AN ALWAYS INCIPIENT COSMOS: A READING OF WALLACE STEVENS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

TOTAL OF 10 PAGES ONLY MAY BE XEROXED

(Without Author's Permission)

LEONA MARIE DEORKSEN

14276

210112
C 1

AN ALWAYS INCIPIENT COSMOS: A READING OF WALLACE STEVENS

A Dissertation

Submitted to

the Faculty of Graduate Studies

The Memorial University of Newfoundland

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

(C) Leona Marie Deorksen

December 1969

AN ALWAYS INCIPIENT COSMOS: A READING OF WALLACE STEVENS

PREFACE

This study has grown out of a conviction that, despite Wallace Stevens's increasing stature among critics and the accompanying increase in the amount of critical literature being devoted to his poetry in recent years, there is still a need for full-length, detailed explications of individual poems. Consequently, I began to assemble a series of such explications. As the number of my readings grew and my understanding of the canon increased, I became convinced that Stevens's poetry has been slow in gaining acceptance not only because of its obscurity but because of the radical world-view it presents. My first chapter outlines this hypothesis and examines it in some detail.

To support the idea it was necessary to present a comprehensive picture of the views resident in the canon and to present these not only in summary (since there is still considerable dispute over their exact nature) but through explication of a representative selection of poems. Thus, the main portion of the study, Chapters II to VI, is taken up with readings of items from The Collected Poems. These readings illustrate that the poetry demands an extension of our 'willing suspension of disbelief' to the

point at which we acknowledge that belief in any logically consistent system of thought is a delusion, and that all such systems are falsifications of an ultimately incomprehensible reality.

In the final chapter I examine the way in which evaluations of Stevens's poetry have frequently been influenced by an inability to accept a view so consistently devoted to the strange logic of contradiction. I suggest that such evaluations rest upon questionable criteria of value in poetry.

The readings I have included in this study will, I hope, be considered to be some advance in the continuing process of exploring the fascinating geography of Wallace Stevens's 'mundo'. In making my selection of poems I have attempted to concentrate on those which have not, as yet, been subject to repeated and intensive interpretation and on those where I might add in a significant way to existing readings. The method has not been without its difficulties, especially in selecting from the poems of Parts of a World and Transport to Summer where the necessity of reading the two long, major poems, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' and 'Esthétique du Mal', precluded the examination of the many shorter, less well-known poems on subsidiary themes.

I am, of course, deeply indebted to all those

whose efforts in this field of study have preceded mine. It was the perusal of essays by such pioneers as William Van O'Connor and Frank Kermode that encouraged me to proceed with my own explorations. It has, however, been to those more recent studies in which close readings have been presented that I have turned most often for assistance and it is to these that I am most deeply in debt. However, the method I chose for selecting the readings to be included here insured that the instances in which I disagree with any given critic would be more common than those in which I concur. I mention my awareness of the situation in order that I may, in some measure at least, redress the balance in the kind of references I have made to these works. I regret that I was not able to obtain a copy of one of the most recent studies, Eugene Nassar's Anatomy of Judgement, before my dissertation was completed.

I am happy to acknowledge the many forms of assistance I have received while preparing this study. It was begun while I was on a fellowship from The Memorial University of Newfoundland. Another fellowship from the Province of Newfoundland made its completion financially possible. To Dr. G. M. Story of Memorial University I am more than grateful for the patience with which he listened to my problems, for his repeated

expressions of encouragement, and for making available to me his fund of scholarship and experience. My thanks are due as well to Dr. E. R. Seary and Dr. A. A. MacDonald who read the manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions, and to Lucille LeSeelleur for her persistent and faithful work at the typewriter. Finally, I would acknowledge the generosity of spirit my husband and family have shown in the face of the disruptions of home life they have had to endure during the years I have spent on this study. Their magnanimity has been heroic and without it any effort on my part would have been futile.

L. M. D.

December 1969

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE		iii
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	EN VOYAGE	20
III.	NORTHWARD	112
IV.	TO FAT ELYSIA	207
V.	MOSTLY MARRIAGE-HYMNS	282
VI.	IN WINTER'S NICK	343
VII.	A FREEDOM OF AIR	407
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY		439
INDEX		446

I

INTRODUCTION

Surely the reason for the continuing popular indifference to the poetry of Wallace Stevens and for its relatively long neglect by literary critics does not lie in its obscurity or 'difficulty' alone. Harmonium, his first volume of poems was published in 1923 and, except for the decade of sterility that followed the unsympathetic reception of that volume, Stevens continued to write and publish poetry until virtually the eve of his death in 1955. Yet the first book-length critical study, William Van O'Connor's The Shaping Spirit, was not published until 1950, and, although a number of studies have appeared since 1960, his name is only now beginning to become known beyond the circle of graduate studies in English literature. In comparison, T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland, published in 1922, is hardly less 'difficult', yet it achieved almost immediate and widespread success. Similarly, the more recent poetry of Dylan Thomas which utilizes a symbolism as individual and idiosyncratic as that of Stevens's verse has been accorded considerable acclaim. Obviously, an adequate explanation for the phenomenon requires the investigation of other possibilities.

To say this is not to suggest that the difficulty of the poetry is a minor matter. The reader who approaches The Collected Poems for the first time enters a strange new world which greets him with a bewildering variety of colours, a perverse cacophony of sounds, with familiar images in bizarre associations and in changing perspectives. Although the brilliance and intensity of concrete impressions subsides in the later verse, the sensation of journeying through a maze of undulating images remains. By the time he arrives at the poet's assertion that 'A poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully' (CP, 350)[1] he will probably wryly concede that, measured by that standard, the poems are more than successful. The result, however, is likely to be rejection of the poetry because, as Ortega y Gasset has pointed out,

> When a man dislikes a work of art, but understands it, he feels superior to it; and there is no reason for indignation. But when his dislike is due to his failure to understand, he feels vaguely humiliated and this rankling sense of inferiority must be counterbalanced by indignant self-assertion.[2]

For the literary critic the representation of reality afforded by Stevens's poetry offers the severest kind of resistance to his efforts. His task, essentially, is to discern within the totality of the poet's expression one of the possible forms of order which may serve to illuminate the way in which that particular body of work

contributes or relates to the literary tradition and to the whole of man's cultural, intellectual and emotional experience. As Stevens said when asked to write an announcement for Dial regarding William Carlos Williams's work, it requires that one tries to 'evolve a mainland from his leaves, scents and floating bottles and boxes' (L, 248). The nature of the task guarantees that it will only be directed towards a canon which may benefit from such an examination; that is, trivial works which merely repeat that which is already trite or banal do not lend themselves to serious critical analysis, for all their essence lies so near the surface that no purpose is served by a reiteration of the obvious. Stevens's poetry certainly has not deserved neglect on that account. It is rather that the case of a poet who finds the 'Connoisseur of Chaos' to be an interesting persona lies at the opposite extreme. The difficulty of penetrating his brilliant surfaces is such that a detailed interpretation of a given poem can be offered with only a limited degree of certainty and thus analysis is obstructed at the most elementary stage. Moreover, much of Stevens's poetry, like so many forms of modern art, was not primarily intended to make an assertion readily reducible to prose. The early and often-quoted letter to Harriet Monroe declares his intention 'to keep on dabbling and

to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluent speech for myself' (L, 231). The obscurity, however, is not merely a matter of an uncertainty about an 'authentic and fluent speech' but an essential ingredient of what he envisaged poetry to be. When asked to explain his controversial 'Emperor of Ice-Cream' he declared:

> Things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions (poems) very often have meanings that differ in nature from the meanings of things that have their origin in reason. They have imaginative or emotional meanings, not rational meanings, and they communicate these meanings to people who are susceptible to imaginative or emotional meanings. They may communicate nothing at all to people who are open only to rational meanings. In short, things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions very often take on a form that is ambiguous or uncertain. It is not possible to attach a single, rational meaning to such things without destroying the imaginative or emotional ambiguity or uncertainty that is inherent in them and that is why poets do not like to explain. That the meanings given by others are sometimes meanings not intended by the poet or that they were never present in his mind does not impair them as meanings.[3]

In a later letter on the same topic he said,

> But, after all, the point of the poem is not its meaning. When people think of integrations they are thinking usually of integrations of ideas: that is to say, of what they mean. However, a poem must have a peculiarity, as if it was the momentarily complete idiom of that which prompts it, even if that which prompts it is the vaguest notion (L, 500).

Yet in his 'Collect of Philosophy' he could remind us that:

> Theoretically, the poetry of thought should be

> the supreme poetry. Hegel called poetry the art of arts, specifically because in poetry the material of which the poem is made, that is to say, the language of the poem, is wholly subordinated to the idea. A poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems. That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good; and so in time and perhaps, in other politics, it may come to be (OP, 187).

There are further complications to the problem, however, of which we become aware when the form of the poetry, despite the poet's attempt to evade the intelligence, convinces us of the ideas resident in the integrations. We become aware that he is frequently inconsistent and what is more, contradictory in the 'vaguest notions' which prompt the poems. What seems worse to the analytic mind, is that he is perfectly conscious of his contradictory statements. One of the most serious debates in connection with the Stevens aesthetic has centered upon the question of which of those antinomies of reality or imagination he considers to be of prime consequence. In a letter to B. Heringman he blithely admits to taking both sides in the argument:

> As both you and Mr. Wagner must realize, I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. Both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that (L, 710).

And in a later letter, as if to confirm his penchant for uncertainty he says: 'If this should be inconsistent with something that I have said elsewhere, it would not matter because one often says contradictory things' (L, 798).

The attitude of mind such quotations display cannot be dismissed as simply further attestation to the commonly held belief that poets are a queer lot and capable of saying anything. It is of deepest consequence when considered in the light of Stevens's belief in the essential and important place of poetry in the contemporary world. As Stevens himself has observed, 'The mind of the poet describes itself constantly in his poems . . .' (NA, 46) and, therefore, when, through long acquaintance, familiarity with the landscape of Stevens's unique mundo permits elusive but recognizable patterns of meaning to emerge, they reflect the processes of a mind capable of ignoring the law of contradictions.

It is this aspect of Stevens that accounts for the deepest difference between his poetry and that of most of his contemporaries. The poems of T.S. Eliot and of Dylan Thomas, though equally challenging intellectually, present a different kind of demand upon the audience and each of these poets provided a basis for sympathetic communication that precludes misunderstanding. The early

Eliot successfully captured the prevailing _malaise_ of his generation which was wandering in a wasteland of shattered faiths, uncertain about what fragments of its values might be shored against the ruins. While the verse might be obscure there was no ambivalence in the attitude of the poet and the accuracy of his images of the prevailing sensibility assured communication on the basis of instinctive recognition. Not all readers would follow Eliot to the experience of 'Ash Wednesday' but the majority could share his sense of loss in the face of the purely vestigial state of Christianity in the world of the twentieth century. Far fewer were prepared to identify themselves with Stevens's sense of release over the death of the gods and to feel any confidence in an atmosphere so completely denuded of the trappings of old systems of thought.

Dylan Thomas, writing in the 30's, spoke to another generation, one which felt itself slipping beyond the paralysis of Prufrock toward 'the pit' of despair which was the prelude to existentialism. The dominant impression that emerges from Thomas's poetry is its almost melodramatic assertion of the ego in the face of a certainty of ultimate dissolution. It represents the extreme in romantic posture, a submission to the irrational at times so complete as to rely upon sheer intensity of emotion to defy the growing awareness of

of the inescapability of eventual non-existence. There are many resemblances to be found in the poetry of Thomas and Stevens. One notes the similarity in their interest in the sounds of words and in what appears to be a dialectical process of thought in each, as well as their common preoccupation with death. However, it is the virtually complete absence of the romantic 'I' in Stevens that makes for an unbridgeable gulf between them and discourages the type of sentimental identification which undoubtedly accounted for much of the adulation showered upon the flamboyant Welshman.

Stevens was well aware that his poetry was radically different from that of his contemporaries. What is more, he was determined that it should be so despite the comparatively poor reception given him by critics and public alike. As for his feeling about Dylan Thomas, a lack of sympathy was mutual.[4] Although he admired Eliot as the 'most brilliant instance of the romantic', using the term in the laudatory sense of achieving the 'living intensity, living singularity that is the vital element in poetry' (OP, 252), he also said, in another context, '. . . Eliot and I are dead opposites and I have been doing about everything that he would not be likely to do' (L, 677). In relation to the total cause

of poetry his ultimate assessment of Eliot was that, although he illustrated the character of 'a man of dynamic mind and, in this field, something of a scholar and very much of an original force' his was 'a negative rather than a positive force' (L, 378). Every poet, of course, intends to speak with a new voice but few, perhaps, are as thoroughly successful in their intention as Stevens has been. One who reads the poems looking for echoes from the tradition of poetry does so, largely, in vain. In a letter to Richard Eberhart he said, '. . . I am not conscious of having been influenced by anybody and have purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously' (L, 813).

Stevens's uniqueness is, however, not purely a matter of his determined effort but the result of his theory of the nature of the poetic process as well. Irving Layton has aptly characterized Stevens's poetry as exhibiting a 'sweatless paganism' and the combination of qualities implied by this phrase, as comparison with Eliot and Thomas has shown, undoubtedly accounts for his failure to gain popular acceptance in his own time. Yet both the lack of passion or emotion and the 'paganism' are essential products of Stevens's definition of modern poetry

as 'the poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice' in an age in which the 'past was souvenir' (CP, 239). For this task a detachment more severe than Keats's 'negative capability' is necessary for, although Stevens felt that 'with a true poet his poetry is the same thing as his vital self', he also held that in poetry as in writing in general, 'the good writers are the good thinkers' (L, 815).

The observation that Stevens's poetry concerns itself with abstract thought is, of course, nothing new, but it assists our appreciation of his seemingly unique qualities to note in this connection the following passage from Ortega y Gasset's essay on 'The Modern Theme':

> It is in the realm of pure thought, therefore, that the earliest faint signs of the coming age can be traced. They are the light ripples caused by the first few puffs of wind on the calm surface of the pool. Thought is man's most fluid possession; and accordingly it yields freely to the slightest variations in his vital sensibility.[5]

Thus it is only reasonable that Stevens's poetry should not so much mirror the world-picture of his own generation as reveal preoccupations which were to become current in literature only during the last decade of his life.

Stevens's awareness of the affinity between the various realms of cultural endeavor and his concern with their ultimate import for vital aspects of life can be seen in the following comments from a letter written to his

friend Henry Church who was interested in establishing a Chair of Poetry at Princeton and who apparently, shared many of Stevens's views:

> For this purpose, poetry means not the language of poetry but the thing itself, wherever it may be found. It does not mean verse any more than philosophy means prose. The subject-matter of poetry is the thing to be ascertained. Off-hand, the subject-matter is what comes to mind when one says of the month of August ...
>
> "Thou art not August, unless I make thee so".
>
> It is the aspects of the world and of men and women that have been added to them by poetry. These aspects are difficult to recognize and to measure.
>
> While aesthetic ideas are commonplaces in this field, its import is not the import of the superficial. 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 either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing, but the intention is not to foster a cult. The knowledge of poetry is a part of philosophy and a part of science; the import of poetry is the import of the spirit. The figures of the essential poets should be spiritual figures. The comedy of life or the tragedy of life as the material of an art, and the mold of life as the object of its creation are contemplated (L, 377-8).

Of course, Stevens's theory of poetry consists of much more than this excerpt indicates, but its tenor suggests that his position, while somewhat akin to Shelley's 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', is far from Wordworth's 'All good poetry is the spontaneous

overflow of powerful feelings.' What is perhaps more significant is that for Stevens, poetry is not something completely separate from or antagonistic to other areas of intellectual effort. The implication, I believe, is that poetry, like philosophy and like science, confronts the heterogeneous agglomeration of experience and attempts to transform it in the sense of discerning in it an order that will add 'the aspects of the world and of men and of women' that are 'the mold of life'.

Despite the frequent observation that Stevens's poetry is never the vehicle for an expression of personal emotion (which Stevens would categorize as sentiment) he has never been accused of a lack of sensibility. The recent publication of his Letters reveals how broad and inclusive was the field in which that sensibility was operative. Appreciation of the poetry, therefore, requires at least a minimal acquaintance with areas of thought that normally lie outside the frame of reference which is adequate for dealing with poetry arising from a more purely literary tradition. Frank Kermode gave an early warning about one aspect of approaching Stevens with too narrow an outlook when he said,

> Stevens is fully American. 'The Americans are not British in sensibility', he noted. The truth of this is evident from the relation that has come to exist between English and American poetry; it is quite clear that the tables of offinity no longer apply, and the intercourse between the two

> is very much what it might be as between two literatures in different but mutually intelligible languages. Stevens was not, of course, indifferent to English poetry; that is impossible to an American poet. But it is equally difficult for a literate American to escape the attractions of Paris, and that special sense of being at home in French culture which history has as it were forced on the American intellectual.[6]

Thus what is required is not an appreciation of a 'parochial Yankee muse' but an appreciation of that trait which makes American poets the legitimate heirs of their pioneer forebears in their rejection of the burden of the cultural past and in their endeavour to grasp the totality of experience with neither the restrictions nor the comforting assurances of traditional systems of thought. If we would come to terms with the elusiveness of his poetry, we must similarly divest ourselves of inherited mental categories and particularly those which lead us to interpret his position as 'so centrally in the Romantic tradition'[7], or as bringing 'to a climax the whole movement of poetry in the Romantic tradition'.[8]

There are, of course, elements in Stevens's poetry that are inescapably reminiscent of earlier voices. However, when he is simultaneously seen by responsible critics to be like Shakespeare in capturing the 'miniature effect of innocent sadness', like Eliot in 'rhythmic contour'[9], like Donne in his intellectual play with

ideas[10], and like Pope in tone and use of the pithy generalization[11], we must recognize that our approach by these channels leads only to further confusion. Recently, too, there has been a tendency to seize the concepts of philosophers alluded to in the essays and to seek out echoes of these in the poetry. The danger of this approach is that, too often in such discussions, the poems recede and philosophy occupies the foreground. While an awareness of the themes of philosophical inquiry is required for reading Stevens, what is still needed, above all, is a discussion of the poems as wholes and in sequence rather than broad generalization based upon provocative fragments gathered at random from the whole canon. Moreover, we must continue in our attempts to see his poetry in a satisfying perspective, for as long as he is viewed as a deviant we cannot be comfortable with the poetry, the 'rage for order' is not exclusively confined to the poet's mind.

Susan Sontag in her essay 'Against Interpretation' has pointed out that the process of interpretation as it is usually carried out is a process of adjusting the piece of art to fit our own presuppositions and suggests that to avoid the destruction of the work entailed in such a process a greater emphasis on an observation of its formal qualities is required.[12] Several recent studies

are in whole or in part based on such an approach. James Henry Lovell's study of the 'Form and Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens' points out the basically dualistic structure of Stevens's verse. He notes that 'A characteristic of Stevens's verse . . . is its irresolution, its inaction, forces are posed against each other in the same way that an observer might find them posed against each other in reality, but human preference for either is denied, and another basis for unity between them is sought out.'[13] Lovell quite validly, I believe, sees the structural patterns of the poetry as Stevens's realization of the basic processes of cognition and he investigates the epistemological and aesthetic implications of the formal aspects of the poetry. He demonstrates 'not <u>what</u> [Stevens] means, but <u>how</u> he means'.[14]

Herbert J. Stern in his <u>Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty</u> recognizes the tendency in Stevens to 'cast opposing aspects of his mind against one another, and to distil from these internal struggles a poetry whose vitality is in its own self-questioning'.[15] His conclusion is that the result of Stevens conflicting allegiances to the imaginative process on the one hand and to the necessity of adherence to the real, to the shaking off of the 'last distortions of romance' on the other, drove him to

'a position from which the work of art no longer appeared to have metaphysical justification'[16] and which resulted in the temporary renunciation of poetry, the period of sterility which followed the Harmonium period.

Ronald Sukenick similarly emphasizes that Stevens never makes up his mind in favour of any given term of the antithetical sets of chaos and order, imagination and reality, stasis and change which provide the basic patterns dominant in the poetry but that whatever synthesis is reached is purely momentary in duration.[17]

An appreciation of the 'poetry of tension' that results takes us only part of the way to grasping Stevens's position because for him the aesthetic obtained its value from its conjunction with the real: 'the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one or, in effect, poetry and reality are one, or should be' (NA, 81). To discuss the structural relations of Stevens's poetry in terms of analogy, metaphor, and resemblance is to stop short of a realization of Stevens's theory of poetry as a theory of life. To assimilate and appreciate that theory is to recognize the world-view which it exemplifies.

Close reading of selections from Collected Poems shows that Stevens moves from the experience of uncertainty, ambivalence, vacillation and doubt to a position in which these attitudes of mind are exalted as the essence of

an acceptable philosophy for man in our time. It is this element in Stevens's poetry that presents the greatest 'difficulty' for his readers because it challenges not only held ideas but the very habits of thought basic to the Western mind since Aristotle. However, Stevens's adoption of this view does not make him the deviant he is often thought to be. Instead it places him in the mainstream of ideas current in modern scientific, philosophic and aesthetic thought. A central attribute of that thought is a growing realization that in the attempt to grasp the totality of a world of flux our dependence upon logic and reason may obscure for us more of the essence than it discloses. In every field the striving is towards a recapture of the perceptions open to the innocent eye, the eye of the primitive for, in the words of Whitehead, 'Heaven knows what seeming nonsense may not tomorrow be demonstrated truth.'[18]

NOTES

I INTRODUCTION

[1]Wallace Stevens, Collected Poems (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1955), p. 350. Subsequent citations in the text to this and other volumes of Stevens's work will be given as follows:

CP Collected Poems

OP Opus Posthumous, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).

NA The Necessary Angel (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

L Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

[2]José Ortega Y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.) p. 6.

[3]Wallace Stevens, 'The Emperor of Ice Cream', Explicator, VII (November, 1948), unpaginated.

[4]Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 802 and William York Tindall, A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas (New York: The Noonday Press, 1962), p. 14.

[5]José Ortega y Gasset, The Modern Theme, trans. J. Cleugh (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 26.

[6]Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 12.

[7]Northrop Frye, 'The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens' in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 163.

[8]Harold Bloom, '<u>Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: a Commentary</u>', <u>ibid</u>., p. 77.

[9]Marianne Moore, 'The Poetry of Wallace Stevens' in <u>Literary Opinion in America</u>, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 402.

[10]Hi Simons, 'The Genre of Wallace Stevens' in Borroff, <u>op. cit.</u>,pp. 43-54.

[11]Samuel French Morse, Introduction to <u>Opus Posthumous</u>, p. XXXV.

[12]Susan Sontag, <u>Against Interpretation</u> (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), pp. 3-14.

[13]James Henry Lovell, Jr., 'Form and Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn.,1962, p. 245.

[14]<u>Ibid.</u>, p. 45.

[15]Herbert J. Stern, <u>Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty</u> (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. viii.

[16]<u>Ibid.</u>, p. 141.

[17]Ronald Sukenick, 'A Wallace Stevens Handbook: A Reading of His Major Poems and an Exposition of his Theory and Practice', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1962, p. 558.

[18]Alfred North Whitehead, <u>Science and the Modern World</u> (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 110.

II

EN VOYAGE

Upon the premature death of Anne Kelligrew in 1685 John Dryden, wishing to honour the memory of a precocious fellow-poet, composed an ode the final stanza of which contains these lines:

> When in mid-Aire, the Golden Trump shall sound,
> To raise the Nations under ground;
> When in the Valley of Jehosaphat,
> The Judging God shall close the Book of Fate;
> And there the last Assizes keep,
> For those who Wake, and those who Sleep;
> When ratling Bones together fly,
> From the four Corners of the Skie,
> When Sinews o're the Skeletons are spread,
> Those cloath'd with Flesh, and Life inspires the Dead:
> . . .
> There Thou, Sweet Saint, before the Quire shalt go,
> As Harbinger of Heav'n, the Way to show,
> The Way which thou so well hast learn'd below.[1]

If anyone of his contemporaries found this graphic account of the Last Judgement distressing in any way no record of such a response remains and, though the merit of the ode has been debated since Joseph Warton first attacked it as bad writing in his edition of Dryden's works,[2] no critic has ever doubted the sincerity and piety of Dryden's intention in writing that description. Two years later Newton, building upon the earlier work of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, published his Principia (1687) and,

albeit unintentionally and unwittingly, initiated a change of thought that would, in the fullness of its development, banish the possibility that a description such as Dryden's would again be taken seriously. Our response to the following Stevens poem dealing with the same notion as that of the Dryden stanza, reveals the vast difference that separates us from the seventeenth century world view:

THE WORMS AT HEAVEN'S GATE (1916)[3]

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbadour,
Within our bellies, we her chariot.
Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,
And, finger after finger, here, the hand,
The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,
The bundle of the body and the feet.
. . . .
Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbadour. (CP, 49-50)

It is doubtful whether a single reader of our fact-oriented century would read this as anything other than a caricature of the doctrine of resurrection. Two other short poems in which Stevens deals with the same idea deserve attention for the characteristics of modern thought which they reveal. In 'Cortège for Rosenbloom' (1921) a stairway, 'The wooden ascents / Of the ascending of the dead' is described as the practical means of transportation from this world to the next and the 'finical

carriers' on a 'hundred legs' who make the ascent are thoughtfully outfitted in turbans and boots of fur to protect them on their journey to the 'regions of frost'. (We note, too, that the description of the insects as 'infants of misanthropes', that is, the imaginative offspring of haters of mankind, adds a note of condemnation to the mockery.) 'Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb' (1921) implies that the whole question of life after death is irrelevant for who is to answer when our 'interpreters' of that region, the clerics and theologians, 'Make hue among the dark comedians' of the dead to inquire about specific conditions of a supposed other-worldly existence? In each of the three poems the means Stevens employs to invalidate this central concept of Christian theology is the submission of the idea to a completely realistic portrayal. He applies the test of the pragmatist, forcing the reader to examine the instrumental implications of the belief and in so doing reveals himself to be a true son of the Age of Reason which was ushered in by the _Principia_.

Just as the transition from acceptance of orthodox Christianity's explanation of man's place in the universe to the adoption of a completely secular interpretation has not been accomplished in one leap in which all have participated with universal accord, so the transition in

personal, individual experience is seldom a simple shift from one position to another. For Stevens, the iconoclastic poems of Harmonium signify the point from which he embarked on a lifetime's search for a means of restoring the harmony between man and his world that had been shattered with the loss of religious faith. Although the end of one era was foreshadowed in Newton's discoveries and although by the turn of this century Newtonian physics was being supplanted by a completely new theory, the durability of the ancient faith is evidenced by the fact that Stevens should still consider it a relevant theme for poetry.

'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws' shows him at his bitter best addressing an attack against several of the positions taken up by theologians in their rearguard action against the encroachments of science. The poem as a whole is typical of Stevens's method with words:

> Above the forest of the parakeets,
> A parakeet of parakeets prevails,
> A pip of life amid a mort of tails.
>
> (The rudiments of tropics are around,
> Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind.)
> His lids are white because his eyes are blind.
>
> He is not paradise of parakeets,
> Of his gold ether, golden alguazil,
> Except because he broods there and is still.

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

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

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

The word 'parakeet' echoes the Paraclete[4] yet the insinuation is sufficiently vague to save the bird from assuming a strictly allegorical role as one member of the Trinity. On the other hand, the echo is sufficiently strong to give the clue essential to a recognition of the generalized concept against which the fierce satire is being directed. As the poem progresses reinforcement is provided by details of the bird's description. First, he is 'a pip of life amid a mort of tails'. Although the word 'pip' has several denotations at least three of which could be applicable (a small fruit seed, something extraordinary of its kind [sl.] , a disorder of a bird marked by formation of a scale or crust on the tongue), the sound of the word alone casts doubts upon the bird's significance. His perch 'amid a mort of tails' is again difficult to interpret precisely since 'mort' is a great quantity or number and this meaning, if combined with the assumption that a play on 'tail' is intended, would

give one interpretation. If, however, the alternative meaning of 'mort' as the note sounded on the hunting horn when a kill has been made is accepted, the bird becomes symbol of life-giving (seed) and death-dealing properties. The combination is, of course, quite appropriate to the divine 'parakeet of parakeets' and it is typical of Stevens that, through the use of these seemingly simple but unusual words, he calls upon an assemblage of references to create a general inference about the subject in hand.

