," through sensibility, of differences perceived" (*Souvenirs* 38), while in "Three Academic Pieces" (from roughly the same period as "Metaphor as Degeneration"), after defining metaphor as "the creation of resemblance by the imagination" (NA 72), he says, "Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance. ... Its singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (NA 77). Resemblance and difference cohabit the partially similar: metaphorizing circulates the similar and dissimilar. If metaphor produces this reinforcing and intensifying, yet differentiating, resemblance which "touches the sense of reality," how, then, is metaphor degeneration?

Regueiro's Stevens sees poetry's tropological character as the chief obstacle in the poet's search for reality. Exemplifying the unsettling double edge of discourse: "to express things, to light the obscure world of reality, the metaphor must usurp the 'thingness' of the object, casting it into a shape that is not its own" (*Limits of Imagination* 180). This is to say that metaphor, while illuminating reality, skews it, becomes fictional in the derogatory sense of falsehood. She extracts from "Poem Written at Morning" (CP 219): "The painting of metaphor is ultimately a faking of reality, not a valid means of experiencing it" (183). In the poem's opening lines:

A sunny day's complete Poussiniana
Divide it from itself. It is this or that
And it is not.
By metaphor you paint
A thing. Thus, the pineapple was a leather fruit,
A fruit for pewter, thorned and palmed and blue,
To be served by men of ice.

For Regueiro, "Through the metaphor the object is posed into 'this' or 'that'—always into something that violates its 'thingness'" (183). But it is as a negative—a question of posturing—that the poem muses: "By metaphor you paint / A thing"?

And within this setting, what does it mean to say that the day is “divided” from itself? The “Poussiniana” are the works of the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin, whose metaphorical seeing would be the prelude to painting a picture; the day would be literally converted into a work of art and, by the addition of the artist’s vision, would no longer be itself. For Stevens, are such metaphorical conversions gain or loss? He writes in “Three Academic Pieces”: “The mind begets in resemblance as the painter begets in representation; that is to say, as the painter makes his world within a world; or as the musician begets in music” (*NA* 76). It is this “world within a world,” not the seemingly uncompounded fact-world, which, ironically, expresses the non-divisive inclusiveness of experience. The subsequent lines of the poem reveal the effect of such artistry:

The senses paint
By metaphor. The juice was fragranter
Than wettest cinnamon. It was cribled pears
Dripping a morning sap.

The metaphorical seeing paints the pineapple so that scent, taste, and touch are added to sight; the poem’s metaphors are ultimately generative; our experience of the pineapple is deepened and expanded, brought closer. The poem concludes:

The truth must be
That you do not see, you experience, you feel,
That the buxom eye brings merely its element
To the total thing, a shapeless giant forced
Upward.
Green were the curls upon that head.

“The total thing,” be it morning or pineapple, is a “shapeless giant” to which the mind gives shape. The mind “begets in resemblance,” giving birth to the day, to the sun, playfully turning the pineapple’s lifeless leaves into “green curls”: an amusing instance—“provoking laughter, an agreement, by surprise” (*CP* 248)—of Stevens’ pervasive association of the color green with the vigorously and fictively real. “A sunny day’s complete Poussiniana / divide it from itself” with fresh transformations which, by metaphor, render (“paint”) an experience that takes us beyond the hypothetically atropical.

Such experience finds its zenith—“green’s green apogee”—in “the fertile thing that can attain no more” in section II of “Credences of Summer” (*CP* 373). Here the morning’s potentiality has developed into the full realization of noonday.

The lines make reference to “the very thing” and to “evasion” by metaphor, highly suggestive for the “decreative” thesis. Yet if we look at these in context, they lose their seemingly anti-metaphoric character. The section begins:

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
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.

Although the third line proposes that we “see the very thing and nothing else,” the first two lines have specified that we are not to “anatomize” summer by breaking it into “physical” and “metaphysical”—that is, empirical and theoretical/ theological, or “the thing-in-itself” and “consciousness,” or “reality” and “imagination.” The “very thing” we are to see is “summer,” which is not the “thing itself,” nor a literal season, but a seasonable complex of thought and feeling. The poet wants to experience summer “with the hottest fire of sight”:

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
Without evasion by a single metaphor.
Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the center that I seek.

These succeeding lines ask for no “evasion” by metaphor. But “summer” itself in the poem is metaphorical. The “whitened sky” on a vibrantly sunny summer day expresses the perfection (mythically associated with whiteness) shaped by the day—an expression which by its own sonorous and conceptual intricacies is refracted toward its origin in what “The Rock” refers to as “the whitest eye” (*CP* 527). The denunciation of “evasion” is not a literal call for the elimination of figures of speech from poetry. Instead it metaphorically reiterates the desire to experience summer in its fullest intensity. Stevens’ play on “single metaphor” underscores/undercuts the monotony of either metaphysical or physical rhetoric, and his emphasis on “essential barrenness” shuns indirection (“deviation”) or peripheral considerations (“Burn everything not part of it to ash”)—which, of course, include malconceived metaphors. In the section’s final lines the informing role of imagination becomes abundantly clear as the perfected present moment, for which summer serves as a symbol, is placed in a context within which its significance can be fully appreciated:

Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of change still possible. Exile desire
For what is not. This is the barrenness
Of the fertile thing that can attain no more.

Proposing that we “exile desire” for metaphorical evasion (either concealed metaphysical origin or physical thing-as-it-is), the poet requires a human world we can confide in, which will “solace us quite as fully as any heavenly visitation could.”

In the first section (*CP* 372) of “Credences” we have learned that

This is the last day of a certain year
Beyond which there is nothing left of time.

In this “final” moment, past and future are dispelled, and we dwell in a spacious present: “It comes to this and the imagination’s life.” It is left for the imagination to situate this moment in “an eternal foliage” infused with an “arrested peace, / Joy of such permanence,” arising from consciously imposed “right ignorance / Of change still possible.” In such deliberate “ignorance,” “what is” is wholly accepted, as we choose to “Exile desire / for what is not.” The “barrenness” is not that of things themselves but of “the fertile thing” (like the pineapple in “Poem Written at Morning”) which grows out of the relatedness of perception and perceived.

But if summer means for Stevens “mostly marriage-hymns”—imaginative integrations—what of the poem of “winter”? According to Pack, “The difference between winter and summer is a difference in visible order, and it can be said, speaking symbolically, that the longing for winter is a desire for fact and the longing for the summer is the desire for the relationships into which fact may enter” (*Wallace Stevens* 134). This is roughly consonant with what we see of summer in “Credences”: as for winter, Stevens writes in “Man and Bottle” (*CP* 238):

The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
Who, to find what will suffice,
Destroys romantic tenements
Of rose and ice.

The destruction of “romantic tenements” does seem close to “a desire for fact”: yet the poem’s last lines (recovering: “The mind is the great poem of winter”) project a need for more than factuality:

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

The “bottle” of the title represents an ordering concept much like the “jar” in “Anecdote of the Jar” (*CP* 76), and the poem prescribes the breaking of that “bottle”; but there is also the indication that a new sufficing concept will take its place. The violence, which, in spite of reference to “destruction,” appears as decreative, is again a means to another construction of “tenements.”

In contrast to this wintry violence (against what may be the romantic rose fixed in ice), “The Poems of Our Climate” (*CP* 193) opens with a serene description:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.

These lines circumscribe a time (of clarity and the freshness of pinks and whites) in which the mind is at rest, seemingly released from the machinations of the imagination; “romantic tenements” have been leveled. And yet the imagined simplicity, if it were actual, would not, finally, be enough: “one desires / So much more than that”:

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one’s torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital 1
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

If winter images the decreative, in the cycle of creation/decreation there will always follow, as in “Esthétique du Mal,” “the yes of the realist spoken because he must / Say yes” (*CP* 320)—an affirmation of compositions dormant/germinal in the scene. The “I” may be “evilly compounded,” as by the fall of mankind away from a mythical simplicity of original, unself-conscious innocence, but a world without its elaborations is untenable:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back,
To what had been so long composed.

In the later poem “The Plain Sense of Things” (*CP* 502), Stevens extends his argument with: “the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined.” Vendler claims for these lines: “‘A necessary function of the imagination,’ we might

represent Stevens as saying, ‘is to imagine its own absence’” (*Act of the Mind* 166); and Regueiro asserts: “Stevens at the end of his career ... attempts to return to ‘the plain sense of things’ through the very language, the very self-consciousness that separate poetry from that world” (*Limits of Imagination* 12). If the thing desired is, as Vendler and Regueiro contend, the “thing itself,” the poem should exude a plain “sufficiency” as the culmination of the poet’s pendulum swing toward factuality. But their readings have inverted the sense of Stevens’ lines by holding that the imagination cancels itself by conceiving its own absence; while the poem suggests that the imagination’s absence must, indeed, be imagined and, from this, that the imagination, however thinly, defines even the image of its absence. And rather than sufficiency, what we see at this negative antipode are some of the bleakest images of poverty in Stevens’ poetry—images reminiscent of the desolation of Eliot’s “the Hollow Men” and *The Waste Land*—as the poem continues:

The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
The great pond and its waste of the lilies.

Regueiro finds in the poem “acceptance of an imagination’s that has consciously turned against itself” and “the imagination’s realization that in questioning its capacity to transform and reconstruct reality it is capable of perceiving reality in its ‘plainness’ and its ‘thingness’” (210); but instead of an appropriation of the “things themselves,” the poem describes only a diminished sense of the real:

The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

A certain structural relation held between thought and object, but is now absent. The “house” is an impoverished variation; the “turban”—an imaginative element—is present only as an absence. The poem offers a sense of the world at the point of imaginative exhaustion, when “romantic tenements” are no longer valid:

A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

And while imagination may now seem “Inanimate in an inert savior,” the sense is that temporary dormancy, or, more accurately, diminution, rather than permanent

abdication. After all, a “savior,” which is itself a way of knowing, does remain, even though “inert.” And though spare, even this scene is not barest “fact”: “all this / Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge”—again, imagined. As Ozymandias insists in “Notes,” “A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind” (*CP* 396). It is not, in the “plain sense,” the end of the imagination but “as if / We had come to an end of the imagination.”

“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” affords an extended example of the “poem of winter.” Vendler describes it as “the poem of an old man living in the lack and the blank” and as, “humanly speaking, the saddest of all Stevens’ poems” (*On Extended Wings* 269). Stevens says about the poem: “Here my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false” (*L* 636). This reads as a reference to section XIV (*CP* 475), in which “Professor Eucalyptus of New Haven” looks for

God in the object itself, without much choice.
It is a choice of the commodious adjective
For what he sees, it comes in the end to that:

The description that makes it divinity, still speech
As it touches the point of reverberation—not grim
Reality but reality grimly seen

And spoken in paradisal parlance new
And in any case never grim, the human grim
That is part of the indifference of the eye

Indifferent to what it sees. The tink-tonk
Of the rain in the spout is not a substitute.

It is of the essence not yet well perceived.

The desire to “get ... close to the ordinary” may parallel Eucalyptus’ interest in nothing beyond the “object.” Yet as if both by way of and despite his concentration, what constitutes the end of the search is not the “object itself” but “the description that makes it divinity (as, later in the poem, it is “exterior made / Interior: breathless things broodingly abreath” [*CP* 481]). This, as Stevens says, “is not in any sense a turning away from the ideas of ‘Credences of Summer’: it is a development of those ideas” (*L* 637). It is “a thought revolved,” (*CP* 184) around the conclusions of “Credences,” again displaying the interdependency of summer and winter phases.

Imagination is to “fix” the object “in an eternal foliage,” transmuted here into “the commodious adjective.” The object is brought near by the outward gesture which resonates in the inward aspect of speech—“still speech / As it touches the point of reverberation.” If Professor Eucalyptus is to find God (or what satisfies the mind) “in the object itself” (in the noun), his discovery must be by means of the sacralizing adjective (“the description that makes it divinity”) that “touches the point of reverberation” at which inner and outer coalesce (and “Real and unreal are two in one” [*CP* 485]): the projection sought is “the fertile thing” which, in the more comprehensible perception—the “paradisaal parlance” of his speech—will yield the “paradisaal” fruit of a regional harmony between the “Professor” and his “New Haven.” If such new speech gathers reality to itself, it is out of desire for significance inaccessible to the indifferent eye. And the bare sound of the rain, though “of the essence,” will not be, without translation, the essence of that significance. In section XV we find reference to a “heaviness” which, like light and imagination, adding “nothing except” themselves,

Listen by light will,
By the hand of desire, faint, sensitive, the soft
Touch and trouble of the touch of the actual hand. (*CP* 476)

Out of desire, a certain touch becomes an image of the significant integration, as, in section XXVI, “the inamorata / Touches, as one hand touches another hand.”

Section XXX (*CP* 487) of “An Ordinary Evening” begins:

The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.
The robins are la-bas, the squirrels, the tree-caves,
Huddle together in the knowledge of squirrels

—much like the opening of “The Plain Sense of Things”: “After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things.” Again the images belong to “winter”: “The wind has blown the silence of summer away”; but, as in summer, there is a degree of absorption in the moment:

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.
It is not part of what is absent, a halt
For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances

—lines which recall the exhortation in “Credences” to “Exile desire / For what is not.” The plain reality of “The Plain Sense” is matched here by an even more obviously decreative reality:

The glass of the air becomes an element—
It was something imagined that has been washed away.
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

The casual reader might take these lines to mean that the imagination itself has been “washed away,” but closer examination shows that what has been banished is a particular idea: “the glass of the air”—extending a figuration found in “Notes” (*CP* 383).

Adam
In Eden was the father of Descartes
And Eve made air the mirror of herself,

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth.

The “washing away” of this mirroring image returns the supernal to ourselves, restoring the “clearness” of an immanence. Section XXX continues

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
It is a visibility of thought,
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.

In this clarity the transparency of thought becomes visibility. The divisive substitution of “object” for “aspect” has been overcome; what was seen as metaphysical, we now see clearly (“reflectively”) as an image of “ourselves.” What remains is not a “bottomless sight,” a seeing without horizons; and this clearness is not “empty”: it is filled with a multiplicity of relational perspectives—as if the whole matrix of consciousness / self-consciousness were directly seen.

Stevens asks in “The Auroras of Autumn” (*CP* 417):

Is there an imagination that sites enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stop
To imagine winter?

This continues the motif of “winter” and “summer” seasons of the mind, with winter, as in the “Plain Sense of Things,” evidence of a dismantling imagination: “Suppose the poet ... had the power ... to reconstruct us by his transformations. He would also have the power too destroy us” (*NA* 45). Imaging the strangeness of this creative/decreative potency is “Poetry Is a Destructive Force” (*CP* 192):

That’s what misery is,
Nothing to have at heart.

It is to have or nothing.

It is a thing to have,
A lion, an ox in his breast,
To feel it breathing there.

As Borroff says, “the imagination, for Stevens, is a destructive force in that it is constantly saying farewell to its ideas, abandoning its integrations” (16). Such destruction could leave “nothing...at heart.” The protagonist, who “is like a man / In the body of a violent beast” (lionlike and oxlike), is vulnerable to destruction of the oxlike integration he has (or is) “at heart”:

The lion sleeps in the sun.
Its nose is on its paws.
It can kill a man

—the “man” as the satisfying, yet tenuous, integration.

In section II of “It Must be Abstract” in “Notes” (*CP* 381), what imagination decreates is specifically an outdated compartmentalization—the “naming” of “the truth,” a process that Stevens terms “the celestial ennui of apartments.” As winter is the preparation for summer, the destruction of such tenements “sends us back to the first idea,” the root of metaphors which have become opaque:

And yet so poisonous

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
The truth itself, the first idea becomes
The hermit in a poet’s metaphors,

Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.

Cambron tells us in regard to Stevens’ poetry: “If metaphor (and, by implication, all of poetry, all of knowledge) is a mere evasion, a ‘shrinking from’ being, it has no value. Of it merely duplicates being, it likewise has no value. The only way out seems to lie in a discarding ‘metaphor’ and confessing our impotence vis-à-vis the purity of being, which is ultimately inexpressible” (*Inclusive Frame* 84). But the poetry discloses that at the lowest ebb the “first idea” still inhabits the “poet’s metaphors”; metaphor becomes a hermitage for the “central” truth: “The monastic man is an artist” (*CP* 382). Again and again, what is discovered through the poetry is less a matter of “discarding” metaphor than of examining it, producing the “visibility of thought” described in “An Ordinary Evening.”

Stevens, at the beginning of “Notes,” rejecting figurational conventions for the sun, redefines the point toward which verbal and mythical converge: the “muddy centre,” the “myth before the myth began” (*CP* 383)—the metaphorical beneath the conventional, the central fiction of the pre-mythical and the starting point for invention of new fictions, since

Not to have is the beginning of desire
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.
It is desire at the end of winter, when

It observes the effortless weather turning blue
And sees the myosotis on its bush.
Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn.

It knows that what it has is what is not
And throws it away like a thing of another time,
As morning throws off stale-moonlight and shabby sleep. (*CP* 382)

This is the expressed decreation of Stevens’ poetry: to discard “what is not” (the obsolete/insufficient), in favor of “what is” (the viral image that rejuvenates belief). The clarity of the new day sheds “stale” and “shabby” remnants of night. “A Thing of another time” cannot suffice: “the calendar hymn” of the changing seasons of belief figures the imagination’s essential decreative/creative activity.

Stevens sees the breach between object and aspect as a source of poetry, proposing in “Notes”:

Form this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves. (*CP* 383)

The center of this conflict is not the primal “muddy centre,” nor is it the “centre that we seek” (*CP* 373); it is a schism that creates desire. And though the seasonal metamorphoses suffice only temporarily, this does not presuppose futility. The gravitational center, as in “Credences,” is a fictive absolute—what draws the eye as we “Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky” and “look at it in its essential barrenness / The barrenness / Of the fertile thing that can attain no more”; its issue is “joy of such permanence, right ignorance / Of change still possible.” And the sun—as the locus of integration, life-source of the light which “adds nothing,” the inconceivably visible, that which makes visible, the original of lunar light, symbol of summer, mark of high noon, the physical/metaphysical center—exists because it is “believed.”

A satisfactory image of the visible integration in Stevens is the “rock” of “Credences” (*CP* 375):

It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
A mountain luminous half way in bloom
And then half way in the extremest light
Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
As if twelve princes sat before a king.

This opulence, set apart from the “stale moonlight and shabby sleep” of “unreal” fictions, figures the spectral opposite of the poverty bred by lack of imagination in “The Plain Sense of Things.” In such opulence the sky becomes “central”—something to have at heart. To assume antagonism between imagination and reality is to halve the rock, and Stevens makes clear that “the rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.” This “truth” does not compromise reality; it carries the real to a luminous extreme where the mind, de-centered from the givenness of things or the given meaning of a concealed creator, finds its own centrality—a gemlike comprehension:

It rises from land and sea and covers them.
It is a mountain half way green and then,
The other immeasurable half, such rock
As placid air becomes.

The image of the rock exposes that “visibility of thought” which greets the “object” within the experience of the signification:”

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.

The truth of the figuration depends upon “this present ground,” the current reality. And what sustains the perceiver’s repose is the metaphorized natural-as-symbol, apotheosized by “the description that makes it divinity.”

For Stevens, “reality,” even as most minor, “is the footing from which we leap after what we do not have and on which everything depends” (*L* 600); as he writes in “Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn” (section III of the “The Rock”),

The rock is the gray particular of man’s life,
The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho,
The step to the bleaker depths of his descents.

Though the particular is gray, it is still a bare beginning. Imaging the Stevensonian “discovery of reality,” the section continues:

Through man's eye, their silent rhapsodist,
Turquoise the rock, at odious evening bright
With redness that sticks fast to evil dreams;
The difficult rightness of half-risen day.

In the turquoise integration transposing the gray particular, the rock's composure—reality's fertile green and imagination's "amorist" blue (*CP* 172)—is "the habitation of the whole". It is

The starting point of the human and the end,
That in which space itself is contained, the gate
To the enclosure, day, the things illumined
By day, night and that which night illumines.

The compassing fiction of the turquoise rock (not the seeming bedrock of the "objective real") becomes an integration which exhibits the texture and pleasure of experience; rather than metaphor-as-evasion, metaphor makes visible. As in the "Adagia," reality's conventional sense is "a cliché from which we escape by metaphor" (*OP* 179).

Stevens' attraction to the Romantic vocabulary is conspicuous. Yet the essay "Imagination as Value" unambiguously repudiates the "romantic":

"The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is to feeling... The imagination is intrepid and eager and ... its achievement lies in abstraction." (*NA* 138)

In other instances, Stevens recognizes a more positive side of the "romantic." Specifying in a "A Poet That Matters" that "the romantic in the pejorative sense merely connotes obsolescence" (*OP* 251), he continues: "The romantic in its other sense, meaning always the living and ... the imaginative, the youthful, the delicate ... , constitutes the vital element in poetry. It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet. Unless one is that, one is not a poet at all" (*OP* 252). Stevens' approach rejects Romanticism as literary and philosophical "relic" while welcoming the imagination's improvisations. The "romantic" in any era is in concert with an imagination which initiates "repetitions" of creation/decreation. A letter to Hi Simons in 1940 observes: "What the world looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new belief" (*L* 350).

“Sailing After Lunch” (*CP* 120) evidences the necessary revolutions within the romantic. Stevens’ protagonist, describing himself as “A most inappropriate man / In a most unpropitious place,” complains,

My old boat goes round on a crutch
And doesn’t get under way.

The energetically romantic, which continually discovers a newness in existence, “throws off stale moonlight.” The “romantic,” though fervently desired, can neither remain nor return:

Mon Dieu, hear the poet’s prayer,
The romantic should be here.
The romantic should be there.
It ought to be everywhere.
But the romantic must never remain,
Mon Dieu, and must never again return.

The “prayer” retains the creative/decreative movement in which the romantic-as-innovation repeatedly replaces itself. The “romantic” refers to a new experience/knowledge of reality ushering in a fresh tropological era, displacing past constructs. The “romantic” captures/creates the contemporary.

The phrase “poetry of being,” popularized by Miller in “Wallace Stevens’ Poetry of Being,” has become useful to those sharing the idea that Stevens’ later poetry seeks a deeper experience of being. Miller on occasion construes “being” as “reality” or even “nothing” (*The Act of the Mind* 157). According to Miller, “being” as “nothing” is “the universal power, visible nowhere in itself, and yet visible everywhere in all things. It is what all things share through the fact that they are. Being...can appear to man only as nothing...” (*The Act of the Mind* 157). And Hines, taking a similar position, describes “Being” as “ground or source of both the mind and the world” (*Later Poetry* 20). Such terminology draws on Heidegger’s ontology; at the same time, the language masks a conception of mystical force more metaphysical than Heideggerian, and resembling the Romantic “Spirit of Beauty” in Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”: “The awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats through unseen among us” (*Poetical Works of Shelley* 356).

In Miller’s description of the dialectic of decreation and re-creation, Stevens simultaneously grasps both poles of the imagination/reality dichotomy, as “as the tension between imagination and reality diminishes there is an unperceived emptying

out of both, until...the poet finds himself face to face with a universal nothing. The nothing is not nothing. It is. It is being" (*The Act of the Mind* 157).

"The Snow Man" calls on images of desolation and sparsity continues with other "poems of winter," both early and late: the snow-covered trees, the "bare place," the empty sound of the wind, and "the listener" who is "nothing"—prefiguring the imagination which "adds nothing, except itself." The poem rejects the concatenation by which we might imagine a "misery in the sound of the wind":

One must have a mind of winter
Not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,
Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place. (*CP* 9)

The poem is not about passive absorption; a "mind of winter" is needed to appreciate the "weather," to "discover an order," the wintry integration providing the imaginative compass of the scene. The "nothing" of the poem simultaneously reveals a "plain reality" which harbors no mystical element and an ironic act of mind "identifying oneself with reality" (*L* 464).

Miller's essay "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" gives yet another account of poetic fictionality, preserving the central importance of "nothingness" (as the "abyss"): "All referentiality in language is a fiction ... All words are initially catachreses. The distinction between literal and figurative is an alogical deduction ... from that primal misnaming. The fiction of the literal or proper is therefore the supreme fiction" (29). On this view, the supreme fiction is a meta-fiction resulting from a misconception in the terrain of metalinguistic aporia.

In the later poetry, Regueiro finds imagination "revealing its incapacity to validly create and inhabit the world" (*The Limits of Imagination* 210). This "revelation" is, in her view, not a note of resignation; it is foundational in Stevens' development toward the exemplary "Of Mere Being": "If consciousness and imagination are the alienating entities that separate the poet from the natural world, the imaginative act that undercuts its own validity brings the poem into contact with natural time" (211). By this de-metaphorizing strategy, the imagination, preparing the way for its withdrawal in favor of an experience of "mere being," sets the stage

for the event itself: “Consciousness has been transformed by paradoxically moving to annihilate itself. And the poem has touched the unimaginable reality by undercutting the creative act that generated it” (213). At the center of the poem is an emptiness: a nothingness or a core of silence, a central void in which the essential perception occurs:

“Of Mere Being” (*OP* 117)

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze décor,
A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human feeling, a foreign song.
You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.
The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird’s fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

Regueiro says:

The poem seems to stretch itself to the point of breakage in an attempt to ‘poematize’ the mere being it cannot reach. ... In positing a world beyond the enclosed space and terming it ‘foreign,’ the imagination undercuts its own space ... and moves out into the space it cannot reach. ...The poetic imagination is silencing itself before it can speak, placing reality in a realm into which it cannot transgress. There is thus a core of silence in the poem, a refusal to order ... the natural world. The poetic imagination cannot inhabit reality. But it can experience reality by thrusting the poem into the silence of mere being. (*The Limits of Imagination* 213)

As is underscoring the viability of metaphor, “Of Mere Being” invests in a concentrated, flamboyant symbol (a gold-feathered bird singing in a palm). The palm, appropriating religious associations and tropical exoticism, is an odd vehicle for unmediated experience—unadorned Being/Reality.

In “Description without Place” the palm stands at the perceptual horizon (as in “Of Mere Being”) and seems to image the symbolizing process itself:

Description is
Composed of a sight indifferent to the eye.
It is an expectation, a desire,
A palm that rises up beyond the sea,
A little different from reality:
The difference that we make in what we see
And our memorials of that difference,

Sprinklings of bright particulars from the sky. (*CP* 343)

Riddel speculates that “what one knows of mere being is an image on the edge of space, where being becomes nothingness. Is this not to prove the ultimate creativity of the mind which must always conceive a reality beyond form or metaphor?” (Riddel 1965, 266). It is the inhuman that marks the beyond of the fiction. While the imagination is “the one reality / In this imagined world” (*CP* 25), “it is the human that is the alien” (“Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit”) (*CP* 328).

1.2.PHENOMENOLOGY

The “poetry of being” and “decreationist” readings often depend on the relation between Husserlian/Heideggerian language and the vocabulary of Stevens’ poetry and poetics. Both thinkers provide viable support general features of Stevens’ phenomenological inclination. Disenfranchising the usual notions of real and unreal, Stevens, with Husserl, delineates objects of perception as phenomenon. The Husserlian perspective, exploring the subject/object distinction, views consciousness and world relationally—and presents this relationality from both sides: “Objects exist for me, and are for me what they are, only as objects of actual and possible consciousness (*Cartesian Meditations* 65), and at the same time, “conscious processes are called intentional, but then the word intentional signifies nothing else than this universal fundamental property of consciousness: consciousness: to be conscious of something; as a cogito, to bear within itself its cogitatum” (*Cartesian Meditations* 33).