The bird is surrounded by 'rudiments of tropics . . . Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind', a scattered collection of elements of Creation, leftovers of an unperfected project. In that the bird is blind and

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

he demonstrates the weaknesses of the apologist's argument for the First Cause, an argument that attempted to reconcile the attributes of a loving Christian God with those of the Unmoved Mover necessary to a mechanical universe. His luxuriance of tails is expressive of his role as the burgeoning fountain of living forms, but his 'tip', either the apex of his creation, man, or the gratuitous gift of life, 'a drop of water', is 'full of storms', a thing of 'turbulent tinges', undulating with change and adversities. As 'pure intellect' he is the

God of the idealist tradition, the Mind which perceives eternally in order to provide continuity for Bishop Berkeley's non-material world, as well as the Unmoved Mover of Dr. Paley. His 'coppery, keen claws' represent vividly the tenacious and cruel hold the idea of a supra-sensible God has, in Stevens's view, had upon the minds and lives of men. The perfect ascetic, he 'munches on dry shell while he exerts / His will' and continues to 'flare' as an angry God who, nonetheless, as he sits 'in the sun-pallor of his rock', sheds but a pale light in comparison with the actual source of organic life.

The iconoclasm of these early poems will reappear expressed with varying intensities of feeling throughout the canon. Like Nietzsche, Stevens came to recognize that the death of God was a cultural fact the implications of which affected every aspect of men's existence, for the departure from Christian religion meant the removal of all the sanctions fundamental to Western culture. In 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' (1922) he whimsically suggests that a complete inversion of the absolutes of Christian moral law might produce a 'jovial hullabaloo among the spheres'. Man, departing from the nay-saying of Christian asceticism to become instead a 'disaffected flagellant', 'may, merely, may' from himself derive a music to match that of 'windy citherns hankering for

hymns' of paradise. The Christian nave of moral law and the masque projected from the peristyle of the opposite law are equal in the source of their authority for both, according to Stevens, are fictions produced by poetry. The palms 'squiggling like saxophones', however, are better suited to the modern scene than are those of the archaic citherns.

The tone of raillery and the emphasis upon the tentativeness of his suggestion soften the effect of the shocking ideas expressed, and save Stevens as well from being accused of opposing a system of absolutes with an equally absolutist position. However, that Stevens intended to effect a conscious overturning of values had already been intimated in 'Ploughing on a Sunday' (1919):

The white cock's tail
Tosses in the wind.
The turkey-cock's tail
Glitters in the sun.

Water in the fields.
The wind pours down.
The feathers flare
And bluster in the wind.

Remus, blow your horn!
I'm ploughing on Sunday,
Ploughing North America.
Blow your horn!

Tum-ti-tum,
Ti-tum-tum-tum!
The turkey-cock's tail
Spreads to the sun.

> The white cock's tail
> Streams to the moon.
> Water in the fields.
> The wind pours down. (CP, 20)

A gesture of defiance against accepted norms is represented in the very title of this early Stevens poem. Indeed, to the average New Englander of 1919, when the poem was written, such an action as ploughing on the 'Lord's day' would have been an outrageous piece of behaviour. The general impression given by the poem on its first reading does nothing to mitigate the implications of that gesture either for, even without a detailed examination of the symbolism, it communicates an attitude of exultant insubordination. Closer study reveals it to be a manifesto in metaphor.

The poem consists of five stanzas of which the first two are balanced against the last two as introit against recessional. The third stanza occupies a pivotal position thematically as well as structurally. In the opening statement the wind, a universal symbol for the creative breath is linked with that emblem of vigilance, the cock who daily greets the rising sun and summons the world to a renewal of activity. By the device of repetition the symbolic meaning of the 'white cock' is transferred in the next two lines to a notably American bird, the turkey-cock whose tail 'glitters in the sun'.

Whether or not Stevens at the time of writing this poem was already using the sun consistently as his symbol for the vital life-force is not essential to our interpretation but we may note that here it is clearly a central image in a portrayal of vibrant vitality.

The 'Water in the fields' of the second stanza introduces the symbol of regeneration and renewal which, through the unusual use of the verb 'pour' in the next line becomes associated with the 'wind' of poetic inspiration. The feathers that 'flare / And bluster in the wind' not only maintain the atmosphere of energetic motion but add a sense of boisterous self-assertiveness to the scene. With this the mood is established, the stage is set and all is in readiness for the appearance of our ploughman.

No ordinary ploughman he, however, for he commands a fanfare to herald his arrival and his herald is none other than Remus, co-founder of Rome. The action of blowing the horn is a link with the breath of inspiration of the previous stanza; the allusion to Remus establishes the identity of the speaker as a Romulus of poetry, a founder of a new state. The stature of the speaker accords with the extravagance of the declaration: 'I'm ploughing on a Sunday, / Ploughing North America.' In

the metaphor of ploughing Stevens implies not only that he is preparing a seed-bed for new ideas, but that to do so he must turn under and bury the dead stalks of worn out matter left over from the preceding season's growth. Part of the outworn matter is that body of literary conventions which is analogous to the social convention which forbids ploughing on a Sunday. By combining the obvious hyperbole of the declaration with a brisk, light rhythm which is underlined in the 'Tum-ti-tum, / Ti-tum-tum-tum!' of the stanza Stevens deftly escapes the danger of sententiousness which is attendant upon any outright statement of purpose.

The first two lines of the fourth stanza vaguely suggest the sound of a drum-beat lingering in the air as the ploughman moves off down the field and we sense that what we have heard partakes of the nature of a spiritual call to join in a new crusade. The scene at the close of the poem is the same as when it opened except that now 'The white cock's tail / Streams to the moon.' His stance suggests that the call is towards a newly awakened awareness of the sun, of reality, but that the new direction takes its bearings from the moon, the symbol for the imagination, as well.

The poems of Harmonium considered thus far seem to indicate that Stevens was able to shed his Presbyterianism without a qualm. While there are other examples

which would further confirm this view there are also a large number which reveal an uneasiness and an uncertainty about the new situation in which he finds himself. In 'Lunar Paraphrase' (1917) for example, the symbols of religion are spoken of in a tone which blends rejection with longing:

> The moon is the mother of pathos and pity.
>
> When, at the wearier end of November,
> Her old light moves along the branches,
> Feebly, slowly, depending upon them;
> When the body of Jesus hangs in a pallor,
> Humanly near, and the figure of Mary,
> Touched on by hoar-frost, shrinks in a shelter
> Made by the leaves, that have rotted and fallen;
> When over the houses, a golden illusion
> Brings back an earlier season of quiet
> And quieting dreams in the sleepers in darkness -
>
> The moon is the mother of pathos and pity. (CP,107)

Here, though the figures of Jesus and Mary stand amid images of old age and decay (at 'the wearier end of November', in an 'old light' which moves 'Feebly, slowly', touched by 'Hoar frost' among leaves that have 'rotted and fallen'), the light of the moon provides 'a golden illusion'. Despite the recognition that the religious ideals represented by the figures are no longer tenable, the speaker regrets the passing of the security they once afforded. Like the woman in 'Sunday Morning' he is aware of a longing that reason and the world of nature cannot

completely satisfy.

The same predicament informs 'Palace of the Babies' (1921) where we find the disbeliever walking 'outside of gates of hammered serafin'. That these serafin, the angels of highest rank whose task it is to guard the throne of God, are now of hammered metal signifies the purely artifactual nature of their existence. The disbeliever's range of vision is limited to the externals of the edifice and, when we recall that 'serafin' in its obsolete sense denotes a silver coin once current in India, the latent meaning implies the nature of that which separates him from the inner throne. He sees 'moon-blotches on the walls', the light 'spinning on the pinnacles' and can only imagine the comfortable 'humming sounds and sleep' within. For him the blank windows reveal no sign of light or life and thus they 'balked / His loneliness', offering no welcome, no promise, no hope of relief for his distress:

> The disbeliever walked the moonlit place,
> Outside of gates of hammered serafin,
> Observing the moon-blotches on the walls.
>
> The yellow rocked across the still facades,
> Or else sat spinning on the pinnacles,
> While he imagined humming sounds and sleep.
>
> The walker in the moonlight walked alone,
> And each blank window of the building balked
> His loneliness and what was in his mind:

If in a shimmering room the babies came,
Drawn close by dreams of fledgling wing,
It was because night nursed them in its fold.

Night nursed not him in whose dark mind
The clambering wings of birds of black revolved,
Making harsh torment of the solitude.

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)

The palace seems to symbolize simultaneously the Church and eternal Heaven. In that it is a haven for babies it suggests, as Margaret Peterson has pointed out, that here 'immortality is ridiculed as the comforting illusion of infantile minds'.[5] The 'harsh torment' of the disbeliever stems from his consciousness of the reality of death; his mind cannot escape 'the clambering wings of birds of black'. His broad-brimmed hat protects him from the moonlight, that light of the imagination which surrounds the delusions of the palace.

The emotional despair or 'cosmic fright'[6] which may grip the human being confronted with a universe where the whirling planets no longer sing of a divine originator receives its most urgent expression in the following poem:

DOMINATION OF BLACK

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 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,
Turning as the flames
Turning in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy
hemlocks
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks. (CP, 8)

A mood of serene contemplation dominates the first seven lines as the speaker, with philosophic detachment, muses upon the similarity between the changing colour and motion of the flames and the colour and motion of the falling leaves. The transformation taking place in the fire is at once destructive and regenerative just as the

process of changing colour in the dying leaves is an essential part of the natural cycle of death and rebirth. The dominant colour, though not mentioned specifically, is red, symbolic of life in that it is the colour of blood; the thoughts of the speaker are on that part of the natural cycle which corresponds to that colour.

Abruptly, in the eighth line, the antithetical thought obtrudes and the serenity is broken as the 'color of the heavy hemlocks', black against the night sky, comes 'striding' into his thoughts as an intruder might come striding into the room. The hemlocks bring the unwelcome thought of death not only by virtue of their colour, but by their verbal echo of the infamous 'cup of hemlock'. The use of the personal pronoun 'I' in the next line tells us that they have forced the idea of his own inevitable death upon him. His sharp though unuttered feeling of anguish calls forth the recollection of the cry of the peacocks, a cry which in its harsh, despairing tones is expressive of his own emotional response.

In the second stanza the image of the peacock is linked with the cyclic pattern of the seasons, of life and death, in that 'the colors of their tails / Were like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind . . . .'

The exploration, then, of the precise nature of the cry of the peacocks becomes, by implication, an exploration of his own response to the thought that he too, as part of the natural world, must die. Is that cry of pain caused by the thought of 'the twilight', the gradual process of old age and decay? Is it a protest 'against the leaves themselves', against the essential natural order? Or is it a cry 'against the hemlocks', trees which in their unvarying colour signify the immutability of the experience of death itself?

The questions are not resolved. The recognition, in the third stanza, that the pattern of the turning leaves, the turning flames, is part of the pattern of the whirling universe merely intensifies his despair. It is the turning of the planet that causes night to come 'striding like the heavy hemlocks' and the cry of the peacocks echoes his personal fear in the face of the overwhelming knowledge that death is inevitable.

What is not said at the conclusion of the poem is, perhaps, as significant as what is expressed. No hope of a possible life after death or paradise of 'imperishable bliss' is mentioned. Nor is the comforting idea that 'Death is the mother of beauty' offered to ameliorate the pain. 'Domination of Black' permits no

rational or philosophic palliation for it communicates a purely instinctive response.

The poem recalls a quotation from Pascal which Stevens included in his late essay 'A Collect of Philosophy': 'Le silence de ces espaces infinis m'effraie' (OP, 194). In an earlier essay Stevens observed that, although Pascal, speaking as the scientist that he was, had at one time derided the imagination, he asked for and received the last rites of the church when faced with the infinity of Nothingness at the hour of death. In his extremity he clung 'to what he himself called the delusive faculty' (NA, 135) of the imagination. Like the later Kierkegaard, he made the irrational 'leap' into religious belief. For Stevens such a belief was no longer possible no matter how he might yearn for its comforts.

He recognizes, however, a certain validity in Pascal's criticism. Though the delusions of religion were being discarded, the concepts with which they were being displaced might be no less a delusion. The ambivalence of his attitude is evidenced in 'Colloquy with a Polish Aunt' (1919) where he dramatizes the confrontation between old and new mythologies:

SHE

How is it that my saints from Voragine,
In their embroidered slippers, touch your spleen?

HE

Old pantaloons, duenna of the spring!

SHE

Imagination is the will of things. . . .
Thus, on the basis of the common drudge,
You dream of women, swathed in indigo,
Holding their books toward the nearer stars,
To read, in secret, burning secrecies. . . . (CP,84)

The Polish aunt questions the nephew about the reason for his angry reaction to her adherence to religious faith with its hieratic convocation of 'saints from Voragine'. Voragine, as the Letters tell us, was the 'immortal begetter' of Legenda Aurea, 'the best known book of the middle ages' (L, 216). The young man's ejaculation signifies first, that he considers the saints to be buffoons such as the lean old dotard who was a stock character of the commedia dell'arte; secondly he implies that she, as their champion, acts as a duenna, a chaperone, who guards the virgin spring from the fullness of knowledge, from the sexual experience that represents complete knowledge. In his eyes religion stands opposed to truth.

The aunt replies that the figures she reveres are no more fictional creations than are those of the modern imagination by which they have been displaced. 'Imagination

is the will of things', that is, men live according to the images of reality which they create at all times. Thus the sentimental romantic for whom womanhood, on the basis of his actual experience, should perhaps figure as no more than 'a common drudge', sees women as the personification of Beauty. They are for him 'swathed in indigo' the deepest blue of imagination, exerting the powerful fascination of the mysterious. That they hold their books, the repositories of those secrets of life of which the sentimentalist would make them custodians, 'toward the nearer stars' suggests that the knowledge they represent is of a kind nearer to earth than that which requires an illumination from more distant heaven.

The poem may be interpreted at a further level of abstraction. If we take 'the common drudge' to represent the natural world as opposed to the heavenly kingdom which the 'saints from Voragine' represent, the nearer stars may be seen as the light of human intelligence which attempts to probe 'burning secrecies' of the universe by use of empirical method represented in the poem by romantic love relationship which the nephew upholds. At either level of interpretation the essential contrast is between the medieval religious imagination and its modern secular counterpart and Stevens suspends his

judgement; the argument is not concluded.

What is not open to debate however is the fact that a drastic change in world-view has taken place and 'Colloquy' presents a detached view of the relative merits of the old and the new. 'O Florida, Venereal Soil' (1922) is a more purely intuitive response to the redefinition of man's place in the universe which is the inevitable result of his continuing quest for knowledge. Consciously or unconsciously the tradition of Western thought has considered that man occupies a special, pre-eminent place in the scheme of things. That this is true of Greek thought hardly needs documentation since the whole of Hellenistic Art moves towards an idealization of the human figure. It is the protagonist as a human being that is the central figure of Greek drama. The fusion of the Greek and the Judaeo-Christian thought, while it redefined the role of man in relation to the supernatural world, in no way disturbed his position as part of nature. He remained at the summit of natural creation, blessed in the special relationship with God which placed him just below the angels in the chain of being. The advent of Newtonian physics placed the upper reaches of that chain in serious question or swept them away entirely and the developments in the biological sciences since the

publication of Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) threatened a reduction of man's stature in what remained.

In this poem, Florida, once named by Ponce de León after the Spanish Easter of Flowers, season of the Resurrection,[7] has now, seemingly, a purely naturalistic dimension for she is the 'Venereal Soil'. She is addressed as a virginal substance for in modern mythology nature is no longer dependent upon God's masculine form-creating power for bringing forth her 'boorish births' among which man is numbered. The first two stanzas reveal the terms of comparison here to be the human and non-human fruits of nature's venery:

O FLORIDA, VENEREAL SOIL

A few things for themselves,
Convolvulus and coral,
Buzzards and live-moss,
Tiestas from the keys,
A few things for themselves,
Florida, venereal soil,
Disclose to the lover.

The dreadful sundry of this world,
The Cuban, Polodowsky,
The Mexican women,
The negro undertaker
Killing the time between corpses
Fishing for crayfish . . .
Virgin of boorish births,

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

You come tormenting,
Insatiable,

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

Donna, donna, dark,
Stooping in indigo gown
And cloudy constellations,
Conceal yourself or disclose
Fewest things to the lover -
A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,
A pungent bloom against your shade. (CP, 47)

How drastic a reduction man faces can be seen from the items from the physical world of the first stanza that Stevens desires to have revealed to him. Convolvulus and coral one can appreciate as perhaps surpassing the human in terms of an aesthetic evaluation. However, when the disclosure of buzzards as well is seen as preferable to an awareness of 'the dreadful sundry' that is made up of human beings, a shocking transvaluation seems to be taking place. Criticism of human frailty is not unusual in literature. A sense that it is necessary to remind man of his fallible nature has always been one of the dominating forces of motivation for the artist. The anonymity and inclusiveness of the list which Stevens brackets within the pejorative opening and closing lines

of the second stanza suggests, however, that the animadversion here is directed against general humanity rather than against particularities of human behaviour. The only specific activity mentioned is that of the negro undertaker 'killing the time between corpses / Fishing for crayfish', and that in itself is hardly a morally reprehensible pastime. It is only when seen as a synecdoche for what is typical of human endeavour in general that it appears dreadful.

The last three stanzas, however, cast a different light upon what has gone before. Since Florida represents the whole world of natural process, she is also that part of the speaker himself, the tormenting insatiable desire for knowledge that continually drives him to probe her secrets. She is both the impulse for the search and the object of its inquiry. Thus the plea of the last stanzas is an expression of the paradoxical attitude toward the knowledge of things 'for themselves' which torments the mind of twentieth century man. He recognizes that the ultimate disclosure of all the facts about man as merely another object in the realm of nature endangers his prospects for joy. As long as he in his search for total knowledge remains a 'scholar of darkness', as long as the role of man in the natural world remains in some

way mysterious, as long as life remains 'wrapped in an indigo gown / And cloudy constellations' the relationship between man and the world can remain that of lover and mistress.

However, the study of man for himself, when he is seen as merely another of nature's products, presents a threat to his very being that the study of 'buzzards and live moss' never affords. Concepts such as honour, beauty, nobility, valour and integrity, all those ideas which rest upon the basic concept of spirit and combine to endow human existence with a sense of purpose, have no place in an image of man as a biological mechanism. Viewed as just another form of matter, man is indeed part of the 'dreadful sundry of the world'. As such he is locked in a perpetual struggle for existence with his environment. Therefore, the poet begs for the comfort of the 'high sea-shadow', that life may retain an element of mystery wherein something beyond the limitations of his physical being may yet reside.

As a statement about man's place in a twentieth century cosmology the poem is ambiguous for it expresses a combination of hope and fear. The poet"s plea may be voiced in the belief that what he desires may truly exist, yet the necessity of expressing that plea is,

in a sense, a tacit admission that the feared revelation has already been made.

To conclude, however, as Margaret Peterson does upon evidence such as this which she takes from the essays, that 'Science remained for Stevens the arch enemy, the denigrator of human values in general and the arts in particular'[8] is to oversimplify drastically. On this question, as in almost every other, Stevens's capacity for contradiction reveals itself in the poetry and it is as a poet that we are interested in him. Despite his recognition of the philosophical dangers inherent in the scientific approach to the definition of man, the description afforded by science had a strong fascination for him. The following poem demonstrates that fascination:

FROGS EAT BUTTERFLIES, SNAKES EAT
FROGS, HOGS EAT SNAKES,
MEN EAT HOGS

It is true that the rivers went nosing like swine,
Tugging at banks, until they seemed
Bland belly-sounds in somnolent troughs,

That the air was heavy with the breath of these swine,
The breath of turgid summer, and
Heavy with thunder's rattapallax,

That the man who erected this cabin, planted
This field, and tended it awhile,
Knew not the quirks of imagery,

That the hours of his indolent, arid days,
Grotesque with this nosing in banks,
This somnolence and rattapallax,

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

We discover from the Letters that Stevens cautioned the editor of Dial, in which this poem first appeared in 1922, against abbreviating the title on the cover (L, 225) and we realize why he should consider it an important point when we stop to analyze what seems at first to be merely a puzzling piece of grotesquerie. The title actually constitutes an example of what biologists call 'a food chain' and provides a clue to the reading of the poem. Within the poem itself the biological chain is replaced by the analogous geological chain of erosional processes. The first line establishes the link between title and poem in the simile which makes a comparison between feeding hogs and the rivers, 'Tugging at banks, until they seemed / Bland belly-sounds in somnolent troughs'. The second stanza adds the dimension of atmospheric conditions to the picture of natural processes and builds upon the image suggested by the 'somnolent troughs' of the previous stanzas. With the reference to the heaviness of the air, 'the breath of these swine', which is repeated in another form in each of the next two lines, a sense of the burdensome nature of the processes of evolution and

erosion are given concreteness. In the last line, the rivers, too, submit to their place in the interminable cycle as they go 'seaward to the sea-mouths'.

The third and central stanza, focuses upon man as he exists within this picture of physical process. The transitoriness of his existence is emphasized in the phrase, 'tended it a while'. To this man who 'Knew not the quirks of imagery', who does not realize the manner in which the imagination may provide a twist or may introduce vagaries into the perception of reality, the fact of his existence, consisting of 'hours of his indolent, arid days' is 'grotesque', absurd or bizarre, in this setting of 'somnolence and rattapallax'. This repetition of the image of somnolence in the third and twelfth lines reminds us that, as in the words of Prospero, 'our little life / Is rounded with a sleep'. The nonce word, both in its being a non-sense construction and in the rattle of its consonants, conveys the idea of meaninglessness. To him the 'hours of his indolent, arid days' assume the proportions of a fifth term to be added to those stated in the title. Hours eat men just as men eat hogs.

The implication of the phrase 'Knew not the quirks of imagery' is somewhat ambiguous. Though the word 'quirks' implies a certain degree of distortion the import

may be in the illustration of the way in which man's mind, through the sub-conscious perception of analogous relationships among quite distant categories of experiential data, produces the poetic metaphor.[9] The question is not so much one of choosing between contradictory interpretations as it is of deciding the point of emphasis and, again, the poem exemplifies what is the dominating characteristic of Stevens poetry. From what is given we can merely conclude that the poem is an observation of the perceptual process. That the poem, structurally, reads like a legal document proceeding from 'It is true that . . .' in a series of clauses, each of which sets forth one aspect of truth, seems to place man completely within the realm of matter. Within that setting we see him being shaped physically and mentally by external forces. As poetry, 'Frogs' illustrates Stevens's marvellous capacity for transforming the most unlikely material into a richly poetic experience. The combination of consonant sounds, perhaps, more than any other element in the poem, evokes a sense of man's origin in primordial sludge.

Two earlier poems, 'Theory' (1917) and 'Anecdote of Men by the Thousand' (1918) deal with the same theme and these more obviously stop just short of making a

definite commitment to the idea of man as purely an environmentally determined creature. In the first of these the statement made seems clear enough:

THEORY

I am what is around me.

Women understand this.
One is not duchess
A hundred yards from a carriage.

These, then are portraits:
A black vestibule;
A high bed sheltered by curtains.

These are merely instances. (CP, 86-7)

However, the title reminds us that the statement is not incontestable fact; it is a hypothesis assumed for the sake of discussion.

The opening statement of 'Anecdote of Men by the Thousand' reiterates the thesis of 'Theory': 'The soul, he said, is composed / Of the external world' (CP, 51). And it has been agreed among critics that the two poems make equivalent statements. That is true, however, only up to a point, despite the fact that Stevens in this poem includes illustrations of the influence of environment on particulars not noted in the experience of the duchess, such particulars as speech, dress and the musical

instruments which residents of a given region find suited to an expression of themselves. (Again, we can observe how, through the use of images of those marvellous birds, the brilliant toucans, and the musically-named mandoline, Stevens raises truly 'essential prose' to poetry.) A careful analysis of the second stanza in relation to the whole poem, however, suggests an extremely significant qualification to the opening lines:

> The soul, he said, is composed
> Of the external world.
>
> There are men of the East, he said,
> Who are the East.
> There are men of a province
> Who are that province.
> There are men of a valley
> Who are that valley.
>
> There are men whose words
> Are as natural sounds
> Of their places
> As the cackle of toucans
> In the place of toucans.
>
> The mandoline is the instrument
> Of a place.
>
> Are there mandolines of western mountains?
> Are there mandolines of northern moonlight?
>
> The dress of a woman of Lhassa,
> In its place,
> Is an invisible element of that place
> Made visible. (CP, 51-2)

The stanza moves from the general toward the specific in its illustration of environmental influence

and examines the particularization process. Within the largest region in which all men exhibit characteristics similar in the most general terms, increasingly smaller regions exist and at each level differentiating traits appear. The organization of this stanza would seem to suggest that Stevens is upholding the theory that man's essence is determined by external events and that additional terms in the progression could be added that would extend the series from the East, the province, the valley, to the city, the suburb and so on until individual man is reached.

What is at issue here, although it is not overtly mentioned, is the question of free will. If each human being is completely determined by his environment there is no point in talking about free will and hence no such thing as moral responsibility. The title of the poem must not be ignored, however, and it warns us against drawing such a conclusion. The difference introduced by its qualification is precisely the difference that Planck's quantum theory introduced into the notion of determinism that was the heir of Newtonian physics. The poem is not an 'Anecdote of Man' but an 'Anecdote of Men by the Thousand'.

In the essay 'A Collect of Philosophy' which was

written in 1951 Stevens refers to the point at issue, attributing the thought to a then-recent letter from Jean Paulhan:

> It is admitted, since Planck, that determinism -- the relation of cause to effect -- exists, or so it seems, on the human scale, only by means of an aggregate of statistical compensations and as the physicists say, by virtue of macroscopic approximations. (There is much to dream about in these macroscopic approximations.) (OP, 195)

Evidence in this 'Anecdote of Men by the Thousand' suggests strongly that the notion of 'macroscopic approximations' had been with Stevens long before Jean Paulhan reminded him of them.

The scene on the banks of the Arkansaw which appears in 'The Jack Rabbit' (1923) seems to be an expansion of the theme of 'Frogs':

> In the morning,
> The jack-rabbit sang to the Arkansaw.
> He carolled in caracoles
> On the feat sandbars.
>
> The black man said,
> "Now, grandmother,
> Crochet me this buzzard
> On your winding-sheet,
> And do not forget his wry neck
> After the winter."
>
> The black man said,
> "Look out, O caroller,
> The entrails of the buzzard
> Are rattling." (CP, 50)

Here man is not alone nor is he a silent occupant of the picture. Both he and the jack-rabbit are speakers; at

least both give expression to inner states of feeling. What is noteworthy is the difference in medium of expression as well as in what is expressed. Stevens describes the rabbit as 'carolling in caracoles', communicating his exuberance by means of bodily movement as he cuts a figure like that of a high-spirited horse 'on the feat sandbars'. His sense of well-being cannot find its way into words.

The black man, on the other hand, speaks to another human, the grandmother, and to the rabbit; he has the capacity to translate his experiences into language. His request that the grandmother crochet a buzzard on her winding sheet emphasizes that the symbolizing process of human mind is the central preoccupation of the poem. (Again, the main idea is found in the structural centre of the poem.) It is this process which constitutes the difference between man and rabbit both of which are seen calling out to certain entities within their environment. The nature of the things which are central to man's consciousness constitutes another major difference in that the rabbit is shown responding purely to what is immediate. The man's consciousness, however, is wholly directed toward the prospect of death. The capacity to symbolize which enables him to extend his thoughts into the future enables him primarily to prepare the winding

sheet for the one certainty of the human future, and his call to the rabbit constitutes a projection of his own sense of the necessity to use foresight in order to escape the 'entrails of the buzzard' representative of the fate which is common to all living creatures. The call demonstrates as well that the concepts of man's mind exceed those which are absolutely essential for his own survival.

Typically, Stevens draws no conclusions from the scene he presents but creates a poetic equivalent of a piece of empirical observation. The items which claim his attention, however, point to an awareness of a question which philosophers such as Whitehead and Bergson consider pivotal in the debate between materialists and idealists, a debate which was still raging furiously in the early decades of this century. In emphasizing man's consciousness of his impending non-existence, however, Stevens reveals that one of his major preoccupations is the same as that which is central to existentialist thinking.

For Stevens, the problem of human consciousness is not solely bound up in the anticipation of death, however, nor does it only constitute a problem for those

who espouse a materialistic definition of man. 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon' (1921) looks at man from the idealist's position and, although the poem has been widely accepted as an expression of exuberant freedom, it contains as well an awareness of a faint malady. This vaguely troubled sensation in the poem is obscured by the ambiguous syntax of the opening lines:

> Not less because in purple I descended
> The western day through what you called
> The loneliest air, not less was I myself.
>
> What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
> What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
> What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?
>
> Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
> And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
> I was myself the compass of that sea:
>
> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
> And there I found myself more truly and more strange.
> (*CP*, 65)

The grammatical structure of the first stanza would seem to be deliberately designed to 'entangle and confuse'. Reduction to prose could result in either 'I was not less myself because in purple . . .' or 'I was myself not less because in purple. . . .' If we look to the last line of the poem which indicates the central issue to be something of an identity crisis we find the confusion of meaning reduced somewhat, but that still

leaves the relationship of the conditional clause in doubt. What we have is an example of the Stevens poem that must be read in reverse in order to get its sense.

We have loosely identified the crux of the poem from the last line. The penultimate statement clearly asserts the source of the problem to be the solipsism that is the legacy of Berkeleyan philosophy, 'I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself . . . .' For Berkeley the world as mind was no problem. He had God on whom he could rely to provide the stability necessary for peace of mind in a world that dissolves into a succession of perceptions. However, not only is the speaker here 'the compass of that sea' of reality, but he has come to recognize that, as he says, 'my ears made the blowing hymns they heard'. The God of Berkeley is just as much a construction of his mind as is the world he experiences.

When God and the world have been defined as mind, all that remains to be examined is the self or ego with its aura of consecration, 'the ointment sprinkled on my beard'. But that sense of special selfhood, too, is self-induced: 'Out of my mind the golden ointment rained.' Thus, 'the loneliest air' in which Hoon exists is so

because it is completely devoid of 'the other'.

According to a letter written by Stevens in 1955 to Norman Holmes Pearson:

> Hoon is Hoon although it could be that he is the son of old man Hoon. He sounds like a Dutchman. I think the word is probably an automatic cipher for "the loneliest air", that is to say, the expanse of sky and space (L, 871).

With all joking aside, the comment states that Hoon is both person and place, the epitome of the solipsistic dilemma that developed in Western philosophical thought, 'the Western day' through which Hoon has descended. Another legacy of that tradition is the 'purple', the special majesty with which it has endowed the human figure, the apex of God's creation. Now, when subject and object have become one, the self may well find itself 'more truly' for it is the Alpha and Omega of truth, but the experience of such a complete redefinition is disconcerting as well as liberating, for it obviates a partaking of sacramental wine. Hoon must drink an innocuous tea for he can no longer aspire to sharing in a mode of being once attributed to the gods. He and his environment, now both indefinable since no limits or boundaries can be drawn, are well described when they are given the name 'Hoon', a meaningless cipher.

The possibility of a quite different, almost

directly opposite, experiential stance is scrutinized in 'The Snow Man', also written in 1921. Whereas 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon' attempts to visualize the full implications of existing in a world which is all mind, in 'The Snow Man' a situation from which all mind has been excised becomes material for imaginative investigation:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
>
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place
>
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.
> (*CP*, 9-10)

In a letter to Hi Simons, dated April 18th, 1944, Stevens says: 'I shall explain 'The Snow Man' as an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it' (*L*, 464). Winter, then, is reality and to 'have a mind of winter' is to achieve the necessary identification with one's environment. Of note at this point is the way in which the absence of

verbal ornament and the avoidance of any of the elegance typical of so much of Stevens's poetry accords with the 'bare place' being described.

While Stevens's statement adequately explains the symbolism of the winter scene and provides us with the theme, the average reader is still likely to be puzzled by the paradox contained in the last stanza. I offer this as a paraphrase: the listener, the snow man, is able to enjoy the harsh reality which surrounds him because he, unlike a living human being, is not separated from his environment by the processes of his own mind, by the burden of human consciousness. If he were human, he would be incapable of perceiving 'the junipers shagged with ice' without formulating some idea, some thought, some organized response in the face of his environmental condition. He would be unable 'not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind'. Man's contact with reality is mediated by the senses and, therefore, he remains the prisoner of his own perceptual responses. Were he able to experience immediately and absolutely, if he, like the snow man, were to see 'Nothing that is not there', the objects about him would have no meaning because they would escape the innate comparing and categorizing process in which the mind engages as soon as it receives the impressions of the senses. The landscape would be

pure potential, 'the nothing that is'. To the observer, the presence of the objects of such unrationalized experience would not be distanced by the necessity of differentiation or by the making of logical connections between them. The result would be a total awareness of reality which would permit a total enjoyment of it since the absence of the self would mean the absence of the subjective experience of pain.[10]

Clearly, the relationship being presented is not within the normal range of human experience; man is not made of snow or of any other form of inanimate matter and the ability to give himself over to nothingness, the achievement of such a state of pure receptivity, is foreign to Western thought and attitudes. What the poem suggests, despite its distinctly North American setting, is a state not unlike that of the absorption into the Void wought by the Zen Buddhist or Hindu holy man who finds perfect peace in the realization that the individual self has no separate identity beyond that of the Absolute which encompasses it.

That Stevens was attracted to Eastern thought and interested in the contrast between it and that typical of his own cultural tradition is evidenced in one of the earliest of the <u>Harmonium</u> poems, 'Six Significant Landscapes'.

The poem was written in the same year, 1916, as the play, 'Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise' in which three Chinese occupy the centre of the stage. The play, according to Stevens's letter to Harriet Monroe, was 'intended to demonstrate that just as objects in nature offset us . . . so, on the other hand, we affect objects in nature, by projecting our moods, emotions etc.', and he goes on to quote as example from the play:

> an old man from Pekin
> Observes sunrise,
> Through Pekin, reddening. (L, 195)

The poem, similar in theme to the play, directs its attention more explicitly to the difference between Oriental and Occidental attitudes.

Samuel French Morse tells us that these were originally 'Eight Significant Landscapes'.[11] If the two that have been deleted were available for study the discontinuity of the whole as we now find it might be resolved. As it stands, however, the six sections seem neither completely discrete, nor is there a clearly definable relationship or progression between the parts when the significant aspects of each landscape have been adduced. The method of presentation is surprisingly similar to the modern film technique of montage.

The dominant features of the first landscape are the Oriental setting and the way in which the old man

(reminiscent of one of Yeats's figures in 'Lapis Lazuli') sees each item in the world about him as matter in motion. What is more, in that 'His beard moves in the wind' he is integrated with the continuously moving, changing environment:

> An old man sits
> In the shadow of a pine tree
> In China.
> He sees larkspur,
> Blue and white,
> At the edge of the shadow,
> Move in the wind.
> His beard moves in the wind.
> The pine tree moves in the wind.
> Thus water flows
> Over weeds. (CP, 73)

The second section is a lyric celebrating the mysterious, the obscure, which the time of night, the figure of the female and a moonlit pool exemplify.

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

In III there is an abrupt change of mood. The speaker's 'I' dominates the passage as he asserts his dominion over the universe. In the last three lines, however, he is forced to confess, with some irritation, that despite his grandiose posturing, certain elements of

the environment are still beyond his control:

> I measure myself
> Against a tall tree.
> I find that I am much taller,
> For I reach right up to the sun,
> With my eye;
> And I reach to the shore of the sea
> With my ear.
> Nevertheless, I dislike
> The way the ants crawl
> In and out of my shadow.

The marked contrast with the first landscape suggests that the speaker is not expressing a personal or individual point of view but represents the general humanistic attitude of Western man.

The salient feature of the dream described in the fourth landscape is that the content we are told about is of the past. The description does not, however, read, 'When I dreamt . . . .' Thus, the speaker's dreaming continues but no longer of that which 'was near the moon'. To interpret the moon in this context as a symbol of the imagination seems meaningless. Dreams are imagination at any time. If we consider the dream to represent an aspiration or a hope, its location near the moon would signify its sublimity, its loftiness.

> When my dream was near the moon,
> The white folds of its gown
> Filled with yellow light.

> The soles of its feet
> Grew red.
> Its hair filled
> With certain blue crystallizations
> From stars,
> Not far off.

The last two lines reiterate the sublimity of the dream but what we are to make of the figure that emerges is difficult to decide. Significantly, it assumes human proportions; it is an anthropomorphic vision. Moreover, though it first appears in a white gown, it gradually takes on all the primary colours, yellow, red and blue. We note as well the positive emphasis in the verbs describing the development of the vision: the folds of its gown 'filled', the feet 'grew' red and again, the hair 'filled' with crystallization. Precise identification of the figure is perhaps impossible but the import of this combination of qualities gives a generalized sense of fulfillment, of satisfaction.

It is difficult not to read V as a continuation of IV and thus an assessment of the comparative value of what has replaced the vision of the previous poem:

> Not all the knives of the lamp-posts,
> Nor the chisels of the long streets,
> Nor the mallets of the domes
> And high towers,
> Can carve
> What one star can carve,
> Shining through the grape-leaves.

The 'knives', 'chisels', and 'mallets' are images of cruel or brutal strength and are associated with the products of a technological age. The 'long streets', 'domes / And high towers' are man-made objects rather than products of nature, are completely lifeless and colourless, and typify the constructions which emanate from the aggressive measuring mind of the speaker of the third landscape. Such accomplishments are, even in their multiplicity, less significant than 'What one star can carve, / Shining through grape-leaves'. The second term of the comparison may be the world of nature's creation but the 'grape-leaves' evoke the thought of wine which when conjoined with 'star' in a total context concerned with vision or envisaging is vaguely suggestive of a Christian view. At the most abstract level the comparison is between the material and utilitarian as opposed to the spiritual and the aesthetic.

The sixth landscape has frequently been cited as evidence of Stevens the advocate of the imagination, or Stevens the anti-intellectual. Again, we must read with care. Certainly the rationalists, whose squares and triangles would delight the speaker in landscape III, are objects of criticism. However, Stevens is not in favour of a complete surrender to the irrational; the suggestion

he makes is a compromise, an 'ellipse of the half-moon'. Though the rationalistic Western tradition and the technology attendant upon it appears in an unfavourable light, what is suggested seems more of a modification than a complete conversion.

'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician' (1919), which is an outstanding example of Stevens's taste for the provocative metaphor, treats the question of man's contact with reality from a universal and philosophical rather than a cultural point of view:

> It comes about that the drifting of these curtains
> Is full of long motions; as the ponderous
> Deflations of distance; or as clouds
> Inseparable from their afternoons;
> Or the changing of light, the dropping
> Of the silence, wide sleep and solitude
> Of night, in which all motion
> Is beyond us, as the firmament,
> Up-rising and down-falling, bares
> The last largeness, bold to see. (CP, 62)

In reply to a query by Hi Simons regarding this poem Stevens said that the long motions were 'part of the structure of the poem which is a poem of long open sounds. To illustrate: "silence, wide sleep and solitude"' (L,463). The remark is typical of the way in which Stevens's comments on his own poems frequently offer only the minimum of assistance in arriving at a satisfactory

interpretation. In this case, the comment directs our attention to what is obvious if we read with attention and note the long, slow rhythm which the long, open sounds create. Syntax as well contributes to the creation of the rhythm, for the poem is one long sentence which begins with the central image and then develops through a series of three similes, each introduced by 'as' and providing an example from the shifting world of appearances.

In the first of these we are reminded that it is motion that alters our perceptions of distances. It deflates or decreases distance and in this case, Stevens may refer to the simplest kind of movement as of persons moving from one place to another. However, the word 'ponderous' suggests that he may have in mind an analogy with much longer motions such as those of celestial spheres in the immense regions of interstellar space. In the second comparison, the idea of motion is associated with that of time, for the 'shifting, drifting clouds' are 'inseparable from their afternoons'. To these aspects then are added the changing experiences of sight and sound the last of which for living things is that 'wide sleep and solitude of night, in which all motion is beyond us'. The final simile explicitly extends the experience

of change into the realm of the cosmic for the motions of the curtains are finally compared with 'the firmament / Up-rising and down-falling'. The essential point of the poem is in this last clause. No matter how the metaphysician may strive to peer beyond the drifting curtains which represent the shifting realm of appearances, he cannot penetrate beyond their motions to an apprehension of any absolute fixed point of reference. It rather comes about that the long rhythms we perceive in the ever-changing world of nature constitute 'the last largeness, bold to see'. The metaphysician is engaged in an exercise of futility for the flux which he perceives is all he can ever hope to see. If it is the 'last largeness', there is nothing beyond it.

Ronald Sukenick has said of this poem that 'it says nothing true or untrue about the chaos of reality in terms of absolute facts, but only represents a congenial way of thinking about what we can believe.'[12] While we can agree in part with that statement, his assertion that the poem is 'an evocation of unintelligible chaos' contradicts the implication of the long rhythms in which it is written and the emphasis which Stevens's comment places upon that rhythm. What is evoked here is not chaos but an intriguing conjunction of unity and

diversity, the changeable and the immutable that constitutes the Heraclitan flux within which we move, and though we may never know anything beyond the sensible world, or the world as our senses present it to us, wherever rhythmic motion is discerned, the utter confusion of chaos does not reign.

This interpretation of the verbal content of the poem, while apparently quite consistent with what appears on the page, nonetheless leaves one with a sense of unease. That sense is produced, I believe, by the clash between what the words say and what the image communicates. Though the curtains, we are told, constitute the 'last largeness', the mental image of curtains as produced by actual past experience suggests that there is a 'large' to be seen beyond their motions. Thus the poem, while arguing against a metaphysical inquiry, provokes within us the very desire that motivates the metaphysician to continue in his attempt to see beyond the veil of appearances. This ambivalent attitude, perhaps not consciously expressed, emerges in the later poetry in Stevens's attempt to create or formulate a supreme fiction which will satisfy the metaphysical yearnings without reducing the motions of the curtains to a life-denying, ritualized performance.

'The Place of the Solitaires' (1919) which is almost a companion-piece to 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician', links the appearance-reality question to that of the self. Stevens referred to it in the same letter to Hi Simons in which he commented upon 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician' saying, 'On the other hand, "The Place of etc." is a poem actually in motion: in motion with the activity of thought in solitude' (L, 463). Thus this poem complements the philosophy of 'Curtains' for, if the reality of the world can never be known as other than a 'Firmament up-rising and down-falling', if there is no point of fixity to be seized by the mind, then the place of thought which is 'The Place of the Solitaires' must also be 'a place of perpetual undulation'. When it ceases to be that, it is guilty of attempting to alter or distort the real to make it conform to our own need for permanence as the Doctor of Geneva is attempting to do.

The long second stanza exemplifies the essential Stevens in that it communicates on a non-verbal almost completely connotative level and the following interpretation which is highly subjective is, perhaps, quite unnecessary: the 'mid-sea / On a dark, green waterwheel' may be read as a reference to the dark depths of the

subconscious in which reside those archetypal images that seem to be part of a racial memory. The wheel is one such image which, in whatever culture it appears, serves to represent the essential split in the world order into contrasting factors: rotary or cyclic movement and immobility. (We might note here that the 'solitaire' as image exhibits a similar duality: the diamond is the hardest, most solid substance and as a solitaire it is the essence of indivisible oneness. Yet it reflects and refracts light into a myriad of colours.) In Stevens's own symbolism, green is the colour of reality and thus, because the dark recesses of the mind are part of the natural world, they too must be in constant motion.

Moving towards consciousness, 'the beaches' would represent the regions of non-articulated but conscious apprehension which receive the messages from the environment in the form of 'noise / And manifold continuation', the unordered perceptions of reality. Lastly, 'and most, of the motion of thought' is most significant because it is the level at which conscious interpretation of raw data is made and where correct or incorrect responses originate. Each of these levels contribute to form that centre which Doggett has interpreted to be 'the self, the single pure center of being'.[13]

When the necessity of a continually changing pattern of ideas such as this is denied and man's conceptions become rigidified in accordance with some form of dogma, he becomes a ludicrous and frustrated figure such as the caricature Stevens presents in 'Doctor of Geneva' (1921), one of the simpler poems of Harmonium.

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

The precise identification of the doctor who stamps the sand, confronting the immensity of 'the Pacific swell', is not possible or essential to the understanding of this poem. His stove-pipe hat and shawl mark him as old-fashioned and, as one 'used to plumb / The multifarious heavens', a man of religion. That he is a 'Lacustrine man' suggests a primitive cast of mind more suited to the prehistoric culture of the age of lake-dwellings than to that of modern times. Geneva calls to

mind the name of Calvin and the association with Racine and Bossuet suggests that, if not specifically a Calvinist, he is at least one who epitomizes strict regularity, order and rigidity, for just as Calvin's name is associated with the establishment of the most rigid of Protestant moral codes, so Racine's name is forever associated with the Three Unities which regulated French drama, and the name of Bossuet, Bishop of Meaux, has become synonymous with adherence to a fixed doctrinal position based on the authority of tradition. The doctor, faced with 'the visible, voluble delugings' finds that the tangible realities of the immense Pacific in speaking their own wild and chaotic truths represent an affront. 'His simmering mind', Stevens's image for a carefully controlled rational process of systematic thought, is no match for the tumultuous uncontrolled boiling of the ocean which he therefore denounces as guilty of 'ruinous waste'. It overflows his limited lacustrine categories and thereby offends against the central code of the Protestant ethic - it is unthrifty.

The last stanza emphasizes the futility of attempting to encompass the immensity of reality within a fixed system of thought. Though the steeples of his city join with the doctor in calling on God's wrath to

destroy the evil waste in a cosmic cataclysm, the waves roll on. The poem provides an excellent example of Stevens's skill in the use of sound to convey the sense of his statement. In the long sentence which leads up to the clash of the penultimate line, the repetition of 's' sounds with increasing frequency suggests the increasing fury of the doctor and the continuing rush of the waves which break upon the shore despite the contrasting clangor of the bells. The last line is a marvellously eloquent anticlimactic gesture of futility. So must anyone sigh who attempts to force the manifold aspects of ever changing reality into any tidy system of ideas.

Thus Stevens, like Camus, seems to be saying, 'All one can say of the world is that it is not amenable to reason.'[14] This comment is applicable whatever the subject-matter of the reasoning processes may be, as we shall see in a moment when we consider 'The Cuban Doctor'. What is implied here in addition to the questioning of rationalism is the folly of looking to the past for interpretations of the present. If reality is an ever-moving, changing sea, our age must create its own structure of images to serve as a paradigm for its actions. The point is made with greater emphasis in 'Invective Against Swans' (1921):

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)

As is often the case with the titles to Stevens's poems this one contributes somewhat to the difficulty of interpretation because it prepares the reader for a discursive statement. Actually the poem moves, not according to the method of analytical reasoning, but by the presentation of a set of images which in association become symbolic of old mythologies, of decadent orderings of reality which, according to Stevens, the soul of man leaves behind in search of a more satisfying vision. The swans are the focal point in this set of images. Whether they represent the swans of the Lohengrin legend or those swans which draw the 'chilly chariot' of the Greek Sun-god across the sky at night, they belong to a sentimentally romantic picture of an age of pomp and ceremony which is no longer consonant with modern reality. Once a viable

emblem for the dignity of majesty or a fitting symbol for a lost paradise of beauty, they are now purely decorative inhabitants of a park in which the crows, symbolic of harsh reality, anoint similarly obsolete artifacts of the imagination, the statues, with dirt.

That Stevens addresses the swans as 'ganders' is significant too, for thus he emphasizes that the object of his invective is the masculine principle of order as opposed to the female principle of variety, that which is part of untrammelled nature. The park is an example of that ordering principle at work. Its ordered parades are in discord with the wind which man cannot order.

The rain in the second stanza is described as 'bronze', a colour which connotes that which has passed its moment of relevance to reality, such as the tools of bronze which were vital to a particular stage of human culture are now merely interesting relics of the dead past. The rain's movement 'from the sun descending' provides an image for the passing of time which has turned the old symbols into 'golden quirks and Paphian caricatures', idiosyncratic ornaments and wanton distortions of reality. The white feathers of the swan, emptied of living form, belong now to the realm of the romantic imagination, the moon. Adjectives such as 'listless' and 'bland' together with the yawning vowels of 'beyond', 'bronze', 'scrawls'

and 'long' contribute to the suggestion that enervation and ennui are characteristic accompaniments of such stale interpretations of reality. The soul of man demands something more, and thus, lonely in the presence of mythologies of the past, flies to the uncircumscribed region of the skies.

While an emotional dissatisfaction with romantic and religious myths of the past apparently provokes the denunciation of 'Invective Against Swans', the myths in which modern man finds a sense of security may be equally unsatisfactory and may be dangerous as well. We have seen in 'Colloquy with a Polish Aunt' one treatment of the subject. 'The Cuban Doctor' (1921) deals in more specific terms with a similar theme:

> I went to Egypt to escape
> The Indian, but the Indian struck
> Out of his cloud and from his sky.
>
> This was no worm bred in the moon,
> Wriggling far down the phantom air,
> And on a comfortable sofa dreamed.
>
> The Indian struck and disappeared.
> I knew my enemy was near -- I,
> Drowsing in summer's sleepiest horn. (CP, 64-5)

Stevens structures the relationship of abstractions central to this poem upon the analogy of geographical and rational differences, using images which are somewhat infrequently encountered elsewhere in his poetry. The

reference to Egypt is unique, occurring in no other poem and only twice in the play, 'Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise'. Cuba provides a better clue to interpretation for it occurs in several poems where the context suggests that it stands for the total world, reality in all its chaotic plenitude.

Man, who is necessarily a native of that Cuba, is a doctor both in the sense that 'to doctor' is to alter deceptively, and in that, since he cannot deal successfully with the raw data he perceives, his mind must order its perceptions so that the world he creates may be conducive to his health, may be suited to his survival.

His flight to Egypt is to the birthplace of one of the oldest civilizations known to history, the civilization that is the source of our system of numbers, of measurement and, in that sense, of analytical thought in general. Thus Egypt suggests the ordering, categorizing process of the mind and man's retreat into that habit of thought means an escape from the Indian that is the wild, the untamed, the uncontrolled aspect of the world and of himself. The attempted escape from confusion is unsuccessful for '. . . the Indian struck / Out of his cloud and from his sky'. An element from the jungle of unordered reality forces its way into the carefully ordered world

of the mind in a manner that precludes ignoring its presence or explaining it as a figment of the imagination. It proceeds from some region external to the mind and manifests itself as something foreign to the existing order, an inescapable fact which does violence to an existing theory which has been complacently taken to be the whole truth.

The disturbance is momentary, 'The Indian struck and disappeared,' for the mind adjusts its theory to accommodate isolated conflicting facts. But the encounter serves to illustrate and to remind the doctor that the 'summer' of modern man's intellectual accomplishments is also the 'sleepiest horn' of complacent rigidity that leaves him exposed to attack from the unperceived, unassimilated and therefore dangerous elements of his immediate environment.

'The Apostrophe to Vincentine' (1918) argues in positive fashion what 'Doctor of Geneva' and 'The Cuban Doctor' have implied through negative approaches.

The poem begins with an address to Heavenly Vincentine and a recollection of the form in which the poet first imagined her. In that it is an apostrophe, the poet is addressing someone who is not present. As the

poem proceeds, it becomes apparent that Stevens is utilizing the alternative definition of 'apostrophe' as well and that Vincentine in the poem is a personification used for the purpose of making concrete an idea that Stevens wishes to elucidate. Moreover, it comes about that the poem as a whole is an examination of a process which parallells the device of rhetorical personification.

> I figured you as nude between
> Monotonous earth and dark blue sky.
> It made you seem so small and lean
> And nameless,
> Heavenly Vincentine. (_CP_, 52)

The figure is nude for she is clothed in none of the elements of experience that would give her particularity. She is pure abstraction and thus she seems nameless. Gradually the abstract idea acquires concreteness. In the second stanza qualities of warmth and colour, those to which the senses of touch and sight respond, appear:

> I saw you then, as warm as flesh,
> Brunette,
> But yet not too brunette,
> As warm, as clean.
> Your dress was green,
> Was whited green,
> Green Vincentine. (_CP_, 53)

As usual in Stevens's colour symbolism, the green colour of the dress denotes the reality that Vincentine is

approaching. She has not yet, however, achieved full reality for her dress is still 'whited green'.

In the third stanza, as the figure becomes realized to the extent that she moves and speaks, she moves out of the realm of the mental or spiritual and into the realm of the human:

> Then you came walking,
> In a group
> Of human others,
> Voluble.
> Yes: you came walking,
> Vincentine.
> Yes: you came talking. (CP, 53)

But in the fourth climactic stanza the ultimate in experience is achieved. The abstraction becomes fully 'blooded' to the extent that communication of feeling is established between two human beings:

> And what I knew you felt
> Came then. (CP, 53)

When that which was pure idea has attained human embodiment and has the capacity of speech, when Vincentine comes 'talking', the miracle of communication takes place. In the first stanza Vincentine was merely an abstraction poised somewhere between 'monotonous earth and dark blue sky', was described in diminutive terms, and was nude. Now the bare, abstract idea has been clothed in human attributes, has been personified and has gained all the

dimensions of concrete existence.

It is typical of Stevens's fondness for ambiguity that the poem may, I think, be interpreted in two ways. We may read it as an exploration of the poetic process which takes place when the poet begins with a somewhat vague, undifferentiated conception and gradually, through the medium of language, gives that idea colour and life in order to communicate in visual and emotional terms. On another level the poem constitutes an examination of the relation between the mental concept and its counterpart in the world of actuality. In these terms the poem becomes an affirmation of the physical as an integral part of the divine. Paradoxically, it is when the conception is totally experienced, when all of its physical aspects, the visual, aural, tactile, and dynamic, have been realized that it transfigures the world:

> Monotonous earth I saw become
> Illimitable spheres of you,
> And that white animal, so lean,
> Turned Vincentine,
> Turned heavenly Vincentine,
> And that white animal, so lean,
> Turned heavenly, heavenly Vincentine. (CP, 53)

Stevens allegiance to experience is not final nor total, however, and 'Of the Surface of Things' (1919) presents a modified statement on the question:

I

In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;
But when I walk I see that it consists of three
or four hills and a cloud.

II

From my balcony, I survey the yellow air,
Reading where I have written,
"The spring is like a belle undressing."

III

The gold tree is blue.
The singer has pulled his cloak over his head.
The moon is in the folds of the cloak. (CP, 57)

The speaker provides three versions of reality, or three stages in perception of the world, beginning with the statement that 'In my room, the world is beyond my understanding', or in other words, experience not thought alone is the means to knowledge. Just as the man confined to his room cannot see what the world is like so the man confined to thought, to rationalization, cannot understand the world. Experiences encountered as 'when I walk' provide the basic data for knowledge. Bare fact alone, however, tells him only that the world consists of 'three or four hills and a cloud'. Viewed from the balcony, on the other hand, with easy access to the room of the mind, not completely removed from the room as in walking, the vision is coloured by the working of the imagination as the speaker surveys 'the yellow air'. This imaginative way of seeing the world is necessary to the poet who thereby perceives the similarity between the spring and 'a belle undressing', two experiences which when viewed as absolute fact are

completely unlike. The imaginative view in no way contradicts the empirical observation but adds a further dimension to bare fact. In the final verse however, when the gold tree is blue and a complete switch from one primary colour to another is made, 'The singer has pulled his cloak over his head' and he no longer sees the real world at all. He is seeing only by the light of the moon which 'is in the folds of his cloak'. He is seeing only by the light of the imagination which, when it no longer maintains firm contact with reality, distorts the vision.

Structurally, the view of the first and third stanzas are opposed to each other. The poem moves from the pole of reality, the realm of absolute fact as provided by experience in the first stanza, to the opposite pole of imagination in the third. Neither of these extremes is presented as an adequate way of viewing the world. The mind instinctively recoils from the reduction or limitations of the first view and is forced by the comment of the detached observer to recognize the falsity of the third. The middle view, however, from the standpoint of truth, can make no claim to our allegiance on the basis of its congruence with truth, whatever that may be. Indeed, the poem merely presents three ways of looking at the world and demonstrates the

arbitrariness of man's interpretation of reality.