Husserl’s phenomenological method, which Cambon, Macksey, and Hines identify as analogous to Stevens’ “poetry as a process of dialectical discovery” (Cambon, *The Inclusive Flame* 237), defines three “reductive” phases—phenomenological, transcendental, and eidetic—directing Husserlian meditations and overcoming the “natural standpoint,” the naïve perspective in which I take the “fact-world” to plainly and immediately exist out there (*Ideas* 106). With the phenomenological reduction, we place in brackets what seems obvious for the natural standpoint (*Ideas* 110). The phenomenological epoché alters our view of

what from the natural standpoint is the Real world: the Reality claim is suspended; “the things that are” are seen as phenomena.

The first reduction makes possible the next, the “transcendental”—rendering accessible as “pure,” or “transcendental,” consciousness: consciousness as the “phenomenological residuum” (*Ideas* 113) remaining after divestiture (“bracketing”) of psychological/empirical elements. In this condition all phenomena refer us back to the constituting ego; phenomenology becomes an investigation of “a sense-giving consciousness” (*Ideas* 168). The subject is no longer “subjected” to Reality; the perceiving “transcendental ego” sees subject and object relationally within the sphere of transcendental subjectivity. The “transcendental-phenomenological” is complemented by “eidetic reduction,” which distills things to their essential form, giving us a field of essences which includes all imaginative variations on the de facto phenomenal field. It encompasses what is in essence apprehensible. The eidetic ego is the essentially possible ego, the transcendental ego.

Section XIX of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (*CP* 175) makes use of “reduce”: “That I may reduce the monster to / Myself, and then may be myself / In the face of the monster.” This dramatizes Stevens’ interest in the world as phenomenal and, consequently, in relation to the perceiving consciousness. He explains that “Monster = nature, which I desire to reduce: master, subjugate, acquire complete control over and use freely for my own purpose, as poet” (*L* 790). Stevens’ use of “reduction” circumscribes the poet’s struggle with reality—an impossible face-to-face confrontation between language and nature, suggested by the image of “the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone.” Stevens elaborates:

I want to face nature the way two lions face one another. I want, as a man of the imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. I want man’s imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality. (*L* 790)

This sense of innovative struggle with what is other recurs in section VII of “Credences” (*CP* 376):

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,

Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

Here the emphasis falls on “capture,” on appropriation of the object a poetic material, or as material for the imagination. The captured thing, both “fully found” and “fully made,” is known in and through integrative transformations. For Stevens, “The habit of probing for an integration seems to be part of the general will to order” (*OP* 196).

Cambon finds that “both Husserl and Stevens aim at a focused apprehension of the essences of things by a process of stripping or unhusking, which Stevens calls abstraction and which appears in so many of his poems as a kind of preliminary negation of the given object, as of our construed interpretations” (*The Inclusive Frame* 237). On this view, by means of bracketing, or reduction, “consciousness discovers the object as if for the first time and corrects the incrustations of history” (237). In Stevens, the assiduous cancelling clears the way for new interpretations, not for a Husserlian apprehension of essence. Stevens is drawn less to the essences of things than to a fictionality that is foreign to Husserl’s “phenomenological science”: to find the real is to be “stripped of every fiction except one” (*L* 443). Hines indicates that Husserlian observations are not altogether inimical to imagination and its fictions (*Later Poetry* 75). Husserl remarks in the *Ideas*: “The element which makes up the life of phenomenology ... is ‘fiction’, that fiction is the source whence the knowledge of “eternal truths” draws its sustenance” (201).

“As You Leave the Room” (*OP* 116), a late poem, elaborates on the range of Stevens’ elaboration/reflection of “the structure of reality” as “the central reference for poetry” (*NA* 71); the poet, looking back over his work, wonders:

... have I lived a skeleton’s life,
As a disbeliever in reality,
A countryman of all the bones in the world?

This mood of skeptical rumination occasions the amplifying integration, which, setting aside monetary doubt, reaffirms imaginative instrumentation:

Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes
Part of a major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality
And thus an elevation, as if I left
With something I could touch, touch every way.
Unreal, as is nothing had been changed at all.

Simply by changing “what is unreal,” the language of the poem creates, out of the memory of snow (emblem for the decreative), an aspect of a “major reality.”

This view of poetry as enhancement opens a gulf between Stevens and Heidegger; the sufficing fiction is antithetical to Heidegger’s study of Being as it is essential to Stevens’ poetry. Heidegger defines poetry as “the saying of the unconcealedness of what is” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 74); Stevens preserves an imaginative play, juxtaposing “Poetry is often a revelation of the elements of appearance” and “Poetry is a renovation of experience” (*OP* 177). Walter Biemel tells us, in his essay “Poetry and Language in Heidegger,” that for Heidegger, “the essence of poetry ... is establishing the truth, the articulated clearing in which Being comes to pass” (78). For Stevens, on the other hand, “In the long run the truth does not matter” (*OP* 180). Heidegger’s account of language as “the House of Being” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 132) does not at all correspond to Stevens’ identification of the imagination as “the magnificent cause of being” (*CP* 25), nor to invention of values, in the Nietzschean sense, which pervades the poetry.

Art for Heidegger is “the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 72). Stevens contends that “the poet ... creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and ... gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (*NA* 31). Neither does Heidegger’s ontological seriousness meet with the characteristically Stevensonian sentiment expressed in “On the Road Home”:

It was when I said,
“There is no such thing as the truth,”
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole. (*CP* 203)

Heidegger would mark as evasive Stevens’ successors to “the truth”—“poetic truths” like those represented in “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay” by the “figure of capable imagination” who “passed her there on a horse all will” (*CP* 249). Stevens’ “imaginative man” finds that his pleasure is the “pleasure of powers that create a truth” (*NA* 58).

Stevens tells us in “Dutch Graves in Buck County” that
Freedom is like a man who kills himself
Each night, an incessant butcher, whose knife
Grows sharp in blood. (*CP* 292)

Nietzsche asserts that life is “continually shedding something that wants to die. Constantly being a murderer” (*Gay Science* 100). By such metaphorical violence humanity overcomes the past, becomes itself by its continual self-overcoming.

1.3. NIETZSCHE

In Stevens’ matrix of figuration the Nietzschean sun supplants the Romantic moon. The sun as original becomes the emblem of wilful invention and the expulsion of the obsolete; and it is the Nietzschean expression “will to power” that Stevens chooses for “Mountains Covered with Cats”:

Regard the invalid personality,
Instead, outcast, without the will to power
And impotent, like the imagination seeking
To propagate the imagination or like
War’s miracle begetting that of peace. (*CP* 368)

The impotence resulting from the absence of will is countered by the figure of Nietzsche himself in “Description without Place”:

Nietzsche in Basil studied the deep pool
Of these discolorations, mastering
The moving and the moving of their forms
In the much-mottled motion of blank time.
...
The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool,
Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias
In perpetual, round and round... (*CP* 342)

Love of the transitory restores creative innocence, which takes tentative shape in the figure of the child. The new beginning renews possibility, prefigured in the “form gulping after formlessness / Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances / And the serpent body flashing without the skin” (*CP* 411) of “The Auroras of Autumn.”

Like the child, the “blind” or “ignorant” man is “innocence and forgetting”—the prelude of “the cricket of summer forming itself out of ice.” The previous summer’s “inamorata” (*CP* 484) has been banished, but the whisperings of her successor begin to be audible:

It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
Has any chance to mate his life with life
That is the sensual, pearly spouse (*CP* 222)

“Ignorance” as a sense of, and reliance on, one’s own capacity, “without external reference” (*CP* 251), becomes “one of the sources of poetry” (*OP* 173). For Stevens, poetry is a vehicle for the Nietzschean transformation of the values, of the sacred “yes”: “If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man” (*NA* 150). Aesthetic consciousness exceeds the mythico-religious: “It is possible to establish aesthetics in the individual mind as immeasurably a greater thing than religion” (*OP* 166).

Whether as “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” or five ways of looking at a November morning near Tehuantepec, the intricacy of the poetic image (its perspectives, figures, rhymes, and rhythms) becomes a reflection of the “thousand connections” of reality satisfying one’s sense of things. It is on this ground that poetic fiction becomes object of “belief”; and with this, as “Asides on the Oboe” asserts,

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. (*CP* 250)

For Stevens, political fictions, as successors to the mythico-religious, evade the depth and breadth of the aesthetic. Spurred by criticism (particularly Stanley Burnshaw’s) that *Ideas of Order* exhibited inadequate social responsibility during the Depression era (Morse, *Wallace Stevens*, 148), Stevens in *Owl’s Clover* takes pains to demonstrate the deficiency of the political (and specifically communism) as “a phenomenon of the imagination” (*NA* 143):

Men gathering for a mighty flight of men,
An abysmal migration into a possible blue. (*OP* 51)

And later, in “Imagination as Value”:

Surely the diffusion of communism exhibits imagination in its most momentous scale. ... With the collapse of other beliefs, this grubby forth promises a practicable earthly paradise. ... the imagination that is satisfied by politics ... has not the same value as the imagination that seeks to satisfy, say, the universal mind, which, in the case of a poet, would be the imagination that tries to penetrate the basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world. (*NA* 145)

Communism proposes as a “final fiction” an idealized, utopian version of society. But this utopian projection is not a self-transcendent “leaner being” (*CP* 387); it is

only the average man collectively made larger. “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and “Parts of a World” extend the examination of the poet’s value and responsibility. His role is not to play an unambiguous version of

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are. (*CP* 165)

Rather, he must struggle against “the pressure of reality”: “the pressure of an external event is events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (*NA* 20). He must resort to “nobility”: that faculty of mind Stevens defines as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without ... the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (*NA* 36).

In a letter of August 1940 Stevens writes: “The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet, appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and, for that matter, greater, if the idea of god is one of the things of the imagination” (*L* 369). The image has reality as a satisfaction; it arises according to certain rules of the imagination, it “passes through sudden rightnesses,” and it “suffices.” The conception of the supreme fiction requires adequacy and the recognition of the originary metaphoricity of language. This aesthetic position is anti-metaphysical:

To say the solar charist is junk
Is not a variation but an end.
Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind
And the desire to believe in a metaphor.
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
Belief, that what it believes in is not true. (*CP* 332)

This frees the mind for metaphoric discoveries: “The ... truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it ...” (*OP* 163). This wilful “knowledge” gives us a truth not of empirical things but of pure forms. In this fictive transcendence of the metaphorical, we find that

... we ourselves
Stand at the center of ideal time,
The inhuman making choice of a human self. (*NA* 89)

This sufficiency, established by metaphor, produces a “vivid transparence” (*CP* 380) in “the excellencies of the air we breathe.” “The Pediment of Appearance” chronicles the search for such transparence:

Young men go walking in the woods,
Hunting for the great ornament,
The pediment of appearance.
They hunt for a form which by its form alone,
Without diamond—blazons or flashing or
Chains of circumstance,
By its form alone, be being right,
By being high, is the stone
For which they are looking:
The savage transparency. ... (*CP* 361)

Poetry is phenomenological discovery through transcendent metaphoricity. Stevens' improvisational structuring attempt to "penetrate" to basic images" which form the texture/truth of experience. Stevens proposes that "the study of his images / Is the study of man" and that

... in images we awake,
Within the very object that we seek,
Participants of its being. It is, we are. (*CP* 464)

The supreme fiction is "the poem of the whole" (*CP* 442). By this semiologic "transcendence," the poet's "word is the making of the world, / The buzzing world and lispings firmament" (*CP* 345). For Stevens, poetry is "a purging of the world's poverty" (*OP* 167); in this sense, "God and the imagination are one" (*CP* 524). Stevens' cycles of decreation and aesthetic integration attempt to heal the rift that detaches abstraction and sublimity from earthliness and mundaneness: "The central poem is the poem of the whole" (*CP* 442). Through the poet's integrations we "realize that we are creatures, not of a part, ... but of a whole for which, for the most part, we have as yet no language" (*OP* 189). Poetry articulates our mute sense of things within a complicated fiction of the whole.

CHAPTER TWO

FIGURES

2.1. MIND

In the poem, “The Common Life,” Stevens complains of “the shadows that are absent from Euclid,” and describes the morbid light cast on the page. This morbid light seems to be the best refraction of the sun that reason can manage. Reason in Stevens’ figuration is seen in terms of straight lines, sharp angles, squares, and truncated geometrical figures.

Day after day, throughout the winter,
We hardened ourselves to live by bluest reason
In a world of wind and frost,

And by will, unshaken and florid
In mornings of angular ice,
That passed beyond us through the narrow sky. (*CP* 124)

What has passed beyond is time, time when the mind could have lived in an imaginative mundo. Reality can be approached by reason, but the result is an inhuman geometric cosmos:

The lines are straight and swift between the stars.
The night is not the cradle that they cry,
The criers, undulating the deep-oceaned phrase.
The lines are much too dark and much too sharp.

The mind herein attains simplicity.
There is no moon, on single, silvered leaf. (*CP* 71)

A tolerable world can be created for oneself only by the twisting of the straight lines of reason into an imaginative deviation from reality:

It was when the trees were leafless first in November
And their blackness became apparent, that one first
Knew the eccentric to be the base of design. (*CP* 151)

One of the “Adagia” reads: “The absolute object slightly turned is a metaphor of the object,” an “evasion” of reality, a “revealing aberration”:

These pods are part of the growth of life within life:
Part of the unpredictable sproutings...

That could come in a slight lurching of the scene,
A swerving, a tilting, a little lengthening. (*OP* 92)

The words Stevens uses to describe the process of the imaginative molding of reality shows his ambivalent attitude toward the process: wrinkling, dodging, writhing, crisping, bending, perverting, tilting, lurching, twisting, swerving, quirk, distortion, contortion, malformation, oblique, astray, askew and awry. But also it is curling, curving, curvetting, swaying, winding, wreathing, turning, the ellipse and the arc. Rosenbloom (*CP* 79) was “wry” and “wizened” because he had turned from reality, but in a wholly supernatural way. The revolutionists (*CP* 102) who stop for orangeade, standing in the sun, cannot go on paying obeisance to the real, to the “capitan geloso,” since “there is no pith in music except in something false.” They must have refreshment, and this can only come from a wholly conscious, and therefore comic, warping of the real:

Wear a helmet without reason,
Tufted, tilted, twirled, and twisted.
Hang a feather by your eye,
Nod and look a little sly.
This must be the vent of pity,
Deeper than a truer ditty
Of the real that wrenches,
Of the quick that’s wry. (*CP* 103)

“Wrenches” and “wry” are ambiguous. The imagination twists reality, but also reality twists the human heart and forces one into absurd posturings in order to endure it. An imaginative artifice creates a new elliptical reality which does not wrench:

Here the total artifice reveals itself

As the total reality. Therefore it is
One says even of the odor of this fruit,
That steeps the room, quickly, then not at all,

It is more than the odor of this core of earth
And water. It is that which is distilled
In the prolific ellipses that we know

In the planes that tilt hard revelations on
The eye, a geometric glitter, tiltings
As of sections collecting toward the greenest cone.

(“Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,” III [*NA* 87])

Always the odor comes and goes. The geometric figures “tilt” the hard revelations of perception, and collect the pineapple, “primitive orb.”

The usual figure to sum up Stevens’ attitude towards all the various “curvings” of reality is the circle. And this obvious culminating of all curves and arcs is something to be avoided:

He called hydrangeas purple. And they were.
Not fixed and deadly (like a curving line that merely makes a ring).
It was a purple changeable to see. (*OP* 23-4)

Once the warping is made the warped form is fixed, and so no longer delights. To live too long within an imaginative mundo is to be locked in a closed circle that is just as tedious as the rational process, always returning us to our poverty of spirit. All the mind’s operations are circular, except the irrational flash of the imagination which allows us to avoid the blankness of the center:

In the punctual center of all circles white
Stands truly. (*CP* 366)

White and black are the polarities of the mind’s spectrum of mood, and both are pernicious. The “black sublime” is death (*OP* 55). White brings us to the void by the opposite direction, by the obliteration of color through the intellect or by the fading away of an imaginative world, as in:

A blue pigeon it is, that circles the blue sky,
On sidelong wing, around and round and round.
A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground,
Grown tired of flight. (*CP* 17)

Or:

A blue scene washing white in the rain (*CP* 306)The weeping burgher (*CP* 61)
distorts reality to create fictions which soon grow old in their “excess”:

And I, then, tortured for old speech,
A white of wildly woven rings;
I, weeping in a calcined heart,
My hands such sharp, imagined things (*CP* 61)

Reality in another poem is figured by a parakeet whose green feathers please our eye, but whose “lids are white because his eyes are blind” (*CP* 82). The “white elders” who ravish Susanna are figures for reality’s victory over the green “garden” of her creation. An old fiction becomes a “white abstraction” (*CP* 276). Whiteness is the

“ultimate intellect” (*CP* 433), when all motion, life, color and mood cease. We long for rest, but rest is either death or sleep; “in the punctual center of all circles white stands truly” (*CP* 366).

In “pink and white carnations—one desires so much more than that” (*CP* 193), the first association is one of mawkishness, the prettiness of pink, too bland in a facing-up to reality. But pink is also a fading of red. Red being the color of unabstracted reality in all its harshness, the statement in fact says that we desire much more than reality can offer. Pink is a stronger color than we want, albeit in a cold astringent scene:

The day itself
Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there. (*CP* 193)

Brown is close to black and therefore to death. Gold is precious, preciousity and also the color of glaring sunlight. Purple is bluer than the sky, an added delight and a distortion. Bronze is a sun-color and a cold metal. Green is the color of life, but also reality without spirit.

All of Europe and the Orient is the East to Stevens. The East implies the cultures of the past, and Crispin, modern man, lives in their backwash, as

The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak
Of China, cap of Spain. (*CP* 28)

These cultures no longer suffice, the old order no longer embodies a reality. Crispin makes his voyage west because of the “westwardness of everything,” culture to anarchy, day to night, life to death:

Light, too, encrusts us, making visible
The motions of the mind and giving form
To moodiest nothings, as, desire for day
Accomplished in the immensely flashing East,
Desire for rest, in that descending sea
Of dark, which in its very darkening
Is rest and silence spreading into sleep. (*CP* 137)

East and West represent light and darkness, the tragic chiaroscuro:

The whole habit of the mind is changed by them
These Gaeled and fitful-fangled darknesses
Made suddenly luminous, themselves a change,
An east in their compelling westwardness. (*CP* 455)

Perhaps the basic dichotomy between North and South in Stevens' mind is that in the North one is in twentieth-century society, while in the South one is more alone with chaotic, exotic reality. But both North and South are fusions of the real with the imaginative, and both necessarily have their tragic aspects. The voyager in "Farewell to Florida" has no illusions about what he will find in the North:

The leaves in which the wind kept up its sound
From my North of cold whistled in a sepulchral South,
My North is leafless and lies in a wintry slime
Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds. (*CP* 117-8)

One's mind is not going to be at rest in either its northern or southern aspects, and can shrink from them both:

Let us fix portals, east and west,
Abhorring green-blue north and blue-green south. (*OP* 17)

Night is a good time for the imagination, and a bad time for personal fears of mortality. Winter, like Night, serves as the tragic background upon which light and life play. Winter is when the mind destroys imaginative worlds created in summer. The winter mind is not a state brought on by the absolute perception of real objects. We all see things through the veils of our senses. He asserts in "The Plain Sense of Things," "The absence of the imagination had itself to be imagined" (*CP* 502). Winter, therefore, is just another metaphor, the fabric of another dream:

Now it is September and the web is woven.
The web is woven and you have to wear it.
The winter is made and you have to bear it,
The winter web, the winter woven, wind and wind
It is the mind that is woven. (*CP* 208)

The mind's landscape, without the flame of the imagination, is always wintry and destructive:

The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
Who, to find what will suffice,
Destroys romantic tenements
Of rose and ice

In the land of war. (*CP* 238-9)

The imagination's workings, its seasons, its colorings, its wars, are hardly voluntary. Both confusion and beauty comes from a lifetime of facing the "dumbfounding abyss between us and the object" (*CP* 437). The mind, as a child asleep in its own life, as isolated, creates out of its own need the "forms of dark

desire” (*CP* 432) and its relation with the exterior world. The figures for these desires, “monsters of elegy” in a “mythology of modern death,” exhibit the ultimate futility of figures.

Sleep realized

Was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect, (*CP* 433)

But the mind cannot help bringing forth children of desire, images of itself at war with itself, any more than the child can, in its cycle of life, deny its instinct for creation:

The children of a desire that is the will,
Even of death, the beings of the mind
In the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate flare.

It is a child that sings itself to sleep,
The mind, among the creatures that it makes,
The people, those by which it lives and dies. (*CP* 436)

2.2. DISORDER

Life is a bitter aspic. We are not
At the center of a diamond. (*CP* 322)

An aspic is a gelatine mass with little pieces of meat, egg or fish embedded here and there. The aspic, Stevens asserts in “*Esthétique du Mal*” X, is analogous to what one can make out of the world without imagination. We recognize particulars, parts, in the mass but we can recognize no coherent order. It was the old philosophy that saw the universe as a diamond with every object and being in it at its appointed position, with everything relating to man as the center, a universe brilliant with values, cut hard and clear for eternity by the diamond master, God. The diamond order was false. Within it, war was frequently noble, man was angelic, the church held the truth beyond the chaos of sense perception, one saw nature as existing for man’s use. The modern poet does not have such riches. In his poverty, he has hardly enough to endure, and his diet must of necessity consist of the aspic. And since there is no other real food, he comes with time to prefer it to the confects of an outworn philosophy, confects which finally are bitter in the extreme in their untruth. The bitterness of the truth, however, is sweet in the expressing of it; these

“exacerbations” become “epicure” in their ordering, their arrangement in the poetic imagination. Stevens does not falsify the essence of the process when he calls it:

Hunger feeding on its own hungriness. (*CP* 323)

Crispin, in his village, had been used to berries, apricots, and salad beds, but once out to sea, and hungry, it is different: “one eats one’s paté, even of salt, quotha.” The salty paté is a food quite like the aspic, with a pun on eating one’s head. There is nothing outside of the mind to feed on as value; one feeds on one’s desire for order, on oneself.

The world, when the imagination is ineffective, is a “dry loaf” to the hunger for order (“Dry Loaf,” *CP* 199). Life in the Thirties was a desperate grasping for the loaf only. And yet, from within man, even in his poverty, more sustenance could come, from out of the imagination, to

The dry men blown
Brown as the bread, thinking of birds
Flying from burning countries and brown sand shores. (*CP* 199-200)

This is not to say that the imaginative order, figured as the bird in flight, has any permanence, that reality will ever be understood or finally ordered.

The world, a turnip once so readily plucked,
Sacked up and carried overseas, daubed out
Of its ancient purple, pruned to the fertile main,
And sown again by the stiffest realist,
Came reproduced in purple, family font,
The same insoluble lump. The fatalist
Stepped in and dropped the chuckling down his craw,
Without grace or grumble. (*CP* 45)

Crispin once thought he knew all about reality, had “daubed” and “pruned” the crude turnip, but he comes to see that solving one problem only gives birth to many more. Only the imagination can handle this “family font” of insoluble problems by accepting the lumpy turnip as one’s food.

Stevens often selects a particular from the external world and uses it as an emblem for that world. The context generates the complexity, usually through a statement of the poet’s mood in conflict with the world (see for example “The Man on the Dump,” *CP* 201). There is a plethora of animals and plants, especially flowers and natural landscapes that are not ambiguous. The lion, the bear, the elephant, and the worm, or the iris, hepatica and the lilac have all their own particular

ambience and are not arbitrary, but, like the women in “The Common Life,” they “have only one side.”

The parakeet with the coppery keen claws is a figure for reality, blind, indifferent, but with a blazing tail and natural dazzle:

He munches a dry shell while he exerts
His will, yet never ceases, perfect cock
To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock. (*CP* 82)

This is a dry bird of sun and rock and yet “dry men” can find sustenance in dreams of flying birds (*CP* 200). Birds are real objects of a red, real world, but the flights of birds, their arcs, feathers, tails, their cries and songs, are all aspects of birds that the imagination fastens on as analogs of complex ideas of order.

One bird is a simple figure for reality—the clawing cock. The cock’s crow awakens the hearer from his sleep of dreams back to reality. The Shelleyan lark is the figure for those dreams:

There is no place,
Here, for the lark fixed in the mind,
In the museum of the sky. The cock
Will claw sleep. (*CP* 182)

The cock existed before man came to assert his centrality in a diamond design of the world: “the best cock of red feather crew before the clocks” (*CP* 89). We must make our own diamonds out of the real. There are those who, while doubting the truth of cosmic design, also distrust the imagination that can make diamonds out of the painful aspic truth,

The people that turned off and came

To avoid the bright, discursive wings,
To avoid the hap-hallow hallow-ho
Of central things,

Nor in their empty hearts to feel
The blood-red redness of the sun,
To shrink to an insensible,
Small oblivion,

Beyond the keenest diamond day
Of people sensible to pain,
When cocks wake, clawing at their beds
To be again,

And who, for that, turn toward the cocks
And toward the start of day

He that suffers most desires
The red bird most and the strongest sky—
Not the people in the air that hear
The little owl fly. (*CP* 243-4)

The desire for the “red bird” is a desire fraught with hedges. The desire is not to run straight into the jaws of reality, the fire-cat (*CP* 3), but to “swerve” away from him, as the bucks do, in “circular” lines, till finally, the firecat, temporarily spent, closes his bright eyes and sleeps. In reality there is ferocity, as in man there are two selves. The animal in us is part of reality, enjoys the sensual, and is figured as the “subman” in “Owl’s Clover” (*OP* 66-8).

He was born within us as a second self,
A self of parents who have never died,
Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips,
Their words and ours, in what we see, their hues
Without a season. (*OP* 67)

The other self fears for its life near the firecat, rejects its mortal, subman self (the animal), and wishes to think about, make fictions of, the real peaches, rather than merely look at and taste them (see *CP* 224). But the “subman” asserts himself:

Who speaks? But it must be that I,
That animal, that exile, for whom
The bells of the chapel pullulate sounds at
Heart. The peaches are large and round,
Ah! and red.

The windows are open. The sunlight fills
The curtains. Even the drifting of the curtains,
Slight as it is, disturbs me. I did not know
That such ferocities could tear
One self from another, as these peaches do. (*CP* 224)

The animal self enjoys being a “botanist,” looking closely at the things of the earth; the other self finds it cold on the “Alp,” viewing a “panorama of despair” (*CP* 135). The poet attempts to make words of the panorama, to be “conversant” with reality, but reality is a “monster”:

It is not a voice that is under the eaves.
It is not speech, the sound we hear
In this conversation, but the sound
Of things and their motion: the other man,
A turquoise monster moving round. (*CP* 359-60)

The man with the blue guitar hopes:

That I may reduce the monster to
Myself, and then may be myself
In face of the monster, be more than part
Of it, more than the monstrous player of
One of its monstrous lutes. (*CP* 175)

But the imaginative dominance of things is not the truth. This fragmented truth can hardly suffice:

All these things together,
Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine
Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth. (*CP* 242)

Rather than ever attaining a constant imaginative dominance over reality, the continual struggle with the monster pushes one to an acedia about struggling to know it at all:

And though one says that one is part of everything,
There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines. (*OP* 96)

Reality, when it is out of control, is figured by Stevens as a monster. When Stevens' imagination is in control of reality, he sees reality as a woman who fascinates him, who dreams of "marriage" (abstraction into an ordered fictive "mundo"), but who is changeable of mood. Consider the "ordinary women" (*CP* 10), as objects unassimilated by the imagination and so in "poverty" and "monotony." The imagination removes them from their prison by means of "heavenly script," the "canting curliques" that make explicit in "puissant speech" the beauty of real things slightly wrought or "pointed." The marriage, the assimilation of things into a poem is wrought by moonlight. But the marriage, being unreal, cannot last, and a return to unassimilated reality (catarrhs) is desired. The "donna, donna dark," otherwise Florida, "venereal soil," is reality figured as a woman that will not be denied, returning always after an imaginative order (the music of the guitar) has been achieved:

Swiftly in the nights,
In the porches of Key West,
Behind the bougainvilleas,
After the guitar is asleep,

Lasciviously as the wind,
You come tormenting,
Insatiable. (*CP* 47-8)

Reality, the ocean of things perceived, the “sea of ex” (*CP* 175), always gets out of control simply through its incomprehensible vastness. We attempt an ordering and guard it jealously against chaos:

These are within what we permit, in-bar
Exquisite in poverty against the suns
Of ex-bar. (*CP* 317)

The ordering is the poem, but implicit in the poem which “resists the intelligence almost successfully” (*CP* 350) are overtones of the uncontrollability of reality, figured in the “storm”:

Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow
Out of a storm we must endure all night
Out of a storm of secondary things. (*CP* 351)

Professor Eucalyptus in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” will not look beyond objects, the chaotic rain of things:

He sits in his room, beside
The window, close to the ramshackle spout in which
The rain falls with a ramshackle sound. (*CP* 475)

He knows the ordering of this awful chaos comes only from within, from the creation of a fictive landscape:

He preserves himself against the repugnant rain
By an instinct for a rainless land, the self
Of his self, come at upon wide delving of wings.

Yet Stevens cannot live in a “rainless land” for long, so that in another poem “the cataracts as facts fall like rejuvenating rain” (*CP* 263).

In “Human Arrangement,” the rain of things upon the mind is matched by a chaotic rain of thought, mixed with desire. Imaginative shiftings of unreal forms are impelled by a will to repose:

Place-bound and time-bound in evening rain
And bound by a sound which does not change,

Except that it begins and ends,
Begins again and ends again—

Rain without change within or from

Without. In this place and in this time

And in this sound, which do not change,
In which the rain is all one thing,

In the sky, an imagined, wooden chair
Is the clear-point of an edifice,

Forced up from nothing, evening's chair,
Blue-strutted curule, true—unreal,

The center of transformations that
Transform for transformation's self,

In a glitter that is a life, a gold
That is a being, a will, a fate. (*CP* 363)

The sound that does not change is the desolate fundamental tone of the universe. It is the romantic who in the sound of wind and leaves will find his own misery, for “here in the west indifferent crickets chant through our indifferent crises” (*CP* 321). The mind attuned to winter sound, the mind of the snowman, will not engage in futile pathetic fallacy or think his misery has any meaning, except to himself, in the larger landscape:

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

In the absence of fantasia. (*OP* 96-7)

The poet, though he must respond to this tone of the real, modulates it to a modest affirmation of the imagination's endurance beneath the storms of rain or snow.

He seeks an image certain as meaning is
To sound, sound's substance and executant,
The particular tingle in a proclamation
That makes it say the little thing it says,
Below the prerogative jumble. (*NA* 84)

The desire of the poet is not modest, the achievement is. He seeks an image; he will not find one. Meaning is not “certain” to sound. The image can be meaning's “executant” only in approximating a complex set of feelings in the poet.

The image that Stevens found that served him best, the figure that best enclosed in itself all of his attitudes toward reality, was the image of the rock.

The world [was a]...

Rock, of valedictory echoings

To which his imagination returned
From which it sped. (*CP* 179)

Reality to the eye is

A space of stone, of inexplicable base
And peaks outsoaring possible adjectives. (*CP* 185)

And “the rock cannot be broken” (*CP* 375). All we can hope to know is the material world of which we are a part:

It is true that you live on the rock,
And in it. It is wholly you. (*OP* 88)

In the face of the rock, it is up to the human being as poet, with his imagination, his “interior paramour,” to make of life what he can:

There was neither voice nor crested image,
No chorister, nor priest. There was
Only the great height of the rock
And the two of them standing still to rest. (*CP* 126)

The poem makes meanings of the rock,
Of such mixed motion and such imagery
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things
And so exists no more. (*CP* 527)

To obliterate the image of reality from the mind is the only “cure.” The imaginative act abstracts from the rock until the rock becomes

The weight we lift with the finger of a dream,
The heaviness we lighten by light will,
By the hand of desire. (*CP* 476)

Mrs. Alfred Uruguay climbs the mountain, the real, on her jackass. She will not allow the imagination to make her lot in life any easier. The poet on horseback descends by means of his imagination into “the ultimate elegance: the imagined land” (*CP* 250). We must study reality intimately so as to come to forget it:

It is to disclose the essential presence, say,
Of a mountain, expanded and elevated almost
Into a sense, an object the less; or else
To disclose in the figure waiting on the road
An object the more, an undetermined form
Between the slouchings of a gunman and a lover,
A gesture in the dark, a fear one feels

In the great vistas of night air. (*CP* 531)

The volcano is another “grey particular of man’s life,” whose activity happens to vent “evil” on man—reality in its violent aspect. The universe is inhuman, pain is human. The escape from pain in the imaginative act is the “maximum answer” that can be truthfully offered to the problem of evil in “*Esthétique du Mal*”:

The force that destroys us is disclosed, within
This maximum, an adventure to be endured
With the politest helplessness. Ay mi!
One feels its action moving in the blood. (*CP* 324)

Human desire in an inhuman universe must of necessity promote the controlled poetic schizophrenia figured in the lover and the gunman. One side of the mind stalks the monster, the other seeks insatiable Florida, fears the firecat or cherishes the cock. The beauty and horror of reality convinces Stevens of the truth of evasions and the evasions of truth. One eats one’s aspic, then places oneself in the center of a diamond, until dinner.

2.3. ORDER

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,
The sovereign ghost. As such, 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.
An eye most apt in gelatines and jupes,
Berries of villages, a barber’s eye,
An eye of land, of simple salad-beds,
Of honest quilts, the eye of Crispin, hung
On porpoises, instead of apricots,
And on silent porpoises, whose snouts
Dibbled in waves that were mustachios,
Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world. (*CP* 27)

Waves are mustaches to the imaginative eye. Whether this distortion of reality, this “twisting,” or “curling” is anything more than deception is impossible to decide in an inscrutable world. For “the very man despising honest quilts lies quilted to his poll in his despite” (*CP* 41): that is, even the man who despises middle-class myths can know nothing of the real world but what his “poll” or “pate” extracts from it. Hairs,

and their arrangements, are seen by Stevens as the innumerable necessary deviations from reality that create an ordered imaginative “mundo.” The creation of mundos is not an occupation exclusive to poets. Various “barbers” and “shearsmen,” imaginative people of one sort or another, clip and care for a vast assortment of wigs, pates, curls, braids and beards. All these “braidings,” from the simple “curl” to the most “pointed coiffure,” are orderings of reality.

In his village, Crispin felt himself the judge or the law-maker to the world of objects. He thought his imagined universe (taken over wholesale from the imaginers of the past) to be the truth about the real universe. But the sea, chaos of things, is our pedagogue; the world is incapable of a true final ordering.

There is nothing wrong with wearing a wig. One must have a dream in the face of the object. The inadmissible thing is to see oneself, the “guerilla I,” as “preceptor” to the sea.

It comes to this:
That the guerilla I should be booked
And bound. Its nigger mystics should change
Foolscap for wigs. Academies
As of a tragic science should rise. (*CP* 195)

The romantic egoist with his desire for heavenly connections will be disillusioned with such a “tragic” world. Stevens accepts being alone.

Is it bad to have come here
And to have found the bed empty?

One might have found tragic hair,
Bitter eyes, hands hostile and cold. (*CP* 161)

There is consolation within this acceptance of a cold life in the imagination’s capacity to respond to the brilliance of natural change, and to fashion

A poet’s metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where
Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind.

There might be in the curling-out of spring
A purple-leaping element that forth

Would froth the whole heaven with its seeming-so. (*CP* 341)

The imagination “curls” nature so that it appears to be spring. Crispin’s four “daughters with curls” in section VI of “The Comedian as the Letter C” are figures for various poetic kinds, different sorts of imaginings. Their “curls” are neither in the external world, nor wholly from the poet’s self, but are products of the imaginative reworking of reality: “The relation between the imagination and reality is a question more or less of precise equilibrium” (*NA* 9). Constant fabrication ends only with death or with the cutting off of the poem:

So may the relation of each man be clipped.
And so distorting, proving what he proves
Is nothing, what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly, to its end? (*CP* 46)

The “mundo” Lenin left behind is as unstable as the rest. The “honeycomb” of any one man cannot endure.

Go, mouse, go nibble at Lenin in his tomb.

Cut summer down to find the honey-comb.
Go hunt for honey in his hair. (*CP* 217)

The expectation of permanent answers from anyone’s fiction is futile.

In a happier mood, Stevens sees the imaginative faculty as the queen of life, whose transformations of reality mean more than dogmas.

And on your head
No crown is simpler than the simple hair. (*CP* 87)

Crowns, symbols of earthly authority, were worn by ancient patriarchs with large “beards.” Beards, like curls and wigs, represent transformations of reality, products of myth-making. Stevens sometimes uses “beard” entirely in this figurative sense to represent myth, as in “salt masks of beard” (*CP* 101), or “gold beards of waterfalls” (*OP* 95). Bearded sages or “sculptors” engage in myth-making, and their beards, or world-views, are a necessary part of the life of an age:

The statue is the sculptor not the stone.
In this he carved himself, he carved his age,

Ethereal compounder, pater patriae,
Great mud-ancestor, oozer and Abraham,

Progenitor wearing the diamond crown of crowns,
He from whose beard the future springs, elect. (*OP* 64)

The modern sage has his own imaginative mundo, yet he does not pretend to any divine illumination, or heavenly hopes. He is not one of the “blessed, whose beard is cloak against the snows” (*CP* 105). The bearded king (the poem or myth) comes out of the imagination’s will to order:

It is clear that it is not a moral law.
It appears to be what there is of life compressed
Into its own illustration, a divinity
Like any other, rex by right of the crown,
The jewels in his beard. (*OP* 79)

From this will to transform objects into jewels comes the bearded patriarchal form that is the fictive god of Stevens’ imaginative mundo:

As if the crude collops came together as one,
A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age. (*CP* 466)

Stevens has gone from a denial of the bearded sages of revelation to the affirmation of an illusory bearded hero that will satisfy man’s hunger for gods:

I sing a hero’s head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man. (*CP* 165)

Stevens has, in his very moments of affirmation, something of Swift’s disgust about illusion. The curls in nature we put there ourselves. History exhibits the continual search for order through myth-making:

Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese
Sat titivating by their mountain pools
Or in the Yangtse studied out their beards?
I shall not play the flat historic scale.
You know how Utamaro’s beauties sought
The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?
Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,
Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep? (*CP* 14)

The “you” addressed is not the wife of the narrator, the uncle; the stanza is a love ode to the “Interior Paramour,” the Imagination. From a sleep of dreams the imagination

emerges with fictions that belie any absolute formulation of reality (“studious ghosts”). The Imagination bathes her hair in Reality’s mountain pool, and orders the world:

In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.
She searched
The touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.
She sighed,
For so much melody.

Upon the bank, she stood
In the cool
Of spent emotions. (*CP* 90)

The imagination finds and spends all the time. Fictional Susannas die, as the mind destroys all “romantic tenements” of rose and ice, only to raise them up again.

Building up and tearing down, creating and destroying, continual love and strife is the occupation of the mind. The human imagination constructs “tenements” or artifacts which represent an ordering. For example, the steeple, the chariot, carriage and motor car, the tambourine, banjo or tin can, etc. are figures of prevalent artifacts, attitudes, pictures in a particular period or a place.

The figure of the natural diamond is used by Stevens to represent a false ordering of reality, the universe in a supposedly natural, immortal diamond-design. But there is also the cut, fashioned diamond that embellishes the “hair” of women, or their fans:

How explicit the coiffures became,
The diamond point, the sapphire point,
The sequins
Of the civil fans! (*CP* 11)

Diamonds represent those insights, flashes of metaphor, that go into the making up of a poetic myth (the “coiffure” or the “civil fan”). The coiffures become “explicit” in the moonlight of the imaginative dream. These fictive diamonds are set together in a “crown,” the complete fiction. Any crown fashioned for reality must be wrought with the minimum of distortion, “the slightest crown of Gothic prong” (*CP* 295). One wants to project neither pure idea (the abstraction) nor pure “thing” (the object),

neither a crown without Mrs. Pappadopoulos, nor Mrs. Pappadopoulos without her crown:

She floats in the contention, the flux
Between the thing as idea and
The idea as thing. (*CP* 295)

Contention, constant battle, is the necessary mental state of the artist. Any order created cannot pretend to the reality that is Mrs. Pappadopoulos:

The arrangement contains the desire of
The artist. But one confides in what has no
Concealed creator. One walks easily

The unpainted shore, accepts the world
As anything but sculpture. Good-bye,
Mrs. Pappadopoulos, and thanks. (*CP* 296)

Behind all “sculpture,” all artistic achievement is the concealed creator and his desire. The “statue” which rose out of the artist’s war with meaninglessness lends value to life for a while, and then is meaningless to another age:

Even imagination has an end,
When the statue is not a thing imagined, a stone
That changed in sleep. It is, it is, let be
The way it came, let be what it may become. (*OP* 71)

This is the summation at the end of “Owl’s Clover.” The confused, complex surface of this poem is in part due to Stevens’ mixed feelings about the destruction of the artifacts of the past. The grand and the grandiose, it seemed to him, must be sacrificed. Crows “anoint” statues, and mice run between equestrian legs. The noble gestures of the past have hardly any meaning; bronze and marble imply a permanent order of which we can know nothing. Reality (the sun) is no “sculptor” for man’s hunger for permanence:

Sun is
A monster-maker, an eye, only an eye,
A sharpener of shapes for only the eye,
Of things no better than paper things, of days
That are paper days. The false and true are one. (*CP* 252-3)

Men like Crispin started out as romantics, but after standing in the “sun” too long, changed their idea of it, and of themselves:

Nothing of himself
Remained, except some starker, barer self
In a starker, barer world, in which the sun

Was not the sun because it never shone
With bland complaisance on pale parasols,
Beetled, in chapels, on the chaste bouquets. (*CP* 29)

It is a sentimental ordering that arranges “bouquets,” that holds a “parasol.” Poets also use parasols:

Eulalia, I lounged on the hospital porch,
On the east, sister and nun, and opened wide
A parasol, which I had found, against
The sun. The interior of a parasol,
It is a kind of blank in which one sees. (*CP* 287)

Even Hartford, Connecticut can be seen under a “purple” parasol:

What is this purple, this parasol,
This stage-light of the Opera?
It is like a region full of intonings.
It is a Hartford seen in a purple light. (*CP* 226)

All arrangements, coiffures, crowns, sculptures, bouquets and parasols are false. Falseness is of necessity bred within the mind by the hunger for permanence. We take a part of reality and treat it for a while as the whole. We live in a “park” whose boundaries are the limitations of our minds, or the fences we fabricate to allow within just so much of reality as we can order and endure.

The park with the most limited boundaries is that of the masses in “Owl’s Clover”:

The workers do not rise, as Venus rose,
Out of a violet sea. They rise a bit
On summer Sundays in the park.

They rise to the muddy, metropolitan elms,
To the camellia-chateaux and an inch beyond. (*OP* 60)

The masses will listen to any “architect,” live in any park given to them, whether by leaders of the present or “skeletons” from the past:

These bands, these swarms, these motions, what of them?
They keep to the paths of the skeleton architect
Of the park. They obey the rules of every skeleton. (*OP* 62)

All parks of the past were fictions that passed in time, and we must live, disenchanted, in a modern park:

The envoi to the past
Is largely another winding of the clock.
The tempo, in short, of the complicated shift.
The summer Sundays in the park, must be

A leaden ticking circular in width.
How shall we face the edge of time? We walk
In the park. We regret we have no nightingale.
We must have the throstle on the gramophone. (*OP* 66)

The transcendent imaginers of the past (who heard the nightingale) had pretensions to final truth; the poet who believes neither in transcendence nor in final truth, must face self-derision at the close of his own hymns, listening to the throstle on the gramophone.

Stevens can focus on the center of the park, the human comedy, the local environment, or he can seek for “things dark on the horizons of perception” (*CP* 508). The poet can focus on his “mansion” in the park, and write poems that become part of the mansion:

Children,
Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know,
Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,
A dirty house in a gutted world. (*CP* 159)

Crispin, at first, was like the children and did not realize what sort of place he lived in,

He that saw
The stride of vanishing autumn in a park
By way of decorous melancholy. (*CP* 31)

The vision of the human comedy as Stevens sees it is projected in “Life is an old casino in the park,” a casino with rain sweeping through its boarded windows and leaves falling into its encrusted fountains. The older the poet gets, the less the human comedy in the park amuses him, till finally his vision of the exterior world is of a nothingness, a “vacancy in the park” where:

The four winds blow through the rustic arbor,
Under its mattresses of vines. (*CP* 511)

The vines, usually figures for an ordered reality, are seen as mattresses, where people sleep, in subjective phantasms.

The old “theater,” the old order in the park is gone
A tempest cracked in the theatre. Quickly,
The wind beat in the roof and half the walls.
The ruin stood still in an external world.

It had been real.

The people sat in the theatre, in the ruin,
As if nothing had happened.

It was a blue scene washing white in the rain. (*CP* 306)

The modern theater is “bare board” and bricks, “without scenery or lights” (*CP* 427). Tragic gesticulation towards “theatrical distances” (*CP* 129) does one little good. What is needed is a new myth, a new theater, and the mind must construct it. It must declaim to itself (“The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself”), hoping through speech to unite two disparate feelings towards its situation:

It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. (*CP* 240)

These new myths will not re-unite the world of people and things. These myths are personal; each of us his/her own myth-maker. The impulse is towards a retreat inwards, to the center of the self, and at the same time towards a flight outwards beyond the theater, the mansions, the park, beyond the “last thought” (*OP* 117) to the edge of space. Stevens wants the maximum exploration of the “park,”

The mind,
The starting point of the human and the end,
That in which space itself is contained, the gate
To the enclosure, day, the things illumined

By day, night and that which night illumines,
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
Night’s hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (*CP* 528)

We are dealing with a “sensibility in desperation” where statements come out as “lyric cries” all the more moving because we feel in them a “craving for a fuller being than they can ever reach” (Blackmur 222). There is in Stevens a desire to transcend the park, to pass through the “portal” that leads not to a “foyer” of another theater, but to an absolute foyer. He always denies the wish immediately; there is no

absolute foyer, he says, only the resting places, the “moments,” those imaginative integrations of common things within the park:

He knew that he was a spirit without a foyer
And that, in his knowledge, local objects become
More precious than the most precious objects of home:

The local objects of a world without a foyer,
Without a remembered past, a present past,
Or a present future, hoped for in present hope,

Objects not present as a matter of course
On the dark side of the heavens or the bright,
In that sphere with so few objects of its own.

Little existed for him but the few things
For which a fresh name always occurred, as if
He wanted to make them, keep them from perishing,

The few things, the objects of insight, the integrations
Of feeling, the things that came of their own accord,
Because he desired without knowing quite what,

That were the moments of the classic, the beautiful.
These were that serene he had always been approaching
As toward an absolute foyer beyond romance. (*OP* 111-2)

The position is nominalist. The second and third stanzas by their iteration of what the objects are not, carry the submerged desire that they could be more than they are. The objects are as seen by the imagination, insights, integrations. The serenity that moments of equilibrium bring has its pathos since there cannot be an absolute foyer: “the crows are flying above the foyer of summer” (*CP* 457). There is no summer free of squawking crows. Man must always return to, and end in, the foyer of winter, “the late, least foyer in a qualm of cold” (*CP* 457).

Stevens consistently shows an understanding of religious belief as a longing for a transcendent paradise “beyond” phenomena. For Stevens, thought does not satisfy desire, reason does not render the religious or the aesthetic imagination unnecessary. The rationalist faith is spiritually crude, it cannot create limited myths out of local objects, making connections vital to the spirit:

Thought is false happiness: the idea
That merely by thinking one can,
Or may, penetrate, not may,
But can, that one is sure to be able—

That there lies at the end of thought
A foyer of the spirit in a landscape
Of the mind, in which we sit
And wear humanity's bleak crown;

In which we read the critique of paradise
And say it is the work
Of a comedian, this critique;
In which we sit and breathe

An innocence of an absolute,
False happiness, since we know that we use
Only the eye as faculty, that the mind
Is the eye, and that this landscape of the mind

Is a landscape only of the eye; and that
We are ignorant men incapable
Of the least, minor, vital metaphor, content,
At last, there, when it turns out to be here. (*CP* 305)

The only approach to a foyer outside of the park that we can hope for is that of the classical, the beautiful, the serene aesthetic moment:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—
The fitful tracing of a portal. (*CP* 91)

As more of reality comes under the poet's command, he sees the portal at the end of the park:

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

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred. (*CP* 130)

In that time of equilibrium it is as if there were an "angel of reality standing at the door" (*CP* 496), bidding the poet to come to the "threshold" (*CP* 511) and there, beyond reason, to behold for a moment a vision of an aesthetic order, permanent within flux, a foyer in which he has no permanent place:

The palm at the end of the mind,

Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down. (*OP* 117-8)

This poem, "Of Mere Being," is one of the last poems Stevens wrote, and is a distillation of his later ideas. Figures here take on the depth of symbols, and Stevens' figural tension is better seen as a tranquil equilibrium, with the palm and the bird as figures of order within the park.

If a figure like "summer" is analyzed, one will see that its real objects take on significations that have to do with the poet's desires, so that a tree, for example, has little to do with the facts of the particular tree:

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
Let's see the very thing and nothing else. (*CP* 373)

A "red" fern represents an object difficult to fix in our perception because the mind abstracts from reality in the moment of looking:

The large-leaved day grows rapidly,
And opens in this familiar spot
Its unfamiliar, difficult fern,
Pushing and pushing red after red. (*CP* 365)

The leaves are the familiar and omnipresent (though still a projection of the mind), in contrast to the unfamiliar red fern. The red fern is, however, the closest relation to the "parent trunk, the dazzling, bulging, brightest core, the furiously burning father fire," or reality apart from man's cloudy perception of it:

Infant, it is enough in life
To speak of what you see. But wait
Until sight wakens the sleepy eye
And pierces the physical fix of things. (*CP* 365)

An old man who can finally “see” will likely lie “deep in the grass of sleep, deep grass that totters under the weight of light” (*OP* 54). He has created his own subjective mundo in the real green grass where he lies until the “dinner bell” rings in the real world, “in the green, outside the door of phantasm” (*OP* 110). Such complete withdrawal into the subjective is, finally, a bad thing for Stevens. He must live with both the metaphysical and the physical pine, skirting both phantasm and the “prerogative jumble” (*NA* 84). The “blue-green” pines (*CP* 191) must be “a little changed by tips of artifice” (*CP* 350), but they must remain essentially what they are, say, “Appalachian” pines (*CP* 76).

The serpent in the fern (*CP* 411) is one of Stevens’ most effective figures for an essential duality in human existence. The serpent is half real animal, strange, beautiful and poisonous, half symbol for the creative act, sinuously weaving and twisting through reality, catching the sunflash, glittering, ever-changing (shedding its skin), winding upward to a “new nest” that it will never find till it reaches death, the “black sublime” (*OP* 55). Then serpentine creation is “bodiless,” “air,” ending in “formlessness”:

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
His head is air.

This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,
And the pines above and along and beside the sea.

This is form gulping after formlessness,
Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances
And the serpent body flashing without the skin.

This is the height emerging and its base
These lights may finally attain a pole
In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there,

In another nest, the master of the maze
Of body and air and forms and images,
Relentlessly in possession of happiness.

This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
Even that. (*CP* 411)

The will impels us to search for a foyer further than that we have reached, though we well know the doubleness of what we will find there:

The possible nest in the invisible tree,
Which in a composite season, now unknown,
Denied, dismissed, may hold a serpent, loud
In our captious hymns, erect and sinuous,
Whose venom and whose wisdom will be one. (*CP* 437)

The palm is also a slippery figure. There is the palm of religious ritual, the palm as reward for victory in competition, and the palm as exotic plant of the southern isles. In Stevens' comic irony, the palm can mean an absurd desire for tropical ease or for divine reward. Also, though, the palm as metaphysical palm can represent, like the fern, the desire to pierce the "physical fix of things," to go beyond phenomena to some knowledge of the noumena. Or the palm can be a figure for the aesthetic mundo that serves the poet, however unsatisfactorily, as his only analogy to the incomprehensible, inexpressible noumena.

Barque of phosphor
On the palmy beach,
Move outward into heaven. (*CP* 23)

The "heaven" is of the "night blues" and the "moonlight," that make a "barque of phosphor" out of one's "black hull," one's real life. One is exhorted to sail into a transient imaginative mundo, where at length the clarity of an order obscures the physical palm:

Say that the palms are clear in the total blue,
Are clear and are obscure; that it is night;
That the moon shines. (*CP* 86)

The two palms in the following quotes are "metaphysical" palms, representing false orders that satisfy or have satisfied:

There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures. (*CP* 68)

Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque

Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms. (*CP* 59)

As the formulations about gods have no basis, neither do romantic statements about the nature and destiny of man. The poetic hero comes “without palms or jugglery” (*CP* 35). The poet must cultivate his own “palms” that shall “tuft the commonplace” (*OP* 17), palms that in the poet’s fictions will “rise up beyond the sea” (*CP* 344), make an order out of the chaos of perception, a palm at the “end of the mind” (*OP* 117).

From simple observations concerning the seasonal change and mortal decay that leaves undergo, Stevens constructs a drama about the mind’s transient moods and the cyclical permanence of imaginative acts. “I live by leaves” (*CP* 134), Stevens the “botanist” says. His search is always for the “new leaf” (*CP* 21), a new way of seeing the objects in the park, as in summer when the “leaves rattled their gold” (*CP* 222), or in winter, “in the sound of a few leaves” (*CP* 10), or in old age when one approaches “total leaflessness” (*CP* 477). The mind and its environment of “leaves” create fluctuating moods in the aging poet, who can expect no return of green, but only a slow domination of black. As the falling leaves represent beauty or youth passing, they can represent words of poetry which create “gardens” which, too, pass. It is said in “Sunday Morning” that our hunger for beauty in our mortal lives causes

Boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves. (*CP* 69)

The plums and pears are figures of the poet’s fictions; the maidens are figures of the desire for beauty. Ultimately the fruits go stale, the fiction is disregarded, the “leaves” litter the garden. The leaves are figures for the thoughts or integrations expressed in poetry, keeping one from the void:

The mobile and the immobile flickering
In the area between is and was are leaves,
Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world. (*CP* 474)

Leaves are both objects and words. Words, ordered in poetry, come and go infinitely,
as particulars, but endure as an answer in general:

An illusion so desired
That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight. The blooming and the musk
Were being alive, an incessant being alive,
A particular of being, that gross universe.