Another instance of suspended judgment on the question of the value of raw experience appears in that fascinating poem, 'Floral Decorations for Bananas' (1923):

> Well, nuncle, this plainly won't do.
> These insolent, linear peels
> And sullen, hurricane shapes
> Won't do with your eglantine.
> They require something serpentine.
> Blunt yellow in such a room!
>
> You should have had plums tonight,
> In an eighteenth-century dish,
> And pettifogging buds,
> For the women of primrose and purl,
> Each one in her decent curl.
> Good God! What a precious light!
>
> But bananas hacked and hunched . . .
> The table was set by an ogre,
> His eye on an outdoor gloom
> And a stiff and noxious place.
> Pile the bananas on planks.
> The women will be all shanks
> And bangles and slatted eyes.
>
> And deck the bananas in leaves
> Plucked from the Carib trees,
> Fibrous and dangling down,
> Oozing cantankerous gum
> Out of their purple maws,
> Darting out of their purple craws
> Their musky and tingling tongues. (*CP*, 53-54)

To read this poem as evidence 'that Stevens shared with Freud the conviction that temporal happiness is attainable only through release from sensual and sexual repression'[15] as Stern does, or to suggest that here Stevens 'shrewdly intimates that all amorous verse . . .

is in a sense floral decorations for bananas'[16] as Wells does is, I believe, 'muffing the mistress for her several maids'. Certainly the poem is structured upon the opposition between the voluptuous, arrogant vitality of the bananas and the refined elegance of the dining room. As the poem stands, however, there is no evidence to indicate that Stevens is completely in favour of either member of the pair. The speaker who addresses his master as 'nuncle' reminds us of the Fool in Shakespeare's King Lear and though he speaks as a fastidious fop his speech is not nonsense.

Despite the speaker's tone of disparagement in describing the bananas as he assigns them to a table of planks where the women will be 'all shanks / And bangles and slatted eyes', there is a magnetism in the vibrant vitality of their insolent 'musky and tingling tongues'. The brute force epitomized by the bananas is not without its repellent aspect, however, for everything associated with them is harsh (note the fibrous leaves) and crude. What is more, there is a sense of the malevolent in their sponsor, 'the ogre', whose orbit is not within the confines of the civilized room but is instead 'an outdoor gloom', 'a stiff and noxious place'. Had the speaker placed all his positive arguments in favour of one term of the duality and directed all his negations toward the

other we could still read Stevens's statement as favouring one or the other, and which one would depend upon whether or not we see the tone as ironical. There is irony here but it exists on more than one level and seems to point in two directions at once. Therefore, we can only conclude that here again Stevens is maintaining a completely detached view and pointing out the essential conflict between refinement and vulgarity, between elegance and gaudiness, and ultimately between civilization and savagery. Each of these sets of alternatives is bound up in the opposition between physical and mental or empirical and rational truth.

'New England Verses' (1923), which is chronologically one of the last poems of Harmonium, is something of a compendium of contrasting viewpoints on the nature of man, his world, and various possible relationships between them. Like 'Floral Decorations for Bananas', 'Of the Surface of Things', and others among the shorter poems we have been considering, no overt moral judgment is made in most instances and thus the poem arrives at no sense of finality or completion. It has provoked little critical comment and those critics who have given

it some attention are sharply divided in their opinions. Enck considers the poem to be 'the only nearly tiresome group Stevens ever wrote'. He says it is one in which 'the contrasts or similarities within the paired stanzas strike one as either so obvious that they seem not worth making or so tangential that anything can be made of them'.[17] Wells, on the other hand, feels that 'Each couplet is powerfully imaginative and clearly poetic at the same time that it constitutes a blow on behalf of trenchant social and aesthetic criticism.' Neither critic provides a close reading of the poem although Wells's appreciative comment (which is somewhat of an overstatement, in my opinion, since the ambivalence of attitude and the obscurity of intention precludes any truly 'trenchant' criticism) stems from a more nearly accurate reading. He summarizes the content in this way:

> Penetrating comments occur in turn on such paradoxical problems as the outlook that renders each individual the center of the universe or excludes him from participation in the objective universe; on the collision of democratic and aristocratic theories; on pedantry versus sensuality, the former in overt league with idealism; on social consciousness as opposed to retirement of the individual; on the proud, self-sufficient individual and the inglorious and formless crowd; on intellectual and aesthetic elegance as opposed to deliberate barbarism; on inveterate cynicism and sophisticated sensuality; on decadence and a fresh perfection.[18]

Some of these generalizations are debatable.

In the first vignette of the poem the poet addresses a pedantic 'Don Don' who is admonished to recall that no one myth represents or effectively reflects total reality. 'All things in the sun are sun,' and thus ideas other than the myth of Hercules may contain truths. To 'nag at ideas' may mean to complain about the heroic ideal in the sense of criticizing its validity, but it could as well be interpreted to mean that, as a teacher, the only view Don Don uses as a basis for exhortation, the basis from which he 'nags' is the heroic ideal. Since the title of the poem suggests that the verses are a parody of the couplets in New England primers[19] which, with apparent ease, reduce the complexity of existence to a few simple Biblically-derived formulas, the latter case is probably intended. The main point is that all ideas, mental configurations, are part of reality, they partake of the real.

Nonetheless, in Section II the speaker confesses to his discovery that there is something 'wholly other' that is impervious to the activity of the mind and not a product of the mind. That this discovery is the product of night, is made 'between moon-rising, and moon-setting' implies, by virtue of Stevens's use of the moon and its domain of night in relation to the imaginative process,

that the world excluding the speaker is paradoxically a reality that must be imagined because it cannot be 'known' in any other way.

Section III proceeds to examine the world as it appears either imaginatively transformed and including the speaker or as it exists unmodified by the imagination. Life is soup with pearls when the simple pleasures of 'ginger and fromage' are magic sufficient to overcome a resentment over the disparity between wealth and poverty. Section IV reminds us, however, that when we come in contact with other humans, such as the tea-belle, they are likely to offer unpleasant reminders of our social station, of the distinctions of social class.

Section V refers to the poverty of the world when described by encyclopaedists, those interested only in bare fact. The outcome in VI is that the spirit which has been nurtured on the narrow, limited world-view, a view of a pond of absolute fact as compared with 'a lofty fountain' in which an imaginative vision of nobler possibilities is active, craves for the larger, more heroic conception.

Sections VII and VIII contrast two types of poetry, the first is that of Phoebus Apothicaire who is the dispenser of health. This may be a statement which accords with Goethe's judgement upon the romantic as 'sickly'

poetry, for the poetry of health includes the whole of reality denying no part of the 'nation's multitude'. It provides an unsentimental look at the world. Phoebus the Tailor, on the other hand, trims away the unpleasant or harsh portions of nature. He selects from the complex totality of experience and thereby finds protection from the disorder of the snows of reality. Each term of the pair is blessed -- neither is favoured by Stevens as being representative of a superior approach.

In IX and X contrasting views of man's role in relation to his world are presented. In the first he is seen in the heroic vision, the master, the 'admiral' of the 'hale, hard blue' which is the sea of reality. That he is described as 'Ashen man on ashen cliff' is ambiguous. It suggests, on the one hand, a purified humanity but at the same time there is the implication of a dead or devitalized image. In the second vision man's domination is obscured by products of his own technology. The scaffolds and derricks rise above the 'men in formless crowds'. The contrast here is between an aristocratic and a democratic view of man and though Stevens here seems to feel a greater sympathy with the first vision, the 'ashen' description is indicative of some feelings of ambivalence as well.

Sections XI and XII present two kinds of the saintly or prophetic vision. The first is that of the 'Patron and patriarch of poets', whom we might identify by his location in the Land of Locusts as St. John the Baptist. Although we know that he called for repentance, the 'fragrant leaves' in which he walks and the balance of 'heat-heavy yet nimble in talk' suggests that the burden of repentance is offset by his promise of salvation to come. Thus the poet who follows his patron will be one who provides not only a negative but a positive message as well. There is, however, strong indication in the combination of a reference to poetry, to walking and to talking, that the saint is connected with the Peripatetic School, with Aristotle. The saints of Land of Pine and Marble in XII on the other hand, whose location suggests they are the martyrs and ascetics of later European Christianity, by their 'complaints', by emphasizing the sinfulness of man and failing to temper that judgement with a mitigating conception of his positive attributes, ultimately contribute to a destructive philosophy. Reading a connection with Aristotle would make this pair a contrast between Greek and Christian attitudes, between Hellenism and Hebraism.

The ascetics of XII resemble to some extent the

male nude of XIII. Theirs is a dark vision arising out of religious connection whereas the male nude's equally unhappy view is a purely secular affair. His nudity suggests that he is stripped of all religious and historic illusions. As a male figure he represents the principle of order, the rational element. The stripping process exposes him completely to the rays of the sun; he is hampered neither by the protection nor by the restriction of 'cap or strap', and though this seemingly unfettered experience provides the pleasures of basking in the sun, the vision remains that of the dark cynic. The darkness proceeds not from external causes; therefore it must have its locus within. The female figure of XIV, on the other hand, does not expose herself completely to the sun of reality. Though she too is denuded of conventional and religious inhibition she chooses 'the straw divan / At home', protected from complete exposure to the sun as Phoebus the Tailor is by his beard protected from exposure to the snow. Ballata, moreover, is not totally aware, she is dozing and though not as true to fact as the male nude, her portrait provides the promise of pleasure. She is 'like the slenderest courtesan' embodying a not-quite-honest view of the world which, nonetheless, appears more attractive than that of the male cynic. She may represent

a world-view ameliorated by the fecund imagination. Thus this is another instance in which Stevens maintains an attitude of ambivalence for he admits that falsification is a necessary part of the more pleasant imaginative view.

In the final pair we have, first, the blighted scene, not of academic life but of 'academic death'. Stevens skilfully conjures up the atmosphere of the university campus in autumn, at convocation perhaps, and implies that barrenness and sterility accompany the complete dedication to reason, to rationality, that dominates our institutions of higher learning. The second scene is 'Fleurie', not the world of reason in academies cut off from the natural environment but nature as Pinakothek, as a picture-gallery, providing innumerable pleasant vistas. Yet even here, in a seemingly unrestrained statement in favour of the latter scene, Stevens concludes with an interjection that constitutes a strong limitation or qualification of that statement. An idealistic vision of nature as picture-gallery, as 'perfect fruit in perfect atmosphere' leaves its proponent without defence against very real dangers. Like Chantecleer of Chaucer's 'Nun's Priest's Tale' he may close his eyes in singing his song of praise and thus fall victim to the fox lurking in the thicket of reality.

Even more than 'New England Verses' which displays an intention to question the basic presuppositions of Western thought by calling attention to the limitations of any and all philosophical, social and intellectual positions, 'The Comedian as the Letter C' (1923) is an 'anti-mythological poem' (L, 778), and it begins with a de-bunking of the heroic image. The title itself, the significance of which escaped early critics, underlines the comic intention. Crispin, an 'every-day man who lives life without the slightest adventure except that he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do' is 'as the Letter C' in that the sounds of the letter 'C', 'both hard and soft, include other letters like K, X, etc.' (L, 778). The variety, to Stevens's mind, created a naturally comic effect and these sounds accompany Crispin on his journey. His passage demonstrates not only that his life-orientation changes, going through several stages before arriving at a destination, but that, like the letter C, he is changed by the context within which he finds himself. What the poem says, above all else I believe, is that man takes himself much too seriously, over-rates his capacity to dominate his environment and over-estimates his importance in the total scheme of things. A much more successful poem than 'New England Verses', 'The Comedian'

presents in allegorical form the poet's progress to the same philosophical impasse that the 'Verses' represent. The poet-hero's state of mind at the end of the journey is the logical outcome of his failure to find a satisfactory single point of reference upon which to build a positive, clearly-defined philosophy.

The poem is, to use Hi Simons's phrase, the 'culminant work' of Stevens's first volume of poetry and, as such, it deserves attention here. However, since virtually every full-length study published thus far deals with 'The Comedian' at some length I hesitate to add another long reading to the many already in existence and shall, therefore, give it a more general reading than has been given the other poems from Harmonium we have been considering.

Hi Simons published the first extensive analysis in an essay about which Stevens said, '. . . it is correct not only in the main but in the particular' (L, 350). In that essay he summarizes the hero's development as:

> passage from (1) juvenile romantic subjectivism, through (2) a realism almost without positive content, consisting merely in recognizing the stark realities of life, (3) an exotic realism, in which he sought reality in radical sensuousness, (4) a kind of grandiose objectivism, in which he speculated upon starting a sort of local-color

> movement in poetry, but which he presently saw as romantic, and finally, through (5) a disciplined realism that resulted in his accepting his environment on its own terms, so to speak, and (6) marrying and begetting children, to (7) an "indulgent fatalis(m)" and skepticism. The protagonist's marriage was actual but also symbolic of complete adjustment to society. . . . an enriching experience, . . . nevertheless . . . something of a capitulation to society.[20]

In a letter written in 1940, seventeen years after 'The Comedian' was written, Stevens described Crispin's progress in more general terms saying,

> I suppose that the way of all mind is from romanticism to realism, to fatalism and then to indifferentism, unless the cycle re-commences and the thing goes from indifferentism back to romanticism all over again. No doubt one could demonstrate that the history of the thing is the history of a cycle. At the moment, the world in general is passing from the fatalism stage to an indifferent stage: a stage in which the primary sense is a sense of helplessness. But, as the world is a good deal more vigorous than most of the individuals in it, what the world looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new belief (L, 350).

The first section of the poem, entitled 'The World without Imagination', describes the defeat of romanticism, the retreat from the initial formulation:

> 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? (CP, 27)

Faced with the magnitude of reality, 'Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh, / Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust', Crispin finds himself stripped of his ancient identity in a tempest of experience. He discovers he is 'merest miniscule in the gales'. Not only is his conception of himself completely altered, but even the sun, once the most familiar aspect of every-day life, is not what his mind had interpreted it to be. In his new condition

> . . . 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)

The turbulence forces upon Crispin the realization that he lives in an alien reality which, to some extent, remains obdurately separate and distinct from the categories of his conceptualizing faculties,

> . . . a vocable thing,
> But with a speech belched out of hoary darks
> Noway resembling his . . . . (CP, 29)

This is 'The World without Imagination' that the speaker of 'New England Verses', in a much less dramatic or engaging fashion, found to be 'not of his begetting'. Here the traumatic experience wipes out stale models for living and demands a total readjustment of personality:

> Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.
> The imagination, here, could not evade,
> In poems of plums, the strict austerity
> Of one vast, subjugating, final tone.
> The drenching of stale lives no more fell down.
> (CP, 30)

What is more, it demands a completely re-organized definition of the world. When all the 'ruses', the subterfuges of belief that man uses to shield himself from the brunt of the environment's hostility, have been shattered by 'the large', a glimpse of the vastness of the real, the fragments that remain constitute an undetermined 'something', brute reality 'given to make whole' within a new integration, a new world-view.

In the second section of the journey, Crispin reaches Yucatan, a place of vivid, intense barbarous sensualism, uninhibited by the conventions of civilized Bordeaux. Here Stevens uses geographical rather than botanical metaphor to represent an opposition very much like that of 'Floral Decorations for Bananas' and expands upon the vacillating or ambivalent mood of that poem. Crispin, released from the restrictions of refinement, finds in himself a greatly enlarged capacity for experience but his new freedom is not without its disadvantages:

> . . . his vicissitudes had much enlarged
> His apprehension, made him intricate
> In moody rucks, and difficult and strange

> In all desires, his destitution's mark.
> He was in this as other freemen are,
> Sonorous nutshells rattling inwardly. (CP, 31)

The emptiness within demands more than purely sensual gratification and the wanderer finds respite from his 'violence for aggrandizement' in writing fables,

> Of an aesthetic tough, diverse, untamed,
> Incredible to prudes, the mint of dirt,
> Green barbarism turning paradigm. (CP, 31)

The imagery and sound effects of this section become absolutely fantastic as Stevens exemplifies the 'too juicily opulent' poetry Crispin writes while under the influence of Yucatan. In the thunderstorm, symbolic of the danger imminent when all the savage energy of elemental nature is let loose, physically or emotionally, Crispin seeks refuge 'in the cathedral with the rest', finding in 'exquisite thought', in the abstract mental processes exercised in the theologican and philosophical meditation, a necessary protection from 'the quintessential fact' of savage nature. As valet, the guise he wore as romantic egotist, he was envious of the energy of nature and, engaging in the pathetic fallacy, sought to make it his own, to exercise that force himself. Now when he accepts the thunderstorm's harsh proclamation of

his own insignificance he is, paradoxically, 'free / And more than free, elate, intent, profound' because he is released from the tremendous responsibility of acting as 'sovereign ghost'. He is free to find his own level of speech as the thunderstorm of fierce passion subsides, 'lapsing in its clap', and letting down 'gigantic quavers of its voice / For Crispin to vociferate again'.

In 'Approaching Carolina' Crispin's imagination reasserts itself and the unrestrained hedonistic impulses of Yucatan contend with the 'boreal mistiness of the moon' which veils perceptions in mental constructs. The vistas of mentally ordered experience seem 'chilled and lank' to one who desires 'the relentless contact' with reality and who 'postulated as his theme / The vulgar' rather than the effete elegance from which he sailed at the outset. He is tempted by the idea that

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

yet feels as well that 'Moonlight was an evasion, or, if not, / A minor meeting, facile, delicate.' The conflict continues:

> Thus he conceived his voyaging to be
> An up and down between two elements,
> A fluctuating between sun and moon,

A sally into gold and crimson forms,
As on this voyage, out of goblinry,
And then retirement like a turning back
And sinking down to the indulgences
That in the moonlight have their habitude. (CP, 35)

As he nears Carolina, however, he reaches a position that is new, one which corresponds to neither of the alternatives between which he has been tossed. The actuality he faces is neither exotic, fabulously sensual and opulent, nor a 'Morose chiaroscuro, gauntly drawn'. Appropriately, his destination is a point midway between the tropics which hold temptations to hedonism and the cold Arctic of colourless, ascetic rationalism. Of this 'midway South' Stevens once remarked that it was an 'uncertainty' (L, 209). Here the sight of ordinary, every-day details create the purifying effect:

. . . It made him see how much
Of what he saw he never saw at all.
He gripped more closely the essential prose
As being, in a world so falsified,
The one integrity for him, the one
Discovery still possible to make,
To which all poems were incident, unless
That prose should wear a poem's guise at last.
(CP, 36)

The 'essential prose' that makes up his new 'curriculum' is made up of elements that bespeak the world of trade and commerce, the world in which pragmatism prevails and

principle is adjusted to meet the contingencies of changing situations.

Thus, the original 'Nota' is now stated in reverse:

> Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.
> That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find.
> Crispin in one laconic phrase laid bare
> His cloudy drift and planned a colony.
> Exit the mental moonlight, exit lex,
> Rex and principium, exit the whole
> Shebang. Exeunt omnes. (CP, 37)

Enthusiastically, Crispin begins to write a new, seemingly perverse, capricious poetry in which 'reverberations in the words' celebrate 'rankest trivia'. If man is but a product of his environment, if 'natives of the rain are rainy men' (the line recalls the testimony of 'Theory', of 'Frogs Eat Butterflies . . .' and, to some extent, the 'Anecdote of Men by the Thousands') the aesthetic which grows out of that conviction must fasten upon the peculiarities of various environmental conditions for its material. The result would be what Simons calls 'a local-color movement in poetry'. Crispin comes to realize, however, that when such an aesthetic becomes formalized, when

> The melon should have apposite ritual,
> Performed in verd apparel, and the peach,
> When its black branches came to bud, belle day,
> Should have an incantation, (CP, 39)

then spontaneity and freedom will have been lost and the poetry will be 'Related in romance to backward flights'. The human mind will again have imposed its order and such poetry will be guilty of the same 'reproach / That first drove Crispin to his wandering'. It will fail to accommodate the unpredictable, 'chance event' that is part of reality. He chooses, therefore, to serve 'Grotesque apprenticeship' to the vagaries of experience. Since ideas of any kind are 'the dependent heirs' of the human, racial memory, 'the heirs / Of dreamers buried in our sleep', they cannot bring about anything truly new, no 'oncoming of fantasies of better birth'. They are falsifications of experience and, therefore, 'Let them be expunged. / But let the rabbit run, the cock declaim.'

Section V records the details of Crispin's 'haphazard denouement'. Had he been discontented, had the circumstance of his 'suzerain soil' not been fortunate, he might have remained the 'prickling realist', an artist in whose work the 'was and is and shall or ought to be' are combined out of reforming intentions. As it is, however, all grandiose projects gradually recede as involvement in the actual world of affairs becomes increasingly appealing:

> . . . day by day, now this thing and now that
> Confined him, while it cosseted, condoned,
> Little by little, as if the suzerain soil
> Abashed him by carouse to humble yet
> Attach. (CP, 40)

The sensible world is always more permanent than man's interpretations of it, 'The plum survives its poems,' and thus Crispin abandons all attempts to theorize about 'shall or ought to be' in favour of experiencing what 'is'.

The denouement represents a defeat of his ambitious colonizing project but he refuses 'to bray this in profoundest brass / Arointing his dreams with fugal requiems'. His experience is, after all, but one among many and is, therefore, hardly an earth-shattering calamity. Though he began by despising 'honest quilts' of simple ideas because they failed to meet the huge, complex dimensions of reality, he finds that he 'Lies quilted to his poll in his despite'. He cannot see beyond the dimensions of his own ideas and, since there is no escaping these limitations, 'For realist, what is is what should be.'

The consequence is the utter passivity of fatalism and it is when he ceases striving that fate presents him with a 'prismy blonde' symbolic of a 'return to social nature'. Just as a prism refracts light to produce the whole spectrum of colour, so the arrival of the blonde

fulfills the whole spectrum of desire. And, though

> . . . the quotidian saps philosophers
> nd men like Crispin like them in intent,
> If not in will, to track the knaves of thought
> (CP, 42)

it 'saps like the sun, true fortuner'. While it robs him of the desire to puzzle over intricate ideas, it, like the sun, endows him with vitality. 'For all it takes it gives a humped return', an overflowing, heaped-up measure, 'Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed', paying out as from a royal treasury an incongruous variety of delights. Within these lines the sounds of the letter 'C' sound forth their fullest orchestration.

'And Daughters with Curls' are among the treasures Crispin has heaped upon him. Frank Kermode interprets these as the four seasons[22] but since they are 'True daughters both of Crispin and his clay', part of 'his own capacious bloom', that reading seems unlikely. Margaret Peterson suggests they are the four stages through which Crispin passes and the four kinds of poems in Harmonium which correspond to the stages of 'spiritual idealist', 'romantic', 'vivid perceptualist', and 'independent rebel'.[23] Stevens's Letters have been published since that study was made and we can substitute his own categories of romantic, realist, fatalist and indifferentist

for those she has used. What is more significant than a specific definition for each is that they represent a variety of attitudes and each is, nonetheless, 'sure answerer'. Yet each is 'questioner' as well and together they represent the pluralism of Stevens's view. If each is 'sure' in spite of the differences between them, the response to that variety might as well be a passive indifference. Thus Crispin resigns himself to the comic conclusion that, for all his voyaging,

> 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. (CP, 45)

Life is what it was, a puzzling combination of rich purple and plain, earthy fact. Man, a mere cipher, may just as well drop 'the chuckling down his craw, / Without grace or grumble'. Ultimately, 'what can all this matter since / The relation comes, benignly, to its end?'

The dominant feature of Crispin's final position is an utter passivity, a submission to conformity that, while it resembles in objective aspects the existentialist's definition of the inauthentic existence, is actually an authentic choice, a position he assumes with

complete awareness of its implications. While he seems quite content with his choice, it does represent an abdication of responsibility. Moreover, though Crispin's denouement involves a return to 'social nature', that is true in a very limited sense of the word 'social'. During all his travels, from Bordeaux to Yucatan to Carolina, he is never among crowds of other human beings, and though he becomes husband and father (again, in a curiously passive way), he is certainly not involved in a larger world of social issues. Furthermore, as it is in 'The Comedian', so it is in the whole of _Harmonium_. Only in 'New England Verses' and in 'The Wind Shifts' (1917) do men in crowds make an appearance, and only in 'Surprises of the Superhuman', a poem included only in the second edition (1931), is reference made to the question of collective attitudes. An appreciation of this aspect of the first volume is essential in order that the nature of the change heralded so clearly in the first poems of _Ideas of Order_ may be understood.

NOTES

II EN VOYAGE

[1]John Dryden, The Poems of John Dryden, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1958), I,465.

[2]John Dryden, Selected Works of John Dryden, ed. William Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 64.

[3]Dates cited following titles of poems are those of the first publication of each as given in Wallace Stevens Checklist and Bibliography of Stevens Criticism by Samuel French Morse, Jackson R. Bryer and Joseph N. Riddell (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1963).

[4]William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950). p. 133.

[5]Margaret Lee Wilson Peterson, 'Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition; A Study of the Philosophical Background of Stevens' Poetry', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, 1965, p. 216.

[6]Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965), p. 86.

[7]George R. Stewart, Names on the Land (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1958), p. 12.

[8]Peterson, op. cit., p. 16.

[9]For a very different reading of this passage see Michel Benamou, 'Wallace and the Symbolist Imagination',

The Act of the Mind (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 100.

[10]Frank Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 156. Lentricchia reads the last lines somewhat differently: 'Stevens suggests on the one hand that by approaching nature passively, by refusing to commit the pathetic fallacy, we will not hear the sound of misery in the wind for the simple reason that reality is inhuman. Yet insofar as we do not imagine -- his conslusion is not without humor -- we do not exist, we are "nothing."'

[11]Samuel French Morse, Introduction to Opus Posthumous, p. XVIII.

[12]Sukenick, op. cit., p. 17.

[13]Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 76.

[14]Quoted in John Cruikshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 37.

[15]Herbert J. Stern, Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 117.

[16]Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 121.

[17]John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 61.

[18]Wells, op. cit., p. 51.

[19]Enck, op. cit., p. 61.

[20]Hi Simons, '"The Comedian as the Letter C": Its Sense and Its Significance', Southern Review, V (1940), p. 454.

[21] R. Noyes, ed., English Romantic Poetry and Prose (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 277.

[22] Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 48.

[23] Peterson, op. cit., p. 260 ff.

III

NORTHWARD

For almost ten years after Harmonium was published (1923), Stevens apparently devoted all his time and energy to establishing himself firmly in the business world and a 'long soothsaying silence' fell over 'the poetry centre of Hartford' (L, 255 n). Indifferentism was seemingly unable to inspire even a 'couplet yearly to the spring'. One poem, however, written during the same year as 'The Comedian', though not included in Harmonium, speaks in a tone quite different from the self-mockery of Crispin's saga and foreshadows the new voice of Ideas of Order in which it would later be collected.

Joseph Riddell has said of 'Academic Discourse at Havana' (CP, 142) which was first published under the title 'Discourse in a Cantina at Havana' in Broom in 1923,

> There is nothing new here. Just why the poem is preserved for Ideas of Order is uncertain, unless for the attack on politic man who "ordained / Imagination as the fateful sin." For politic man is synonymous with rational, ascetic, institutional man -- any man who legislates rather than discovers. The poet, naturally, is his opposite.[1]

At first reading that judgement would seem fairly accurate. In imagery and idiom it is very much akin to the Harmonium poems. There is a difference, however, that reveals itself only when the poem is given a more detailed analysis than that which Riddell has accorded it:

> . . . the contrasts of jungle and city offer the antitheses of order (intuitive vs. rational) from which Stevens' simplistic ideas spring. Stevens examines here an old theme, an American theme: the vital self against the rigid institution.

The poem consists of four sections which together constitute a 'verse-essay', one of that group of poems which Wells considers to be

> . . . most astringently didactic in tone and as a rule the driest in style - perhaps the most intellectually substantial works but questionably the most perfected as poetry.[2]

Whether or not we agree with Wells's value judgement, the poem (which is too long to be quoted in its entirety here) does proceed according to the pattern of expository composition: the first section presents the problem as it manifests itself in its particulars; the second expresses it in a general statement; the third gives a review of antecedent conditions; and the fourth makes a tentative suggestion for a program of correction and

hesitantly professes to see a source of hope in the whole situation under review.

The four statements of Section I say, in effect, 'This is what we have now; it is not the same as what we have had, but it is not good enough.' 'Canaries in the morning, orchestras / In the afternoon, balloons at night' exemplify the preoccupations central to the 'general sense of order' prevailing in the present. As such they offer a picture of a people given over to the pursuit of pleasant diversions. Stevens considers this 'a difference, at least', not better in itself perhaps, but an improvement in the sense of being a change from the sentimentality of 'nightingales', the harsh austerity of 'Jehovah' and the fanciful superstitions about the 'great sea-worm'. The hedonistic response is at least a rejection of the over-simplified versions of reality that would make the 'air so elemental' and 'the earth so near', would reduce the whole chaotic world to the neat logical categories of spirit and matter. The change to canaries is a 'wilderness', a reversion to barbarism, to the world of Yucatan, in reaction against the restrictions of long-established order, but it cannot 'sustain us in the metropoles' that constitute the complex environment of modern man.