The fiction of the leaves is the icon

Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness,
And the icon is the man. The pearled chaplet of spring,
The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood,

Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock.
These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man.
These are a cure of the ground and of ourselves,

In the predicate that there is nothing else.
They bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change.
They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock

They bud the whitest eye, the pallidest sprout,
New senses in the engenderings of sense,
The desire to be at the end of distances. (*CP* 526-7)

The leaves fall, and the black hemlock alone looms large in the landscape
(*CP* 8). But the memory of the joy of words, of leaves in summer and of the
peacock's cry (and the splendor of his tail) ward off the blackness of night:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The peacock's cry may be felt as a cry against the twilight, or the hemlock, or the falling of the leaves, or all of these together, a cry of fear or of loss. The tail of the peacock, like the panache of forms in the parakeet's tail (*CP* 82), represents the gaudium of natural forms. The flight of the peacock from the bough of the hemlock represents the life that is ordered motion, the balanced, curved arc, the imaginative equilibrium between the sharp, straight lines of reality and the closed circle of the intellect. The aesthetic ordering takes place in the bleak atmosphere of a turning world, blown by winds of change and mortal fears:

And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.
The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
In the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.
I heard them cry—the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind. (*CP* 8-9)

The cry of the birds in the park and their flights are figures of order. The plumage of a bird, feathers and tail, represent the perceptions of varying forms and colors the imagination draws upon for new orderings. Any given integration of these forms must be discarded with every new springtime; last year's cock turns "white," and a new bird is ready in the imagination.

The white cock's tail
Tosses in the wind.
The turkey-cock's tail
Glitters in the sun. (*CP* 20)

The "gold-feathered" bird (*OP* 117) is not another bird of "mutable plume" (*CP* 348); it is a projection of a desire to escape the sun's bronze time; it is "fire-fangled," created to withstand the ravishes of the Heracleitean fire, which consumes all objects of reality. Such a bird is conceived in the imaginative eye; it is never to be perceived in the ocean of phenomena:

The generations of the bird are all
By water washed away. They follow after.
They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away.

Without this bird that never settles, without
Its generations that follow in their universe,
The ocean, falling and falling on the hollow shore,

Would be a geography of the dead. (*CP* 304)

These birds never settle on a bough. They are figures for the imaginative aspect of the mind ever creating, ever destroying, evading deadly repose in its fictions (“ripenings”) or in hollow reality (the “point” of redness).

The sun is the country wherever he is. The bird
In the brightest landscape downwardly revolves
Disdaining each astringent ripening,
Evading the point of redness, not content
To repose in an hour or season or long era
Of the country colors crowding against it, since
The yellow grassman’s mind is still immense,
Still promises perfections cast away. (*CP* 318)

The mind’s eye of the poet, the yellow grassman, perceives nature (the green grass) in the yellow light of the sun. Nature, the sun’s country, is not enough for the poet; he desires the “further consummation,” an ordering, a “transmutation...askew” (*CP* 318). The “big bird,” which pecks on the poet with insatiable appetite, is the mind and its “rage for order.”

The bird that can no longer fly is a fiction that no longer suffices:

A blue pigeon it is, that circles the blue sky,
On sidelong wing, around and round and round.
A white pigeon it is, that flutters to the ground,
Grown tired of flight. (*CP* 17)

The flight of the birds is a slow curve downwards, as day falls into night, sunlight into darkness, life to death, the imagination’s summer to late autumn:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (*CP* 70)

They sink bearing no divine message, as the dove did: the lazy circling in summer and the descent in November is ambiguous, mixed with the isolation, the terror of darkness. The response to flights of such beauty, such terror, such ambiguity, comes not from the rational man within us, but directly from the “subman” who can innocently feel awe at natural beauty, and who can twist imaginative kinks from the sun-dazzle:

Tell me more of the eagle, Cotton,
And you, black Sly,
Tell me how he descended
Out of the morning sky.

Describe with deepened voice
And noble imagery
His slowly-falling round
Down to the fishy sea.

Here was a sovereign sight,
Fit for a kinky clan.
Tell me again of the point
At which the flight began,

Say how his heavy wings,
Spread on the sun-bronzed air,
Turned tip and tip away,
Down to the sand, the glare

Of the pine trees edging the sand,
Dropping in sovereign rings
Out of his fiery lair
Speak of the dazzling wings. (*CP* 126-7)

The bird figure has come full circle. The sun teaches us all we know, all we can perceive, and out of the sun's arrangements we fashion imaginative birds. "Mystics" watch the process with reverence. As natural things are slightly "tipped," they are seen as "discursive wings" (*CP* 243). The imagination is a bird of "intermitted bliss singing in the night's abyss" (*OP* 4). Or, the imagination is the "listening to the birds" without human meaning: "beyond the last thought."

She attends the tintinnabula
Of birds called up by more than the sun,
Birds of more wit, that substitute

Their intelligible twittering
For unintelligible thought. (*CP* 505)

The birds are more than the sun, more than real birds; they are made of will and desire. It is the desire for permanence, for an absolute foyer, beyond parks, beyond the flux of phenomena, beyond "listless" (Christian) myths, and man's inflated conceptions of himself:

The soul, O ganders, flies beyond the parks
And far beyond the discords of the wind.

A bronze rain from the sun descending marks
The death of summer, which that time endures

Like one who scrawls a listless testament
Of golden quirks and Paphian caricatures,

Bequeathing your white feathers to the moon
And giving your bland motions to the air.

Behold, already on the long parades
The crows anoint the statues with their dirt.

And the soul, O ganders, being lonely, flies
Beyond your chilly chariots, to the skies. (*CP* 4)

The “soul” cannot really escape, and what it will find in the skies will be, consistently, that “dividing and indifferent blue” (*CP* 68). But the bird must never settle lest it fall in the ocean, the “geography of the dead.”

Man must constantly live within some myth or other; artifacts like the statue in the park or the poem about a bird make order out of phenomena for an age or for a certain sensibility. More important than the ordering of the external world is the composing of the self. For Stevens, modern man is stripped naked: he is without belief, without absolute values, without a central position in the world.

The mordant side of Stevens’ mind cherishes, demands “nakedness,” wishes the object and the self absolutely stripped of all metaphorical accretions. But nakedness itself has to be imagined from scratch:

But nakedness, wollen massa, concerns an innermost atom.
If that remains concealed, what does the bottom matter? (*CP* 145)

The paltry nude (*CP* 5) is skimming the “spick” torrent without the attendants that Venus had. She is reality figured as a woman.

She too is discontent
And would have purple stuff upon her arms. (*CP* 5)

Stevens implores that other female figure of reality, Florida, the insatiable mistress, “venereal soil,” to come to him in the weavings of the imagination:

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)

Reality, without the draping of the indigo gown, is not bearable. One selects from reality those things that please and “clothes” them with imaginative “hand.” The poet must make “silk dresses out of worms” (*OP* 157), grow a “beard” that is “cloak against the snows” (*CP* 105). Nakedness (the casting off of old beliefs) is but a necessary stage to a modern mythology of the self. The poet must look within, and not to old mythologies, draperies of old orders. He must drop the “cloak and speech of Virgil” (*CP* 185).

Crispin in his early days was a motley, accepting the trappings of past civilizations:

Crispin,
The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak
Of China, cap of Spain, imperative haw
Of hum. (*CP* 28)

Spirit informs our trappings as our bodies, and both are subject to decay. We are but “bellowing breeches” if we turn our eyes away from reality towards an old mythology. The sea, chaotic reality, is incapable of being ordered, “formed to mind or voice,” and so is “wholly body” (*CP* 128). Any myth woven around the sea will be simply a curious cloak, “fluttering its empty sleeves,” without the body of truth.

The clothing that is myth gets gradually more difficult. Penelope, waiting, weaves her cretonnes (*CP* 520), the old poet wraps about him a shawl (*CP* 524). “Weaker and weaker the sunlight falls in the afternoon” (*CP* 504), till finally, in the “indigence of the light,” a “stellar pallor hangs upon the threads.” The old fictions do not color life anymore. The sun and the self, when they are strong, together weave the “angel” of reality (the fiction), who describes himself as

An apparition apparelled in
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone. (*CP* 497)

The angel, is it real?

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.
It was Ulysses and it was not. (*CP* 521)

The sun (phenomena) and its imaginative dress, the ordering we weave for it, that is all there is in the universe. The world is empty and full, void and plenum, this and not:

It is empty. But a woman in threadless gold
Burns us with brushings of her dress

And a dissociated abundance of being. (*CP* 445)

The plenum, the summertime of the imagination, is but the sunsparkle in the void; “every thread of summer is at last unwoven” (*CP* 456) and without the weaving of the imagination, when the “interior paramour” is gone, man is quite alone:

So summer comes in the end to these few stains
And the rust and rot of the door through which she went.

The house is empty. But here is where she sat
To comb her dewy hair, a touchless light,

Perplexed by its darker iridescences.
This was the glass in which she used to look

At the moment’s being, without history,
The self of summer perfectly perceived,

And feel its country gaiety and smile
And be surprised and tremble, hand and lip.

This is the chair from which she gathered up
Her dress, the carefulest, commodious weave

Inwoven by a weaver to twelve bells.
The dress is lying, cast-off on the floor.

Now, the first tutoyers of tragedy
Speak softly, to begin with, in the eaves. (*CP* 428)

The discarded dress was simply one more of the

Generations of the imagination piled
In the manner of its stitching, of its thread,
In the weaving round the wonder of its need. (*CP* 434)

In Stevens, the sort of hat a person wears suggests his approach to life. Each man has his own unique circumstances, sensibilities, environment, and the poet will “tip” or “top” or “cap” his view of reality by the slight twist or twirl of his “hat.” The hat

is another figure for an order imposed upon chaotic reality, and, again, some hats are better than others.

Though the hat is meant, in part, to keep the burning sun from one's eyes, it should not be such as to keep out light completely:

The walker in the moonlight walked alone,
And in his heart his disbelief lay cold.
His broad-brimmed hat came close upon his eyes. (*CP* 77)

Rosenbloom's bearers wear turbans (*CP* 80), apparently the wrong sort of headpiece. They are treading where they cannot (in the sky) and, to Stevens' mind, believing what they should not; they are maudlin and absurd as far as Stevens is concerned. The revolutionists (*CP* 102) wear a "helmet without reason," since, to Stevens, intense patriotism of the real, of the capitan geloso, is as foolish as belief in any myth (against which the revolution took place); a sort of serious clowning is the only honest posture for the revolutionists. The rationalists, the "meta-men," "cold with an impotency that they know," wear hats "of angular flick and fleck" (*CP* 449).

All objects exterior to the self need to be "a little changed by the tips of artifice" (*CP* 350) so as to fit into some order that establishes a relation of man with the exterior world. The "tipping," the "curving," the imaginative distorting that the poet makes to order reality discloses his essential humanity, his unconcealed desire for the fictive covering:

The importance of its hat to a form becomes
More definite. The sweeping brim of the hat
Makes of the form Most Merciful Capitan
The flare
In the sweeping brim becomes the origin
Of a human evocation. (*CP* 379)

So cold is the exterior world of things to human desire, so necessary to the endurance of life is imaginative mythmaking, that the myth (the hat) makes us what we are, composes a self for the individual, and, if effective enough, for a nation:

Men make themselves their speech: the hard hidalgo
Lives in the mountainous character of his speech;

And in that mountainous mirror Spain acquires
The knowledge of Spain and of the hidalgo's hat—

A seeming of the Spaniard, a style of life,
The invention of a nation in a phrase. (*CP* 345)

The products of the human imagination are, for Stevens, the only comprehensible divinity. The myth-making capacity in man gives life its fictive values. The figure of the “Major Man” represents the sum total of man’s plausible projections of himself. For Stevens, the comforts of rhetoric are just as real, while being just as illusory, as the comforts of any other fiction in which the mind chooses to believe. The imagination fuses the real self with the desire for a fuller being to create a projection of the self which is larger than life. A “giant” thus formed may be a vicious giant if the projection was based on a false formulation of man and of his place in reality. Or it may be a true giant who, with the strength of the imagination, fights against the “murderous alphabet” of chaos (*CP* 179). Stevens sees his Major Men, his projections of the self, as necessary though unreal, of a nobility soon to be deflated:

It is an eminence,
But of nothing, trash of sleep that will disappear
With the special things of night, little by little,
In day’s constellation, and yet remain, yet be,

Not father, but bare brother, megalfrere,
Or by whatever boorish name a man
Might call the common self, interior fons. (*CP* 300-1)

The figure of Major Man developed slowly. There is a hint of Major Man in what Stevens says of himself in the thirties:

Men and the affairs of men seldom concerned
This pundit of the weather, who never ceased
To think of man the abstraction, the comic sum. (*CP* 156)

The destructive, ironic or comic impulse is strong in Stevens, and in “Owl’s Clover” (1936), he cannot give himself up to being an unswerving disciple to the imagination:

It may be the future depends on an orator,
Some pebble-chewer practiced in Tyrian speech,
An apparition, twanging instruments
Within us hitherto unknown, he that
Confounds all opposites and spins a sphere
Created, like a bubble, of bright sheens,
With a tendency to bulge as it floats away. (*OP* 63)

If the poet is to preach the imagination as the ultimate value for the future, he must consider whether anyone can give form to the “sprawling portent,” the dark vision of modern man:

The form
Of a generation that does not know itself,
Still questioning if to crush the soaring stacks,
The churches,
And the people suddenly evil, waked, accused,
Destroyed by a vengeful movement of the arms,
A mass overtaken by the blackest sky. (*OP* 68-9)

Aesthetic order is subjective, it may not impose order on the world. The poet, alienated from belief in any myth, is a custodian of the imagination. Living in his cold “cell,” the poet is a minor “hero” whose hymns promote a feeling of awe for the heroic capacities of the imagination:

Out of the hero’s being, the deliverer

Delivering the prisoner by his words,
So that the skeleton in the moonlight sings,
Sings of an heroic world beyond the cell,

No, not believing, but to make the cell
A hero’s world in which he is the hero.
Man must become the hero of his world. (*CP* 261)

The hero is a speculative order of the self which resists exterior disorder:

It is not an image. It is a feeling.
There is no image of the hero.
There is a feeling as definition
How could there be an image, an outline,
A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?
The hero is a feeling.

We have and are the man, capable
Of his brave quickening, the human
Accelerations that seem inhuman.

Say that the hero is his nation,
In him made one, and in that saying
Destroy all references. (*CP* 278-9)

Stevens is both disciple and skeptic. One side of his rhetoric is the mocking “hautboy,” laughing at the inner hero; the other is at one with the philosophers who find that man’s imaginings, both past and to come (Major Man), make him god-like:

If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,
Can never stand as god, is ever wrong
In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
The impossible possible philosophers' man
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up. (*CP* 250)

"Gigantomachia" (*CP* 289) presents the poet or hero as "soldier" fighting
"giants," striving

To strip off the complacent trifles,
To expel the ever-present seductions,
To reject the script for its lack-tragic,
To confront with plainest eye the changes. (*CP* 289)

The "giants" of the past were romantic myths that followed an unacceptable script. In rejecting this script and looking within for a new one "each man himself became a giant tipped out with largeness" (*CP* 289). The same battle against giants is taking place, in a comic frame, in "Bantams in Pine Woods" (*CP* 75). There is a ten-foot fowl, abnormal, perverse. It is a cock that deals in universals, If-you-can of As-can. The less pretentious poet, the inchling, warns that no one can encompass the universe. Each bantam is only a phenomenologist, not a transcendentalist. Each can tip the pines around himself by the shaping faculty of the imagination, but the "hoos" of universals are out.

"Jumbo" is another overinflated giant, a transcendentalist who sees only man in the universe, and man in a central position:

Loud, general, large, fat, soft
And wild and free, the secondary man,
Ancestor of Narcissus, prince
Of the secondary men. There are no rocks
And stones, only this imager. (*CP* 269)

The battle for an acceptable mythology does not go on simply between jumbos and heroes. A giant or a Major Man can suffice for an age, for a mood, for a summer's day, and then have to be done away with. Time was when the fear of thunder provoked simple country people to produce god-myths. We are more sophisticated today, and, face to face with the void, the business of giant-killing, killing yesterday's good giant, has become a constantly necessary, pathetic occupation:

Millions of major men against their like

Make more than thunder's rural rumbling. They make
The giants that each one of them becomes
In a calculated chaos. (*CP* 307)

The killing is "calculated" because the poet has come to realize that only by a constant re-invigoration of the spirit through fresh imaginings can he endure. Reality itself is a terrible, inexplicable giant,

Part of the question that is a giant himself:
Of what is this house composed if not of the sun,
These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances? (*CP* 465)

The only answer Stevens can give to this question about the dark giant of reality (the multiplicity of things) is to destroy him by another, more tolerable giant, a giant of the imagination:

Dark things without a double, after all,
Unless a second giant kills the first—
A recent imagining of reality. (*CP* 465)

Out of an inscrutable world, a nothingness, the poet has brought forth, and will ever bring forth hairs, birds, foyers, palms, cloaks, giants, images, figures, myths, poems that come and go, sustain and disgust, all flowing from a compulsion to order that lies deep beneath rational life:

That's it. The lover writes, the believer hears,
The poet mumbles and the painter sees,
Each one, his fated eccentricity,
As a part, but part, but tenacious particle,
Of the skeleton of the ether, the total
Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods
Of color, the giant of nothingness, each one
And the giant ever changing, living in change. (*CP* 443)

2.4. CHANGE

The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
To which the swans curvated, a will to change,
A will to make iris frettings on the blank. (*CP* 397)

"Death is the mother of beauty," Stevens asserts ironically in "Sunday Morning," "hence from her, alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams and our desires." But such fulfillment annihilates. We will never be fulfilled, but we can feel beauty more acutely because of the pressures of time and annihilation. If these

moments of pleasure are all we have, then “life is motion”; the measure of life is the ability to keep moving into new moments of equilibrium. The imagination must play with inconstants. It must turn formless reality into music, speech, fiction:

It was as if thunder took form upon
The piano, that time; the time when the crude
And jealous grandeurs of sun and sky
Scattered themselves in the garden, like
The wind dissolving into birds,
The clouds becoming braided girls.
It was like the sea poured out again
In east wind beating the shutters at night.

The crude and jealous formlessness
Became the form and the fragrance of things
Without clairvoyance. (*CP* 246-7)

Only some motions are manageable; the sun (ever shifting) can mingle with imaginative phantasy to create new bodies to comfort us. But they are deceptions:

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 motion, touch and sound
To make the body covetous in desire
Of the still finer, more implacable chords.
So be it. Yet the spaciousness and light
In which the body walks and is deceived,
Falls from that fatal and that barer sky,
And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved. (*CP* 108)

The phenomenological universe does not hold any tenderness or grief. It is the body's desire that impels the phantasy. Man has to go through all sorts of spiritual contortions to live under a fatal sky. In the modern “epic of disbelief,” the “pleasures of merely circulating” (*CP* 149) keep the poet from the void.

The wind, in Stevens, is a destructive force, and one necessary to cathartic change. On the other hand, the wind is a beneficent afflatus, carrying the imagination's fiction over the sea of chaos. The imagination is overcome by the “weather,” but in its “moments,” it can bend the winds to its purpose. In the face of the overwhelming multiplicity of things, the vision of desire fulfilled is an impossible vision:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,

And yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean. (*CP* 128)

The inhuman cry of the ocean cannot be controlled. The imagination (“she”), by disdaining the cry of the sea, can create her own mundo in which to live for a time. The ocean represents the chaos; there is a “dumbfounding abyss” between the ocean and our desires that only poetry can attempt to bridge:

Today the air is clear of everything.
It has no knowledge except of nothingness
And it flows over us without meanings. (*OP* 113)

Air is air,
Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.
Its sounds are not angelic syllables
But our unfashioned spirits realized
More sharply in more furious selves. (*CP* 137)

“Clouds” can figure the moving, shifting, and changing of our “cloudy” perceptions of reality. The tumults of the winds, the sea, the refractions of the sun’s rays, the iridescence in the air, can give variable coloring, motion, and shape to clouds in the sky, and these changes of appearance in clouds can serve poetically to suggest subtle fluctuations in emotion, changes in mood and changes in ideas, in what we think. “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” is a tour de force in projecting some of these fluctuating perceptions, emotions and ideas, and in representing their integrations and dissipations.

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm
And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
And in its watery radiance, while the hue

Of heaven in an antique reflection rolled
Round those flotillas. And sometimes the sea
Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue. (*CP* 99)

The sea blooms evolved from clouds are moving, changing, dissipating. Any particular integration, figured as a sea bloom, comes and goes; fresh integrations of new moods and perceptions will follow, to be dissipated in their turn, all “impalpable / Mirrors unstill of the eternal change.” The process goes on and on. The poem ends:

The sovereign clouds came clustering. The conch

Of loyal conjuration trumped. The wind
Of green blooms turning crisped the motley hue

To clearing opalescence. Then the sea
And heaven rolled as one and from the two
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue. (*CP* 102)

The transfiguring integration is fictional. The clouds are “sovereign” in that they are real. The imagination conjures while nature clears the spell. Implicit in every line are emotions both of awe and of irony concerning what the imagination can do.

Clouds do not contain revelations:

These lights are not a spell of light,
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.
An innocence of the earth and no false sign

Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,
Lie down like children in this holiness. (*CP* 418)

We are children without fathers, but with “benevolences” (*CP* 317) in the clouds. The universe is enwrapped in cloud; we cannot pierce the “physical fix of things.” Yet there is the human desire to do so, to understand the “unfamiliar, difficult fern, pushing and pushing red after red” (*CP* 365). We cannot get at the core of existence, we are limited to our sense perception, always at a cloudy second remove from objects:

There are doubles of this fern in clouds,
Less firm than the paternal flame,
Yet drenched with its identity,
Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes

And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown
Beyond relation to the parent trunk:
The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,
The furiously burning father-fire. (*CP* 365)

The Paltry Nude, bare bones of a fiction, “touches the clouds” (*CP* 5); this is the projection of the imagination. The poet accepts the “drifting waste” of sun and cloud and magnifies what he has in imaginative fictions:

So speech of your processions returns
In the casual evocations of your tread
Across the stale, mysterious seasons. These
Are the music of meet resignation; these
The responsive, still sustaining pomps for you
To magnify, if in that drifting waste

You are to be accompanied by more
Than mute bare splendors of the sun and moon. (CP 56)

The “costuming of clouds” (CP 139) is all the poet has. Yet a poetry of the natural cannot satisfy human desire completely:

I know that I cannot be mended,
Out of the clouds, pomp of the air,
By which at least I am befriended. (CP 201)

Frequently, the imagination must move along on the “wheel” of the flux of nature:

To say the light wind worries the sail,
To say the water is swift today,

To expunge all people and be a pupil
Of the gorgeous wheel. (CP 120-1)

Nature is inhuman, “the wheel survives the myths” (CP 222). The waves of the ocean endlessly rise and fall on the dry salt shore of reality. The weather changes and we make of it what we will. The candle of the imagination can create for us, momentarily, a mundo that satisfies the desire for permanence:

The candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible. (CP 509)

2.5. THE HERO

The original edition of Wallace Stevens’ *Parts of a World* (1942) was accompanied by a short statement on poetry and war:

In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination. And consciousness of an immense war is a consciousness of a fact. The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact. It goes on everywhere, even in the periods that we call peace. But in war the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be and to move quickly is overwhelming. (OP 241)

In appending the statement to *Parts of a World*, Stevens is suggesting that his poems are in some sense an intervention in the events of 1942; but the gist of Stevens’ analysis is to define a programme for poetry against the backdrop of “an immense war.” Stevens wants, at once, to argue that his poetry has an extra-linguistic

relevance and to privilege that poetry over the external world of events. Stevens wants it both ways, as he simultaneously advances and withdraws from the position that poetry must find its “real significance” in the sphere of action. Stevens’ double desire is to assume a central position if not in then on the world, and to enlist that world as a part of poetry.

“Man and Bottle” shows Stevens on the brink of the “central” poetry of the “hero,” casting about for an idiom appropriate to war, for a poetic which,

to find what will suffice
Destroys romantic tenements
Of rose and ice

In the land of war. (*CP* 238)

“Man and Bottle” has to

persuade that war is part of itself,
A manner of thinking, a mode
Of destroying

If war is part of poetry, then the poem assumes the status of a combatant, and can claim that poetry is a destructive force. “Poetry is a Destructive Force” claims that poetry is a decreative force:

That’s what misery is,
Nothing to have at heart.
It is to have or nothing. (*CP* 192)

Using decreation as a synonym for destruction, Stevens argues that this lionized poetry “can kill a man.”

“Man and Bottle” and “Of Modern Poetry” were first published, together, in 1940, under the title “Two Theoretical Poems.” Both poems want to retain their declared “theoretical” status and assume a “central” role in the world of events and world war. According to “Of Modern Poetry,” poetry is “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice,” positing a significant role for itself in the sphere of action:

It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. (*CP* 240)

The idiom of the “hero” in *Parts of the World* is articulated most forcefully in a triad of poems, “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” “Examination of the Hero in a Time of

War,” and “Asides on the Oboe.” The opening gesture of “Asides on the Oboe” is a rejection of relativism:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. (*CP* 250)

Stevens’s tone here moves between irony and urgency. Against improvised music and playful irony is the urgency of the “now,” and the insistence that one must choose.

What is the nature of the choice Stevens demands that we make? The choice seems to be between the relativism of preliminary manoeuvres and “final belief.” Yet this “final belief,” Stevens suggests, “Must be in a fiction.” As in William James’s “will to believe,” belief is a psychological imperative. Stevens elaborates in a 1942 letter, where he says that “If one no longer believes in God (as truth) it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else ... one’s final belief must be in a fiction” (*L* 370). The ensuing lines of “Asides on the Oboe” produce the fictive “hero” in whom, according to Stevens, it is necessary to believe, the “central man” who, in his totalizing nature, closes off the subversive possibilities of irony latent in the “prologue.”

The poem presents a survey of what Stevens calls “obsolete fictions.” The “metal heroes that time granulates” are the statues of great men which Stevens repeatedly bring into his poems only to dismiss with asperity and consign to the “dump” of the world’s jaded images. In contrast to these corroded “metal heroes” is the “the philosophers man” who “still alone walks in dew.” The “hero,” in our introduction him here, is “still” the sole surviving viable fiction. The word “still” is repeated three times in the opening stanza, combining a sense of beatific peace with the endurance of the “hero” who still stands as belief.

Stevens goes on to describe the “impossible possible” nature of his “hero.” The glass-like fragility of the “hero” is offset by his totalizing centrality describing the “hero” Stevens is carried away on a weave of hyperbole: claims about the “hero” follow one upon another, until we may wonder if the “hero” is eventually more a defensive conception. The hero is

The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up. (*CP* 250)

The “hero” figure who recurs in Stevens’ poetry from the Forties has its own privileged vocabulary, a lexicon of opalescence, purity and the crystalline—words like “dew,” “milky,” “immaculate,” “naked,” “mirror,” “man of glass,” “diamond” and “transparence.” Taken together, Stevens’ “hero” poems form a private mythology. In “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” the “hero” is both crystalline and central:

A thousand crystals’ chiming voices,
Like the shiddow-shaddow of lights revolving
To momentary ones, are blended,
In hymns, through iridescent changes,
Of the apprehending of the hero.
These hymns are like a stubborn brightness
Approaching in the dark approaches
Of time and place, becoming certain,
The organic centre of responses,
Naked of hindrance, a thousand crystals.
To meditate the highest men, not
The highest supposed in him and over,
Creates, in the blissfuller perceptions,
What unisons create in music. (*CP* 279)

The crystalline imagery in “Asides on the Oboe” describes the already achieved perfection of the “diamond globe.” In canto XIV of “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” the same imagery charts a synthesizing movement from parts to whole, from the many to the one. The crystal voices are “blended” in “hymns” and “becoming certain,” the crystals for “The organic centre of responses,” in a culmination of the numinous idiom which is also associated with the “hero.” As in “Asides on the Oboe,” the hero-language and the synthesizing action of the “hero” are compared with music, with identity of pitch, the complete agreement, of “unisons.”