The second section sums up the situation in the

declaration, 'Life is an old casino in a park,' transitory and a thing of chance, now that the pursuit of pleasure is its only concern. The park which surrounds the casino, a model for the imposition of man-made order upon natural elements, is in a state of decay the proportions of which exceed the bounds of any minor or individual pattern within the social order. The 'grand decadence' which 'settles down like cold' represents the end of a whole era of history. Two aspects of the park are singled out for special mention: the 'swans' and 'Rouge-Fatima'. The first, as we have already seen in 'Invective against Swans', suggests worn-out figurations such as those of Greek mythology, the romantic legend of Lohengrin, the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson, or the mystical allegories of Beaudelaire, in each of which the swan signifies a process of transubstantiation or transcendence. A further complexity of the image must be considered because the swan is a royal bird as well and thus associated with a particular kind of social order. The simplest interpretation of its significance in the poem is probably as an embodiment of a concept of nobility which, since the swans' bills 'are flat upon the ground', is now dead.

'Rouge-Fatima' similarly evokes a host of connotations. The context suggests that the reference is to a

piece of statuary but what figure it represents is uncertain. Fatima, of course, has religious associations resident in it as the name of a daughter of Mohammed and deriving as well from the later miracle of Our Lady of Fatima. The latter figure would in actuality be the most likely inhabitant of a park in the Western world, but as an allusion it calls to mind, too, the Fatima of Arabian Nights and the last wife of Bluebeard. Thus the reference is typical of Stevens's skill in creating an effect of the concrete and the specific while retaining the fluidity and flexibility consonant with the elusiveness of his theme which, in this case, is the general and continuing process of myth-making. Rouge-Fatima captures the essence of several rigidified and outmoded concepts of our society.

In Section III, the first stanza looks back through history, beyond the discouraging situation of the present in which 'the boarded windows', symbolic of the loss of a larger vision, afford insufficient protection against the elements of adversity. It passes over the recent past during which adherence to traditional patterns had become pure affectation, not adequate to the need, yet in their vestigial form preventing the emergence of 'books' of a new vision. In the time long past when swans

> . . . warded the blank waters of the lakes
> And island canopies which were entailed
> To that casino   (_CP_, 142)

the concepts they represent encompassed every facet of life and 'arrayed / The twilights of the mythy goober khan', adorned the periphery of a belief centred upon one god. That belief held out the promise of future 'centuries of excellence' and become 'the sooth', both comfort and truth, for the time.

The process of rationalization, the 'toil of thought' employed in formulating dogma, created an order which deviated from the evidence of the senses but gave a pleasing impression of harmony sufficient to mask the 'gruff drums' of problems not reconciled by that formulation:

> The indolent progressions of the swans
> Made earth come right; a peanut parody
> For peanut people.

Like the paradise of 'Sunday Morning' in which ripe fruit never falls, the 'serener myth' is conceived in terms of the superlative:

> Lusty as June, more fruitful than the weeks
> Of ripest summer, always lingering
> To touch again the hottest bloom, to strike
> Once more the longest resonance, to cap
> The clearest woman with apt weed, to mount
> The thickest man on the thickest stallion-back,
> This urgent, competent serener myth
> Passed like a circus.

The combination of the reference to 'circus' in this stanza and the description of the prevailing myth as a 'peanut parody / For peanut people' suggest that Stevens, like Marx and Nietzsche, considers religion to be a tool, an opiate for the masses, serving to keep them in a state of unthinking subjugation.

The transition to 'Politic man' confirms that impression. As part of the historical account this fourth stanza marks the onset of decay in the old order, for when imagination is 'ordained . . . the fateful sin' the zenith of development has passed. No revision of the existing myth is permitted and thus no provision for the aspirations and ideals of new generations can be made. 'Grandmother and her basketful of pears / Must be the crux for our compendia.' The worship of tradition has begun and the attendant nostalgia for the past gives birth to a taste for medieval or Gothic romance in which a central figure is, typically, 'the peached and ivory wench / For whom the towers are built'.

The supremacy of materialistic aims suited to 'a burgher's breast' is another characteristic of a decaying society. At this stage the beautiful, imaginative and exceptional idea or creation, such as would be the 'prodigy' of a 'delicate ether star-impaled', is

regarded with suspicion for, unless they conform to the taste of the market-place, 'Prodigious things are tricks'. The pressure to conform declares war on dreamers; but Stevens warns, 'The world is not / The bauble of the sleepless'. Further, the period is characterized by a refusal to recognize that the human mind creates its own world, the 'word' by which it attempts to bring meaning, 'a universal pith' to the sprawling, teeming, confusing Cuba of reality. Blind adherence to the system of absolutes erected by rationalists of the past is considered best.

Stevens, in an aside to the reader, urges that he take note of this evidence of weakness or debility. Such 'milky matters' serve to maintain the position of the Jupiter reigning at the centre of prevailing belief. His own contempt for such thoughtless acceptance of established tenets is reflected in the description of them as 'casual pap', food for childish minds, which 'will drop like sweetness in the empty nights / When too great rhapsody', the hope of heaven, 'is left annulled', reduced to nothing, and when confused, 'liquorish' prayers merely arouse new fears. Thus, when man no longer is free to exercise intellect or imagination and lives only according to established custom, 'Life is a casino in a wood,' a matter of chance in a place of

darkness, for he has lost control of his own destiny.

The fourth section examines the role of the poet in creating the models of reality according to which man conducts his life, a question which will be examined in all its ramifications in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'. The opening lines question a poetry that is merely pleasing sound to 'stuff the ear' and like religious prophecy, tranquillize the restive populace. The problem of making a selection from the array of 'ebon' and 'halcyon' that makes up the whole of reality is the poet's greatest problem. 'His rarities are ours' and because he is human he can only hope that his poetry will reflect accurately so as to 'reconcile us to ourselves'. In the face of his awareness of limitations and the possibility of error, Stevens declares, 'Close the cantina,' calling a halt to the submission to chance and circumstance. 'Hood the chandelier,' and reject the artificial light which forces a perception of the world in antiquated terms and see instead by the purer, white light of the imagination. The sense of release afforded by such a change in view is rendered splendidly:

> How pale and how possessed a night it is,
> How full of exhalations of the sea . . .

In itself the world 'is older than its oldest

hymn / Has no more meaning than tomorrow's bread'. But the poet has the power to imbue the ordinary with meaning and to inspire 'the sleepers' to a new awareness. His vision will not necessarily be for the best; it 'may be benediction, sepulcher / And epitaph'. It may, however, be the magic charm, the 'incantation' that is a clear and full reflection of reality just as the moon is a reflection of the sun. What is more, the 'old casino' and 'the perished swans' which give evidence of drift and decay are testimony as well to the fact that change is taking place, and in so doing, they represent an attribute of collective humanity that gives reason for hope.

Like The Waste Land this poem analyses the state of torpor into which Western culture had fallen but the attitude Stevens adopts toward that phenomenon is, obviously, the polar opposite of Eliot's position. The poem's obdurate iconoclasm would make it quite in place in Harmonium, as Riddell has suggested, but the critical point of difference here is its assertion of the role the poet might play in creating a new order. It is in this aspect that it clearly belongs to Ideas of Order. The hesitant, tentative tone in which the hope for improvement is voiced, and the consciousness of there being no guarantee against a change that might prove completely destructive,

are indicative of Stevens's reasons for allowing his sense of responsibility to lie dormant for a decade after this poem was written. Then too, a call to a commitment to search for higher aspirations had as much chance of receiving a hearing during 'the roaring twenties' as would any academic discourse in a cantina at Havana.

Even more serious in tone than the 'Discourse' are several poems that were first published in the 1931 edition of Harmonium. Though the Letters give no indication of any particularly distressing situation in either his business or his personal life, Stevens at this time found himself writing in a mood of melancholy. 'The Sun This March' (1931) is an open confession of his sense of puzzled unease:

> The exceeding brightness of this early sun
> Makes me conceive how dark I have become,
>
> And re-illumines things that used to turn
> To gold in broadest blue, and be a part
>
> Of a turning spirit in an earlier self.
> That, too, returns from out the winter's air,
>
> Like an hallucination come to daze
> The corner of the eye. Our element,
>
> Cold is our element and winter's air
> Brings voices as of lions coming down.
>
> Oh! Rabbi, rabbi, fend my soul for me
> And true savant of this dark nature be. (CP, 133)

'Anatomy of Monotony', 'Two at Norfolk' and 'In the Clear Season of Grapes', all of which became part of Harmonium only in the second edition, give indications of the existential dimensions of the concern lying at the base of the mood.

The 'Anatomy' begins with an 'if' that is typical of Stevens's tentative attitude toward all statements of pure theory:

I

If from the earth we came, it was an earth
That bore us as a part of all the things
It breeds and that was lewder than it is.
Our nature is her nature. Hence it comes,
Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows
The same. We parallel the mother's death.
She walks an autumn ampler than the wind
Cries up for us and colder than the frost
Pricks in our spirits at the summer's end,
And over the bare spaces of our skies
She sees a barer sky that does not bend.

II

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, 107)

From the conditional acceptance of the Darwinian theory of evolution he moves on to examine consequences of

accepting that theory, first of which is that present observation indicates the rate of emergence of new species to be slower now than it once was; thus, nature was once 'lewder' than it is. Since our nature is her nature, then from the evidence of the course of human life we may deduce that the gradual decay of the earth is also taking place. That she has passed the prime of her existence has already been intimated. The thought is repeated in the phrase 'she walks in autumn' and her autumn, since she moves within the immeasurable regions of space, is 'ampler than the wind / Cries up for us'. Moreover, it is 'colder than the frost / Pricks in our spirits at the summer's end' for the decay of mother earth is part of a larger death of the universe. Thus Stevens is apparently building this section of the poem upon the theory of entropy according to which the energy of the universe is slowly passing into heat uniformly distributed and therefore becoming unavailable as a source of useful work. Since entropy is always tending to a maximum what must eventually result is a motionless and dead universe. Thus for our earth the sky 'does not bend' because her sky is limitless space in which there is no cycle of renewal.

In keeping with the implication of the title, the anatomy, a dissection, consists of a two-part analysis of

the theme. The first treats the macrocosm, the second the microcosm. Though the sun provides the comforts of warmth and 'though other bodies come', that is, though new generations appear, like us, 'apt in versatile motion, touch and sound', the 'spaciousness and light' which these comforts represent are ultimately a deception for they fall 'from that fatal and that barer sky, / And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved'. Regardless of its joys and its pleasures, human existence is absurd. It is purposeless and leads to no other certainty than death. The consciousness of this certainty produces a sense of painful monotony.

The limited nature of the comfort afforded by the 'finer, more implacable chords' is acknowledged with a sense of sadness in 'Two at Norfolk'. This is one of those poems Crispin might have produced to 'colonize his polar planterdom' for it speaks specifically about a classic feature of North American sociology. Its figures exemplify the experience of each new wave of immigrants and the subsequent generation of citizens. The theme extends beyond such parochialism, however, and the first stanza signals the broader intention:

> Mow the grass in the cemetery, darkies,
> Study the symbols and the requiescats,
> But leave a bed beneath the myrtles.
> This skeleton had a daughter and that, a son. (CP,111)

When the grass is mowed the 'symbols and requiescats' are no longer hidden and we must face the fact of inescapable and perhaps imminent death. The consciousness of that fact is, for Stevens, the proper setting for 'a bed beneath the myrtles', symbols of Venus, goddess of Love and Beauty,[3] one place in the cemetery he would retain as an escape from that consciousness.

The second and third stanzas describe the first generation and the Old Country qualities in each father that isolated him both from his child and his neighbour.

> In his time, this one had little to speak of,
> The softest word went gurrituck in his skull.
> For him the moon was always in Scandinavia
> And his daughter was a foreign thing.
>
> And that one was never a man of heart.
> The making of his son was one more duty.
> When the music of the boy fell like a fountain,
> He praised Johann Sebastian, as he should.

The second generation has no such cultural differences to overcome and thus:

> The dark shadows of the funereal magnolias
> Are full of the songs of Jamanda and Carlotta;
> The son and the daughter, who come to the darkness,
> He for her burning breast and she for his arms.

That is not the end of the poem, however, and when in the last stanza we are told that

> . . . these two never meet in the air so full
> of summer
> And touch each other, even touching closely,
> Without an escape in the lapses of their kisses,

we recognize that the central theme of the poem is not the problem of the cultural differences that separate individuals but rather the essential solitariness of each human being. Though the darkies 'make a bed and leave the iris in it', neither the beauty of the iris nor the physical union which takes place there can overcome the fundamental isolation that is part of the human condition.

The sense of helplessness afforded by meditation on subjects such as these is symptomatic of a condition which, when it becomes general, contributes to a change in the cycle that Stevens referred to in his comment on 'The Comedian' (see p. 97 above) as 'the way of all mind'. That comment was stated in impersonal terms but 'In the Clear Season of Grapes' shows us that his observation was a generalization based upon his own experience.

The seasonal setting of this poem indicates that it represents a stock-taking, an autumnal assessment of the fruits of labour and effort expended in the past. It is at this time of year that man withdraws his attention from the details of contending with his environment and looks about him to survey his progress within a larger

perspective. Thus, in the opening stanzas, the poet is suddenly struck with the awareness that he has, perhaps, not stopped before to consider the panorama within which he has laboured:

> The mountains between our lands and the sea -
> This conjunction of mountains and sea and our lands -
> Have I stopped and thought of its point before?
> (*CP*, 110)

He realizes that until now he has always thought of his environment solely in terms of the particular objects of his immediate surroundings:

> When I think of our lands I think of the house
> And the table that holds a platter of pears,
> Vermilion smeared over with green, arranged for show.

Moreover, his attention has been focussed upon those aspects of daily life that have provided him with a sense of security and those which have added a touch of beauty to his existence. The pears, though attractive in their 'Vermilion smeared over with green', have been 'arranged for show'. They are not a part of the essential facts of existence but a matter of appearance only, a kind of window-dressing for the real. Not only are they something of a falsification but, seen in this clear season, in relation to 'this gross blue under rolling

bronzes' that the expanse of the 'conjunction of mountains and sea and our lands' provides, they are inconsequential. By implication, the 'point' of the totality of the larger scene seems to lie in the belittlement of pears which it affords:

> But this gross blue under rolling bronzes
> Belittles those carefully chosen daubs.
> Flashier fruits! A flip for the sun and moon . . . .

The ninth line marks a complete reversal in thought, a determined rejection of such an interpretation of man's place in the universe.

> . . . A flip for the sun and moon,
>
> If they mean no more than that. But they do.
> And mountains and the sea do. And our lands.
> And the welter of frost and the fox cries do.
>
> Much more than that. Autumnal passages
> Are overhung by the shadows of the rocks
> And his nostrils blow out salt around each man.

The fourth stanza asserts somewhat emotionally, for the meaningfulness is iterated in brief, broken fragments, that there is more meaning than that to the particular and to the whole that is made up of such a heterogeneous 'welter of frost and fox cries', mountains and sea. The 'shadows of the rocks' which overhang 'autumnal passages' bear witness to the struggles that have been overcome in

reaching this point in time. The rocks represent the antipathetic elements of the environment that constantly threaten to wipe out the basic fact of human existence. Merely by remaining alive, by breathing, man gives savour to life and creates an ambience of meaning, 'his nostrils blow out salt around each man'. There is no attempt to assert a belief in a meaning resident elsewhere in the vision of sea and sky. The heavens remain empty. But in the face of that emptiness the speaker insists upon the value of life.

Thus the poem expresses a considerable change in attitude from that which dominates the earlier poems of Harmonium. Here the 'indifferentism' to which Crispin had succumbed has been succeeded by a qualified affirmation which, in its essentials if not in intensity, is remarkably like that with which the later Camus would counter the absurd:

> I continue to believe that this world has no supernatural meaning. But I know that something in the world has meaning -- man -- because he is the only being who demands meaning for himself. This world at least contains the truth of man, and our task is to justify him in the face of destiny itself.[4]

In 1931 Stevens was not yet ready to take up that task as a social responsibility; these poems still present

a lone figure engaged in a purely individual search. 'Sailing after Lunch' (1935), the first poem in the private edition of Ideas of Order, though it too records a subjective experience, makes the major step necessary before an extension of the field of concern can take place.

Louis L. Martz called it a 'curiously fatigued poem' ending in a 'sentimental desire'[5] and he discusses it as a contrast to 'Farewell to Florida', the poem which supplanted 'Sailing after Lunch' as the first poem in the second (or trade) edition of Ideas of Order. Joseph Riddell reads it as 'the voice of Harmonium hesitantly raised against the forces of history'.[6] Both assessments fail to do justice to what is said and the artistry with which it is expressed. When read with attention to the nuances of rhythm, it reveals a muted dramatization of that which will be trumpeted in brass in 'Farewell to Florida'. Thus what is presented is not 'the voice of Harmonium' but a blueprint for an escape from the vertiginous experience that results from the philosophical attitude of the Harmonium period. A letter to Ronald Lane Latimer written shortly before his Alcestis Press published Ideas of Order contains Stevens's own summary of the essential portent of the poem:

> Perhaps it means more to me than it should . . . . the thing is an abridgement of at least

> a temporary theory of poetry. When people speak of the romantic, they do so in what the French commonly call a pejorative sense. But poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as romantic. Without this new romantic, one gets nowhere; with it, the most casual things take on transcendence, and the poet rushes brightly, and so on. What one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure: eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic (L, 277).

It remains for the reader to examine the poem for what, in more specific terms, it indicates about the new romantic attitude and how it differs from the original that is 'the heavy historical sail' preventing movement beyond the nauseating solipsism which has crippled the 'old boat', causing it to 'go round on a crutch'. In so doing, we would do well to recall that for Stevens 'The theory of poetry is the theory of life' (OP, 178).

The first four stanzas of the poem present the modern experience of fragmentation through the use of a series of short, halting statements and end-stopped lines markedly different from the flowing run-on lines which commence in the fifth stanza:

> It is the word pejorative that hurts.
> My old boat goes round on a crutch
> And doesn't get under way.
> It's the time of the year
> And the time of the day.

Perhaps it's the lunch that we had
Or the lunch that we should have had.
But I am, in any case,
A most inappropriate man
In a most unpropitious place.

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.
This heavy historical sail
Through the mustiest blue of the lake
In a really vertiginous boat
Is wholly the vapidest fake. . . . (CP, 120)

The effect which Stevens describes in these initial stanzas captures exactly what it feels like to have trouble getting a boat under sail. In a general sense it anticipates by several years the experience which dominates Sartre's La Nausée, but unlike Sartre who could visualize no honest means of escape from the fundamental absurdity of existence, Stevens, at this time, was determined to find within himself a force sufficient to overcome the sickening sense of futility. In the first stanza the failure to 'get under way' is attributed to 'the time of the year / And the time of the day'. In the second, further reasons are proposed, reasons which suggest, in a fastidious way, the nausea being experienced: 'Perhaps it's the lunch that we had / Or the lunch that we should

have had.' What is noteworthy about these suggestions is that all are external or physical circumstances. When man is seen primarily as a perceptive mechanism which reacts in response to concrete stimuli, all responsibility for what his life becomes rests upon circumstance. If he lives in a meaningless universe, his responses reflect the purposelessness of his environment. The immediate source of his discomfort is his consciousness which serves only to make him aware that he is an 'inappropriate man / In a most unpropitious place'. The poet, a man of especially acute sensibility, is particularly aware of his situation and thus urgently desirous of something to break the monotony of going round and round. That is what the romantic represents and that is why 'The romantic should be here' but must neither remain nor return. The difference between old and new romantic is, in part, that the old is trite and stale, sailing through 'the mustiest blue of the lake', but what is worse, it is an uninteresting, boring falsification.

The last two stanzas define the difference between the old and new more precisely although, if read outside of the context of the whole poem, they would seem to say nothing revolutionary:

It is least what one ever sees.
It is only the way one feels, to say
Where my spirit is I am,
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 and so to give
That slight transcendence to the dirty sail,
By light, the way one feels, sharp white,
And then rush brightly through the summer air.

When Stevens says, however, 'It is least what one ever sees,' he rejects all those reasons he proposed to himself at the outset. The romantic, the freshening of life, is not dependent upon a return to the Lake District or to Florida, nor is it to be denied by 'the malady of the quotidian'. The neo-romanticism that provides the 'slight transcendence to the dirty sail' finds its source within and uses the centre of the self as a fixed point in the midst of a world of undulations. Thus it is possible

. . . to say
Where my spirit is I am,
To say the light wind worries the sail,
To say the water is swift today,

thereby selecting from among the multitude of external factors, which include 'the time of the year / And the time of the day', those elements which serve his purpose. Then the poet is no longer knave and valet to reality and his fate is no longer a 'haphazard denouement'.

The decision 'To expunge all people and be a pupil / Of the gorgeous wheel' effects a rejection of the pejorative judgements made by others in order to make his own study of existence. The reference to the 'gorgeous wheel' may mean as well a decision to study the art of directing the course of his boat. However, Stevens is no Byronic hero pitting himself against enormous odds in the grand romantic gesture. All he hopes for is a 'slight transcendence' and 'By light, the way one feels, sharp white, / And then rush brightly through the summer air'. The combination of the assonance of 'slight', 'light', 'white' and 'brightly' with a repetition of 'l' sounds builds the sense of light forward movement until the last line virtually carries the verse away. The poem may be subdued or restrained but 'fatigued' it is not.

The central image in 'Farewell to Florida' (1936) is essentially the same as that in 'Sailing after Lunch' but just as a 'high ship' is an enlargement upon the 'boat' of the earlier poem, so Stevens's sense of resolution and commitment has grown in the year of social unrest that separates the dates of their composition. Both poems, in their concern for a departure from a stagnant situation in favour of dynamic, forward, progressive motion, echo a

passage from Bergson's The Two Sources of Morality and Religion which Stevens quotes in part in his essay, 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet'. There he likens the experience of the poet to the morality of aspiration which motivates the mystic, an aspiration that contains the feeling of progress and of liberation (NA, 49).

A consideration of the context of the Bergson passage quoted in that essay suggests why Stevens should announce his change in point of view as something sufficiently revolutionary to warrant the ringing tones of 'Farewell to Florida'. The reader cannot escape the sense that to Stevens the alteration is much more radical than the mere 'step from an individual to a social conscience' that Riddell assesses it to be.[7] Briefly stated Bergson's argument[8] is that man is motivated by two kinds of moral obligation, the social and the human, which proceed from demands that are diametrically opposed to each other. The first stems from the pressure toward self-preservation and is a natural obligation arising out of instinct which is reinforced by the social pressures of the immediate group whose survival is bound up in his own. In response to this need, says Bergson, 'The soul . . . moves round in a circle'. The second kind of

obligation encompasses the 'brotherhood of man' and 'is all love'. It can never, since its source of motivation is the emotions, be elicited by persuasion or rational argument, but manifests itself as aspirations aroused through the inspirational effect of charismatic individuals such as 'founders and reformers of religions, mystics and saints, obscure heroes of moral life' whose force of personality is such that they can lead men to an open-ness of soul which looks to an expansive joy rather than mere pleasure and well-being for satisfaction. In comparing the two, Bergson says,

> Immanent in the former is the representation of a society which aims only at self-preservation; the circular movement in which it carries round with it individuals, as it revolves on the same spot, is a vague imitation, through the medium of habit, of the immobility of instinct. The feeling which would characterize the consciousness of these pure obligations, assuming they were all fulfilled, would be a state of individual and social well-being similar to that which accompanies the normal working of life. It would resemble pleasure rather than joy. The morality of aspiration, on the contrary, implicitly contains the feeling of progress. The emotion of which we were speaking is the enthusiasm of a forward movement, enthusiasm by means of which this morality had won over a few and has then, through them, spread over the world.[9]

The experience common to the reformers, according to Bergson, is a feeling of liberation:

> Well-being, pleasures, riches, all those things that mean so much to the common run of men, leave them indifferent. In breaking away from them they feel relief, and then exhilaration.[10]

Seen within the framework of this theory we can better appreciate the tone with which the rejection of Florida is stated in the poem under consideration. Admittedly, there is no way of proving a direct connection between the Bergson theory and these particular poems but the emphasis on 'the way one feels' as a means of escape from the sickening circular movement in 'Sailing after Lunch' and the sense of liberation that accompanies the feeling of progress in that poem and in 'Farewell to Florida' seem remarkably like the essential features of Bergson's argument. The essay on 'The Figure of the Youth' was written in 1943 but the Bergson book was published in French in 1932, and translated into English in 1935, the year in which 'Sailing after Lunch' was written. We know, too, from the Letters that Stevens had at this time already established a connection with A. Vidal, the Paris bookseller from whom he obtained many of his books and paintings (L, 290).

The notion of the poet as arbiter of the collective consciousness is as ancient as poetry, of course, and

makes its appearance in several earlier poems, notably in 'An Academic Discourse at Havana'. What sets 'Farewell to Florida' apart is the emphasis given to the direction of movement which is from the individual to the humanitarian view and the assertion that this movement constitutes a sharp break with the past rather than being a matter of gradual development, a 'step' from one stage of consciousness to another. The first section of the poem is, indeed a series of repetitions of that assertion. We note, too that the repeated juxtaposition of old and new is accompanied by an emphasis on the distance that separates a lower from a higher attitude:

> Go on, high ship, since now, upon the shore,
> The snake has left its skin upon the floor.
> Key West sank downward under massive clouds
> And silvers and greens spread over the sea. The moon
> Is at the mast-head and the past is dead.
> Her mind will never speak to me again.
> I am free. High above the mast the moon
> Rides clear of her mind and the waves make a refrain
> Of this: that the snake has shed its skin upon
> The floor. Go on through the darkness. The waves
> fly back. (CP, 117)

The short, almost exclamatory 'I am free' breaks into the flow of the iambic pentameter thus conveying both the sense of rupture with the past and the sudden sense of release.

In the second section we are given a review of the feeling of confinement and sterility that a yielding to the seductive 'calling / For music, for whisperings from the reefs' can produce. Beauty and corruption combine 'in a sepulchral South' to create an uncertainty and debility of spirit which the poet feels happy to escape:

> Her mind had bound me round. The palms were hot
> As if I lived in ashen ground, as if
> The leaves in which the wind kept up its sound
> From my North of cold whistled in a sepulchral
> South,
> Her South of pine and coral and coraline sea,
> Her home, not mine, in the ever-freshened Keys,
> Her days, her oceanic nights, calling
> For music, for whisperings from the reefs.
> How content I shall be in the North to which I sail
> And to feel sure and to forget the bleaching
> sand . . .

The very sound of 'the weathery yawl' in the opening line of section III communicates the indecisiveness and vacillation that the poet has come to hate. The 'wilderness / Of waving weeds', too, provides an image of purposeless motion while the 'vivid blooms / Curled over the shadowless hut' assume a posture of absolute malevolence. In 'the rust and bones, / The trees like bones and leaves half sand, half sun', we reach the climax of revulsion and the next line takes us abruptly out of the brutal brilliance into a welcome

respite of 'the dark' from which to say, 'Farewell.' The disgust registered in the first five lines of this section is reminiscent of the mood of Harmonium's 'Banal Sojourn'. Here the decay that was seen as incipient in the earlier poem can look forward to no renewal for it is an integral and continuing part of the 'ever-freshened Keys' and thus the 'malady' is doubly oppressive.

The last section which looks ahead to a future committed to 'a slime of men in crowds' is remarkable for the singularly unattractive picture that it paints. Despite the rejection so firmly expressed in the previous section, the superiority in terms of sensuous appeal of 'vivid blooms' and pools of 'waving weeds' over the various physical aspects of the 'lifeless North' is undeniable. The region towards which he turns

> . . . lies in a wintry slime
> Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds.
> The men are moving as the water moves,
> This darkened water cloven by sullen swells
> Against your sides, then shoving and slithering,
> The darkness shattered, turbulent with foam.
> (CP, 118)

The alliterative spirants of 'slime', 'sullen swells', 'shoving', 'slithering', and 'shattered', create the onomatopoeic effect of waves breaking upon the prow and

link as well those images which give weight to the sense of foreboding with which the future is anticipated. Paradoxically, the release from the tyranny of self-indulgence and uncertainty arises from the submission to another form of subjugation, that of the individual to the collective need:

> To be free again, to return to the violent mind
> That is their mind, these men, and that will bind
> Me round, carry me, misty deck, carry me
> To the cold, go on, high ship, go on, plunge on.
> (CP, 118)

Certainly Yvor Winters either failed to read or chose to ignore 'Farewell to Florida' when in 1947 he labelled Stevens as an Epicurean whose 'hedonism is so fused with Romanticism as to be merely an elegant variation on that somewhat inelegant System of Thoughtlessness'.[11] Though a new romanticism is heralded here, it is hardly a matter of thoughtless indulgence. The change signalled by the first poems of Ideas of Order has its source in the new identity that Louis L. Martz has noted. Crispin has been 'made new' again, yet this does not mean a renunciation of the 'world of physical apprehension, where men created within the bounds of natural order'.[12] Stevens remains, as we shall see, a devotee of the 'ever-jubilant weather' (CP, 128) though its 'rouged fruits' now come

served in 'early snow'. But he recognizes the need for an additional dimension of experience 'within the bounds of the natural order'. What he has discovered is that it may be psychologically and socially necessary that the self not be forever 'as the letter C', changing according to the context and that it be not so much 'a place of undulations' responding to externals as 'The heraldic center of the world' (CP, 172).