In the second stanza of “Asides on the Oboe” though, Stevens seems to want to set his “hero” in some kind of wider “folk” tradition—now Stevens presents the “hero” as a peddler who arrives in the summer to sell his wares. The “hero”

sets his peddler’s pie and cries in summer,
The glass man, cold and numbered, dewily cries,
“Thou art not August unless I make thee so.” (*CP* 251)

In “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” too, Stevens places his “hero” poetry in the tradition of “the earliest poems of the world”—a tradition which guarantees primal, original power. These “earliest poems” lead to a hero’s progress into a fairytale land:

[...] in the hero-land to which we go,
A little nearer by each multitude,
To which we come as into bezeled plain,

The poison in the blood will have been purged,
An inner miracle and sun-sacrament (*CP* 262)

The folksy peddler-hero of “Asides on the Oboe” is also “The glass man, cold and numbered”: he is diaphanous and distant, he is “numbered” in the sense, perhaps, of his days being numbered, but in the sense, too, of being designated or singled out from the mass. The “hero,” here, is described by the word “dewily,” so he is related to the natural world—and yet he also has sway over it. This portentous “numbered” man is given a single line of direct speech—“Thou art not August unless I make thee so.” Stevens claims for his “hero” an earthly authenticity, where the “hero” is related to the seasons—he “cries in summer,” the proper season for the “hero” in “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” too—and yet Stevens also conceives of the “hero” in terms of an assertive and imperious version of the High Romantic tradition, which prescribes the seasons: “Thou art not August unless I make thee so.”

“Montrachet-le-Jardin” bolsters the “final belief” of “Asides on the Oboe” in presenting the “hero” a sunsurpassable, comsummate:

it is a question of
The naked man, the naked man at last
And tallest hero and plus gaudiest vir. (*CP* 262)

Yet, as well as stressing his incommensurability, Stevens also asks us to accept the “hero” as “plus gaudiest vir”—as in “Asides on the Oboe,” he wants his “hero” to be both “glass man” and peddler. But in “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” the exuberance is strained and overplayed. In the ninth canto of “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” the “hero”

seems
To stand taller than a person stands, has
A wider brow, large and less human
Eyes and bruted ears: the man-like body
Of a primitive. He walks with a defter
And lithier stride. His arms are heavy
And his breast is greatness. (*CP* 277)

As in the “tallest” “hero” of “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” it is sheer physical size that is stressed here: “taller,” “wider,” “large,” “bruted,” “heavy,” “greatness.” The aggrandized “hero” is perhaps an example of how, according to Stevens, the vast scale of world war “affects the scale of one’s thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic” (*OP* 242). In the later poem “Chocorua to its Neighbor,” the talking mountain describes the “major man”—

How singular he was as man, how large,
If nothing more than that, for the moment, large (*CP* 302)

In “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” the “hero” becomes “super-man,” when Stevens says that

to speak simply of good is like to love,
To equate the root-man and the super-man,
The root-man swarming, tortured by his mass,
The super-man friseured, possessing and possessed. (*CP* 262)

In Stevens’ idiosyncratic syntax, it is not clear if an equation of “root-man” and “super-man” is to be welcomed. The equation does not balance. If “love” propels an equation of “root-man” and “super-man,” in another index of value the stanza still makes a distinction between the two, in terms of a distinction between singular and plural, whole and parts: the “root-man” is “swarming, tortured by his mass”—he is infested, whereas the “superman” is refined, aloof, urbane, even, “friseured,” coiffed. Something similar happens in the third canto of “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas,” where the “multitude of thoughts” is “Like insects in the depths of the mind” and the “single thought” is imaged as a fabulous king or queen, and as a Christ-figure.

Yet the final stanza of “Montrachet-le-Jardin” effects a startling turn:
And yet what good were yesterday’s devotions?
I affirm and then at midnight the great cat
Leaps quickly from the fireside and is gone. (*CP* 264)

This acknowledgement of the temporal and ultimately useless character of heroic affirmation is a welcome piece of self-depreciation in the “hero” poetry: at the end of “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” the “devotions” are not so much counterpointed as cancelled by the poem’s hollow last word, “gone.” But “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” written in 1941, doesn’t spell the end for the “hero” in *Parts of a World*. “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” written in 1942, is the longest and most exhaustive of the “hero” poems. The poem opens with a speaker whose words, “cold,

my element,” echo “The Sun This March” from *Ideas of Order*, where “Cold is our element and winter’s air / Bring voices as of lions coming down” (CP 134). The soldiers evoked here hold to their articles of faith doggedly, and do not follow Stevens’ “hero” in appropriating a religious idiom: “These were the psalter of their sybils”; “The Got whome we serve is able to deliver / Us.”

In an essay on Stevens’ war poetry, Weissman looks to this poem-sequence as a process of producing and discarding possible ways of coming to the “hero,” as Stevens searches out new versions of nobility and heroism (43). The poem’s third stanza tells us that “Sight, / In war, observes each man profoundly”—and so a new way of seeing the “hero” is required, adequate to this “exacting eye,” its “sight” as accurate and uncompromising as the gunsight the line latently plays upon. The fourth canto goes on to produce, and dismiss, various versions of the “hero”—“on a horse, in a plane, at the piano.” But in cantos xii to xv, the presentations of the “hero,” rather than being subject to revision, buttress each other, as the poem turns from a counterpointing to an accretive method. And throughout the poem, Stevens holds fast to certain characteristics of his “hero,” such as his numinous quality. In “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” the “major miracle” of the “hero” inverts Christian ritual in the pagan, sun-worshipping “sun-sacrament,” and the “hero” replaces the “speechless, invisible gods” who “Ruled us before.” “On the Road Home” and “The Well-Dressed Man with a Beard” resisted and deconstructed a religious idiom which pointed to a totalization in “truth”: the “hero” poems employ precisely such an idiom. In “Examination of the Hero in Time of War,” “becoming certain” has a cumulative movement which is only incidentally provisional. The poem’s final canto opens in the disintoxicating vein in which “Montrachet-le-Jardin” concludes, acknowledging that “After false thing ends,” and admitting that “After the hero, the familiar / Man makes the hero artificial.” There is a similar turn at the end of “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas,” the final canto of which places the poem in the war-bound present of 1940:

We live in a camp...Stanzas of final peace
Lie in the heart’s residuum...Amen. (CP 258)

Peace is associated with the poem—“Stanzas of final peace”—and war, by implication, with the external world. But the poem’s concluding couplet is unsettling:

Behold the men in helmets borne on steel,

Discolored, how they are going to defeat. (*CP* 259)

Are these soldiers going to meet a defeat in battle? Or are they to overcome an enemy absent from Stevens' syntax? One effect of the concluding couplet is to make the reader reassess the poem from the perspective of a time of war. The couplet stands in a potentially devastating relation to the poem it concludes. In its sudden and brutal change of focus it is a rebuking alternative to the poet's "stanzas of final peace." Yet at the very end of "Examination of the Hero in Time of War," Stevens draws back from the consequences of what he is saying for his "hero":

But was the summer false? The hero?
How did we come to think that autumn
Was the veritable season, that familiar
Man was the veritable man? So
Summer, jangling the savagest diamonds and
Dressed in its azure-doubled crimsons,
May truly bear its heroic fortunes
For the large, the solitary figure. (*CP* 280-1)

Here Stevens attempts to pull his "hero" back from "winter-stop" and to naturalize the "hero" in the seasonal cycle. But his attempt is not altogether convincing—the "central man" is now a marginal figure. Still "large," he is also vulnerable. Yet the significance of this abandonment and last-ditch resuscitation of the "hero" is qualified by the regularity of his resurrection as "major man" in Stevens' subsequent poetry.

In its final stanzas, "Asides on the Oboe" abandon the present tense and turns to a form of historical narrative. The present urgency of the poem's opening—the "now" and the "It is time to choose"—is modulated at the end of the poem; the crisis of the "one year" is safely in the past:

One year, death and war prevented the jasmine scent
And the jasmine islands were bloody martyrdoms.
How was it then with the central man? (*CP* 251)

These lines appear to take us outside the world of the poem, to ask, what was the effect on the "central man" or "hero" of this external event of war? But all Stevens tells us is what we already know—that the "hero" is consummate, that he is "the sum." Stevens asks "Did we / Find peace?" only to answer "We found the sum of men." The word "peace," which is associated with the "hero" earlier in the poem, takes on a new resonance with the reference here to "war." But the war, in which the

“hero” suffers, is finally is finally unable to intrude on his diamond globe. The “hero” survives war relatively unscathed: his days were not, after all, “numbered.” War is seen as an enabling rather than a divisive force, insofar as its effect is that “We and the diamond globe at last were one.” It’s not enough to be “partly one,” Stevens says near the end of the poem—and at the end, the relativism of parts is entirely done away with. Instead of parts, we have the autotelic “world” of the “hero,” “The glass man,” without external reference.” The poem’s diamond-studded “hero” is the “impossible possible” projection of the imagination, a self-contained and pristine man of glass who remains unsullied by external events and by war. Similarly, in “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” we are told that while others “Secrete with them / too many references,” the “hero” would “Destroy all references” (CP 279).

“Asides on the Oboe” ostensibly addresses the external event of the war, yet the poem works to subsume the world and the war into its own autotelic “world.” Both the globe-like “hero” and the sealed poetic world he inhabits and represents act as bulwarks against an external world which is viewed as a threat to the self-contained world of the poem. Stevens constructs a private mythology around his “hero”—but one which becomes of the time of its production and the wartime resonance of heroism, gestures toward public relevance.

As “Asides on the Oboe” and the other “hero” poems show, in the early Forties, Stevens’ provisional, playful vocabulary is countered by his “supreme fiction,” his desire for a heroic, unified and self-enclosed poetic “world.” Stevens may have been attracted, intellectually, to relativism and to the provisional, but temperamentally he was drawn to unity, to closure, to the sealed world of the poem where the poet calls all the shots.

Alan Filreis, in his *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, concentrates on Stevens’ work circa World War Two, and attempts to link Stevens with the actualities of the world in the period under discussion, by reading the poetry and prose of 1939-1941 as “a form of isolationism” and “a readiness to withdraw into the basic fact of American distance” (*Actual World*, 3, 6). For Filreis, Stevens’ refusal of “external experience” is referential because it has to do with that refusal of external reference found in American isolationist thinking. Filreis contextualizes Stevens in

relation to the New Criticism, and the relationship between the rhetoric of the New Criticism and that of American isolationism; as Fekete points out, “the cultural politics of the New Criticism are linked with the political culture of the period” (*The Critical Twilight* 49). In the early Forties, Stevens’ reputation depended to a degree upon the lionization of his work by New Critics like Blackmur, Ransom and Tate. A poem like “Asides on the Oboe,” which champions at a thematic level organic form and unity and which refuses “external reference,” intersected perfectly with the pedagogical mores of the New Critics. As Filreis points out, the New Critical credo as aesthetic detachment found its political corollary in isolationism. But in the late 30s and the early Forties, the New Critical idiom was itself fighting for survival. The New Nationalist movement spearheaded by Archibald Macleish insisted that it was unpatriotic to focus on the mere structure of a poem; instead the poetic and critical imagination had to be devoted to American national writing and to the pending American war effort.

Stevens’ poetry from 1939 to 1942 displays a tension between attraction to the autotelic world of the poem and desire for engagement, for intervention, in the wider world. At the beginning of his “Asides on the Oboe,” Stevens tells us that “It is time to choose.” But in terms of the debate between isolation and intervention, Stevens doesn’t choose.

Where Filreis attempts to historicize the Stevens of the early Forties, Vendler takes a different, ahistorical, approach, when she argues that, in the “hero,” Stevens “hankers after ... the masculine common life” (*On Extended Wings* 153). The fifth canto of “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” proposes the “common man” as “hero”—

The common man is the common hero.
The common hero is the hero. (*CP* 275)

—and Vendler suggests that “The hero ... is the source of Stevens’ new preoccupation with the common language and its common forms; and the framing of a poetry out of the speech of the million presents him with a linguistic problem analogous to the creation of a hero from the common soldier” (*On Extended Wings* 153). Yet the hero poems qualify again and again any aspiration they may voice to be in contact with the “common” and with “common language.” And in “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” “common fortune”—which follows Stevens’

proposition of the “common hero”—isn’t given much of a chance; the first example of “common fortune” the poet chooses is “the entrails / Of a cat,” something belonging on the “dump,” and Stevens concludes this canto of the poem in a pun on “common-places” (*CP* 275).

A letter Stevens wrote in 1940 suggests that a desire for the “common life” has a psychological basis for the poet:

About the time when I, personally, began to feel around for a new romanticism, I might naturally have been expected to start on a new cycle. Instead of doing so, I began to feel that I was on the edge : that I wanted to get to the center: that I was isolated, and that I wanted to share the common life. ... Of course, I don’t agree with people who say that I live in a world of my own. I think that I am perfectly normal, but I see that there is a center. For instance, a photograph of a lot of fat men and women in the woods, drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo convinces me that there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve. (*CP* 352)

Try as he does to muffle the painful confession he is making in the ridiculous example he offers at the end of the letter as to what the “normal” or the “common life” might be, relativism, for someone of Stevens’ temperament, brings with it a measure of vertigo, or in Stevens’ own terms a feeling of being “on the edge,” when “It would be much nicer to things definite. ... I think I’d enjoy being an executioner or a Russian policeman” (*L* 86-7). Instead of achieving the centrality of “common life,” the “hero” poems produce a “capable” and “central” figure to compensate Steven’s anxiety about his own felt marginality. Where major men, in the Nietzschean manner (*NA* 150), should be able to delight in heights, “A Weak Mind in the Mountains” is -, for example, a poem about not rising to the occasion, not realizing a potential to have “stood up sharply in the sky” (*CP* 212).

Notwithstanding Stevens’ hostility to “external reference,” it is tempting to try to find references, analogues and contexts for his “hero.” A genealogy of sorts of the “capable” figure can of course be traced to Nietzsche and to Emerson—but with caveats. Stevens’ “hero” isn’t disruptive like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is strenuous, combative, communicative. Where Nietzsche maintains a relativistic scepticism, Stevens’ hero without relativism, sums us up. Stevens’ hero is generated out of a psychological imperative, at least as much as from an historical or national context.

Nietzsche himself was, of course, influenced by Emerson, and it is probable that Stevens’ exposure to Nietzsche was mediated through the American perspective

of Emerson. Two texts of Emerson suggest themselves in relation to Stevens' "hero" poems—the essay "Heroism" and *Representative Men*. In the "Uses of Great Men," the first part of his *Representative Men*, Emerson's idea of a collective identity in which the individual is subsumed is expressed in a vocabulary of the center and of transience (*Representative* 38). Emerson is anxious to stress that one of the uses of great men is that they stimulate the rest of us to new possibilities (*Representative* 11). Emerson provides an analogue to Stevens in the essay "Heroism" where the hero, "with perfect urbanity" will "dare the gibbet and the mob by the absolute truth of his speech. Toward all his external evil the man within the beast assume a warlike attitude." And when Emerson says that "Heroism feels and never reasons and therefore is always right" ("Heroism" 148) he sound very like the Stevens who in canto xii of "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" claims the "hero" as "a feeling as definition." Many parallels have been drawn between Emerson and Stevens' "hero": Weissman, for example, reads "Asides on the Oboe" as teaching an Emersonian lesson on self-reliance, poetry should help us live our lives by making us free from dependence on any external source of dignity which could be destroyed by overwhelming historical facts" ("Stevens' War Poems" 42). And bloom argues that "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" remains firmly in the Emerson-Whitman tradition of testing out the poet or the hero as a central man" (*Our Climate* 158).

The promotion in Stevens' poetry—in the era of Hitler and Mussolini—of a masterful and totalizing figure is surely troubling, the more so in the light of Stevens' own political opinions, like that voiced in a 1935 letter about Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. Stevens remarks in this letter that "I am pro-Mussolini personally," and he goes on to add that "The Italians have as much right to take Ethiopia from the coons as the coons had to take it from the boa-constrictors" (*L* 289).

In a letter in 1940, Stevens asks, apropos his poem "Owl's Clover,"

If the future ... comes to nothing, shan't we be looking round for someone superhuman, to put us together again, some prodigy capable of measuring sun and moon, someone who, if he is to dictate our fates, had better be inhuman, so that we shall know that he is without any of our weaknesses and cannot fail? (*L* 371-2)

One of the first reviews of *Parts of a World* is Hi Simons' 1942 notice "The Humanism of Wallace Stevens." Simons' review agrees that in the "hero," Stevens elaborates on a new distinctive kind of humanism. It was to Simons that Stevens had written his 1940 letter about the "superhuman" "prodigy" who is to "dictate our fates"—and recalling this letter in his review of *Parts of a World*, Simons has difficulty in persuading himself that "humanism" is, after all, an accurate description of Stevens' "hero"-project: "When this figure ... first appeared [in *Owl's Clover*], as a "super-animal" to 'dictate our fates,' ... he bore some suspicion of resemblance to a sort of fuehrer."

Simons goes on to declare that "the definitive characterization" of the "hero" is to be found in other poems of *Parts of a World*, where the "hero" "personifies those capacities for noble living and thinking in which the average man transcends himself" (Doyle, *The Critical Heritage*, 208).

Stevens' capable figures provoke analogues with the likes of Mussolini; but the "hero" is a self-referential conception which fends off analogues as vigorously as it suggests them. A pushing back of external reference, a refusal to let history in, fits uneasily with the emphasis on "fact" in the statement on poetry and war Stevens wrote for the first edition of *Parts of a World*. The statement suggests that the poems have a purchase on the wider world scene, but the "hero" poems testify to the very different way in which the desire to be, in some sense, a combatant is negotiated by Stevens. "Of Modern Poetry" had promised poems that would adequate themselves to a wider historical scene: the "hero" poetry gives itself the status of commentary and of "Examination," but the function of these poems is, rather, to internalize the world and the war.

An attraction to the hero-worship recurs in the "hero" poems Stevens is writing at this time, where the "hero" isn't Mussolini, but is an heroic surrogate for the poet himself. The "hero" is a personal projection which is fielded as an historical necessity. Like the Jungian archetype, the "hero" is produced in "extreme situations," like that of world war, and is presented as a facet of a mythopoeic imagination. Stevens' "hero" poetry may be an examination of the "hero" as a capable" persona for the poet; his "hero" can be seen as a psychological defense mechanism transferred into an aesthetic.

Looking back on *Parts of a World* in 1943, Stevens remarked, “What a poet needs above everything else is acceptance.” He felt that “this element is lacking in my own case” (L 433). Stevens’ plea for “acceptance” recalls the 1940 letter in which he confesses that “I wanted to get to the center.” Stevens’ response to feelings of marginality was the production of the totalizing “hero.”

The term Eliot proposed in relation to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “ordering myth,” which is “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (“Ulysses, Order, and Myth” 483) also describes Stevens’ “hero”-project. Poirier has argued that Stevens doesn’t share in this “waste land ethos,” but locates “the problem of literary production mostly in language rather than in historical circumstance”: in *Parts of a World* there is a complex and troubled relationship between poetry and external event, between “language” and “historical circumstance” (*The Renewal of Literature* 10). Stevens’ hero is a mythological bulwark against the encroachments of a turbulent world, a peaceful and self-protective globe in himself. Canto XV of “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” describes the curiously contradictory “pastimes” of the “hero”—the “hero” is aggrandized and active, he is “man-sun, man-moon, man-earth, man-ocean,” and “the hero is his nation, / In him made one,” but the “hero” is also more quietly self-contained, when “he studies the paper / On the wall, the lemons on the table” (CP 280). The “hero,” finally, sounds more like an urbane man of leisure than a combatant, like the “fictive man” of “Paisant Chronicle,” who “may be seated in / A café. There may be a dish of country cheese / And a pineapple on the table” (CP 335). In his double aspect, Stevens’ “hero” offers less an insight into the relationship between Wallace Stevens and American national politics than a psychological insight into Stevens himself.

CHAPTER THREE

READINGS

3.1. “PETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER”

“Peter Quince at the Clavier” (CP 89) is a poem about poetry, about form as an imperative in a world of flux. Whereas “Sunday Morning” is an embrace of an orderly vitalism, “Peter Quince” is devoted to the form which preserves art from the transience of life. Shakespeare’s Peter Quince, the director of comedy in *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream*, becomes the mask of the poet with the lyric voice. In his role as improvisator he turns myth into idea, he gives back to the myth its reality, its violence, shapes it in enduring forms.

Established in Part I of the poem are the theme of music (poetry) as feeling (imagination) and the parable of the apocryphal story of Susanna and the elders:

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

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music.

The experience of the elders before Susanna’s nudity is a feeling of alien passion and thus a pizzicato. Against the warm and fertile tones of her “green evening, clear and warm,” against the composed ambience of her “still garden,” the vibrations of the elders grate:

The basses of their beings throb
In witching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

Reducing feeling into restrictive as opposed to imaginative form, the elders confuse flesh and spirit in a timbre of perversion.

The lyric softness which opens Part II is a striking break from the similes of Part I. Susanna’s liquid sensuality is a perfectly attuned response to her world, indulgent but discreetly ordered. The rhythm of Susanna in her garden modulates

into a picture of graceful, controlled action. But the dissonant intrusion of crashing cymbal and roaring horns that closes the passage fixes the attempted rape as a violation of beauty by “unnatural” human appetite.

Part III continues the dramatization of violence, as the naturally harmonious world of Susanna is reduced to the severe moral judgments of her “attendant Byzantines.” These attendants perceive her violated purity under the moral, not the aesthetic law, committing a further ravishment of beauty.

Part IV becomes, in part, a variation of Stevens’ enduring theme:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.
The body dies; the body’s beauty lives.

Any pure abstraction is not enduring unless manifest in some sensuous form. The flesh does not endure, but the form does. Peter Quince’s controlled tonalities preserve what first was immortal (aesthetic form) in that it was mortal (embodied):

Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

The forms of poetry create and preserve beauty; the laws of moral convention leave it spent and dissipated. Death is the mother of beauty because death is the end toward which life grows. In this poem, immortality is form, the constant sacrament of art. The poetic vision is adjusted to the world’s incoherent sensuous body. If transcendence is impossible, art is the only refuge from time.

3.2. “SUNDAY MORNING”

“Sunday Morning” (*CP* 66) develops a meditative argument in which the poet assumes the role of a woman’s conscience, presenting and interpreting her drama of self. In the opening stanza, the woman is settled (sensuously) at home, flouting the “holy hush of ancient sacrifice” which nevertheless troubles her deeply. The solemn, dark intrusion of religious imagery suggests the opposite of “complacencies.” Hence the “dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe” which comes to disturb her world of “green freedom”; hence the poem’s tension:

The pungent oranges and bright, green wings

Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

The woman, caught between desires, would like to transmute ephemeral pleasures into eternal ones. Death disallows easy consolations and forces a mortal choice.

In stanza two, the poet denies the “ancient sacrifice,” denying what is promise for what is. “Divinity must live within herself”: a latter-day Emersonianism without the transcendental rationale. It is presented as a discovery and a premise, entailing a full acceptance of the contradictions of living in a physical world.

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grieving in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights.

“These,” says the apocalyptic speaker, “are the measures destined for her soul.” The physical landscape, as an extension of self, becomes an antagonist. Not so much a pantheism, this is rather life deliberately measured to include all pleasures, all pain. The price is the sacrifice of the comforting myth of immortality.

There is a shift of theme in stanza three. Altering the imagery from Christian to pagan mythology, Stevens plays a variation on the theme that “Divinity must live within herself.” The old god of inhuman birth, who “moved among us, as a muttering king,” is dead, victim of time and his own gaudiness. Perhaps all gods are dead, because the history of gods is the history of their death; they become anachronistic when their role becomes familiar and formal, and reason refutes their magic. Stevens is anticipating in this stanza his later speculation on the gods as aesthetic creations who disappear when their aesthetic becomes apparent, when we know them as gods in myths, being unable any longer to embrace them as truth. From Jove to Christ, the poem seems to say, was a humanizing of divinity; and now the Christian myth is in its throes, leaving us once more with ultimate questions:

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,

Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

This sky is the horizon of the self—beyond which is nothingness. Our senses scan the only horizons and the self is the last divinity.

Stanza four confronts directly the non-sense of a transcendent paradise, rejecting unembodied beauty. The woman must choose: remote paradise or fulfillment of the senses. There is a vivid paradox in the transformation of Christian and pagan imagery. The sensuous world of birds and wings takes on the qualities of paradise, which the woman's orthodoxy has reserved for that "isle / Melodious," or "visionary south," or "cloudy palm / Remote on heaven's hill." The poet, presenting the woman with her choice between heaven and earth, subtly manages his imagery to conceive that earth as paradise.

The shocking, and pivotal, rejoinder to the woman's wish for "some imperishable bliss," which opens stanza five, is not gratuitous. "Death is the mother of beauty," and the woman has discovered this. It is consciousness of death which has forced her to embrace her contentment so intensely, to sustain her Sunday morning even when harried by the "dark / Encroachment" of conscience. It is death which makes us grasp things in the world. Life is change; it is our growth into death. And stanza six can reinforce the truth with a succinct metaphorical contrast between the ponderous ennui of a paradise without change and the light, spicy sensuousness that is our reward for embracing the "earthly mothers".

Released from negation, the poem bursts forth in stanza seven with a dazzling paganism that has its own order. Its ritualistic chant has a Whitmanesque breadth, though contained in a discreet pentameter. It is shocking, this "boisterous devotion to the sun," but not without restraint; it is an aesthetic orgy of pleasure. Deliberately tempered by the still darkness of stanza eight, it offers a climax of sensuous enthusiasm—the "bough of summer"—before the final resolution—the "winter branch"—anticipated in stanza two. The paganism is flooded with Christian imagery, and the worship of reality is not without price. The price of this boisterous devotion is the mature recognition of the concluding stanza, in which death and life are married.

The resolution turns to the secular adaptation of Christian forms of value. The opening line of stanza eight returns us to stanza one, to the "wide water, without

sound” that bore the woman’s conscience to “silent Palestine.” Only now Palestine is the world of a secular Christ, man himself and not the Martyr, the divinity of self caught in the existential insularity of an “unsponsored” world:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.

Within this ironic paradise of impermanence, nature’s casual harmonies enact the only permanence. The life cycle resolves the pathos of man’s self-awareness; life comes to fruition and passes into nothingness in a constant rhythm that provides a secular metaphor for man’s cosmic (and comic?) existence:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

3.3. “LE MONOCLE DE MON ONCLE”

In “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (*CP* 13) comic lightness modulates into irony, and finally precipitates seriousness. But it is the comic, and with it life, that triumphs. Stevens assumes the avuncular mask, in contrast to the more familiar youthful masks of his early poems. In places, there is an excess of flippant diction and high-handed rhetoric which almost overwhelms the ironies that lie at the poem’s center. Hyperbole comes to be a norm of the poem’s ironic manner. The uncle-poet is Stevens’ Prufrock, whose self-consciousness provokes the tragic-comic meditations, with his anxiety releasing his imagination rather than paralyzing his soul. The uncle’s vision is narrow, pathos unrelenting, but he is never paralyzed by Laforguean helplessness.