A letter to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1935 explains Stevens's new 'way of thinking':

> In THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER C, Crispin was regarded as a "profitless philosopher". Life, for him, was not a straight course; it was picking his way in a haphazard manner through a mass of irrelevancies. Under such circumstances, life would mean nothing to him, however pleasant it might be. In THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST life has ceased to be a matter of chance. It may be that every man introduces his own order into the life about him and that the idea of order in general is simply what Bishop Berkeley might have called a fortuitous concourse of personal orders. But still there is order (L, 293).

The same passage includes a note of warning that predicts future developments: '. . . I never thought that it was a fixed philosophic proposition that life was mass of irrelevancies any more than I now think that it is a fixed philosophic proposition that every man introduces

his own order as part of a general order. These are tentative ideas for the purposes of poetry.' Nonetheless, from the firmness afforded by his new position, however tentative, he could announce in the jacket-note to Ideas of Order, 'I believe that, in my society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination of that society.'[13] Crispin could not have taken such a stand for he was so absorbed in the confusing, wonderful world of physical events that he hardly knew society existed.

Though there is a change in the range of vision in this second volume, there is endurance as well and one of the continuing themes is the antagonism to fixity or rigidity. In 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz' (1935) the complaint against the waltz, which in the regularity of its accented measure typifies a perfect order, is that it 'is so much motionless sound'. Like the boat in 'Sailing after Lunch' it goes round and round and doesn't get under way, never moves forward; therefore, 'we can mourn no more' that it has ended. In its gaiety 'It is no longer a mode of desire' for it is expressive of desires achieved and 'empty of the shadows' of those as yet unfulfilled which, were they embodied in its form, would impel it towards another state, would demand a linear, forward movement. The contrast between the

image called forth by the waltz, that of a large assemblage of elegantly dressed couples whirling in graceful rhythm across the polished floor of a chandeliered ballroom, and that of the 'sudden mobs of men' and 'these sudden clouds of faces and arms' suggests why, despite a recognition of the waltz's inadequacies, the poet can say, 'Too many waltzes have ended.' The collapse of the various aspects of social order for which the gay waltz is a synecdoche has freed men but leaves them in a state of utter confusion.

One such form of organization which has ended is that of Hoon, dweller in 'the loneliest air . . . the expanse of sky and space' (L, 871) for whom undoubtedly, as for the young Stevens, 'most people are a great nuisance' (L, 107). In that he is 'mountain-minded' he is fellow to the couple whom we see scaling the heights towards a noble aspiration in 'How to Live What to Do'. The 'blissful liaison' between himself and his environment formulated in terms of 'sea and sun' and the individual percipient can no longer withstand the pressure of social ills brought to a climax in the era of economic depression during which this poem was written.

Unlike many poets of the thirties, Stevens saw no ideology offered during this time as an adequate alternative to the decadent waltzes of earlier prescriptions. To him the 'voices crying without knowing for what / Except to be happy' are 'Requiring an order beyond their speech'. The 'shapes / For which the voices cry', the specific demands that are being made, do not yet combine to form a coherent program for improvement. Although the last stanzas prophesy that the situation will worsen, they offer Stevens's own hope for relief:

> Too many waltzes - The epic of disbelief
> Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant.
> Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music
>
> Will unite these figures of men and their shapes
> Will glisten again with motion, the music
> Will be motion and full of shadows. (CP, 122)

The new formulation will be 'skeptical music', neither returning to old beliefs nor positing another promise of perfection. It will not be another Utopian dream resulting in a superficial gaiety like that of the waltz but 'Will be motion and full of shadows', expressive of what, in an imperfect world, must be a striving towards ever-receding visions of the ideal.

'Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu' (1935) demonstrates,

too, that Stevens's taste for contradiction and paradox remained unimpaired for it illustrates a situation in which complete stillness, a cessation of striving, becomes the equivalent of motion. Here a reversal of everyday habits of syntax, which is part of the Stevens idiom, requires that we proceed to the last line of each of the first two stanzas in order to discover what constitutes the farewell that 'would be waving and that would be crying'.

> That would be waving and that would be crying,
> Crying and shouting and meaning farewell,
> Farewell in the eyes and farewell at the centre,
> Just to stand still without moving a hand.
>
> In a world without heaven to follow, the stops
> Would be endings, more poignant than partings,
>   profounder,
> And that would be saying farewell, repeating fare-
>   well,
> Just to be there and just to behold. (CP, 127)

We find that 'Just to stand still without moving a hand' and 'Just to be there and just to behold', two descriptions of a completely passive perceptive state toward which body contributes no motion and mind contributes no idea or image, would be a farewell. Such a state would be a departure from the customary and the habitual and the first lines of the second stanza provide an example of the habits of thought that would be departed

from. To view death without the intervention of the accumulation of religious myths would in fact constitute an act of leave-taking. The last stanza, in suggesting that the deliberate effort to achieve such an attitude is in contrast to or even in opposition to practicing 'for heaven', confirms an anti-mythological intention in the poem.

The complete psychic iconoclasm required to achieve the moment of immediate experience would mean as well a farewell to all previous interpretations of the human being leaving only 'one's singular self'. It would mean 'to despise / The being that yielded so little, acquired / So little', that self too constrained and circumscribed by convention and the accretion of intellectualizations to permit a joyful response to 'the ever-jubilant weather', that ambience of change which is the world of nature.

The new freedom is not without cost, however, for while it thus becomes possible to enjoy the immediate, the sensual and the transitory, it also makes it necessary 'to sip / One's cup and never say a word', to accept the contingency of existence without positing any formulas of evasion. Living in the shadow of constantly approaching death means that, as Frank Doggett

has observed, '. . . merely standing still or sleeping without movement -- is a fateful act . . . in a world where each moment is final.'[14] Paradoxically, it is while standing in this shadow saying all the possible farewells that the moment of pure being is experienced, a moment which, while it is a 'crying and a shouting', is also 'ever-jubilant'. Moreover, it is all that remains for modern man who poses what has become a purely rhetorical question:

> What is there but weather, what spirit
> Have I except it comes from the sun?

The unusual rhythm of the poem, particularly apparent in the first, regular, stanza, deserves comment for it is unusual in Stevens and relatively unusual in poetry in general. What it represents is a subtle form of mockery for it is a rhythm like that of the religious hymn in a three-beat measure. Obviously, the spirit of 'The Comedian' survives even in the North.

The Letters tell us (L, 295) that Stevens considered 'How to Live. What to Do' (1935) to be a companion piece to 'A Fading of the Sun' (1933):

Last evening the moon rose above this rock
Impure upon a world unpurged.
The man and his companion stopped
To rest before the heroic height.

Coldly the wind fell upon them
In many majesties of sound:
They that had left the flame-freaked sun
To seek a sun of fuller fire.

Instead there was this tufted rock
Massively rising high and bare
Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown
Like giant arms among the clouds.

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

There was the cold wind and the sound
It made, away from the muck of the land
That they had left, heroic sound
Joyous and jubilant and sure. (CP, 125)

It could just as well be seen as a fitting companion to several other poems of Ideas of Order. The central question to which it is addressed is the challenge of living without either the hindrances or the satisfactions afforded by traditional beliefs, 'the sovereign images' of the past. Like the man in 'Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu' the couple in this poem inhabit a 'world without heaven to follow' for the rock they face is 'high and bare' (CP, 125) with neither 'voice nor crested image, / nor chorister nor priest', completely devoid of the hieratic.

Though the rock is securely a part of this world in being 'Impure upon a world unpurged', in that it appears by the light of the moon, the imagination, it represents the massive mental and spiritual challenge faced by those that have 'left the flame-freaked sun / To seek a sun of fuller fire'. The rock cannot, perhaps be defined in precise terms but it seems to represent as well the immense potential of collective humanity, demonstrably flawed yet soaring to 'heroic height' as yet unrealized. Daniel Fuchs says of these lines, '"The man and his companion" leave the world of experience, the world of the flame-freaked sun, for the more intense atmosphere of imagination, or the moon, "a sun of fuller fire"'.[15] To me the idea central to the phrase within the context of the poem would appear to be a quality of lesser intensity in comparison with the more intense 'sun of fuller fire' that is sought. If we take the sun to be an image of reality as is customary in Stevens's poetry, the comparison would be between a world of less intense reality, such as one in which direct experience is inhibited by the strictures of custom and religion, and one in which no such inhibitions exist.

The coldness of the wind suggests the rigorous

nature of an assault upon the heroic heights when it is undertaken without the comforting assurance of clearly defined ideology. Yet the wind, symbolic of the unformulated and essentially formless free realm of the spirit, acts not as part of that against which they contend, but falls down upon them as would a blessing. The sound of the wind is mentioned again in the last stanza and its repetition there suggests that it is of considerable importance to the poem. Sound, indeed, in all of Ideas of Order is a frequently recurring symbol which, when it appears as music, represents the creation of harmony out of chaos. It is an ordering of reality such as is accomplished by the song of the girl who walks along the seashore in 'The Idea of Order at Key West'. In the poem under consideration it is not yet music but the creative principle that precedes an ordering. It is that which is potentially 'many majesties'.

Another passage from Bergson offers interesting similarities in ideas and imagery. Bergson argues that feeling, not intellectual argument, moves men to moral action (see pp. 137-9 above). Art in general but music in particular has the power to arouse those feelings. Furthermore, the artist establishes associations between

certain emotions and particular objects which henceforth serve to rouse those emotions in all who encounter the objects so linked. What is particularly interesting in relation to the poem under discussion is that Bergson uses Rousseau and the connection he established between a new emotion and mountains as an example in his argument,[16] but the whole chapter expresses ideas very similar to the central themes of Ideas of Order.

As an illustration of how to live and what to do, the poem suggests that though men have left 'the muck of the land', though they have left the primal mud by means of the evolutionary process, the present is but a resting place from which to launch further advances, Man is eternally in a state of potentiality and this is his new 'heroic sound / Joyous, jubilant and sure'.

Significant in relation to the development of Stevens's world-view is the stress, in the poem, upon the active striving towards a higher goal and the fact that, unlike the landscapes of Harmonium, in this the human figure is no longer completely solitary. In 'A Fading of the Sun' his concern about the general need for a tenable system of value and a legitimate source for such an order is emphasized:

Who can think of the sun costuming clouds
When all people are shaken
Or of night endazzled, proud,
When people awaken
And cry and cry for help?

The warm antiquity of self,
Everyone, grows suddenly cold.
The tea is bad, bread sad.
How can the world so old be so mad
That the people die?

If joy shall be without a book
It lies, themselves within themselves,
If they will look
Within themselves
And cry and cry for help?

Within as pillars of the sun,
Supports of night. The tea,
The wine is good. The bread,
The meat is sweet.
And they will not die. (CP, 139)

A Stevens's letter to Ronald Lane Latimer provides the only comment necessary:

> It is an old story that we derive our ideas of nobility, say, from noble objects of nature. But then, it is an equally old story that we derive them from ourselves. For convenience, and in view of the simplicity of the large mass of people, we give our good qualities to God, or to various gods, but they come from ourselves. In A FADING OF THE SUN the point is that, instead of crying for help to God or to one of the gods, we should look to ourselves for help. The exaltation of human nature should take the place of its abasement (L, 295).

The poem that deals with the 'old story' of

deriving ideas of nobility from noble objects in nature is 'Some Friends From Pascagoula' (1935) (although the same comment could be applied to 'How to Live. What to Do'). The speaker, two residents of Mississippi, and the story of an eagle with dazzling wings are the main elements of this poem:

> 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)

The story has obviously been told before since the speaker who requests it can enumerate the details he wishes to hear. Moreover, he knows how he wants it to be told: 'with deepened voice / And noble imagery'

befitting a tale about a bird which is virtually an archetypal symbol for nobility of spirit, for power and which, undoubtedly for this reason, was chosen as the American emblem. The fact that 'Cotton' and 'black Sly' hail from Pascagoula and that their story tells of an eagle 'descending / Down to the sand, the glare / Of the pine trees' reminiscent of the 'Appalachian tangs' in 'Bantams in Pine Woods' reinforces the notion that the poet is concerned with an American problem rather than a purely individual matter.

Essentially, what is being requested is a revitalization of the image that once gave body to the ideals and aspirations of the nation, that 'was a sovereign sight / Fit for a kinky clan'. The word 'sovereign' implies that the emblem not only expressed but controlled or ruled over the ideals of the people who chose it. Ellipsis has probably converted the 'kinky-haired clan' to a 'kinky clan' and the adjective refers to a Negroid characteristic. The figure of the negro, or 'nigger', in Stevens's poems, however, seldom is used in the literal sense but, like most of his recurring images, represents an abstraction. The dark skin colour connotes an unenlightened, primitive or sometimes a

subconscious state of mind or being. Thus the 'sovereign sight' was fit for the nation in its earlier, primitive state of development. That the poet should feel the need for a rehearsal of the majestic and powerful flight, 'the fiery lair' that was 'the point at which the flight began', and repeatedly for the 'heavy', 'dazzling' wings, implies that the nobility it represents stands in danger of being forgotten. Equally significant is that in order to regain the freshness of the image the speaker turns to two individuals whose names and colour suggest the primitive, the simple and an instinctive rather than an intellectualized view of the world. Typically, it is a view that we associate with the poet and with artists in general. While in most of the poems under discussion in this chapter the role of the artist in providing the images around which the aspirations of his people may coalesce has been more or less implicit, the idea is here given a clear, definite expression.

The sense of imminent disaster that brooded over the decade of the Great Depression during which 'A Postcard from the Volcano' (1936) was written is captured vividly in its title but the point made in the poem has relevance to the relationship of the artist to his culture

in any age. The poem, one of the finest of this volume, concerns itself with two aspects of contemporary culture and Stevens is severely critical of both. His initial complaint is against the inadequacy of the image that future generations will derive from the artifacts of his time:

> Children picking up our bones
> Will never know that these were once
> As quick as foxes on the hill;
>
> And that in autumn, when the grapes
> Made sharp air sharper by their smell
> These had a being, breathing frost;
>
> And least will guess that with our bones
> We left much more, left what still is
> The look of things, left what we felt
>
> At what we saw. . . . (CP, 158-9)

The image being presented lacks any suggestion of action, vigour or vitality. What is worse, that image will communicate nothing which is expressive of the emotional responses being made to 'the look of things', the general contour of reality that does not change in time and will still be 'the look of things' in time to come.

The present, Stevens admits, is melancholy enough. But those who define it in its gloomy aspects alone are also those who must take responsibility for what it has become:

The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky

Cries out a literate despair.
We knew for long the mansion's look
And what we said of it became

A part of what it is . . .

Though children of the future find no trace of any positive quality of spirit in the 'speech', the literature, they inherit, they will be quite conscious of a lack, and will be aware that an energy has been stifled. The mansion, the future that is their heritage, will be left exuding a sense of frustration; to its inhabitants it will seem 'As if he that lived there left behind / A spirit storming in blank walls'. Moreover, they will have to contend with the ruin that is left when a generation or an age finds no voice, no form in which to assert or realize its aspirations. Stevens laments the fact that what is being handed on will seem to be 'A dirty house in a gutted world, / A tatter of shadows peaked to white', which reveals only a trace of what might have been in being 'Smeared with the gold of the opulent sun'.

Although the capacity for hope and lofty aspiration may fail to find adequate definition or expression,

the desire for relief from present distress remains urgent. Indeed, it assumes a new intensity in a time when old beliefs have lost their substance and only the vestiges remain. 'Ghosts as Cocoons' (1936), a poem in which the imagery is more than usually provocative of a broad range of associations, expresses both the sense of dissatisfaction with the present and the profound craving for a new millenium:

> The grass is in seed. The young birds are flying.
> Yet the house is not built, not even begun.
>
> The vetch has turned purple. But where is the bride?
> It is easy to say to those bidden -- But where,
>
> Where, butcher, seducer, bloodman, reveller,
> Where is sun and music and highest heaven's lust,
>
> For which more than any words cries deeplier?
> This mangled, smutted semi-world hacked out
>
> Of dirt . . . It is not possible for the moon
> To blot this with its dove-winged blendings.
>
> She must come now. The grass is in seed and high.
> Come now. Those to be born have need
>
> Of the bride, love being a birth, have need to see
> And to touch her, have need to say to her,
>
> "The fly on the rose prevents us, O season
> Excelling summer, ghost of fragrance falling
>
> On dung." Come now, pearled and pasted, bloomy-
> leafed,
> While the domes resound with chant involving chant.
> (_CP_, 119)

The first three lines express a warning vaguely reminiscent of John 4:35 :

> Say not ye, there are yet four months,
> And <u>then</u> cometh harvest? Behold, I
> Say unto you, Lift up your eyes,
> And look on the fields, for they are white
> Already to the harvest.

Stevens is speaking, of course, in secular terms. Indeed, he rejects the suggestion that religion can offer relief in the present situation: 'It is not possible for the moon / To blot this with its dove-winged blendings.' No imaginative falsifications or evasions can obscure the grim aspects of this 'semi-world'. It is not a complete world in that it is all bad. It requires a 'bride' of pleasurable aspects to bring it to completion and she, in the penultimate stanza, is a 'ghost of fragrance', a vision of beauty now lost. The Biblical echoes already noted and the translation in the sixth line of the bride into 'sun and music and highest heaven's lust' serves to indicate that among the 'Ghosts' of the title are the dead hopes and expectations of a paradise after death which were once offered as compensation for sufferings on earth. The death of religion is a cocoon because out of it has come a demand for happiness in the world of the

present. Thus, 'She must come now.'

Stevens's warning goes to those responsible for the fact that 'the house is not built, not even begun'. They are 'those bidden' to the wedding feast and to pose the question is easy. The answer by implication is not. A letter written to Hi Simons tells us that 'The butcher, seducer, etc., is literally the inept politician, and that sort of thing and again, not so literally, evil and unhappiness. "Those to be born": "the grass is in seed": the people of the future who need to know something of the happiness of life' (L, 347).

The call, however, is not really a demand for a new Utopia. Even if the bride were to appear to those who 'have need to see / And to touch her', they, in their communication with the good, would still acknowledge the existence of inescapable limitations and imperfections:

> The fly on the rose prevents us, O season
> Excelling summer, ghost of fragrance falling
>
> On dung.

The cry is admittedly a demand or desire for some artfully conceived, fruitful construct for she is a 'pearled and pasted, bloomy-leafed' vision, not a being springing

full-bodied from some natural or supernatural source.

Despite his conviction of a general need for the deliberate intervention of the imagination into the chaos of social as well as perceptual reality, Stevens retains this awareness of the distance between the mind's order and that of the natural world. Even that captivating, well-known poem, 'The Idea of Order at Key West' (1934) in which the 'maker's rage to order words of the sea' (CP, 128) is called 'Blessed', his reservations reveal themselves. (Frank Lentricchia goes so far as to say the poem is 'painfully ambivalent'.[17]) The woman's song, though it has a powerful impact on the way in which the speaker and 'pale Ramon' see the world, never unites with the reality of the 'veritable ocean' to form a 'medleyed sound'. She remains 'the single artificer of the world / In which she sang' for there is no interpenetration of the imagination and reality. Though she sings 'Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred, / And of ourselves and of our origins', her words are 'ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds' than those of actuality.

The much less widely-known poem, 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery' (1935) seems on first reading to be one which, in opposition to the principle of order, gives itself over completely to chaos. Critics who have commented on 'Decorations' generally agree that the salient characteristic of the poem is its thorough-going discontinuity. Enck finds in it 'an extreme relaxing of structure', a poem 'rather terrifyingly free', made up of 'dissociated images in autumn'. He considers the poem as evidence that at this period in Stevens's career 'the structure of individual poems caused him increasing trouble'.[18] Wells says it has 'little continuity, being for the most part merely a gathering of unrelated epigrams'.[19] In a more recent analysis, one which is probably the most detailed reading that has been given the poem thus far, Helen Henessy Vendler agrees with the consensus and elaborates:

> The title is an ellipsis: it should be read (My Poems Are) Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery. A flagrant simile for a wilderness of poems, fifty of them, an experiment in poetry as epigram, or poetry as fossil bones. . . . Though the poetry of disconnection is Stevens' most adequate form, and the gaps from 'stanza' to 'stanza' in the long poems will always challenge the best efforts of critical articulation, still the discontinuity will never again be so flagrant as in this example. . . . Whether Decorations is any more than fifty

> short pieces pretending to be one poem is debatable, but if we believe in Stevens' good faith we must assume he thought it a viable whole.

She considers the discontinuity to be so radical and pervasive that only a common subject-matter provides whatever unity the poem possesses:

> . . . the unity is radial, not linear. Stevens' true subject in Decorations becomes the complexity of mental response, the intimations, in these fifty stanzas, of almost all possible responses to the decay that is its topic. If this is a poetry of meditation, it does not have the sustained progressive development we know in other meditative poets: it is the staccato meditation, of intimation and dismissal, of fits and starts, revulsions and shrugs, lightenings and sloughs, the play of the mind and sensibility over a topic.[20]

While I would agree that the general impression of the poem accords with these views, there is, I believe, a much greater degree of coherence present than critics have perceived. What is more, although as Enck has said, the poem 'does not appear to have any notable ideas of order buried beneath it',[21] the poem proceeds by indirection towards a formulation that is quite in harmony with the dominant theme of the whole volume within which it appears. It can be seen as a meditation in the spirit of Cartesian doubt, a meditation which, while it develops by means radically different from those of Descartes,

strives to find an unassailable 'cogito' upon which a 'wise man' may begin 'building his city in snow'.

Like 'Domination of Black' which it resembles in its focus, the poem's first stanza pulsates with a colour that bespeaks the life-giving principle of regeneration which continues amid the contrasting appearances of 'death and day' that constitute the polar extremes of a diverse reality. The reference to Walt Whitman combined with the imagery in this stanza and of the two which follow, suggest strongly that Whitman's 'Song and Sunset' provided the impulse which launched 'Decorations'. Sections one and two, two stanzas of section three, and the last section of that poem are particularly interesting in the comparison of imagery and the contrast of mood they provide in relation to the Stevens poem. I quote them here for convenience:

SONG AT SUNSET

1

Splendour of ended day, floating and filling me!
Hour prophetic -- hour resuming the past!
Inflating my throat -- you, divine Average!
You, Earth and Life, till the last ray gleams, I sing.

2

Open mouth of my soul, uttering gladness,
Eyes of my soul, seeing perfection,
Natural life of me, faithfully praising things;
Corroborating forever the triumph of things.

3

. . .
Good in all,
In the satisfaction and aplomb of animals,
In the annual return of the seasons,
In the hilarity of youth,
In the strength and flush of manhood,
In the grandeur and exquisiteness of old age,
In the superb vistas of Death.

. . .

Wonderful how I celebrate you and myself!
How my thoughts play subtly at the spectacles around!
How the clouds pass silently overhead!
How the earth darts on and on! and how the sun, moon,
stars, dart on and on!
How the water sports and sings! (surely it is alive!)
How the trees rise and stand up -- with strong trunks --
with branches and leaves!
Surely there is something more in each of the trees --
some living soul.

. . .

I sing the Equalities;
I sing the endless finales of things;
I say Nature continues -- Glory continues:
I praise with electric voice:
For I do not see one imperfection in the universe;
And I do not see one cause or result lamentable at
last in the universe.

O setting sun ! though the time has come,
I still warble under you unmitigated adoration.[22]

The essential concern of Stevens's meditation apparently stems from his inability to respond in like fashion to a world that, while it still provides the light of sunset, seems increasingly to assume the proportions of a 'Nigger Cemetery'. The first line of the second section with its shift to the falling metre of

modulated dactyllics is an exhalation of weariness, regret and dejection that both expresses and stems from an inability to echo Whitman's second stanza of praise:

> Sigh for me, night wind, in the noisy leaves of the oak.
> I am tired. Sleep for me, heaven over the hill.
> Shout for me, loudly and loudly, joyful sun,
>   when you rise. (CP, 150)

The sense of inanition is so complete that it exceeds his own capacity for expression. Whitman's optimism which focused on trees with 'branches of leaves' has been succeeded by a state of benumbed passivity that finds its source in the realities of this later, starker season:

> 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)

Unlike Whitman who 'does not see one imperfection in the universe', Stevens perceives imperfection, disorder, and deviation from order as, paradoxically, the only pattern to be discerned within the universe. At other times he has been able to view the world of continual change with equanimity but for the moment he has, apparently, lost sight of 'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating'. Of that poem, first published a year before 'Decorations', Stevens

has said, 'The spectacle of order is so vast that it resembles disorder; it resembles the fortuitous. Swedish babies are as likely as not to have been something else. But for all the apparent fortuitousness of things, they hold together' (L, 348). Obviously, in 'Decorations' that article of faith does not sustain him.

As the change from the impersonal 'one' of Section II to the personal 'my' in the next section indicates, the speaker moves from a generalized concern to a more specific and more personal reason for his dejection: 'Under the mat of frost and over the mat of clouds / But in between lies the sphere of my fortune'.

He recognizes his fate to be that of a 'middling beast' existing in a sphere between earth and sky, body and spirit, prevented from soaring or sinking beyond the limits of a finite existence, bound on both sides by Nothingness. Thus, 'the fortunes of frost and clouds' are 'all alike', death of the body means death of the spirit, 'except for the rules of the rabbis'. The mocking yet envious tone of the last line suggests the distance between Stevens's own position and that of the 'Happy men, distinguishing frost and clouds'.

While Stevens rejects the distinctions that permit the 'tranquil beliefs' of such 'happy men' he goes on in

Section V to consider the role that the continuing search for such a belief plays in the nature of things. The argument is not clearly defined but the suggestion seems to be that if man were to cease in his search for ultimate meaning the dialectical process of history which has resulted in the present unsatisfactory state might be halted and the future would no longer need to bear the consequences of an unfortunate past. The suggestion reveals its inherent contradictions even as it is stated, for the 'future' is a purely imaginary concept that does not exist in clock-time, a time which can show only the present. As it is differentiated from the present in the realm of human conceptions, the future is that nebulous far-off time toward which we are ever striving and which recedes with every advance we make towards it. The existence of the conception is, actually, psychological evidence of man's innate capacity for hope. Thus 'the search / And the future emerging out of us seem to be one'; they are both ideational entities and because their general orientation is similar they seem inseparable.

The abrupt brevity and ellipsis of the next section renders linguistically the violence to habitual associations that would occur were we to separate certain

specifics of our 'search for a tranquil belief' and that aspect of the future which is the common denominator of all:

> We should die except for Death
> In his chalk and violet robes,
> Not to die a parish death.

A letter to Hi Simons provides us with Stevens's own interpretation of these lines:

> VI consists of the statement of two unrelated ideas: the first is that we do not die simply; we are attended by a figure. It might be easier for us to turn away from that figure. The second is that we should not die like a poor parishioner; a man should meet death for what it is (L, 349).

The ideas are 'unrelated' in the sense that the second does not necessarily follow from the first; they are statements of contrast, the first speaking of death as it is experienced and the second of death as it might be experienced. Man has clothed the concept of death, which is really a pure abstraction, in an anthropomorphic image through a process like that which we saw unfolding in 'Heavenly Vincentine'. Having done so he has altered his response to the event itself. The last line proposes the opposite experience. To die simply would be 'not to die a parish death' because to do so

would obviate the possibility of approaching death with a craven plea for charity. Or, to consider it in another light, the absence of any figure would eliminate the idea of Death's visitation as an act of mercy, charitably bestowed. It would simply be.

There is, apparently, no bridge of thought between the sixth section and the seventh. We can perceive however, that what mediates between them is an emotion, the feeling of release, of relaxation that is induced by imagining the experience of an uncomplicated simple death:

> How easily the feelings flow this afternoon
> Over the simplest words. (CP, 151)

And the words over which they flow represent in metaphor the intimation that, for the poet, life is drawing near its close; the time for meditation is replacing the time of action.