The “monocle” is a reductive spectacle of man’s once vital self left with empty abstractions—“mon oncle” elided into “monocle” by the “clashed edges of two words that kill.” The aging self moves from a life primarily physical to one primarily reflective. He must celebrate his new love in words, which paradoxically

kill the feeling, in giving it form and order. Metaphor, or fictive truth, is paradoxical. Undone by his notions of romance, the “eye” is “instructed of much mortality.” Poetry is a necessary retreat, as it searches for the “substance in us that prevails.”

The themes of the poem can be summed thus: stanza one opens with a mock invocation to some faded muse; the second strophe initiates a series of ironic thoughts on loss, and in man’s longing for immortality; doubt leads beyond personal pain to a skepticism of all formalized conceptions of truth and beauty, and of all longings for permanence; the aging man’s concerns turn inward as “amorists grow bald” and the longing for absolutes replaces the pleasures of sensation; ephemeral consolations are accepted and dubious “heaven” is rejected; love becomes merely memorable, hence comic in its grotesque nostalgia; poetry, not religion, becomes surrogate for pleasure gone and the expected consolations of immortality; the poet turns not to chants of romantic or divine love but to a ceremony of reality; the spiritual life is to be realized in living fully our “anguishing hour,” but living it in the eloquence of an earthly poetry; in the final strophe, the poet discovers the continuity between his youthful appetite for love and his mature hunger for “the origin and course” of things.

The uncle’s meandering discoveries progress hesitantly from the shock of recognition toward some tentative acceptance. Having lost love, the uncle will take no pleasure in transcendental chants, but in poetry will make a new kind of love out of the love he has had. Two lines in stanza five sum up what was lost, and intimate the expense of man’s devotions to a physical world: “The measure of the intensity of love / IS measure, also, of the verve of earth.” The uncle is an earlier Crispin, clipped by life, yet tenaciously intent on retaining his measure of selfhood. Thus the comic pose, the hierophantic tone, the quizzical self-consciousness, all of which tend to dilute and disperse the seriousness with might have fettered the poem with morbidity. There is no tragedy for aging lovers. Between the uncle’s laconic acceptance of his age and his ironic lament, “We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed” (viii), Stevens achieves sentiment without sentimentality.

The poem has its moments of strategic opacity. But this is consonant with the speaker’s mind and his unsettling discovery. The self-mockery of the invocation—the futility of words—has its origin in the comic self-consciousness that motivates

the poem. The uncle's memory of his passionate youth and his young love—she Venus-like in the “spuming thought” of his recollections—cannot deny the “saltier” awareness that passion, love and youth are ephemeral. But love is now a dream, a memory. And man like the red bird seeks his secure place in an orderly nature only to discover that, unlike the bird, he is an alien in the world: “These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell” (ii). It is doubly ironic that the uncle, sardonically aware that the Heaven is make-believe, an “anecdotal bliss,” is himself a man of parables, and must resolve his dilemma in a parable, or in poetry. Caught between the desire for permanence and the certain beauties of change, he opts for this life (vii):

The mules that angles ride come slowly down
 The blazing passes, from beyond the sun.
 Descensions of their tinkling bells arrive.
 These muleteers are dainty of their way.
 Meantime, centurions guffaw and beat
 Their shrilling tankards on the table-boards.
 This parable, in sense, amounts to this:
 The honey of heaven may or may not come,
 But that of earth both comes and goes at once.

The parable of mules—one to which Stevens will return with variation in “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay”—offers the same alternatives as “Sunday Morning,” and implies a similar choice. Thirsty men want their thirst quenched; yet man as “centurion”—Stevens’ inversion of Eliot’s “Gerontion”—cannot live beyond himself. This is a parable of the imagination returning to reality, embracing what little of the honey of earth, rather than wishing for the honey of heaven. To have loved is inevitably to have lost, except in memory (in poetry), where one may embrace “A damsel heightened by eternal bloom.” And so the uncle comes to live in the mind, in memory, by imagination:

If men at forty will be painting lakes
 The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one,
 The basic slate, the universal hue.
 There is a substance in us that prevails.
 But in our amours amorists discern
 Such fluctuations that their scrivening
 Is breathless to attend each quirky turn.
 When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink
 Into the compass and curriculum
 Of introspective exiles, lecturing.

It is a theme for Hyacinth alone.

Stevens celebrates the life-preserving imagination, the “substance in us that prevails,” by which the tragedy of amorists, like that of Hyacinth, is transmuted into beauty’s enduring form. Hence, the uncle discovers the truth of his growth from dark rabbi to rose rabbi, from the youth of infinite vistas to the introspective exile whose bloom is gone. Between man’s pursuit of the “origin and course / Of love”—universals—and his need to cherish “fluttering things”—vital particulars—Stevens’ avuncular persona realizes with tragic humor that the honey of earth “both comes and goes at once.” The dull scholar of stanza eight survives as poet of reality, or poet of memory. In any event, he is a poet of earth, of fluttering things and not of golden boughs (x). The uncle has discovered, even in the composition of his own poem, the self’s power to act and thus to escape the inundation of reality that drowned Prufrock (ix):

I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything
For the music and manner of the paladins
To make ablation fit. Where shall I find
Bravura adequate to this great hymn?

“Le Monocle” would be Stevens’ dejection ode, were it not for the uncle’s remarkable recovery, his discovery of affirmation in the comedy of loss.

3.4. “THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER C”

“The Comedian as the Letter C” (*CP* 27) is a quest poem, a symbolic voyage of experience, and a parable of the modern poet. Its theme is the quest of the self-conscious modern person, disabused of his romantic “mythology of self.” It produces a reduced persona who is the opposite of that expansive, all-encompassing Stevens persona, the Emersonian Hoon. Crispin is a version of the modern ego in the comic process of confronting its isolation. Crispin the poet is the “every-day” man, “any man of imagination,” “clipped” and humbled into the quotidian coherence of his life.

Resonating with the third-century Saint Crispin, the valet Crispin of seventeenth-century French comedy, with Candide, Figaro, the Pierrot of Laforgue, and with the several types of harlequin in the Italian and French comic traditions, Crispin the poet is first the hapless champion of idle fancy, and then, once disabused

of his ego, a humble slave to a rich and loved reality. Before the violence of Yucatan's portentous thunder—the illimitable sublime—he makes a compromising adjustment, aesthetic rather than moral, between two extremes. The poem's changing landscape is an extended metaphor of the poet's private mental geography.

Crispin's experience is a version of the development of romanticism, or it could be seen as a comic history of the evolution of modernist poetry. It is likewise an inward quest to a discovery of the secular self: its needs, its limitations, in a cosmos which no longer feeds the romantic-transcendentalist appetite for self-definition. The comic valet, who is in the beginning an extremely pompous "Socrates / Of snails," is a decadent, but no less a child of the Enlightenment. His dilettante's manner exposes the deficiencies of his closed world which has shut out the "terrestrial" for a "snug hibernal" escape into the "lex" of a closed mind. He is a poet of neatly defined things in a "World without Imagination." Crispin's subjective cloak is a prim "mythology of self," and Crispin an untidy mélange of masks, without country, without definition:

The lutanist of fleas, the knave, the thane,
The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak
Of China, cap of Spain, imperative haw
Of hum, inquisitorial botanist,
And general lexicographer of mute
And maidenly greenhorns.

As the presumed intelligence of his soil, Crispin is a carryover from a simpler time when the world seemed to be a plum and not a turnip. He will grow beyond foppishness into the wise Fool, altering his masks by circumstantial necessity and according to his maturity. But first the fabricated self must be "washed away by magnitude," by the floodtide of reality that Emerson called the not-me.

The first condition of Crispin's undoing is the exposure to "polyphony beyond his baton's thrust." There is not motivation for Crispin's fall into experience, no reason for his exposure to the not-me, and hence no real drama. There is only an awakening of sensibility, followed by the flood of an "inscrutable world" rushing in upon the hapless "short-shanks." The sea as "watery realist" dissolves the old Triton, refuses to be defined by its old mythological forms, leaving Crispin without familiar understanding, forcing him out upon alien waters. Crispin is to suffer a sea change. Crispin "dissolved" is Crispin bereft of his tradition-oriented consciousness, cast out

from the sophisticated order of continental Bordeaux toward peninsular Yucatan and its disordered welter of reality, thence to Carolina, a provincial compromise.

His voyage has more drift than direction, but the inevitable compromise must be read in terms of his aesthetic. Confronted by the enigmatic thing-in-itself, Crispin is reminded of the attenuation of the self:

Severance
Was clear. The last distortion of romance
Forsook the insatiable egotist. The sea
Severs not only lands but also selves.
Here was no help before reality.
Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.

He was made new by being unmade, and thrust rudely into the intensity of the “Caribbean amphitheater.” The second section is a curious landscape, lush and overwhelming. In contrast to Bordeaux, Yucatan drives its inhabitants into withdrawal from experience. Not so Crispin, who rushed to embrace the “green barbarism,” forfeiting his prudish aesthetic: “an aesthetic though, diverse, untamed / Incredible to prudes,” an aesthetic in which the soil not only dominates but overwhelms the intelligence. Yet Crispin is not ready for revelation; his sensibility is no compass for the immensities of Yucatan. Crispin will have to find a soil to accommodate the self, a “Carolina” of discreet, rude reality. Romanticism must reach out to its obverse and its complement, Naturalism.

“Approaching Carolina” is a compromise; the poet who is, as Eliot said, the most civilized and primitive of men must mediate between Bordeaux and Yucatan.

How many poems he denied himself
In his observant progress, lesser things
Than the relentless contact he desired;
How many sea-masks he ignored.

He denied, too, the evasions of moonlight. Hence is developed the dialectic of Crispin: the “up and down” between subjective moon and objective sun. He has not denied imagination, but simply turned it outward, upon the flourishing tropic, finding in that act just what priority the mind has over things:

He came. The poetic hero without palms
Or jugglery, without regalia.
And as he came he saw that it was spring,
A time abhorrent to the nihilist
Or searcher for the fecund minimum.

Exorcizing the moonlight fiction, he does not exorcise the imagination; rather, he embraces the essential prose, the physical world, as the “one integrity ... the one / Discovery still possible to make, / To which all poems were incident.” Hoon departs his Palaz and descends towards the “Fat girl” of earth.

Discovering the “essential prose” to be the ground of an essential poetry, Crispin has come at last upon the true aesthetic ratio: “Nota: his soil is man’s intelligence.” And the last three parts of the poem proceed to investigate this discovery. Crispin’s comic reduction is both beginning and end of a western voyage, an attempt to define the role of the poet as everyday man within the narrows of a world which demands mythologies but rejects the imagination. Crispin’s regional aesthetic is in one sense existential, in another a return to the primitive, innocent consciousness with its dereference to the “thing-in-itself.” He begins again, in a world unnamed. Projecting a colony, Crispin projects an aesthetic of smart detail, “veracious page on page, exact.” Crispin has learned to serve “grotesque apprenticeship to chance event.”

What Crispin learns in “A Nice Shady Home,” is that a colony, with all its clutter of rude reality, limited history and tenuous tradition placed within an enormous present, must honor the quotidian:

He first, as realist, admitted that
Whoever hunts a matinal continent
May, after all, stop short before a plum
And be content and still be realist.
The words of things entangle and confuse.
The plum survives its poems.

The poet, Crispin learns, must always begin in a matinal continent and build cabins before he plans “Loquacious columns by the ructive sea.” It is the cabin that is his life, that houses his marriage with the prisms blonde (of earth?), a humble marriage in a humble house, made in the knowledge that “what is is what should be.” This is the modern poet, trapped in his mortality. No “tragedian’s testament” for Crispin, but no heroics either. There is no tragedy for selves of Crispin’s stature.

Crispin’s return to social nature ends his reductive voyage in an ironic exuberance. The indulgent fatalist finds himself trapped by the conditions of his own limited nature. Desiring divine progeny, he produces human progeny, finding himself “sharply stopped / In the door-yard by his own capacious bloom”—somewhat short

of Whitman's cosmic prophecy when lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed. This is his "disguised pronunciamento," an apt metaphor for the journey of a "stiffest realist" in a world that insists on remaining materially itself, that offers but little comfort to the "seraphic proclamations" of a man with a limited imagination. "So may the relation of each man be "clipped"—thus the saga ends. Crispin's narrative, his relation, has come "benignly, to its end," humanly, comically, without the greater consolations.

3.5. "THE MAN WITH THE BLUE GUITAR"

The blue guitar in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP 165) is Stevens' overt symbol for imagination. No longer can the poet subsume his world, or reduce reality to measure forms; he must now strum it out moment by moment in the folksy voice of his guitar, piece it together like Picasso's "hoard / Of destructions." The poem ends up not in Guernica but in Oxidia, the vulgar, toxic landscape of the present.

The poem opens on a note of drama, the guitarist being implored to play both "things as they are" and a "tone beyond." The task is self-defeating—the need for the artist to be more than artist, to be the creator of magnificent proportions, to bring "a world quite round," bears the seeds of failure. The "shearsman," like Crispin, is one who experiences rather than transcends things as they are. His profession (poet) is self-limiting, but thus is life:

I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.

If to serenade almost to man
Is to miss, by that, things are as they are,

Say that it is the serenade
Of a man that plays a blue guitar. (ii)

The guitarist's desire to "play man number one," to create the perfect abstract of man in what Stevens called man's "happier normal," is a godlike though fatuous desire to know the ultimate, a divine rather than human knowledge (iii). This is the

poet's hope, and his defeat. An art that would catch life would kill that life. While poem three voices an impassioned desire to know ultimately, to create perfectly, four intimates that the buzzing intercourse of blue guitar and things as they are is an imperfect, happy, human act.

The poet is rebuffed by his auditors for playing old music. They wish to hear not of the "greatness of poetry" but of its reality." For they know poetry in this world I not charismatic, not "of the structure of vaults upon a point of light," but of a world "flat and bare," things as they are. And the poet abides their contention: "Poetry," says chorus,

Each music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place
Even in the chattering of your guitar.

Man is the secular myth, a replacement.

Things as they are, abstracted upon the blue guitar, assume the permanence of poetry, the abstraction blooded, in opposition to the permanence of empty heaven. The artist works and records in spatial and temporal abstractions. He cannot imitate the religious mind and transcend the physical (vii). And he must accept with humility the limited power of his imagination, which, like "reason in a storm," bends with the tumult but nevertheless "brings the storm to bear" (viii), in the imagination's "leaden twang" of ordered sound, reality caught in the rhythm of music. The imagination is of its environment; not entirely a "free agent," the color of the imagination is blue (the blue guitar), the color of the weather.

Out of dramatic weather come a few questions: the nature of divinity in this real world (x), the danger of a world without imagination (xi), the amorphousness and disorder of things as they are (xii), and the empty purity of imagination which does not focus on reality (xiii). The poet is left without a deity but not without the guitar. And it is not only the tinsel gods that the poet must "topple": with his guitar, he must face the vortex of chaos that threatens the individual (xi). The possibility of extinction of self is a nadir for the shearsman-guitarsman and demands that he pick himself up by his own bootstraps:

Where
Do I begin and end? And where

As I strum the thing, do I pick up
That which momentarily declares

Itself not to be I and yet
Must be. (xii)

Poems thirteen and fourteen provide some reassurance in terms of the imagination's priority over things. Hesitant, evasive, poem thirteen toys with the purity of imagination, the "amorist Adjective," and finds the definition unsatisfactory. Fourteen limits the imagination to its role in the life of perception:

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,

In a chiaroscuro where
One sits and plays the blue guitar.

With this definition, the guitarman moves on to the greater world beyond the "book and bread," those sacramental objects of the physical world. It is a world of violence, Picasso's reality—"this hoard / Of destructions, a picture of ourselves." The moment of self-questioning and despair, and then comes the discovery that even asking questions is an act and an affirmation. This affirmative world of poem sixteen is "not the matter," but "an oppressor." The combat of imagination and the violent world issues in its own kind of violence, and produces a harshness rare in Stevens:

To live in war, to live at war,
To chap the sullen psaltery,
To improve the sewers in Jerusalem,
The electricity the nimbuses—

And the guitarman experiences another moment of despair amid the meretricious present: "Place honey on the altars and die, / You lovers that are bitter at heart." The imperative is to play on or die. But the depression is a turning point, a recovery.

Poem seventeen opens with a proposition and continues with a brief excursus on the dualistic self, on the soul ("animal" or mind) which lives both in and beyond its "mould" (the body). As soul is to body, so imagination to reality, or even vice

versa. The guitarman discovers his guitar to be a mould, a supplier of shapes, a body or form.

The guitarman desires to “reduce the monster” of earth, to be the “lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone.” The lute of imagination, or the stone of matter. Then the “poor pale guitar” is summoned to “search for a belief,” to create certainty out of “good air.” Poem twenty-one denies belief in a “gold self aloft,” affirming the “Lord of the body” as “substitute for all the gods”:

One’s self and the mountains of one’s land,

Without shadows, without magnificence,
The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.

What the guitarman has discovered is a theory of poetry, that the act of poetry is a theory a thing, that “things as they are” are only when married to mind in a poem:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are those separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun’s green,
Cloud’s red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse. (xxii).

This is both climax and resolution. The absence in poetry is what the poet denies. If poetry “takes” it matter from the world, it “gives” in exchange coherence, order. The push-pull of the aesthetic creates; poetry is perception of order in the world.

As an act of continuous creation, poetry becomes a “missal” of reality, the book of a ritualistic exchange (xxiv); the poet becomes an agile clown juggling a reality that is vitality in motion, ever changing around the “eternal” self (xxv). Thus,

The world washed in his imagination,
The world was a shore, whether sound or form

Or light, the relic of farewells,
Rock, of valedictory echoings,

To which his imagination returned,
From which it sped.

Coming and going, “the swarm of dreams / Of inaccessible Utopia”—the dialectic remains firm as strength flows into the guitar. The self acts, imagines, in a non-stop world. Not only is poetry realized in the poem’s chords, it sounds in the constant revolutions of nature within the inconstant forms. Thus the guitarist, as “natural” man, submits to the constancy of his world, becomes a “native” (xxviii).

Having reaffirmed the self in its environment, the guitarist confronts his reality, the violent, toxic “Oxidia” which is what we have today instead of the mythological “Olympia” (xxx). It is the modern poet’s trial, for the landscape is the man:

From this I shall evolve a man.
This is his essence: the old fantoche

Hanging his shawl upon the wind,
Like something on the stage, puffed out.

A comic figure, a bitter world, a balance; man “was nevermore / Himself” than when seen in comic dress. Oxidia is the world as it is, and the old fantoche puppet man as he is. In poem thirty-one, nature’s shrieks echo social confusion, and the guitarist is compelled to play his rhapsody there; poetry has become “combat.” In thirty-two, he is compelled to “Throw away the lights, the definitions, / And say what you see in the dark / That is this or that it is that.” Little bravado, much imperative to be. Committed to “Time in its final block, not time / To come,” the guitar subdues jauntiness into a judicious affirmation: the world, it says, is a stone, “except”

The moments when we choose to play
The imagined pine, the imagined joy.

Our life is essentially in this block of time, and it is ugly and vulgar; but paradoxically we can “choose.” The last note on the guitar gives man a freedom, setting him at the center, make of himself though not of the world. What he can choose is not to live beyond the world but to live in it—choose, that is, to live in the imagination.

The guitarist has discovered that the act of strumming is itself a good. Stevens has journeyed through the ideological wasteland, amid burnt out Oxidias and harridan selves. The tentative creator of order in this turmoil, crabbedly, fitfully, willfully, Stevens has herded his imagination through a world of broken statues and challenges which have tempted him to self-caricature. And he has come out somehow.

3.6. "NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION"

What "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (*CP* 380) dramatizes is the need for poetry, the need to know, and the possibilities of the mind attending to this prison of a world which offers minor pleasures but no "final belief." The poet's motive for creating is a higher act of love, because the poet, acting not for himself but as the hero, acts for the common good, for order. He shows man the possibilities and limitations of his humanity.

"It Must Be Abstract": the initial poem makes its appeal to innocence by way of defining the human limits within which the poem develops. What we begin with are the elementary opposites—pure self and pure being, ephebe and sun. But neither can be in and for itself. To know, as the ephebe desires, is to abstract. Man may abstract forward to the transcendent future, or backward to the origin. Abstraction is at once truth and fiction. Looking at the sun not as a fixed idea—not as a thing known, named and thus contained within its image—the poet demands that each man begin again like the old Adam, by naming what the sun is and not what generations have him it is. One begins with an awareness of the limits of naming, that a name evades its object. In the return to the sun as the ultimate idea and source of this invented world, it is suggested that we return also to the source of the self, the source of oneness, that first idea in which self and reality were one. We discover that man has invented this present world, that is, has invented the abstractions by which he knows it. The ephebe must admit the limitations of abstractions and thus the limitations of the knowing self. By the end of "Notes" he will have discovered that the life of knowing is a fiction, that the supreme for which he aspires is not really

available “except in crystal.” Stevens’ ephebe is thrust into a world in which nature is itself, not an emanation of the divine, and the imagination is of nature.

Canto two investigates the origins of our absolutes, our needs necessity is the mother of imagination:

It is the celestial ennui of apartments
That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
Of this invention.

“Quick” connotes animal vitality, as well as the pain of self-consciousness which quickens our need for truth; but the poet knows that our knowing is slanted: “so poisonous”

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
The truth itself, the first idea becomes
The hermit in a poet’s metaphors,

Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.

The push-pull of experience, the exchanges of self and reality, is prologue to the perceiving of a first idea; yet it is experience which stands between us and idea. Men of “desire,” the imaginative seekers of order, turn of necessity to partial resolutions drawn from the physical world, the only world they have—resolutions which nature in her dumb but vital constancy confirms. Hungering for truth, these men of desire hunger for abstraction, but one which at once explains and contains the world rather than explaining it away. And the truth they seek is fictive.

Having proclaimed metaphor as the poverty of truth, Stevens submits his proclamation to investigation (iii). The initial step is to identify the poem with the holistic vision of the ignorant man. The act of poetry, or of imagination, is an experience of the first idea, a knowing of what it is “to be,” a movement through the many toward the apprehension of the one, the “candor” of things as they are undergoing transformation into some reality. Canto three is a meditative discourse; the surrealistic anecdote of the Arabian bears the import of a poetry which refines for us the confusions of experience, showing how “life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation.”

Hence the proposition of canto four, the strange relation between first idea and poetry:

The first idea was not our own. Adam
In Eden was the father of Descartes

And Eve made air the minor of herself.

In Stevens' secularization of the Fall, the origin of consciousness was the birth of imagination; man grown conscious of himself wills to name the world, to possess it as it once possessed him. He wills the "I am" of poem one, and in willing it completes his fall into an alien world. The paradox is this: without self-consciousness there is no poetry, no need for the fiction which marries self with world. The fall (Adam's, Descartes', or own) is fortunate:

The clouds preceded us

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

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

Stevens reiterates Santayana's epiphenomenal tenet that "all origins lie in the realm of matter." Men are "mimics"; "Clouds are pedagogues." In the tension between the two, we add our sweeping meanings, creating these fictions through which we live in the world by making it live in us.

The tension is given dramatic body in canto five, in the violent combat of animal and nature. This is an elementary opposition, brute consciousness confronting brute matter and finding a mutual freedom and oneness. In the ephebe's world, the self is "cowed, not free like the lion or bear—yet freer in a different sense. It is not free to roar self-assertion, but free to suffer the agony of self-consciousness, and hence to work toward a higher knowing. The poet finds his restrictive world, the "roofs" which limit his vision, both intimidating and challenging: thus poets ironically are the heroic children in the final strophe, who, trapped in a world not their own, see life's realities not like an animal as naked otherness, but imaginatively, humanly, as the source of good. "Rooms" are the limits of self, housing the agony of self-awareness; but therein, paradoxically, is the imagination's life, its painful bitter utterance, so different from the brute's snarl, which ultimately masters the world in an act of mind.

The poet's constricted vision demands of him the most concentrated attentions toward that world which he can master (vi). What he sees, the fabric of

nature, must be masterfully realized, not only imagined but “imagined well” and conceived like a delicate, yet rich, canvas of “Franz Hals.” Poetic abstraction is an admittedly false form, and the poet must proceed with humility to affirm his stewardship of reality. His partial perspectives are the measures of his humanity. Out of the imaginative intercourse between the “weather and the giant of the weather” comes the abstraction blooded, Stevens’ principal figure for a vital idea. What is affirmed is the life of the mind, in which abstraction is a reality.

Cantos seven and eight are, so to speak, extended proofs of the abstraction blooded: the former investigating the natural harmonies of the external world for evidence of “balances,” the latter beginning with the abstraction of a “major man,” an idea of man, and attempting to satisfy the conclusion of canto six. Nature provides its own balances, notes the poet, not “balances / That we achieve but balances that happen.” Life reduced to its essential fraction invariably adapts to nature’s harmonies in order to achieve its own, those “incalculable” balances which provide the poet with some of his felicitous insights: “Perhaps,” he muses, “The truth depends on a walk around the lake”: “a stop to watch / A definition growing certain and / A wait within that certainty.”

But man’s balances?—they do not just “happen.” The human balances are of imaginative birth, the common apotheosized: in Stevens’ figures, the self as “MacCullough” is dilated into a major man. As first idea, this “pensive giant” is also the “crystal hypothesis,” man become “Logos,” a humanistic extension of finite man into creator of the infinite idea. As a “Beau linguist” he is both poet and poet’s creation. Major man, in brief, extends Stevens’ search for the man-hero to replace the divine-hero. The commonplace MacCullough, being a man with an imagination, is capable of imagining a major man. MacCullough is man in his act of imagining, taking the world into his self, there to give it order and meaning as it gives him body and sustenance. Canto eight is a reworking of the hero myth, man taking on the dress of his world precisely as in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (ix), and in that attire proving himself to be “Logos and logic” of the place where he resides.

In canto nine:

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And if its nature, the idiom thereof.

They differ from reason's click-clack, its applied
Enflashings. But apotheosis is not
The origin of the major man.

The definition of major man continues to perplex. He is, in effect, an image to replace the idea of God. Yet he is not a form so much as a sense of human possibility. Canto nine provides a reverie of faith in the poet's new confection, the major man in whom resides the powers of creation.

Major man is neither transcendent deity nor anthropomorphic symbol, but a transference of the ephebe, the humanist myth made in man's comic image. Stevens sees his representative man not as a "literatus" but as a harlequin in the human comedy, with "his old coat," / His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town, / Looking for what was, where it used to be." The poet's responsibility to "confect" this figure turns away from the god without, acknowledges the self within. He returns the service of imagination to the commonplace world, to its fecund beauty and tragedy and to his own activity as the MacCullough, the creator and creation. The poet is not to elevate man but to reinvigorate him, not turn him from the world but toward it, not offer him a future but give him back a present—not "to console / Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound."

"It Must Change." The search for the abstraction blooded was to affirm the life of the imagination as the source of selfhood. Since the essence of the real is change, to affirm life is to affirm living in change. The cantos of Part Two shift the focus to nature's flux and the kinds of experience possible there. To live in change is to submit to its multiple ambiguities: its constant inconstancy. The poet seeks both to resist and embrace change; which is to say, he embraces that which contradicts the first idea and resists abstractions. Yet even change, the vital process of things, has its rhythms, its forms, its universality, in a "universe of inconstancy."

Canto one establishes the encompassing reality of change which comes to natural order in "repetition." The opening images, of the old seraph looking out upon a fecund world of doves and violets and girls with jonquils in their hair, dramatize the reality of change, not in the artifice of reasonable "chronologies," but in the continuity of vital life. Between the poles of youth and age there is change and exchange, and the old seraph discovers the paradox of joy in mutability:

The bees come booming as if they had never gone,
As if hyacinths had never gone. We say
This changes and that changes. Thus the constant

Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths,
Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause
In a universe of inconstancy.

Recalling Eliot's "hyacinth girl," and her role in the wasteland, the passage pays homage to Bergson's analysis of temporality and salutes the pleasure of merely circulating ("bees" as being). The old seraph is another figure of the man of imagination confronted by the withering of his flesh, bound by his inconstant body but freed by his vitally constant imagination. Becoming "satyr in Saturn, according to his thoughts," the old seraph creates in mind what Hoon has experienced in pure feeling. Stevens' poem of Spring is an invocation to change in which "beginning" is "not resuming." Stevens separates his constant inconstancy of change from the teleological view of change which ordains nature's cycle as a symbol of man's immortality, which finds a human analogy in Spring's rebirth. For Stevens, things have life because they are dying, not because they are reborn.

"It Must Change" begins with the changes of nature and modulates into a consideration of the role of imagination amid these changes; inevitably the human is abstracted from change. Denying the legislation of immortality, and its pathetic expression in false forms of wish-fulfillment, viewing man's will to preserve the self against change as one of "our more vestigial states of mind," Stevens must arbitrate man's role in nature. If man cannot survive beyond nature and change, neither can he live fully within change; canto four delivers a tentative proposition, which imposes an aesthetic order on change, as experienced by a self, not change as an inherent law of nature. Change is also abstraction: "the partaker partakes of that which changes him." He partakes of death and not of immortality (v). If nature finds its immortality in recurrence, man must find his in his fictions. Man the "planter" leaves his plantations to a world, but in a world of change, old forms submit to time's transformations.

The poem rejects the myth of immortality, and it mocks even as it celebrates things of this world. It mocks the insistence of things of this world—as well as selves—to be beyond change. Nature is chaotic, each of its elements calling out for

identity, chanting an “idiot minstrelsy.” In canto seven, the futile dreams of individual immortality are forfeited for the “luster of the moon,” the beauty of an idea, an imagined order. It is not the paradise of a seducing hymn but an accessible bliss that man seeks, and that bliss is dependent on change:

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

Man must suffuse the vital with his forms; the statue is essential through change. In canto eight, “Nanzia Nunzio” confronts “Ozymandias,” a marriage of opposites: spontaneity challenging permanence, “nakedness” before an “inflexible / Order,” the fertile earth before the statue. The poem celebrates a putting back of abstraction into change: a dialectical marriage the fruit of which is a “fictive covering,” poetry-in-life. “Ozymandias” as a barren form of the past, which pridefully assumed itself immortal, is revived by a “vestal” reality, given identity once more by that which can affirm “I am.” Ozymandias’ speech is order, the fictive covering that clothes reality in “the spirit’s diamond coronal.” This is in praise of poetry: “The poem goes from the poet’s gibberish to / The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.” Somewhere between the isolated self and its alien world the poem captures not an absence of reality but the only reality available to man, an “evasion” perhaps of the thing itself, yet all we have:

He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general,
To compound the imagination’s Latin with
The lingua franca et jocundissima.

From change to order, from process to the “imagination’s Latin”—the poem that reflects change must also be abstract, even as the abstraction must change. And the poet of canto ten, sitting in the “Theatre / Of Trope,” is not unrelated to the major man of Part One, the “Logos and logic,” the poet who voices the “communal.” Talking about human experience as abstraction, celebrating change, Stevens shows poetry to be the subject of the poem and the poem to be an act of life. For Stevens, the self is Logos, and the poet’s words, though ideal, are of the world. Life and its reality are “vagabond in metaphor.” Stevens accepts man’s comic role, and makes his method (the “imagination’s Latin”) connect with the way things are (the “lingua

franca”), not transcend them. If metaphor evades, if the fiction is false, it has human truth. Imaginings might be artificial, yet the will to change outruns metaphors. Participating in change, one is changed; the volatile world is and is not contained in the “glass” of metaphor.

“It Must Give Pleasure.” Part Three is about the life we live in poetry. Stevens begins by denying preconceptions, the pleasure of traditional rituals, customs, celebrations (i). They are a “facile exercise,” traditional and dogmatic, restrained rather than vital. And they provide a false security. The greater pleasures are of the “diffichest rigor,” pleasures of the moment grasped without reference to past joys. These are, beyond self-indulgence, unexpected discoveries, rudimentary rituals and creations of order rather than confirmed instances of order. The irrational joy of the poetry is conceived as discovery in what Stevens calls a “later reason.” The pulsing world of nature perceived in its own ceremonies is a starting point, the order inherent in the “image of what we see.”

We reason of these things with a later reason
And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.

Later reason yields its own kind of pleasure, its own kind of clarity. The “mystic marriage” of a “great captain and the maiden Bawda,” who solemnize their rites in “Catawba,” returns the poem to the pleasure of balances: to the ceremony of order within change, and to the geography of Crispin’s Carolina. Recalling the “captain” of “Life on a Battleship,” Stevens dresses him out in the attire of lover rather than legislator, and consummates his love of Bawda in an antimythological poem. The marriage is a poem of earth and not of heaven or hell:

Each must the other take as sign, short sign
To stop the whirlwind, balk the elements.

The great captain loved the ever-hill Catawba
And therefore married Bawda, whom he found there,
And Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun.

They married well because the marriage-place
Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell.
They were love’s characters come face to face.

Love, the poem cautions, is of this world and no other—certainly not divine, but apoetry of place. Stevens introduces as counterpoint to the bawdy ceremony in

Catawba the anecdote of the Canon Aspirin and his form of order. The three cantos of this group form an animated rejection of religious or institutional abstractions, heralding instead the natural and primitive, the vital that lies at our center. The Canon and his sister delight in the sophisticated pleasures of a provident life: her “widow’s gaiety” a sharp restraint on the vital children, his “outline of a fugue / Of praise” indicative of his solemn, restrained pleasures. But in sleep, the children escape from avuncular privation into pure imagination and with them goes the mother’s true blessing:

Yet when her children slept, his sister herself
Demanded of sleep, in the excitements of silence
Only the unmuddled self of sleep, for them.

In canto six, the Canon experiences a similar freedom, an escape into the nothingness of the pure pleasure of sleep. Through the evanescent purity of dream, in the transports of imagination, the Canon escapes the corridors of reason into a realm “beyond which thought could not progress as thought.” This is not at all the province of his usual experience, for his is the world of institutions, of capitols and corridors, the city of God filled with “statues of reasonable man.” A dreamer of angels, he has the capacity to live beyond his canonical law, to grasp the first idea. But when he has it he awakens to the world and makes his canonical choice—he submits his experience to the formal ordering of dogma. His order violates his experience: “But to impose is not / To discover.” The truest pleasure resides in a moment of order, a method of seeing actualized by a propensity to witness rather than control. It is a search for the absolute in the full awareness that the search is a necessary fiction:

To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute.

Cantos eight and nine pursue this discovery, this truth not to be human but to be pursued. “Majesty,” finite man learns, “is a mirror of the self” (viii), the apotheosis of the “I am”—a happy discovery for a poem which began with an uneasy ephebe and a minatory world which would not mean but “be.” The proclamation of the “I” consummates the ephebe’s marriage with earth, and makes those external regions for which he, like the Canon, yearns reflections of the self: regions filled with Cinderella longings and the escapades of death. Thus Stevens’ answer to canto

eight's trenchant beginning: "What am I to believe?" Thus too his subsequent meditation of the "I" who can do "all that angels can" and more, being human. He is the poet who discovers that his capacity to "enjoy" is a capacity to master the earth's "eccentric measure" (ix). To celebrate the earth's whirl is to live as poet, "he that of repetition is most master," to affirm that "merely going round is a final good" because it is change enjoyed, change contained in the self but not denied.

What Stevens has evolved is a self, and in that self an image of the world of which man is master, the man-hero who comes to accept what is humanly possible and desire no more. The ephebe becomes a poet, lover of the "Fat girl," the vital heart of the world, the procreative source, the world that is no longer a place "not our own." And like the old Adam he proclaims this world to be his because his names, if evasions, are all the humanity the world possesses: "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling." Stevens' concluding lines are the faith of an aesthetic which would replace the old theology. Man, possessing the world in tropes, posses finally and irreducibly himself:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

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

"Except in crystal"—except in poetry, in the self whose names master but do not deny the fluent mundo. The soldier of the poem's coda is the human warrior, the mask of man bound in change, living there without imagination, but whose identity depends on the poet's words:

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly will proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

Has language become our host, and at this point in Stevens' career, very nearly the thing itself? "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" provides a gloss: "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words. ... Poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words" (NA 32).

The conception of "Notes" signifies that it was meant to be that Grand Poem which took shape in *Harmonium*, except that Stevens knew by 1940 that a supreme

fiction was the poetry of a lifetime, to be evolved and not suddenly realized. "Notes" is modern in its abstractness, open-endedness and ironic posture yet deeply wedded to the romantic tradition of the reflective poem. It moves toward symbolism whenever it searches for points where words and the world marry into a reality that is likewise a fiction, but it refuses to rest on any final order, either transcendental or modern. At times it recalls *The Prelude* with narrative sections excised: there is nothing in it like Wordsworth's identifiable personal history stringing it together and fixing it in a natural and historical landscape. Stevens resorts to a dialectic of the imagination and reality, representation and being, the self and the world, that is almost a modern cliché, as is to mock form or to show the possibilities of freedom within a particular schema. The poem is neither patched together like the surface of a surrealist canvas, nor is it an arbitrary composite of thirty-one poems. It is not modern in the sense, say, of Pound's *Cantos*, with the glue of facts holding together feeling, history's vortex whirling toward an ideal and ideologically-wrought center. Each poem rhetorically develops out of the previous one; what emerges from the mists of rhetoric and private nuance is a voice fully identifiable, a voice which begins an uninitiated ephebe and evolves through self-discovery into an "I." The movement of the poem recalls the aesthetic trinity of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, moving from the ephebe's desire for wholeness (the first idea) to his discovery of the essential harmony of diverse things (change) toward a final "vision" of radiance (pleasure) in the crystal of poetry.

"Notes" gives us a comic, not a cosmic "I," the act of discovery, not ecstasy or vision. Both cerebral and lyrical, the poem shows the human being probing and discovering his world, his place in it, and its place in him. The things, words and ideas of the poem establish the landscape of a total self. "Notes" is the "poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (CP 239). Coming upon the "war between the mind / And sky," we discover that what suffices for the ephebe is his act which, feeding upon the actual, arrives at the discovery that what he knows is his creation. What he can know is himself. Man, discovering himself, discovers that all men are ephebes, who must evolve an "I" within a world. Life and poetry, in this sense, are one.

3.7. “ESTHÉTIQUE DU MAL”

“Esthétique du Mal” (CP 313) is an intellectual lyric, which analyzes the historical failures of imagination to account for the essence of the human: imperfection. It is a study of the anomalies and incongruities of living in the physical world, and the way these disturbances may be mitigated without their destroying man or without his denying them, either instance being an abdication of one’s humanity. *Mal* is a synonym for disorder, just as *esthétique* is synonymous with order; the aesthetics of evil, the order of the disorder, the art of human existence. The poem is an engagement of chaos by its connoisseur. The poem introduces to Stevens’ aesthetic the moral dimension: the aesthetic precedes the moral but is integral to it.

“Esthétique du Mal” is closer in conception to “Owl’s Clover” than to “Sunday Morning,” especially in the way it approaches varied but dramatically related problems of contemporary life: the bankruptcy of traditional forms of belief; sentimentalism and self-pity as escapes from reality; the secularization of religion; the inadequacy of reason as a mode of belief; the pressures of modern violence; the poverty of materialism and utilitarianism.

The fifteen poems examine negative and positive approaches to life in a world where evil and pain are preeminent. The following outline indicates something of the qualitative nature of the argument. Poems i and ii establish a scene and introduce a protagonist, suggesting man’s relation to nature in the modern world as a metaphysical separation unknown to previous ages and hence not explained by the old forms of belief. Poems iii-v present various negative responses to this modern evil or pain, responses which point up the danger in avoiding or denying their reality. Poems vi-vii offer correctives by celebrating the reality of human imperfections; they indicate that man’s only defense against evil is to absorb it into the normal process of experience or into the timeless framework of art. Poems viii-ix analyze the disaster of negation, the denial of evil as a reality constituting a denial of the human, which leaves man defenseless against the ravages of time. Poems x-xiii suggest four approaches to the reality of evil, each based on the acknowledgement of man’s imperfection; man has the imagination and metaphors to fend against the times. Poem xiv is a rhetorical attack on reason; the argument for comparative or relative

evil is vindicated in its contrast with the extreme logic which legislates its antitheses out of its perfect world. Poem xv affirms vital life; the world of process denies nothing, and evil thus recognized becomes a necessary and acceptable part of life lived in the imperfect.

The poem opens with the poet at Naples, involved in activities both mundane and intellectual: “writing letters home” and “reading paragraphs / On the sublime.” He is modern man: uprooted, alienated, disabused of his faith, man seeking coherence in a world without spiritual coordinates. The setting corresponds to Crispin’s Carolina, part way between the rational abstractions of the polar North and the chaotic but essentially real tropics. He is not at Rome. Letters and the sublime indicate a desire for order, the one seeking imaginative continuity with his past, the other a strategy for defining his place in an awesome cosmos. If “Vesuvius had groaned / For a month,” its voluble complaint is a violence contained in traditional expectancy: “He could describe / The terror of the sound because the sound / Was ancient.” He can, that is, understand Vesuvius’ “sultriest fulgurations” because he has a language for it—“paragraphs / On the sublime.”

The poet’s desire for a comprehensible order is a search for an aesthetic, a human norm. The “sublime”—a reference to Longinus’ grand style—refers to a time when both man and nature had meaning and place, and style could transport the man. In a juxtaposition of the ridiculous and the sublime, Longinus’ style (“The volcano trembled in another ether”), like the dignity of man, is found wanting in this modern condition. Pain defines the human. To deny it, or to attempt to transcend it, is to deny life. “Except for us” there is no pain; within the sublime the human is negligible, and so is pain and human history.

Picking up this motif, the second poem rejects the Longinian “paragraphs” for a meditation on despair. Pain is not to be rejected but embraced. Poem two opens with a basic paradox: pain and evil are essential flaws in an imperfect world; as causes of despair, they provoke man’s quest for transcendence and hence provoke his rejection of the life he cherishes. Pain motivates, ironically, that which if achieved would destroy it. Resolutions, the poet discovers, either cancel themselves or are beyond reach:

The moon rose up as if it had escaped
His meditation. It evaded his mind.

It was part of a supremacy always

The moon—here not a stock symbol of imagination, but a sign of purity beyond man's distorting eye, beyond the poet's *August*, free and thus a contrast to and measure of his pain—this moon, transcending the poet's despair, becomes the absolute for which he longs. Representing transcendence, it denies the human. To enjoy "acacias" we must despair of the purity of the moon. For acacias are mortal and remind us that life's *mal*, like our cosmic incertitude, is the gift of life itself, which makes us conscious of things of this world and our separation from them. To desire the supremacy of the moon is a kind of bad faith, our longing for harmony with the greater cosmos is frustrated. The moon, beyond our world of despair, is the measure of our despair. At this point, paradox refuses to unbend into lyricism; the "intellectual lyric" embodies the meditation of despair and brings the poet if not to resolution, then to another point of departure.

In poem three, the moon acacias of poem two are replaced by the antithesis of heaven and hell. Here the poet's fictions discover heaven in hell, unity in diversity, and so resolve the pain poem two not in transcendence but in forms of the imagination. Poetry is contrasted with the sentimentalism of religions which have forfeited imagination for the "over-human god," offering pity rather than life. Modern man, left without assurance of either this world or the next, indulges in escapes of self-pity, for he is isolated in a universe which affords him no consolations of immortality. The poet does not desire a return to the superstitions of a "reddest lord," the morbid fantasy of a wrathful God. He suggests instead indulgence in the "honey of common summer," from which pain is not excluded but is denied preternatural significance;

As if hell, so modified, had disappeared,
As if pain, no longer satanic mimicry,
Could be borne, as if we were sure to find our way.

The first stage of the poet's searching leads him to embrace the imperfect but vital world of flux; he rejects sentimental denials of that world, including denial of pain. In the opening lines of poem four, the "sentimentalist" is taken to task for dealing in generic abstractions and not in particularities and events. The sentimentalist, like the Platonist, negates evil by denying the significance of the individual things of this world. The artist in contrast, who discovers the one by

honoring the many, avoids the generic abstraction and celebrates the world of broken shards. The imagination of “that Spaniard of the rose” who “rescued the rose / From Nature,” gave the thing meaning in his “own special eye.” The examples of artistic struggle, transcending nature yet preserving the particular, enforce the poet’s conclusion that evil is in the world and a part of life, that it must not be sentimentally wished away but preserved in the texture of our vision. Life like art is imperfection seeking order, but the order can never transcend the imperfection. The “genius of / The mind,” or pure imagination, is wrong, not in itself real; no more so is the “genius of the body,” things as they are. Each is nothing in isolation; and man, committed to either one as truth, exhausts himself “in the false engagements of the mind.” The sentimentalist is tempted to abstract evil. Poetry is a true engagement, mind married to thing, nothing denied, everything hallowed, including the *mal* without which there is no “dark-blooded” rose. The poet—the “Spaniard”—in cultivating his hybrid, creates a new form which is neither pure nature nor abstract idea. The hybrid (the poem), in its mature beauty, is form ripe with decay (“*mal*”).

With caution, the poet works toward a synthesis of art and life, form and thing. Poem five counsels a return to the “actual, the warm, the near,” to a world “without the inventions of sorrow.” Having embraced the imperfect, we forego the tragic or the transcendental: “the ai-ai / Of parades in the obscurer selvages.” A world without God, or gods, removes from man the consolations of tragedy; no longer victimized/redeemed by sublime fate, we build our own worlds, imperfect, human. Imperfection becomes the essence of being, producing not sorrow but joyous affirmations. Thus the “in-bar” of our true self must replace the “ex-bar,” those “golden forms” of the old god(s) into which man projected his own ideal image. The human supplants the supernatural; the gesture of compassion and love replaces the devotion to golden forms. We reclaim our humanity: the “ex-bar” will no longer serve. Before we can be fully human, we must replace the old rites with affirmations of self and the source of mythologies: imagination.

In poem six, the sun as both source of life and cosmic timepiece becomes Stevens’ symbol for the world of process and thus for imperfection: it “brings the day to perfection and then fails”; it “still desires / A further consummation.” Its opposite, the moon, is wholeness, the perfection of the lunar cycle. And the opposites

become one: no lunar month without the light of the sun; no unity without the processes of time; no imagination without reality. And yet from his knowledge of their interdependence, man can glean no single, certain truth. The world is never brought quite round, the destructive flux never transcended: "space is filled with his / Rejected years." In his "clownish yellow," he enlivens the world but leaves it short of fruition. For Stevens, time is death-in-life. Man, in his gross appetite for life, is like a voracious bird pecking at the sun, itself an ironic continuum of incessant change. Like the phoenix, man has risen from his imperfections, nourishing himself on that which at once sustains him and binds him in mortality. The appetite for life is also an appetite for apotheosis. In a concluding metaphor, we return once more to "Sunday Morning": the ambulant figure of the bird revolving downward to earth yet resisting the inevitable absorption of life into the common center of nature. This tension between bird and earth is metaphorically man's own struggle with a world that is at the same time mother and tomb. Our desire for wholeness, for the "lunar month," is satisfied only in the imperfect consummations of a day in the sun. Sun illuminates moon, then yearns for her perfections; the mind-bird devours its own source.

In poem seven, the soldier's wound, drawn from the context of a violent world, is transmuted into a symbol of man's humanity, the mark of his distinctiveness, his individuality, his fall. Grown "deathless in great size," he becomes a surrogate and a secularized martyr to man's fate, not a Christ figure but another version of Stevens' hero, who does not absolve human evil but solemnizes its necessity. Hence we share in his wound sacramentally; we are bound together in a mutual suffering and a mutual joy:

The shadows of his fellows ring him round
In the high night, the summer breathes for them
Its fragrance, a heavy somnolence, and for him,
For the soldier of time, it breathes a summer sleep

In which his wound is good because life was.
No part of him was ever part of death.
A woman smoothes her forehead with her hand
And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that stroke.

Death thus conceived is necessary to the complete awareness of life; the woman's emotional gesture of acceptance suggests a universal sharing of the soldier's fate,

which makes that suffering plausible without denying it. The commonplace gesture, pregnant with compassion, becomes revelation.

The two succeeding poems connect denying mortality to denying evil. The “denial of Satan,” in both poems, is a “tragedy / For the imagination”; since Satan is the symbol of the human desire to be individual, the denial of Satan has been a rejection of the human. Satan is the patron of imagination. His death destroyed the sense of man free to be himself, free to create. He was destroyed by the age of reason, when evil / imperfection became something to be transcended, or a form of ignorance which time will amend. What was destroyed was the need for belief, and imagination with it, yet the poet, being a “realist,” cannot accept “sentimental” negations:

The tragedy, however, may have begun,
Again, in the imagination’s new beginning,
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
Say yes, spoken because under every no
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.

Stevens’ tragedy, recalling Emerson’s, is the tragedy of self-consciousness, the fall we redeem only in imagination, in the passion for yes.

Poem nine distills from the broader problem the more specific cause for the “mortal no”: “Panic in the face of the moon.” For the moon is that supremacy above us, that perfection for which we futilely long. And the panic is man’s inability to face that supremacy with the knowledge that we are not to reach it, and that it is the idea of perfection which gives our imperfect life meaning. Poem nine is an analysis of our loss of imagination, and of the consequences of losing the magical world view which gives our lives vitality. It is also an aggressive denial of self-pity, and an affirmation of life even in its modern imaginative poverty. If we have lost the “folly of the moon,” the “miraculous thrift” of an imagined “paradise of meaning,” we can still make music. The voice of the poem cries, not plaintively, for a poetry of “primitive ecstasy” to fulfill that passion for yes: “music / That buffets the shapes of its possible halcyon / Against the haggardic.” Loss is transmuted into affirmation in the individual yes that echoes the spheres.

Poems ten through thirteen examine various responses of secular man to his mortality. In poem ten, as student of the nostalgias, those old lost beliefs, he is led finally to embrace the most authentic “woman,” who is “reality / The gross, the

fecund.” A familiar Stevens motif, an embrace of the “Fat girl” once more, and thus an embrace of change, death, *mal*. It is the love of the “anima for its animal,” the spirit for the body, man for his mortal being. Nostalgias are those archaic forms of metaphysical explanation; but the poet, left without belief, is not left without the need for it—what we must believe in is the “grossly maternal,” not the “mauve / Maman”; this world as against any possible fancy next. He rejects the nostalgias, except one—the belief in life:

That he might suffer or that
He might die was the innocence of living, if life
Itself was innocent. To say that it was
Disentangled him from sleek ensolacings.

He faces the shocking truth which begins the next meditation: “Life is a bitter aspic. We are not / At the centre of a diamond.” Emerson’s central man, like Hoon, has been displaced at the center of things. The disjunctive imagery of masses, of violence, and of utilitarian excesses combines to alienate man from nature and from himself, and provokes the poet’s somber prophecy: “Natives of poverty, children of Malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur.” Poem eleven displays a mutation of images, filtered through this central couplet which celebrates the reigning order of language. Paratroopers, ship and steeple, which are combined in the opening stanza to elaborate the violence, materialistic abandon, and spiritual evasions that have led to the dehumanization of life, become in the final stanza images of a sham world. A vulgar materialism provides the sacramental objects of worship, all of which the “man of bitter appetite,” the poet, despises. He despises the anti-life imaged by a culture where violence and utilitarianism find mutual justification, and religious abstractions explain away moral contradictions. But he “caresses these exacerbations” and savors the painful truth of a meretricious world which threatens to destroy him.

In poem twelve, through the ambiguities of self-knowledge, Stevens proceeds to a synthesis in a “third world without knowledge, / In which no one peers”. This third world (beyond objective/subjective) is the poem or fiction. The composition of this world suggests the experience of Stevens’ “ignorant” man, who knows reality without preconception:

It accepts whatever is as true,
Including pain, which, otherwise, is false.

In the third world, then, there is no pain.

Whatever is real is an object for the imagination. The third world is painless because it is form. Yet the difficulty of attaining the poet's designated third world is inordinate. The poem displays the futility of a metaphysical rationalization of pain, reminding us of the shocking ease with which Emerson and Whitman disposed of evil in their respective worlds. It would seem that there is no third world without pain—except in poetry.

In poem thirteen, the unalterable necessity of human failure leads the poet to accept the “fragmentary tragedy / Within the universal whole.” Yet the poet wills affirmation out of his fatal logic:

And it may be
That in his Mediterranean cloister a man,
Reclining, eased of desire, establishes
The visible, a zone of blue and orange
Versicolorings, establishes a time
To watch the fire-feinting sea and calls it good,
The ultimate good.

This evokes the spirit of Santayana's life and therefore his “good,” the envisioned harmony of a secular self meditating in a world it cannot transcend. “Evil in evil is / Comparative,” because *mal* is foremost a disturbance of the harmony of the good, as well as a relative antithesis of the good: it is a “force” of life-death “moving in the blood.” His concluding sigh for the paradox lived by finite man is an embracing of Santayana's intrepid skepticism: the evil of life is “an adventure to be endured / With the politest helplessness.”

In canto fourteen, the irrationalist's lambent meditations are juxtaposed with the rationalist's jejune logic. It is claimed that Stalinism produces inhumanism out of its logical humanism. The resolutionists sublimate their blind romanticism in an “intellectual structure.” To live in the world of a single idea is to submit chaos to an intellectual cosmos which is a violent order. Political lunacy in the form of the logic of history is one of those evils with which the connoisseur of imperfections must live, for ideology is often simply imaginative order out of touch with reality. The poem ends in affirmation “beyond belief,” by accepting what has always been man's even when he has denied it through dreams or logic, rationalization or eager faith:

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire

Is too difficult to tell from despair.

The ignorant beginnings of faith, where the world as it is is not explained away in false nostalgias, accepts the *mal* in the sense that it accepts the human: accepts, that is, the desire and despair of being an alien in nature. Out of desire and despair, however, man aesthetically reconstructs his world, discovering his metaphysical in the physical of pain/pleasure. What he makes, these “many sensuous worlds,” are self-makings:

Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,
But the dark italics it could not propound.
And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.

“*Esthétique du Mal*” is a serious consideration of man’s need to accept this world as it is, without the old metaphysical assurances. Evil stripped of its sublimity becomes once again, in a secular world, the cause of man’s good. Like death, it is paradoxically the mother of beauty and the destructive element; and one must embrace it as one does death, as the price of merely living. This originates out of secular man’s intense need of metaphysical assurances. Stevens can only offer, albeit hesitantly, aesthetic to replace the old nostalgias. “*Esthétique du Mal*” is a concentrated meditation on authentic and inauthentic modes of being, authentic and inauthentic modes of faith.