Again the transition from the seventh to the eighth 'stanza' seems to be completely missing. However, one can read a progression in this way:

It is too cold for work, now, in the fields, and as we withdraw from activity in favour of contemplation we are adopting an attitude that is common to all men of religious faith. Therefore, 'Out of the spirit of the

holy temples, / Empty and grandiose, let us make hymns'. The collapse of the old religions which leaves temples empty of worshippers is associated with their grandiosity, a quality expressive of the attempt to impress, an attempt to influence and attract a following. Stevens would supplant the organized public formal religion with individual and private meditation.

The advantage of such meditation, indeed, the necessity of it in a 'world of universal poverty', one characterized by a dearth of mental and spiritual resources, is the subject of Section IX. The condition of spiritual poverty that Stevens sees as imminent is by its own nature one of stagnation and thus the autumn 'will be perpetual'. Although the setting of this poem is the geographical opposite of 'the ever-freshened Keys' that he abjures in 'Farewell to Florida', the moral situation it represents is the same.

From a concern about such a state of death-in-life the mind moves to the thought of actual physical death conceived now, not as a figure but as that which occurs in a sudden fleeting moment 'between farewell and the absence of farewell', that which is both the 'final mercy and the final loss', an expiration that is like

'the wind and the sudden falling of the wind'. The section is, significantly, incomplete grammatically, a sentence fragment, a conditional clause.

The letter to Hi Simons already quoted says of Section XI, 'These lines concern the ubiquitous "will" of things', but it is highly doubtful that Stevens is suggesting the existence of a pantheistic energizing force when he speaks of that which causes a cloud to rise 'upward like a heavy stone' and brings about the changes in colour that occur with the passing of daylight. By using the images associated with the Aristotelian argument against atomic theory, an argument long since refuted, Stevens achieves an intense compression of quite different ideas. The fact that Aristotle was incorrect in his rejection of Democritus' theory places in question as well the notions about 'final causes' in nature that lay behind that rejection. The 'ubiquitous "will" of things' that reveals itself in the inexorable processes of nature does not serve as evidence of any meaning or purpose behind those processes. Too, the equating of 'heaviness', a so-called 'primary' quality, with the 'secondary' quality of colour reminds us of the Berkeleyan argument about reality. The juxtaposition of this complex of associations with the fragmentary utterance about death in the previous section

underlines the completely naturalistic and existentialistic world-view that was implied in the structure of that stanza.

In Section XII the 'ubiquitous "will" of things' again assumes an anthropomorphic image, that of 'Ananke' who when he appeared in 'Owl's Clover' (1936) was described as 'fatal' and 'fateful' (OP, 59). The 'sense of the serpent', the notion of evil associated with an inescapable fate, and the awareness that life is but an interim permitted by 'your averted stride' can 'add nothing to the horror of the frost / That glistens on your face and hair'. The appearance of the figure that the mind has created is of itself the cause of man's fear of death, a fear which exists independently of any logical reason which might give rise to it or of the realization that death is an imminent and ever-present contingency.

From musing upon the operations of his own mind and its dark reaction to its own figurations, the speaker's attention turns in XIII to the pleasant serenity of the scene which surrounds him. In sharp contrast to his gloomy concerns, the yellow birds 'singing in the patios' are undisturbed by any thoughts such as those that trouble him. They are 'pecking at more lascivious rinds than

ours' and the comparison gives evidence that it is the contrast between his own mood and that of the birds that claims his attention. They are destroying a form of life far more lusty and vigorous than our own with no sense of malevolence whatever, acting out of 'sheer Gemütlichkeit', sheer good-natured geniality. Thus death in the world of plants and animals bears no stigma of evil, is accompanied by no figure such as that of Ananke. By implication then, if we could see ourselves as natural beings, death in the human sphere might just as well be interpreted as a good-natured occurrence.

The contrast provokes a further examination into the reasons for seeing death in relation to ourselves as an evil, an abomination. Clearly, human consciousness determines the difference in attitude. Section XIV exemplifies an act of the mind that may be analogous to that which we exhibit when we imagine what death will be like. Do we imagine that when we are as dead as a leaden pigeon we will, in that state beyond consciousness, miss its opposite, the state of mortal existence? The reader here is asked to observe the imaginative process as it operates in the speaker, projecting emotional experiences drawn from life into the world of inanimate objects:

The leaden pigeon on the entrance gate
Must miss the symmetry of a leaden mate,
Must see her fans of silver undulate. (CP, 152)

At another remove, the act of imagining the state of death as involving any feeling whatever is as fanciful as the projected transmutation of the leaden wings of a non-existent mate into 'fans of silver' that 'undulate'.

Since, therefore, we should not expect to experience either pain or pleasure in our future state we should turn to what actually remains in the autumn of life: 'Serve the rouged fruits in early snow.' By contrasting their brightness with the winter state of which approaching old age is the harbinger, the 'rouged fruits' that are the harvest to be gathered from an earlier season of work in the fields, will appear even more brilliant. Thus:

They resemble a page of Toulet
Read in the ruins of a new society
Furtively, by candle and out of need. (CP, 153)

We would not need the consciousness of approaching death to heighten the pleasures of life

If thinking could be blown away
Yet this remain the dwelling place
Of those with a sense for simple space.

But Stevens speaks as an inhabitant of the West where thought and rationality hold sway. Here the 'sun of Asia' that rises each morning with a life-giving potential equal to the strength, vigour and courage of the tiger becomes 'lamed by nothingness and frost' in the 'haggard and tenous air' that our emphasis on the intellect has created. The letter to Hi Simons says in reference to this section: 'When I first came to Hartford, I was much taken by the castiron animals on the lawns' (L, 349). In a later section these animals again appear as indicators of certain characteristics of the American world-view. Here the lamed tiger clearly refers to the life-denying effect of excessive rationality for the description of the atmosphere which immobilizes as a 'haggard' air accords with other references in the poetry where unimaginative reason is associated with gauntness. As we are aware from the first 'stanzas' of the poem, Stevens shares in the feeling of 'nothingness' and we know too what particular habits of thought have been contributors to his personal sense of dejection.

Section XVII raises the question of how to cope with the causes of his despondency. The stanza can be interpreted as an outburst against an indifferent public whose attitude would destroy the speaker as artist.

According to such a reading the last line is a recognition that his hope of combatting such an attitude is futile for such a public would avoid reading the arguments he might voice in poetry. That interpretation has a certain validity. When the section is read within the total context of this unusual 'Dejection Ode', however, the lines can be interpreted in more general terms as well. The Hi Simons letter says in answer to a question about these lines, 'I am afraid that I did not focus any more closely than "my destroyers": everything inimical' (L, 349), and we have already noted that Stevens's own consciousness has revealed itself to be as much an enemy as are any objective forces such as the implacable processes of nature that impress themselves upon his mind in this autumnal season. To 'grapple' with such 'destroyers / In the muscular poses of the museums' suggests the adoption of the defiant stance that finds its epitome in a shout of 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.' Such an attitude is, however, a relic of the past, a museum piece that testifies to a whole complex of ideas about man and the fates which oppose him, a whole tradition of ideas that Stevens's mind can no longer accept.

The adoption of the heroic stance would, therefore, be as false and theatrical for Stevens as is the dramatic expression of joy presented to us in the next section:

> An opening of portals when night ends,
> A running forward, arms stretched out as drilled.
> Act I, Scene I, at a German Stats-Oper. (CP, 153)

The scathing tones of the third line are an unmistakable rejection of all such posturing whether it be adopted when confronted with the hostile forces of nature or whether it is assumed in response to nature's beneficence.

Nor is the source of human renewal to be found at any time in the world of nature. This we are told in the first line of Section XX. The world as it appears in and of itself is a 'meaningless, natural effigy'. In this Stevens obviously agrees with Coleridge's observation that 'in our life alone does Nature live'. What is needed at this juncture then, is not to be found in the mind alone, nor in nature alone. Instead, 'the revealing aberration should appear', a product of the imagination which is an imitation of the natural object so created that it emphasizes a particularly significant aspect of reality, just as 'the agate in the eye, the tufted ear / The rabbit fat, at last, in glassy grass'

is an imitation quite unnatural. As the brief interjection of the last line implies, the rabbit in natural grass would not be fat but would still be engaged in a never-ending struggle with hunger. Only in the artist's construction does he reach that state of fatness toward which his whole life effort is directed. It is the 'aberration' that draws forth the meaning from what in nature must remain meaningless.

The lines of XXI are imbued with a mood of vague nostalgia for some past emotional experience, an experience that can no more be clearly identified than can the haunting memory of one who, even at some earlier time

> . . . was a shadow as thin in memory
> As an autumn ancient underneath the snow
> Which one recalls at a concert or in a café.
> (CP, 154)

Whether 'she' represents an achievement of meaning now long buried in the past or whether she is a lost imaginative capacity for creating the 'revealing aberration' is not clear but the positioning of this section between an explicit expression of desire for the appearance of a work of art and the reference to theatrical or dramatic genre in the next section suggests that the memory refers to some form of artistic experience rather than

to a lost personal relationship.

'The comedy of hollow sounds', that sense of the meaninglessness and triviality of life that lies at the root of the poet's <u>malaise</u>, 'derives / From truth', from the undistorted actuality of life and 'not from satire', not from the artist's deliberately contrived comedy. Satire depends for its force upon the artist's selection of facts to support his particular point of view and a corresponding suppression of other facts that would detract from the strength of his argument. When Stevens goes on to say, 'Clog, therefore, purple Jack and crimson Jill', he compresses within one line several examples of artistic falsification and he sees such falsification as needful in the face of the depressing facts of reality. Dancing in a particularly loud kind of footwear, creating the one-dimensional nursery rhyme character, and choosing the especially brilliant colours of purple and crimson which rarely appear in untamed nature, all these are forms of artistic distortion used for the sake of heightening the effect of what in nature would assume the drab appearance of the ordinary. All are unnatural; all are instances of the selective process that is the basis of art.

The 'odd morphology of regret' that we are asked to consider in XXIII is a study of the process of language and thought that is analogous to the process of artistic selection spoken of in the previous section. As Helen Henessy Vendler has observed in reference to this stanza,

> This poem is one of regret; placing decorations on graves is a gesture of regret; and yet these actions are reserved by the human world for its own members alone; no regret is expended on the deaths of the fish, the wheat, the pheasant, but rather we buy, sell, and deal in death of all sorts without regret every day.[23]

What I think is equally significant in these lines is that death in its non-human form is shown as providing us with not only necessities such as fish and bread, but with pleasure as well. Moreover, what is perhaps more significant than the idea of trading in death, an implication which can be drawn from the first two of Stevens's examples but one which has no relevance to the third, is that we are selective in our responses to death just as we select fish from a display in a window or bread from a shop or choose the sport of hunting as a form of pleasure. Some forms of death we choose to see only as part of the bountiful harvest season when, obviously, they could be seen in much starker tones.

The point being made, I believe, is that it is not the bare, unrelated concept of death that underlies human regret. Our response is a matter of selection like the selection of the artist who gives meaning to his presentation by carefully choosing the materials for his design.

Section XXIV develops the thought in still another example, illustrating the way in which the same objective fact, a bridge, can move from one pole of qualitative significance to the opposite pole without having undergone any change in itself. Whether one sees it as 'rich Tweedle-dum' or 'poor Tweedle-dee' depends upon conditions not inherent in the bridge itself.

If that is so, what does it mean to be 'realistic'? 'Crow is realist. But then, / Oriole, also may be realist.' Though there is nothing to choose between them on the basis of objective validity, we are reminded, 'From oriole to crow, note the decline / In music.' Obviously, to choose the musical, the beautiful, is subjectively preferable.

Having established a case for a pragmatic or hedonistic definition of the good, Stevens is now free to choose with moral impunity 'this fat pistache of Belgian grapes' instead of the 'total gala of auburn

aureoles' that are the reward promised for an ascetic life, a life based on a consistent selection of crow's 'music'. The 'Cochon!' that is flung at him by some observer of opposite mind implies that, though there may be no basis in verifiable empirical evidence upon which to base an opposition to such a choice, the sensualistic attitude is vulgar, a matter of execrable taste. To which Stevens, speaking as though to an instructor or Don says, 'Master, the grapes are here and now,' while the auburn aureoles are, by implication, part of an uncertain future.

The question of good taste leads to a consideration of American cultural values in Section XXVII:

> John Constable they could never quite transplant
> And our streams rejected the dim Academy.
> Granted the Picts impressed us otherwise
> In the taste for iron dogs and deer. (CP, 154-5)

A taste for softened, English landscapes and the etherealized aesthetic of 'the dim Academy' has remained foreign to the American scene of which Stevens is a part. The hedonism espoused in the previous section is kin to the 'taste for iron dogs and deer', a tougher approach to life and one in which an emphasis on material substance is paramount. In linking this attitude with the Picts, Stevens depends upon our stereotyped image of the Scotsman

to expand a question of artistic taste into a reference that can encompass the complete world-view of his compatriots.

The sensual pleasures are not to be thought of pejoratively, however, even though they seem to be related to the materialistic attitude of the Scot. The true appreciation of things should derive from the joys they afford. The fruits of a life of labour 'in the fields' should, like a pear, 'come to the table popped with juice / Ripened in warmth and served in warmth'. Thus Stevens would distinguish between a harsh, Calvinistic attitude to things of this world, an attitude which makes a virtue of hard work and material success but denies the morality of enjoying the results of such labour, and an outright hedonism which recognizes the enjoyment of the pleasures of natural life as the only means whereby man can evade the depressing consciousness of an otherwise purposeless existence.

For Section XXIX we have Stevens's own paraphrase and its relationship to the thought of the previous stanza is obvious:

> Paraphrased, this means: cast out the spirit that you have inherited for one of your own, for one based on reality. Thus, the bells are not ghostly,

> nor do they make phosphorescent sounds, so to speak. They are heavy and "are tolling rowdy-dow" (L, 349).

Although Stevens applauds the 'tolling rowdy-dow' of exuberance he is not making a case for a life of thoughtless pleasure. He rejects the 'spirit that you have inherited' because it is one that sets up an after-life of 'auburn aureoles' as preferable to the grapes that are 'here and now', but the thought of death itself is not to be ignored completely for it is an indispensable part of any fruitful interpretation of reality. It must retain its identity in our consciousness and is not to be denied, distorted or falsified. To subsume life under an over-riding concern with death and a hereafter is life-denying: 'The hen-cock crows at midnight and lays no egg', but so is the opposite case when 'The cock-hen crows all day'. To focus on life alone reduces it to the impotence of ennui. Only the conjunction of opposites yields the optimum benefit: When 'cockerel shrieks, / Hen shudders: the copious egg is made and laid'.

The fruitfulness that results from the interaction of opposites reveals itself in the world of nature and in the world of thought creating a 'teeming millpond or a

furious mind'. Section XXI is itself the fruit of the productive principle for through the meditation on our conceptions of life and death, through the attempts to define without evasion both poles of existence in the preceding stanzas, the poet's spiritual impotence has been overcome, at least in part, for he can now look at the world of 'Gray grasses rolling windily away / And bristling thorn-trees spinning on the bank' and say, 'The actual is a deft beneficence.' His response is considerably less exuberant than that of Whitman, but so it must be, for it denies no imperfections. Still, it is a marked improvement upon the paralysis with which he began the poem.

Within the process that has taken place resides the primary value of poetry, the 'revealing aberration', and, therefore, Stevens can assert,

> Poetry is a finikin thing of air
> That lives uncertainly and not for long
> Yet radiantly beyond much lustier blurs. (CP,155)

The statement is an interesting comment on Stevens's theory of poetry for it contradicts the view held by poets such as Yeats, the view that the value of art consists in its power to transcend the processes of nature, to redeem from the ravages of time. Stevens would not agree.

He recognizes that the formulation he has achieved is but a 'momentary stay against confusion'. Its value lies in the moment of more intense experience it affords, a moment that has less substance than the 'lustier blurs' of which the physical world is made.

Like the poems of Harmonium, the stanzas of 'Decorations' have, to this point, been mainly concerned with 'man the abstraction, the comic sum'. Now, having achieved a temporary release from the 'pressures of reality' through the good offices of the imaginative process, he can survey the scene again. As he does so he recognizes that in his examination of his individual problem of stagnation he has been peering at 'a reflection stagnant in a stagnant stream'. He is but part of a mass of men whose lives are engaged in the same difficulty. Regarding these lines Stevens has said, 'Under the stagnant surfaces one feels the tenseness of the life of the world' (L, 349), and the subsequent sections can be seen as a meditation upon the relationship of the poet to 'men and the affairs of men'. A departure from an earlier angle of vision is signalled in the abrupt change in rhythm in the first line of XXXIV and in the tense of the verbs in XXXV:

A calm November. Sunday in the fields.
A reflection stagnant in a stagnant stream.
Yet invisible currents clearly circulate.
(*CP*, 156)

Only when seen as an integral part of the whole poem does the subliminal effect of the verbal structure of these lines emerge. Note the repeated halt of the first line, the stasis of the balanced second line and then the eddying motion suggested in the alliteration and consonance of the third.

Thus the subject of the next section is in the plural and the experience of death, which has thus far been considered in relation to the individual, is now viewed in relation to the many:

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.

Stevens provided the following note to Section XXXVI: 'Death is like this. A child will die halfway to bed. The phrase is voice of death: the voluptuary is the child in heaven' (*L*, 349). Central to the illustration here provided is the stress upon the radical vulnerability of human existence:

The children will be crying on the stair,
Half-way to bed, when the phrase will be spoken,
The starry voluptuary will be born.

Not only do we not know when death will come but we have no way of knowing which one of the 'children' among whom we move will become, in an instant, a 'starry voluptuary'. The irony in the choice of the word 'voluptuary' again implicitly argues the case for an appreciation of the sensual good here and now.

In the face of such a precarious future, a future in which the only certainty is a gradual decay leading eventually to non-being, an awareness of the fleeting nature of time becomes paramount. Thus it seems as if only 'Yesterday the roses were rising upward, / Pushing their buds above the dark green leaves', and now, today, they are 'noble in autumn, yet nobler than autumn'. The very fact of their striving in the face of the ultimate futility of their burgeoning seems to create a kind of nobility that transcends the fact of transcience. Their meaning for the beholder lies in his appreciation of the contrast between the present beauty and the threat which broods over it.

The point is important to the artist who hopes to create the 'revealing aberration' to meet the need of his time, to find that which will suffice for himself and for his age. The metaphoric nature of the next sections was pointed out by Stevens in the letter to Hi Simons: 'This

and the others to which you refer under this number, while expressed in terms of autumn do not concern autumn. Do not show me Corot while it is still summer; do not show me pictures of summer while it is still summer; even the mist is golden; wait until a little later. XXXVIII: Despair' (L, 349). Since we do not have a copy of Hi Simons's questions we cannot identify 'the others' to which this answer applies, and that, perhaps, is not of great importance. What we can gather, however, from the comment is that it is not the images themselves that have meaning. Their significance lies in their relation to the real. We do not fully appreciate an image of the good, of what is pleasant and full of ease, until 'the sky is black' with despair. Contrast between real and unreal heightens the value of the artist's interpretation.

The obverse may also be true. If so, and if the artist wishes to enhance our appreciation of the good as it exists in reality, he should paint

> Not the ocean of the virtuosi
> But the ugly alien, the mask that speaks
> Things unintelligible, yet understood. (CP, 156)

His imitation should stress the hostility of the environment which is one of the 'masks' it wears. The antagonism of nature is unintelligible; man has always sought an explanation for its essential absurdity. Yet

the art that reflects this alienation is understood because it speaks of that which is part of actual experience.

The value of such realism is defined more explicitly in Section XL: 'if each began / Not by beginning but at the last man's end' he would, at the beginning of life be provided with the heightened sensitivity to beauty that comes naturally only when the mist is no longer 'golden' and 'the sky is black'. The 'standard repertoire', that is, the story of every man's experience, would then become the means of overcoming the imperfection of our earliest 'summer' perceptions. Each man's life would be a 'practicing' for life rather than for an after-life 'and that would be perfection' in the sense of a continual ongoing process of becoming perfect.

Natural life, if seen against the background of imminent non-being provides its own validations. Like the pear that 'beguiles the fatalist',

> The chrysanthemum's astringent fragrance comes
> Each year to disguise the clanking mechanism
> Of machine within machine within machine. (CP, 157)

We might note the precision with which the adjective 'astringent' captures the piquancy afforded by an apprehension of contrasting qualities.

Stevens moves on in the next section to an assessment of the formulation that has been evolved through man's attempts to achieve a reconciliation with the 'other' that impresses itself upon his consciousness. The 'God of the sausage makers' is the 'tranquil belief' man has postulated for his comfort instead of accepting the chrysanthemum's fragrance as the only relief from the clanking monotony of the quotidian. Stevens has said of this section, 'An anthropomorphic god is simply a projection of itself by a race of egoists, which it is natural for them to treat as sacred' (L, 349).

Though the 'God of the sausage makers' is an egotistical evasion of reality, the empirical analysis of fact that is exemplified in Section XLIII seems inadequate as well. The mode of the mathematician and the scientist is not guilty of departing from demonstrable fact, but the conclusions that are reached through reducing the world to a structure made up of densities and planes and then submitting the parts to mathematical analysis, 'dividing the number of legs one sees by two', are not necessarily profound. Their relevance for the individual who is searching for meaning that will revitalize his existence is negligible. The non-egotistical, completely detached observer does not

falsify by fanciful evasions but the answers he achieves are purely quantitative expressions. They can provide no answers for the problem that is a matter of qualitative experience.

And it is the subjective, qualitative experience of freshness that is most needed in this season of Autumn. Stevens rejects the notion that such freshness is dependent upon objective fact or external circumstance; it 'is more than the east wind blowing round one'. If it is purely a quality bearing an inverse relation to chronological age there would be 'no such thing as innocence in autumn'. Stevens suggests, albeit tentatively, that if we are concerned with the way in which life is interpreted, with the quality of life rather than its quantity alone, it may be, 'innocence is never lost'.

In Section XLV he again takes up the theme of the fleeting moment which appeared earlier, in Section XXXVII, and examines it within the qualitative-quantitative paradigm. Despite the importance he has placed on the constant, conscious apprehension of the imminence of non-being as a means for maintaining a lively, fresh appreciation of life's beauties, he scorns as 'woman's words' of weakness the whimpering plea for another moment of happiness. Here extension of moments is again a quantitative measure

which, even to a 'country connoisseur' whose judgement of quality is perhaps somewhat crude, would be quite unsatisfactory.

The awareness of the fleeting moment, when viewed as a quantitative reference, can become an obsession that dominates the vision as it does in Section XLVI where 'everything ticks like a clock'. The world then becomes the 'cabinet / Of a man gone mad, after all, for time'. The desire for an extension of life, which is the impulse behind the 'woman's words', then serves not as a means of enhancing the enjoyment of the present but becomes instead 'a mania for clocks', a form of insanity. The cuckoos, birds so careless of the morrow that they even neglect nest-building, the most elementary effort on behalf of posterity, and still survive, should provide an object lesson. Their awareness of time is legendary, as the cuckoo-clock can testify, but it is divorced from concern for the future.

Ultimately, of course, the meaning and value of life must arise out of life itself and by itself:

> The sun is seeking something bright to shine on.
> The trees are wooden, the grass is yellow and thin.
> The ponds are not the surfaces it seeks.
> It must create its colors out of itself. (<u>CP</u>, 157-8)

As a particular of reality the sun is the source and origin of all forms of life, but when it is here engaged in a search for meaning it becomes the prototype for what is a distinctively human preoccupation. Significantly, the metaphor is couched in the present progressive tense and the section which follows elaborates upon this aspect of the search. Notwithstanding the clear recognition of what is needed and a realization of the source from which the answer to that need must come, the

> Music is not written yet but is to be.
> The preparation is long and of long intent
> For the time when sound shall be subtler
> than we ourselves.

In the letter to Hi Simons, Stevens explained these lines in this way:

> This refers only to music. Most expressionism is rather terrifying, that means it is simply imperfect. In music we hear ourselves most definitely, most crudely. It is easy to look forward to a time when crudely will be less crudely, and then subtler: in the long run, why not subtler than we ourselves?

The note of affirmation is clear and, what is equally important, it is expressed as a prospect to be achieved collectively rather than individually, finding its origin

in the impulses common to all humanity and developing in a refining process toward an expression that hopefully will transcend the limitations of its source. That Stevens should emphasize that his subject is strictly music is indicative of his continuing concern for the achievement of a formulation of meaning, an interpretation of reality, that will reflect both the dynamic process that is the 'ever-changing' and the harmonious rhythms that are 'the ever-never-changing same' of external reality and of ourselves. Music is the art form, the 'revealing aberration', that most accurately captures the paradox that is the essence of Stevens's world-view.

It is in paradoxical terms, too, that Stevens explains his 'return to people':

> It needed the heavy nights of drenching weather
> To make his return to people, to find among them
> Whatever it was that he found in their absence,
> A pleasure, an indulgence, an infatuation. (CP, 158)

Perhaps it is fortunate that the biographical information we have for the period of Stevens's life is too sketchy to permit an interpretation of 'the heavy nights of drenching weather' in terms of specific events for the lack prevents the diversion of our attention from what is a statement of considerable consequence to an

appreciation of Stevens's position in relation to literary tradition. Whatever the adverse experience was, it has caused him to reject the kind of individualism that is the essence of a Romantic interpretation of man's place in the scheme of things. The 'pleasure, an indulgence or infatuation' which 'he found in the absence' of people he now hopes 'to find among them'. Thus, what he seeks is not a quality resident in the unique experience, not that which reveals itself in the particular or that which manifests itself in the individual self alone. Clearly, the individual self becomes a problem without that other term essential to the Romantic formulation, a supra-sensible realm of reality, something residing at 'the heart of things' to which man can relate in bonds of sympathetic understanding. The short poem entitled 'Re-Statement of Romance' which was written in the same year as 'Decorations' enunciates the limited scope of communicable experience in a world of nature 'that knows nothing of the chants of night'. In an alien universe, he declares, 'Only we two may interchange / Each in the other what each has to give' (CP, 146). Similarly in 'Decorations' the 'pleasure' that is sought resides in those basic elements of experience that all men hold in common.

The last section underlines the aspect of universal human experience that Stevens considers to be the only foundation for a viable approach to the problem of human existence:

> Union of the weakest develops strength
> Not wisdom. Can all men, together, avenge
> One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?
> But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow.

Personal relationships _per se_ are not the essential ingredient although they have been found to be a source of comfort and a means of escape from what Stevens in another context has spoken of as 'the inexpressible loneliness of thinking' (_OP_, 237). They can in no way alter the inescapable fact of mutability nor can they offer compensation for it. The wise man 'avenges' by accepting necessity and committing himself to the absurdity of his condition. The 'city' that he builds is, therefore, in ultimate terms a city of one, no matter how many others come to share his austere vision.

Without making any claim to being the final interpretation or the only possible paraphrase of an extremely puzzling piece of poetry, the reading here presented does reveal that the striking discontinuity of 'Decorations' is more a quality of surface than of substance. That this quality is deliberate is hardly

open to doubt. To disguise so effectively an elaborate, intricate interweaving of associations is not a casual achievement. Miss Vendler has observed that at least a fifth of the stanzas are syntactically incomplete and that the abjuring of verbs is the 'oddest characteristic' of the poem. Generally, the elisions that are made serve to eliminate most of those logical connectives that in ordinary discourse serve to signal the shifts in direction of the speaker's ideational movement. Thus deprived of the props of discursive argument, the reader must depend largely upon intuition or imagination to decide whether the movement from one 'stanza' to the next is made on the basis of elaboration, of analogy, of contrast or of a tangential association of thought. The conclusions that are reached by different readers will, therefore, show a considerable variety in detail.

While the method is clearly definable, what remains to be considered is a possible explanation for Stevens's decision to include such a flagrant example of his 'poetry of disconnection' in a volume dedicated to ideas of order. We need not fall into the error of the 'intentional fallacy' in arriving at some reasonable conclusions about the question. The poem, as we have seen,

can be read as a search for meaning when existence has become meaningless, and yet the structure seems to be directly at odds with any concept of meaning or order. If we consider, however, Stevens's frequently repeated expressions of a troubled awareness that the world of sensible reality is a pandemonium of fortuitous impressions, and if we note as well his declared theory that 'the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one' (NA, 81), then we must recognize that the poem to meet that criterion must present such an appearance of randomness as we find in 'Decorations'. The elimination or destruction of the restrictions of syntax can be seen as an attempt to render in language that which the orderly structure of discursive language alters by virtue of its own grammatical logic. When the transitional devices and verbal connections are removed, the stanzas can operate as individual items of sense-data approximating the products of that primary symbolic function of the sense organs with which we initially and intuitively respond to the confusion of external stimuli.