Stevens reclaims Satan as worthy of the imagination; Stevens’ Satan has naturally given us our selfhood. He is our constant symbol of how far we fail in our quest for perfection. The yes of “*Esthétique du Mal*” lies in its denial of absolutes and of resolutions. If Stevens offers the imagination as defense against chaos, he is committing himself to the imperfect, which he celebrates as our paradise. This has been his “thesis scrivened in delight.” To create heavens in the image of earth is not only a natural inversion of religious orthodoxy; for Stevens it is the very act of self-preservation without self-denial: “Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance” (*OP* 225). *Mal* corrupts the good, but there is no good without *mal*—and the exchanges between the two, the

metaphysical changes, constitute an aesthetic that obtains on every level of human existence: from the most elementary act of perception to the most exacting turn of metaphor. *Mal* is inextricable from our need of faith, which is also our modern “esthétique.”

CONCLUSION

Stevens' world is populated by characters who are frequently versions of himself—masks he has created to explore the possibilities of the mind. Even if they are imaginary and at times feminine—muse figures, his interior paramours—they are exfoliations of himself. Stevens writes poems that reveal himself and are metaphors of the self. Stevens is a ventriloquist who takes on myriad stances, often several in the same poem.

Stevens' poems are not language games, but urgent responses to a world which was confusing and unsatisfactory. Peeking through Stevens' poems are the unresolved planes—or identities—of his double life as an insurance executive and as a poet, as a respectable bourgeois figure and as a member of the avant-garde. Stevens is, paradoxically, a "Puritan" who demanded of himself an ascetic life and excoriated himself for the smallest departures from that life, and a hedonist who reveled in the freedom of words.

For Stevens art was a compensation for the control and understatement of his public mask: "The incessant desire for freedom in literature or in any of the arts is a desire for freedom in life. The desire is irrational. The result is the irrational searching the irrational..." (*OP* 121). He needed to turn his back on the priggish morality of the woman in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (1922)—perhaps a version not only of a moralistic other from whom he could never escape, but of his wife from whom he was estranged by sensibility and temperament—and discover in his poetry his desire. When Stevens is speaking, as he often does, of the muse or interior paramour, we should realize that such an alter ego is compensation for the kind of interlocutor he wanted, the emphatic other who would understand his poetry.

Helen Vendler speaks of the need to substitute "I" for "He" in reading his lyrics. Often both are present. For Stevens' poems contain many voices. Even when we hear an "I," this is as an ironic second character in a duet with the speaker. The listener is also frequently dramatized as another character. At times, it is helpful to think that Stevens dramatizes different versions of the same self; at other times, we think we hear one playful voice wearing many masks. From yet another perspective, we may find it helpful in reading Stevens to abandon the concept of a consistent

persona or voice or self and to admit the possibility of hearing multiple—and at times contradictory and cacophonous—voices, as if they were intersecting planes on the order of a Cubist collage or diverse motifs in a symphony.

Reading Stevens' letters, we hear the voice of a man who is the successor to a Victorian tradition—epitomized by Arnold—which wanted to hold the Philistines at arm's length while providing a cultural enclave for themselves and their followers; yet we also hear a modernist dazzled by the motion, energy, and excitement of the modern city and the possibilities offered for art by new circumstances. Stevens oscillates between the world of fact, symbolized by his career as an insurance lawyer, and a world of imagination. We hear the voice of a man drawn by iconoclastic, ascetic, and contemplative impulses, and one who desperately wishes to feel a kinship with his fellows. Writing of a distinction between the "ascetic" Courbet—"He was an ascetic by virtue of all his rejections and also by virtue of his devotion to the real" (*L* 685)—and the "humanistic" Giorgione, he wrote: "What I am thinking of is that the ascetic is negative and the humanistic affirmative, and that they face in two different ways which would bring them together ultimately at the other side of the world, face to face" (*L* 685). Stevens wished to avoid the poles of realism and fantasy to write a poetry of negotiating and crossing back and forth between the two: "A real poetry, that is to say, a poetry that is not poetical or that is merely the notation of objects in themselves poetic is a poetry divested of poetry" (*L* 685).

Stevens is a poet of loneliness. As Vendler has written,

Stevens' meditations on the restlessness of the soul, the heart, and the mind are the most unsparing account in poetry of the oscillations of skepticism and faith ... Never was there a more devout believer—in love, in the transcendent, in truth, in poetry—than Stevens. And never was there a more corrosive disbeliever—disillusioned in love, deprived of religious belief, and rejecting in disgust their credulous "trash" of previous poems. (Vendler 1984, 49)

Poignant feelings of separation, isolation, and marginality pervade Stevens' poetry. In Stevens we feel the loneliness and isolation of the speaker reduced to a mite in the cosmos, nearly overwhelmed by the world in which he finds himself. The opening words are often the search for a stance, the beginning of an act of self-defense, a drawing of the line between life and art, as he seeks refuge on the side representing art.

The reason for the obscurity of Stevens' beginnings is that his exegesis cannot begin until his precritical perceptions of a particular situation are presented; for within Stevens the voices of presentation and exegesis co-exist. He creates an imaginary world—a circus, a carnival of levels and voices—in which both “he” and “I” find repose. It is his ironic awareness of the continuing, never-ceasing dialogue between these worlds which gives the poems their tension.

Fear of failure, fatigue, depression, pain, and imaginative impotence haunt Stevens' pages. One thinks of “The Man on the Dump,” and “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad”; but these emotions struggle with his exuberance, imaginative and creative energy, and threaten to undermine his belief that one can find “as ifs” in fictions, in poetry. His self-doubt and anxiety are the source of much of the dramatic tension in his poems. Yet at other times he conceived of himself as a poet-prophet with a mission—the noble and heroic mission to educate his fellows. In this sense, his poems were also written out of philosophic urgency.

For Stevens, the style with which he defines his persona's speech is the essence of the creative act. Imagining the speech act is the way of rescuing meaning; the very speaking of the dramatic and lyrical moment, as in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” has a heightened poetic value. The urgency of speech evokes a reality for the speaker and to an imagined audience—including the joy the speaker has in overhearing himself, no matter how putative (and perhaps indifferent) others might respond. First and foremost, Stevens' narratee is a version of himself.

Stevens is a conversational poet. The act of the mind is an act of speaking. Narrative is both telling and representation, and for Stevens the telling—the movement of the mind rendered in words—is what is represented. In poems like “The Snow Man” and “The Idea of Order at Key West,” his dramatic openings take the reader into the impassioned middle of a blunt, unrestrained conversational give-and-take at the moment the exchange is reaching a crescendo. We might think of groups of Stevens' poems as a dialogue in which discrete poems speak to one another; such an example is the lyric sequence comprising “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” “The Snow Man,” and “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon.”

Within many Stevens poems we have what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia, a dialogue among many multiple voices reflecting systems of language and, hence, different perspectives of reality. As Bakhtin notes about heteroglossia:

Languages do not exclude each other but rather intersect with each other ... All languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people ... As such, these languages live a real life; they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia. Therefore they are all able to enter into the unitary plane of the novel, which can unite in itself parodic stylizations of generic languages, various forms of stylizations and illustrations of professional and period-bound languages, the languages of particular generations, of social dialects and others... They may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes and for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values. (Bakhtin 1981, 291)

Along with the diverse aspects of the persona in a poem like “The Comedian as the Letter C” are diverse voices of the speaker which respond to the personae in multiple, complex, and often contradictory ways. Stevens’ power derives from the dialogic nature of his inquiry, and his refusal to impose a monochromatic, teleological view or vision. He is the poet of process and his works are mutability cantos.

Stevens believed that the poet had a mission to enrich the world of others: “The poet’s role, in short, is to help people to live their lives” (NA 29). When we think of Stevens’ poems that emphasize the strength of the imagination to create reality, we should remember that he is preaching not solipsism, but the accessibility of the imagination to his readers. Stevens preaches that the poet must be our prophet: “What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive it” (NA 31). Or, as he puts it in the fifth section of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: “Poetry / Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns, / Ourselves in poetry must take their place / Even in the chattering of your guitar.”

The essence of Stevens is the dialogue between imagination and reality. As his career developed and he turned his back on the aestheticism of Pater, Stevens

became increasingly impatient with such Yeats figures such as Fergus, who renounce this world and its responsibilities to seek a fairy land or ivory tower apart from the pressures of this world. It is the frisson between the two that is the essence of his life and poetry: "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real...By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 6, 20).

Some have thought of Stevens as an esoteric poet; in fact, he speaks to a basic human need to create fictions that explore the possibilities of seeing and knowing. As a poet with a philosophic bent, Stevens believed in the categorizing sensibility and insisted on seeing what experience meant. To an extent, he has a more Arnoldian temperament than has been realized and believes, like Arnold, that poetry can be a surrogate for religion. What poets do is abstract themselves from their personal confrontation with reality and try to discover the universal meaning of that experience. In the great poets, "What is remote becomes near and what is dead lives with an intensity beyond any experience of life" (NA 23); the "measure of a poet is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination" (NA 23). For Stevens, the poet was the guide for discovering meaning in reality: "The poet has his own meaning for reality... The subject-matter of poetry is not that collection of solid, static objects extended in space but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are" (NA 25). Stevens believes that "the Noble Rider" is the poet who actively seeks to enrich reality for himself and others:

The poet refuses to allow his task to be set for him. He denies that he has a task and considers that the organization of *materia poetica* is a contradiction in terms. Yet the imagination gives to everything that it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility, of which there are many degrees. (NA 33)

Stevens consistently presents himself in the persona of a poet and renders the writing of poetry and the perception of the world as potential subjects for poetry the central agon of much of his work: "The subjects of one's poems are the symbols of one's self or of one's selves" (OP 191). Notwithstanding his masks and his obscurity, Stevens' poems enact an expressive aesthetic in which we hear a strong voice

struggling to discover an aesthetic, even as he strives to write the poems which enact that aesthetic. For Joyce, Shakespeare was a paradigm of the writer as genius, a paradigm that Joyce believed only he among writers in English since Shakespeare fulfilled. Perhaps the best gloss of Stevens' conception of the artist is the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode of *Ulysses* where Stephen Dedalus, with Joyce's approval, argues that the major writer, such as Shakespeare, contains the "all in all": "His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery" (Joyce 1984: IX. 228); "He was the lord of language" (IX.454); "All events brought grist to his mill" (IX. 748); "He felt himself the father of all his race" (IX. 868); "He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible" (IX. 1041); "He passes on toward eternity in undiminished personality, untaught by the wisdom he has written or by the laws he has revealed" (IX. 476). Such deliberate, and perhaps perverse, antinomianism or anarchism in modernist creative conception can be seen everywhere in Stevens; I will give two examples, one from a poet-mask of Stevens in "The Weeping Burgher," and one from the "Adagia": "It must be with a strange malice that I distort the world," and "Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be unreal" (*OP* 195).

Stevens restructured our concept of what it means to read. He requires from his readers an acrobatics and insists that we read him not only linearly but back and forth. As in psychoanalysis, we must often make the connections; drawn from dreamscapes, his words and images often summon our unconscious to respond. Particularly his later work is a kind of correlative to the Action Painting of the New York School, for it not only depends on his own involvement with his subject matter, but on the involvement of his perceiver. Because his poems are arenas in which to render acts of perception rather than to record prior reality, the spectator is rhetorically urged to act upon the poem in his act of reading. The intense nervous energy enacted by the rush of perceptions creates an anxious, seeking, intense response in the reader; but, at times, the other pole of Stevens' art—his meditative contemplation and categorizing sensibility—also shapes the reader.

When Stevens formed his poetic and aesthetic principles, silent cinema, as well as modern painting and sculpture, were demanding intense attention. Stevens' rapidly changing metaphors not only have a kinship with cinema, but mime the

condition of modern perception in which man has far more impressions and far more variety to deal with than his predecessors. Metaphoricity, the rapid sequence of metaphors, owes something to Muybridge and to the concept of chronophotography, the recording of human beings or animals in motion by means of successive photographic exposures. The process of successive exposure seems crucial to “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” even though that poem can also be perceived as a non-linear collage. Indeed, that poem may owe something to Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, or *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* (1915-23), based on a Feydeau farce in which nine bachelors pursue the same girl. No more than when we perceive a collage should we limit our reading of a Stevens poem to our linear reading experience. The reader of Stevens needs to respond to odd juxtapositions and seemingly free associations, undoubtedly influenced by the liberation of chance from the logical gridlocks of Western epistemology by Dadaism, Freud, and Surrealism; and Hans Richter remarked, “Chance appeared to us as a magical procedure by which we could transcend the barriers of causality and conscious volition, and by which the inner ear and eye become more acute...For us, chance was the unconscious mind, which Freud had discovered in 1900” (Russell 1974, 179).

Stevens wrote at a time when artists believed that the very nature of communication might be changed and when artists such as Duchamp believed that impersonal, non-associative colors might convey meanings beyond what they represent. As late as 1928, Stevens was insisting on the purity and non-representational quality of poetry, as if the reader’s mind could resist making sense of words in terms that situate the poem in his understanding: “A mind that examines ‘Domination of Black’ for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it” (*L* 279).

Stevens understood the difficulty in reading his abstract poems; yet he depended upon a reader who would experience his alternation between self-conscious abstraction and epiphanic moments. He knew that when he didn’t provide predicates, as in the fourth stanza of “the Sail of Ulysses,” that he would frustrate the adventure of reading:

The unnamed creator of an unknown sphere,
Unknown as yet, unknowable,
Uncertain certainty, Apollo

Imagined among the indigenes
And Eden conceived on Morningside,
The centre of the self, the self
Of the future, of future man
And future place, when these are known,
A freedom at last from the mystical,
The beginning of a final order,
The order of man's right to be
As he is, the discipline of his scope
Observed as an absolute, himself. (*PM* 388)

Stevens requires an exegetical reader, one committed to unraveling the mysteries of the text, to finding mysteries within and collating them with mysteries of other poems. He needs to be read as one reads the holy scriptures, to be decoded and interpreted. Poised between insight and puzzlement, between exultation and despair, between the creative moment and paralysis, his poems create a reader whose stance has ambiguities and oscillations. His Ulysses is an apt figure for the poet in search of an epistemological and physical home and the odyssean reader who is trying to arrive at a destination. Stevens proclaims in "The Sail of Ulysses" that "the right to know and the right to be are one," but the emphasis is always on the quest for knowledge, a quest which inevitably falls short.

Stevens' titles announce or imply that what follows will be oblique and resistant to easy understanding. His titles owe much to the surrealistic painters. These titles often bear an ironic or antiphrastic relation to what follows. His titles are seductions that invite the reader, but often the titles promise something other than what they deliver. Stevens' titles are always playfully oblique.

Stevens' poetry depends on a process of metaphoricity, the active seeking and probing for analogies with which to locate the world of perceptual experience and the impressions of the mind. His poems gradually create a configuration in which experience can be understood. The dialogue between reading Stevens metaphorically—as evoking a prior world—and metonymically—as troping linguistic phenomena within a private world—is invited by Stevens' art and reflects a basic struggle within his mind about the very essence of language and reality. The ambiguity of the reader's role in responding to Stevens' poems is created by Stevens alternating between traditional narrative and lyric; between representational and what might be called decorative poetry; between privileging anterior reality as historically

and culturally constituted and focusing on the speaker's vision; between the thematic essence and construed values of a situation and the apparently ephemeral objects that present themselves.

Reading Stevens depends on a dialogue between metonymical reading and metaphorical reading. Metaphor depends on the ability of the verb "to be" to declare the presence of something absent from the immediate world and, by doing so, to imply what that world lacks. Stevens conjures an elaborate fantasy world simply by inventing metaphors that declare its presence. In a sense Stevens' work is about the creation of metaphors and their importance as a means of understanding ourselves and the world we live in. Stevens would have understood why Derrida approvingly quoted Nietzsche on metaphor: "Logic is only slavery within the bounds of language. Language has within it, however, an illogical element, the metaphor. Its principal force brings about the identification of the nonidentical; it is thus an operation of the imagination. It is on this that the existence of concepts, forms, etc. rests" (Harari 1979, 83). From one perspective, metonymy is a metaphor that depends upon the reader's perception of the relatedness among elements within the imagined world.

Stevens uses metonymy, like contiguous relationship of one word or a set of words substituting for another, as a principal means of making distinctions and connections. But the metonymical relationship is always incomplete. Because no metonym quite fits the object for which it stands, the mind continues on an endless, unresolved quest in search of the apt image, the more apt image. To be cursed to wander the verbal universe unfulfilled, to be always seeking the appropriate phrase or image, to believe for a moment that one has found the apt metaphor, only to realize that one has not, because one can never do so—and yet to have to resume the search—is the essence of the pathos in Stevens.

While Joyce primarily looked for metaphors to render recurring cultural patterns and thus spatialized historical time on a vertical axis, Stevens, to find apt ways of seeing, sought metonymies within the nominalistic world of horizontal time that we experience. Both use the process of metaphoricity to focus on the quest for bringing together dissimilar entities for the purpose of revealing resemblances and differences. Both desire a resolved spatial plane where the patterns of temporality can be examined synchronically. Joyce, following Vico, proposes cyclical theories of

history which justify his literary and historical parallels, where Ulysses prefigures Bloom, Telemachus is an earlier Stephen Dedalus, and Penelope awaits her husband as Molly “awaits” Leopold. Stevens proposes the ideal of the imagination as an alternate space; then he populates that space with figures and fictions.

For Stevens, nature is both a text on which the imagination writes its text with words and a pretext for writing the text of the world. Thus it is, to quote “The Snow Man,” both “the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Stevens’ geography (like his meteorology)—whether it be in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” or the voyages of the artistic-picaro Crispin—is always a mindscape, a metaphor for a state of mind rather than an external place. Stevens describes nature in terms of inner experience, where landscape and mindscape become metaphors for one another; representation of external geography takes a back seat to rhetoric.

Stevens is an Aristotelian who is impatient with the globalizing answers of Christianity and other versions of Platonist ideology that privilege a world beyond this one. Yet he is tempted by the possibility of an imaginative world coterminous with this one, a place to which the mind might escape; his poems point to such an imaginative place or state of mind, even as they enact the process of building that world. He addresses what Joyce called the “ineluctability of the visible.” Within any system of binary opposition, Stevens refuses to embrace either alternative. Alternately, he both reveres and recoils from both the Aristotelian and Platonic perspectives; both the Apollonian and the Dionysian; the natural and the artificial; the poem in his mind and the complicated reality of life in action. Often he finds refuge—or bisects the distance between abstract and actual—in the sensuous idealization of nature or in allegories or performative moments which enact the suspension of time and consciousness—as in the final lines of “Sunday Morning” (1915), which eschew the issue of the death of God and enact a state of rapture, or the lyrical conclusion to “The Man with the Blue Guitar.”

Stevens is even suspicious of imagination, aware of how it may drain the possibilities of the real. Characteristically, poems conclude with the realization that the physical world is what we have and that we should revel in its multiplicity: “The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, and to feel that one’s desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair.” Stevens is an Aristotelian desperately seeking

Platonic resolutions: he is almost always seeking to define the First Idea, the Supreme Fiction, Major Man. But a part of him knew that the supreme fictions were of men in this world; such fictions must be explorations of the here and now: "The poet is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and, also, between people as between themselves; but not between people and some other world" (*OP* 189). The here-and-now is the essence of life and of poetry.

Stevens' metaphors do not evoke an absent world to figure the literal so much as set up a series of analogies and appositions where the thing imaged has no greater priority than the image. Frequently, the vehicle of a metaphor becomes the tenor of a new metaphor within a sequence of analogies and appositions. Thus the verbal surface resembles the texture of an abstract pattern where each element of the design is equally foregrounded. In Stevens, no metaphor is quite right, each metaphor or metonym is a search for metaphor or metonym. Thus an image is never actually the definitive image for something; it is always a proposal, a provisional hypothesis, a discursive formation, a plea, a feint, a snare. In "Adagia," Stevens wrote, "The Final belief is to believe in a fiction which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (*OP* 189). What we have is a profusion of images on a lateral plane, each, at the time it is proposed, an hypothesis which might be more accurate or compelling than its predecessor; this hypothesis in turn gives way to another image that refines or modulates it, moving towards the never-*reachable goal of accuracy, the accuracy of a willingly-held fiction.

Stevens' other favorite tropes are hyperbole and litotes, which tempt the unwary reader to overreading or underreading. Often Stevens is testing radical versions of his positions and metaphorical structures, trying them on as he explores his psyche. Overstatement may be a way of convincing oneself or throwing everything into glee of irony; understatement can be an urbane or diffident evasion of the passion and intensity of the imaginative desire, or a guise for self-doubt, frustration with one's poetic powers, or depression.

To review the modernist poetic stance of Stevens so far: 1) Stevens discovers order in apparent contiguity and disorder, resolves antinomies, and posits odd juxtapositions of images and narrative shards. Yet he often allows disorder,

contradictions, ambiguities, and eschews expected closure and resolution, preferring to leave many unresolved strands in a pluralism of images and perspectives. 2) He introduces radical variations for the expected meaning of words, or the expected grammatical structure, frequently reversing or undulating the order of words to elude or evade the expected meaning. Stevens' poems are like conversations in an invented language. Stevens revels in the texture of language—as grammar, as sound, as denotation, as metaphor, as image—neologisms, ambiguity of antecedents, and the disruption of traditional syntax are common. We have to become like Stevens to read him properly. He wrenches, distorts, tricks, invents, reinvents the diction and syntax of English, exploding the sounds. 3) Hence, when reading his poems we need to hear internal rhymes, stresses, irregularities in the phonic and rhythmic structure. The sounds are difficult, free form mimesis, jazzy, oscillating between moments of harmony and cacophony, between meaning and the pure elaboration of sound densities.

Without neglecting his deep connection with the English Romantic tradition and the American Emersonian-Whitmanian strain, we can stress the modernism of Wallace Stevens. He must be named as a high modernist among the likes of Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence and Yeats; but he is also a modernist as he is related to Picasso, Matisse and Klee. The transformation of the nature of mimesis, or representation—stimulated by the disconnectedness of modernist narratives, and the collages and Cubism of modern art, as well as the free forms of modern jazz—influenced Stevens; so did the emphasis on the unconscious flux of recurring images and analogies in Freud. Stevens had a strong sense of himself not merely as a major American figure, but as the heir of the major figures in Western literature. He had a sense election that it was his mission to write the great poem and was convinced that such a poem must be difficult, accessible to a privileged elite audience. Like Joyce, he thought of himself as a successor to Dante, who was writing the human comedy for his era. His biographer, Joan Richardson, has spoken of Stevens' "epic desire to rival Dante's *Divine Comedy* in being the new vulgate of experience for his time and place" (Richardson I, 29). Stevens conceived himself undertaking an epic project for a world where religious belief was no longer possible and where a man's consciousness was separate and distinct from the amoral, indifferent cosmos in

which he found himself. Vendler has remarked, “Stevens is one of the last of our writers to experience fully the nineteenth-century crisis of the death of God” (Vendler 1984, 30). He sought and found belief in the power of his own imagination; in “Adagia”: “God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry” (*OP* 193). Stevens’ poetry is informed by his inability to convince himself of an omnipotent God who was interested in the diurnal affairs of humans. Yet he disbelieved the way only a former believer disbelieves, and thought obsessively about the function of the imagination as a provider of spiritual solace for those who do not believe: “The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give” (*OP* 186). Stevens believed in belief and convinced himself that the imagination could create beliefs: “God and the imagination are one” (*OP* 202).

Following Yeats and Wilde, Stevens creates diverse selves to heighten his reality and too explore himself; he uses his personae to liberate himself from his everyday self and to take metaphoric journeys in vividly imagined lands of existential and artistic significance. As Pater, that priest of the English 1890s avant-garde, had urged, he wanted to burn with a gemlike flame in full participation in perceptual, intellectual and aesthetic life. From Pater he learned that he could live intensely in aesthetic experiences. Stevens, of course, lived a double life; his very identity as a poet was a vacation from his daytime self. In his “Effects of Analogy,” Stevens praises the concept of the ivory tower where the poet might retreat and thus affirms his ties to Yeats and to a tradition of modernism which privileges the imagination apart from the pressure of social reality. For a time Stevens regarded his entire corpus as a kind of great works of arcane knowledge—a version of Yeats’ *A Vision*—that a responsive audience of aesthetes and iconoclasts would gradually understand if they were extremely diligent and attentive. It is high modernism which insists on the iconoclasm of the artist as a figure apart; when Stevens left the routines of his insurance company world and his domestic life, his mind lived in a world apart: “Yes, the all-commanding subject-matter of poetry is life, the never-ceasing

source. But it is not a social obligation” (NA 28). Stevens lived a conservative, restrained life in Hartford; but in his poetry he often thought of himself as a vanguard figure, as someone whose poetry expanded the frontiers of poetry. In this “transcendental” mode he searched for hidden meanings in experience. Language was an amorphous frontier and he worked at its edge, reinventing language from prior language, pushing at the borders of expression. While Eliot and Pound elegized the death of civilization—as well as tragically attempting to revitalize it—Stevens (and Williams and Joyce and Gertrude Stein) sought new idioms and ways of seeing for new epistemological situations. But they also responded to the sheer energy of modern culture and society, an energy that not even the war could squelch. Stevens’ rhythms reflect the syncopation of jazz, the plenitude of new experience, the optimum that something within the individual and particular could be found to counterbalance the loss of belief in God. Stevens felt exhilarated in the continual transformation of self, and the process of transforming the experience of modern possibilities into art.

Like Duchamp and Klee, Stevens is fascinated by the possibility, in life and art, of being both protagonist and ironic spectator. Just as Duchamp and Klee composed works that were both art works and criticism of the very concept of aesthetic object, so Stevens wrote poems that were a criticism of poetry; meta-poems, as it were. If we are to understand Stevens, we might consider how his poems, like Cubist paintings or Klee’s “musing lines,” are a brash attack on traditional ideas of representation. Art depends less on what is perceived than on how we think about and render what we perceive. The artist does not simply communicate what he has seen to the perceiver. The perceiver must parse together a reading to accompany the perceiving. Like Cubist paintings, Stevens’ poems focus on objects or situations which the reader needs to put together. Like Cubist collages, they break up the surface into several uneven planes, and they depend on playfulness and a pervasive attitude of irony, rapid oscillations between abstraction and specificity, odd juxtapositions and displaced fragments. Such a modernist work of art is not to be understood immediately.

Wallace Stevens wrote poetry and theorized almost entirely within a major modernist paradigm built around the question: how does one remake a poetry, and a

culture, on the grounds of an exhausted tradition? In the name of renovation, modernist writers frequently become purveyors of the archaic, the obsolete, the ruin, the insufferably quaint. The archaic is part of the motivation for modernist writing. According to T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, the fresh individual talent joins the canon only through the complicated drama of violating the past, the tradition, most effectively and properly. Only the misfit is befitting. As the timeless desire to innovate, to break with tradition, modernism is one of the most traditional cultural impulses in art and social life. Such is the ironic, destructive and oddly conservative dialectic of tradition and modernism.

Wallace Stevens was a destructive character, and as a destructive character he is one of the most traditional poets. Stevens was a poet who cleared ground for himself and his aesthetic projects—he was a radical, anarchistic poet—and also a poet who made culture and its continuance possible—he was a staunch conservative, a conserver. The funny thing is, his very radicalism is part and parcel of his conservatism.

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