Thus, the linguistic structure becomes analagous to the unmediated world of sense impressions that is the setting for the search taking place in the poem. Moreover, the structure (or anti-structure) forces the reader to

supply from his own conceptual store the links necessary for the creation of the whole that we assume to be the object of the poet's pursuit. Thus, the reader's experience duplicates the process about which the poet is speaking. In making this particular kind of demand upon the reader, 'Decorations' gives evidence of an artistic sensibility considerably in advance of its time for it bears a curious resemblance to the preoccupation with audience participation and involvement that we see in the avant-garde theatre of today. What it illustrates is that, regardless of our human 'rage for order', the world and our brief existence in it remain mysterious and inexplicable, unaltered by the forms of order we superficially impose 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery'.

NOTES

III NORTHWARD

[1]Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 1965), pp. 110-111.

[2]Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 109.

[3]Edith Hamilton, Mythology (New York: The New American Library, Inc.,1942), p. 33.

[4]John Cruickshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 64.

[5]Louis L. Martz, 'The World as Meditation', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 137.

[6]Riddell, op. cit., p. 112.

[7]Ibid., p. 112.

[8]Henri Bergson, The two Sources of Morality and Religion, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1935), pp. 38-52.

[9]Ibid., p. 51.

[10]Ibid., p. 52.

[11]Yvor Winters, 'Wallace Stevens or the Hedonist's Progress', In Defense of Reason (New York: Swallow-Morrow, 1947), p. 459.

[12]Martz, op. cit., p. 138.

[13]As quoted in Riddell, op. cit., p. 110.

[14]Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 59.

[15]Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963), p. 158.

[16]Bergson, op. cit., pp. 39-41.

[17]Frank Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 179-86.

[18]John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), pp. 111-3, 134.

[19]Wells, op. cit., p. 44.

[20]Helen Henessy Vendler, 'Stevens' "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"', Massachusetts Review, VIII: 1 (Winter 1966), pp. 136-46.

[21]Enck, op. cit., p. 113.

[22]Walt Whitman, 'Song at Sunset', Poems by Walt Whitman, ed. Wm. Michael Rossetti (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), pp. 282-5.

[23]Vendler, op. cit., p. 142.

IV

TO FAT ELYSIA

Having then, moved from the attitude of passive acceptance of uncertainty in the _Harmonium_ period to a realization of the responsibility placed upon man by the fortuitousness of his natural condition and upon the poet as spokesman for the imagination of his society, Stevens, in the volumes which succeed _Ideas of Order_, grapples with the questions which inescapably arise out of these fundamentals. Given that man cannot depend upon any system of absolutes, that there are no _a priori_ determinants to give purpose and value to his existence, he must find or, rather, create from within himself, from the bare fact of his being and his unique ability to be aware of the contingency of being, that which will give savour to an otherwise monotonous march from Nothingness to Nothingness.

Recognition of that necessity is, however, not the equivalent of meeting the need. The iconoclasm of the early poetry becomes less a predominant theme as Stevens struggles to find a formulation to replace the shattered myths. His difficulty is, in part, of his own

making for, having condemned the old for failing to conform to the real, he cannot without compromising his own position propose a new myth or prescribe a new system of ideals because it too, in representing the ideal, would have to ignore much of the confusing contradiction existent in reality. Any myth, any prescription would be a falsification because it must needs be a static conception no longer capable of mirroring the flux that is the actual world. 'Decorations' is both an exploration of the need and a daring experiment in form. However, the conception or solution at which the speaker arrives in that poem hardly permits succinct summary for it remains in essence an argument in favour of an open-minded, dynamic process of apprehension or state of mind rather than the arrival at a particular idea. Such a conception resists translation into a fixed image or mythic symbol which may serve as a pattern for activity. While the fragmented form Stevens uses in that poem is becoming a commonplace of the present, the paradoxical conception underlying such experiments must have been utterly confusing to the average reader of the thirties. The now-famous review of <u>Ideas of Order</u> by Stanley Burnshaw is one example of a response that was undoubtedly widely felt at the time of its publication. In that review (which comments simultaneously on the poetry of

Haniel Long) Burnshaw stated:

> . . . the texture of their thought is made of speculations, questionings, contradictions. Acutely conscious members of a class menaced by the clashes between capital and labor, these writers are in the throes of a struggle for philosophical adjustment. . . . Will Stevens sweep his contradictory notions into a valid Idea of Order?[1]

Burnshaw's criticism illustrates the demand for completely logical and consistent thought so typical of the Western mind and a demand that becomes extremely acute and is expressed more urgently in times of social confusion and crisis. In a recent article Burnshaw has reviewed the situation surrounding the writing of his criticism and he describes the time as one in which '. . . tentativeness and humility were unthinkable: the world was separating into two enemy camps and time was running out!'[2] Yet it was just such an attitude that had ever aroused Stevens's suspicions and antipathies, as is evidenced by the early poems.

Thus, the combination of his newly acquired conviction about the responsibility of the artist and an aversion to the rigidity of thought that Burnshaw's Marxism represented prompted Stevens to make a sally into the arena of ideological controversy in writing 'Owl's Clover' (1936). Predictably, the result was

poetically unsuccessful. (Although William Van O'Connor judges it to be Stevens's 'finest long poem',[3] few critics have agreed with his evaluation.) Even as it was being written Stevens confessed that the poem was 'a source of a good deal of trouble' (L, 289) to him and that the result of attempting 'actually to deal with the commonplace of the day' seemed 'rather boring' (L, 308). The central difficulty is really that in the poem Stevens has attempted to reconcile the irreconcilable. The essence of his attitude toward contemporary problems was that they demanded a capacity for adaptation to change and that commitment to any cause would limit flexibility. However, attempting to refute a fixed system with an attitude of complete detachment is, by definition, impossible. And when Stevens's determination to maintain complete flexibility manifests itself formally in his use of a variable symbol for his central image (L, 355), impenetrability is virtually assured. Obscurity is at home with pure poetry but quite unsuited to polemic. Stevens's own sense of dissatisfaction with the poem is reflected in its omission from the Collected Poems.

'The Man with the Blue Guitar', which was written just after publication of 'Owl's Clover', is a series of variations (thirty-three) on some of the difficulties

faced by the poet who must select from the complexity of the world yet does so as an approach to truth. Whereas 'Owl's Clover' caused him a great deal of trouble because he was attempting to deal with 'things as they are', 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' examines the nature of those troubles and becomes a discussion of the relation of imagination and reality, of art to life, a question which becomes crucial when art is seen as a primary means for the moulding of social attitudes. The publication of Stevens's Letters provides us with his own gloss on all but five of the thirty-three sections which make up the poem and, as Riddell has noted, 'indicate[s] that it is a nearly literal confession of the poet's frustrations in unlocking the enigma of man, and of himself as man'.[4] Nonetheless, though the imagination can never completely 'play man number one' (CP, 166) nor 'bring the world quite round' (CP, 165) and though we know that the previous 'generation's dream' was 'aviled / In the mud, in Monday's dirty light' (CP, 183) and ours will fare no better, 'The bread / Will be our bread, the stone will be / Our bed' (CP, 184), it remains essential to 'Throw away the lights, the definitions' (CP, 183), the previous formulas for being, so that 'Nothing must stand / Between you and the shapes you

take' as the imagination's new, 'jocular procreations' appear.

Considerably less assertive in tone than 'Farewell to Florida' and other poems of Ideas of Order, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' represents a slight 'recess' from Stevens's Northern 'continent'. Yet despite its acknowledgement of the poet's limitations, and its scope is avowedly 'confined to the area of poetry and makes no pretense of going beyond that area' (L, 788), the poem does reassert the freedom of each generation to define its own nature as the mind is free (relatively) to make its own world. Stevens's poetry in the decade which follows is dominated by long poems of which the longest and most significant are 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (1942) and 'Esthétique du Mal' (1944), and it does seem that the shorter poems 'no more than annotate aspects of the longer ones'.[5] We can, however, in a brief examination of the themes of these shorter poems, trace the development of thought which culminates in 'Notes' which is, without doubt, the most important single poem of this period.

The freedom from 'the definitions', 'the rotted names' (CP, 183) spoken of in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' is part of a more fundamental assertion that

'There are many truths / But they are not parts of a truth' (CP, 203), which we encounter in 'On the Road Home'. 'The Latest Freed Man' (1938) and 'Anything Is Beautiful if You Say It Is' (1938) concur and also speak of the advantages that are gained by that denial. The good that derives, Stevens declares is the expansion of the horizons of enjoyment; everything seen is enlarged by the expanded range of possibility afforded by the departure from rigid definitions of what is true.

Typically, however, there are other poems in which Stevens notes with distress the general effects of a loss of firm definitions. 'Loneliness in Jersey City' (1938) deplores the lack of any sense of discrimination in a society which would, conceivably, find that a noble, graceful creature like the deer is one with or equal to an ungainly, pampered, dependent household pet like the dachshund. Having lost faith in the values symbolized by 'the steeple', public tastes seem to have sunk to the cobblestones. In 'Forces, the Will & the Weather' (1942) he observes that his age is characterized by a total lack of courage and convictions. His 'peer yellow' lives 'Without ideas in a land without ideas' (CP, 228), and thus, like the 'pink girl', people find themselves controlled by, not controlling the forces

operating in society, and those forces are not necessarily obviously malevolent.[6] They are, like the fluffy dog, part of a pink-and-white world of trivialities.

There is, however, no easy solution to the problems posed by living in a time when everything is recognized as being in a fluid state. 'Glass of Water' (1938) is built upon the idea that, like the poet's imaginative perceptions, physical and political entities are only seemingly static.[7] Perceptions, objects, governments, all are merely a state. Yet the concern about what is at the 'centre of our lives' in this situation is not purely a contemporary uncertainty arising out of the complexity of the time. Even in the most primitive conditions, 'Among the dogs and dung, / One would continue to contend with one's ideas.'

The often-quoted 'Connoisseur of Chaos' (1938), written in essentially the same spirit as 'Doctor of Geneva', gives warning against the imposition of the mind's order upon natural disorder. 'The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind' (CP, 215). Even the Hegelian dialectic which is based on 'a law of inherent opposites / Of essential unity' is too neat, too 'pretty'. All we can say is that 'relation appears, / A small relation', and that, in spite of his awareness of the

futility of a search for a complete understanding, 'The pensive man . . . He sees that eagle float / For which the intricate Alps are a single nest.'[8]

'Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas' (1942) demands more detailed analysis. Frank Doggett says that the first section of the poem

> . . . opens with the opposition between concept and percept; here a sense of physical presence is given in subconscious perception. Only in an impossible Eden of corporeal immediacy -- "a land beyond the mind" -- could there be the naked life of unthinking direct experience. The world of daily conception that men share is an abstraction, created out of language and become a paper world rather than a sensory one.[9]

He goes on to comment upon the similarity of imagery and thought between this section and a passage in Santayana's 'Realm of Truth' and that (in reference to the third stanza) 'Only in an impossible covert like that of Eden can man in the nakedness of direct experience live a life of responsiveness, free of the unreality and intervention of knowledge.' One might add that the stanza thus acknowledges the impossibility of the situation postulated in 'The Snow Man'. We might observe, too, that 'reality' in this context refers to what Kant termed 'nuomenal' reality, 'The Whole World Excluding the Speaker' that was discovered in 'New England Verses'.

Although man may desire 'the rainy rose' of that reality, one can actually know only its paper counterpart and, what is more, will not even know that a difference exists:

> Rain is an unbearable tyranny. Sun is
> A monster-maker, an eye, only an eye,
> A shapener 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, 253)

In 'Phosphor Reading by His Own Light' (1942) this acknowledgement is used as a warning to the realist who thinks he knows 'objectively'. Here, in Section II Stevens observes that it is natural for man to accept the evidence of the senses but such acceptance is a matter of pure faith: 'The eye believes and its communion takes. / The spirit laughs to see the eye believe / And its communion take.' With mock-sententiousness he asks 'the Secretary for Porcelain', who keeps a record of fragile 'Fine Ideas' to add one more to his list:

> That evil made magic, as in catastrophe,
> If neatly glazed, becomes the same as the fruit
> Of an emperor, the egg-plant of a prince.
> The good is evil's last invention.

Evil, if seen in its largest dimension or on the large scale as in catastrophe is a source of good equal to a

supreme luxury. Good is the ultimate end of evil because

> The maker of catastrophe invents the eye
> And through the eye equates ten thousand deaths
> With a single well-tempered apricot, or, say,
> An egg-plant of good air.

Nature, of which evil, corruption, and decay are part, enables us to see death (in the large perspective, if not in personal, individual cases) as part of the same process as that which ripens the 'well-tempered apricot' and brings it to its end. The theme is one that was broached as early as 'Sunday Morning' (1915): 'Death is the mother of beauty', and is one which will form the core of the later 'Esthétique du Mal'.

The second stanza elaborates on the first. The 'laughter of evil', the good in death, is described as 'the fierce ricanery' and here Stevens seems to have devised his own word out of 'rictus', meaning 'grimace', and 'chicanery', and the combination well expresses the ambivalent feelings we all must have toward the subject for as it is described it is a combination of fierce laughter and sobs rising in 'fugues', themes presented in variations by a succession of different voices. Moreover,

It is death
That is ten thousand deaths and evil death.
Be tranquil in your wounds. It is good death
That puts an end to evil death and dies.

The 'placating star', this vision seen in cosmic perspective, 'Shall be gentler for the death you die' for the death of the individual contributes to the general which is the source of consolation. Then, in a tone of irony, 'The helpless philosophers say still helpful things', and he lists two philosophies that are diametrically opposed: Platonic idealism and Naturalism, 'the reddened flower' that best describes his own view, adding as well 'the erotic bird' which hovers over Freudian or psychological hedonism.

The third section begins with a comment that dismisses religion as part of the dead past: 'The lean cats of the arches of the churches, / That's the old world. In the new, all men are priests.' But the reference in the stanza which follows is ambiguous. Are they that 'preach and . . . are preaching in a land / To be described' the old cats or the new priests? Daniel Fuchs reads it as a reference to the religious cats who are 'ineffectual because . . . there is a fatal lack of unity in their myth'.[10] The same is true, however, of the new priests, as we shall discover as the poem

progresses, and the ambiguity here is probably deliberate. Preaching from any fixed position and demanding mass allegiance to any doctrine, ecclesiastical or secular, could succeed only if that doctrine were 'a queen, / An intercessor by innate rapport', one which represented a position to which men could relate intuitively, through natural instinct, a position cognate with natural propensities. Or it must be 'a dark-blue king, _un roi tonnerre_' of such inner force that persuasion is not necessary to arouse allegiance, 'Whose merely being was his valiance'.

Stevens pauses over the possibility of such a universal creed, recalling that the Christ-figure represented such a unifying force and was nonetheless destroyed. In describing the working of the mind in this simile: '. . . is it the multitude of thoughts, / Like insects in the depths of the mind, that kill / The single thought' (_CP_, 254), Stevens establishes an analogy between the life of mental and ideological constructs and the life of organic entities in a Darwinian world.

The cats, lean from long years of contention, 'feel transparent'. According to their lights, the sun

in which they bask, they feel they represent true vision as if 'designed by X, the per-noble master', the complete abstraction, perfect and noble because he is uncontaminated by imperfections of the actual. Order and taste are associated with these guardians of the establishment who 'have a sense of design and savor / The sunlight'. They 'bear brightly' (carry cheerfully, without hesitation or doubt) the 'little beyond / Themselves' that is the limited insight they possess. It is 'the slightly unjust' representation of the world that is their 'genius' or specialty. As a description of the message of religion, this is considerably less vituperative than were earlier references, such as, for instance, that which 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws' presented. We may, I believe, trace this softening of attitude to the growing awareness, expressed in poems such as 'Loneliness in Jersey City', that an indifferent or confused attitude toward the question of value or truth was causing social and cultural problems. Thus, though the religious myth is no longer adequate, its formulation is one of the 'errors of time', decadent as all ideas are destined to become with the passage of time, but nonetheless, an 'exquisite' item amid the variety of porcelain.

Having provided one illustration of the way in which an interpretation of the 'rainy rose' of the world has succumbed to the inevitable, Stevens now, in Section IV, turns to an examination of his own Gestalt in relation to the question of truth. He does so, not in the subjective 'I-form', we notice, but from the point of view of a detached omniscient observer. The motive for the exploration of the sterile landscape which is being made in this season of physical and mental paralysis is a curiosity about what new life-giving idea the coming season will bring. All that remains of the past season is 'gray grass like a pallet, closely pressed; / And dirt'. The wind, formless spirit,

> . . . blew in the empty place.
> The winter wind blew in an empty place -
> There was that difference between the and an,
> The difference between himself and no man. . . .
> (CP, 255)

The distinction made between the definite and indefinite article may be interpreted as the difference between the 'the' that underlies appearance, that which is empty because it is pure potential, and the particular manifestation of reality that is the perceiving consciousness of the speaker. The differentiation or particularization

is underlined by the addition of a descriptive modifier: it is the winter wind in the second instance. The empty place in which the speaker stands may be as well the contemporary cultural scene, devoid of any ideational furniture of conviction. Stevens differentiates, then, between the general and the particular case. A vacancy that afflicts all men is the property of no man and in the general situation there was 'No man that heard a wind in an empty place'. 'He' cannot remedy the general condition (as he has tried to do since 'Farewell to Florida') and he recognizes that it is 'time to be himself again', to see whether the potential for self-actualization still exists. Only in defining himself does he separate himself from the abstract 'other' within which he moves. This differentiation is a kind of knowing that will receive increasing emphasis in the later volumes. Now it is described as the emergence of a new self:

> And being would be being himself again,
> Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self,
> Black water breaking into reality.

As the succession of participles pile one upon the other in the penultimate line and reach a peak in the new

identity, the climax of the poem is achieved. The final line is a process realized in striking imagery but its falling cadence is tribute, as well, to the onset of decline which follows the instant that any crest is reached.

Analogies implicit in the previous section find explicit expression in Section V and are explored, not as items of an inner experience, but as the abstractions of formal discourse. Just as 'Ideas are men', ideas are selves and all are subject to a 'law of chaos'. The striking contradiction within that phrase describes precisely the relationship existing between individuals and the mass. And, by implication, the pattern repeats itself within each man as well. Within the general framework of accepted opinion, differing ideas arise, '. . . three or four / Ideas, or say, five men or, possibly, six.' Again, by combining the seeming exactitude of definite numbers with the imprecision or indecisiveness of the conclusion, Stevens conveys the conflict about which he speaks.

In the conflict, one idea prevails and temporarily the turbulence is quelled. That the one who remains should be a poet, 'He that remains plays on an

instrument' (such as a guitar), is not so much a claim for the power of poetry as it is a definition of what Stevens means by poetry. It is the process of defining the self and the world, a process which remains forever a process of becoming. The romance between the guitarist and the sound he seeks; a desire that 'clings to the mind like that right sound', is described as 'singular' in the sense of 'single' because it is a feeling for the 'pure idea', a 'warmth in the blood world' that will never find consummation. His song remains as consolation, temporarily helpful, although the inability to find the right sound is a continuing fact of his condition. The short, clipped statements of the first four couplets give a sense of finality to the laws they propound. But the pouring of the flux, within and without, moves in the long rhythms of the remainder of the poem as the guitarist's music surges toward the expression of a song that can exist only in 'the high imagination triumphantly'.

The opposition between systematic and imaginative thinking governs Section VI. 'Ercole', in whose name the echo of _école_ communicates the pattern of logical, academic thought that is 'the way to death', stands in contrast to one who would 'think his way to life'. The

description of the life-giving process provides a definition, hazy though it be, of Stevens's ideas about the structure of the mind. Although a precise Coleridgean description of man's faculties would contradict Stevens's argument, he must acknowledge the existence of different kinds of thinking in order to explain the inadequate, fragmented response, and 'thinking in your cavern' is one such fragmentary approach to the world. Listing the anatomical parts, 'skin, spine and hair', illustrates the 'way to death'. But mind is more than analytical intellect. It is in part the intuitive 'half-sun' of the tie to earth and its satisfaction is not to be achieved by simply adding 'half earth, half mind; half sun, / Half thinking'. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and must be wholly satisfied before the balance is achieved in a totality of response so complete that the boundary between the self and 'the weather' disappears.

Yet 'the redeeming thought', though sometimes achieved in that semi-conscious state of 'sleepy mid-days', must remain undefinable. If it were amenable to definition it would lose that quality essential to its

very being and become a product of Ercole's thinking. Thus, it must remain a fleeting apprehension, attainable but only 'too vaguely that it be written in character'.

Section VII hardly needs interpretation for it is an affirmation of the adequacy of tranquilly accepting the world of appearances as all we can know. It is a belief in unbelief for it 'resists each past apocalypse' and rejects any hope of future apocalyptic visions from afar (Ceylon), from amid the flux of reality, or any 'mad mountains' constructed out of hard thinking. For Stevens such a strange form of belief is more than adequate for it comprises 'ecstatic identities / Between one's self and the weather', between the inner and the outer world. It is a submission to a state of 'poverty' dependent upon no detail of sensual experience, 'without any scent or the shade / Of any woman' and 'naked of any illusion' of the imagination yet 'part of that / And nothing more'. It is a return to 'the subtle centre' of the sphere of being.

The last section is summation. 'We live in a camp' of warring ideas. 'Stanzas of final peace / Lie in the heart's residuum', that which remains when all the vapours, all things open to doubt have been driven off. That which remains for Stevens is not Descartes's

'I think', for that, as it reveals itself in ideas, is just as open to doubt. The subtle centre is the 'I am'. That this can be seen as the final, inescapable good, he argues, is so only because the condition comes benignly to an end in death. To subscribe to some form of life after death, some reincarnation, would mean the pain of being would be endless. Thus, to have pierced the 'heart's residuum' and discovered there the bare fact of existence and that existence bound up in mortality, Stevens finds 'the music for a single line / Equal in memory' to all the formulations of previous centuries, 'one line in which / The vital music' of earth and death 'formulates the words'.

Although Joseph Riddell sees a 'failure of irony'[11] in the poem, the conclusion can be read as exquisite irony for this formulation is, after all, another 'paper rose', another contribution to the 'dust' that resides in the Academy of Fine Ideas. So far as it is an idea, it becomes part of the infinite procession of 'men in helmets . . . going to defeat'. Nonetheless, the poem fails to attain the heights we have come to expect of Stevens although there are a few memorable passages.

'Parochial Theme' (1938), the first poem in the 1942 volume, constitutes a qualified assertion which accords with the tone and conclusion of 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'. Its theme, since it is 'parochial', must reflect the restrictions of the area out of which it arises and in which it has relevance. Thus, it does not presume to offer all-embracing or eternal truths; it is but one part of the world Stevens is creating. The central image of the poem is that of the hunt, a form of the quest: 'Long-tailed ponies go nosing the pine-lands, / Ponies of Parisians shooting on the hill' (CP, 191). Since the hunters are Parisians, their quarry must be related to the central preoccupation of the world's fashion capital, a life-style (L, 434-5). The setting in which they hunt is a world of shapeless wind and 'the voices / Have shapes that are not fully themselves', not yet having acquired the form that constitutes fully developed speech. Strange to say, as the 'sounds are blown by a blower into shapes', as words and speech are formed out of the formless wind and voices, the blower's shape is altered as well. In the reciprocal alteration, he is 'squeezed to the thinnest mi of falsetto'. Assuming there is a pun on 'me', the lines become an examination of the process of

developing a personal identity. The use of the word 'falsetto' conveys Stevens's characteristic awareness of the ambivalence with which one may view the process. The falsetto is, of course, the highest and finest as well as the thinnest tone within the range of the singing voice and is reached with a loss of the timbre or depth of lower notes.

As the poem proceeds it becomes clear that the 'thinnest <u>mi</u>' is merely one end of the scale to be included by the hunters running to and fro. While it suggests the ultimate in refinement and conscious control, there is another dimension of being to be probed as well and that is the forest of the subconscious, the primeval, instinctual inheritance which is as much a part of the total structure within which the search is carried on as is the spiritual realm signified by the wind. Within the depths of the forest, among the 'grunting, shuffling branches', the emotions are deepened to compensate or balance that falsetto accomplishment of speech. The use of animalistic imagery in describing the forest conveys the notion of gross physicality, yet these aspects are also described as being 'the robust, / The nocturnal, the antique'. A pejorative, moralistic

connotation is avoided. Again, the word 'inhuman', though in common usage a term of degradation, in this context more particularly refers to those savage elements in man that are his source of power and energy and, therefore, neither totally inescapable nor undesirable. They are part of a tableau depicting health, a health that is 'holy', meriting veneration and awe.

It is not, however, a condition that is static or at rest. The call of 'halloo, halloo, halloo' continues and does so in the face of protesting or opposing cries from the conformists and traditionalists for whom 'a square room is a fire'. These people are those who no longer engage in the hunt; their questions are all answered and they accept conventional morality for the warm security of social acceptance conformity provides. These are they whom the 'statues', the rigidified concepts immobilized by tradition, inhibit.

The vital, dynamic and continuing search of the 'Parisians' is a 'descant of the self', a melody or theme with variations, and it is a 'barbarous chanting' for it never achieves the state of perfect civilization that would rob it of those elements of the savage that give it strength. Yet, for all its power, it is not a

represent but the name of the lady who struggles to find 'elegance' makes us suspect that she has some kinship with J. Alfred Prufrock who is so riddled with uncertainty that his capacity to make even the simplest, most elementary decision is impaired. Mrs. Uruguay's condition is not like Prufrock's in all respects. It is true that 'Her no and no made yes impossible' (CP, 249-51) and, therefore, she continues in her struggle to approach 'the real' upon her donkey. Her refusal to commit herself to a firm belief is not a matter of indifference as it is with 'the others' who say 'so what', but rather it is a refusal to accept a 'falsifying bell'. The donkey, symbolic of the humble mind or spirit, is all that remains when the 'moonlight' myths with which the human being has been overlaid through time have been 'wiped away . . . like mud'. Imaginative constructs become less and less vital and satisfying as the search continues: 'The moonlight crumbled to degenerate forms, / While she approached the real.' Like the man in 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas', her search for truth, the real, extends to the recognition that 'for her, / To be, regardless of velvet, could never be more / Than to be' and, thus, she cannot reach

represent but the name of the lady who struggles to find 'elegance' makes us suspect that she has some kinship with J. Alfred Prufrock who is so riddled with uncertainty that his capacity to make even the simplest, most elementary decision is impaired. Mrs. Uruguay's condition is not like Prufrock's in all respects. It is true that 'Her no and no made yes impossible' (<u>CP</u>, 249-51) and, therefore, she continues in her struggle to approach 'the real' upon her donkey. Her refusal to commit herself to a firm belief is not a matter of indifference as it is with 'the others' who say 'so what', but rather it is a refusal to accept a 'falsifying bell'. The donkey, symbolic of the humble mind or spirit, is all that remains when the 'moonlight' myths with which the human being has been overlaid through time have been 'wiped away . . . like mud'. Imaginative constructs become less and less vital and satisfying as the search continues: 'The moonlight crumbled to degenerate forms, / While she approached the real.' Like the man in 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas', her search for truth, the real, extends to the recognition that 'for her, / To be, regardless of velvet, could never be more / Than to be' and, thus, she cannot reach

a final conclusion. Being involves 'becoming seeing and feeling and self' (CP, 255) and so she can only go on.

The man 'of capable imagination' who comes clattering down the road she climbs so slowly is described as

> A youth, a lover with phosphorescent hair,
> Dressed poorly, arrogant of his streaming forces,
> Lost in an integration of the martyrs' bones,
> Rushing from what was real; and capable?

His phosphorescent hair mark him as a brother to the realist of 'Phosphor Reading by His Own Light' (1942) who thinks he reads 'the green night' (CP, 267) of nature's mysteries. Unlike 'the peer yellow' of 'Forces, the Will, and the Weather', this youth has found a horse to ride. The poverty of his dress, evidence of the poverty of his imaginative or inner life, is associated with the arrogance with which he rides, 'Lost in an integration of the martyrs' bones', the belief within which his self has become submerged. Whether, like the one who speaks in 'Idiom of the Hero' (1938), he knows that the real is a chaos that 'will not be ended' (CP, 200), or whether he accepts his belief in ignorance of the incomprehensibility of the real, we cannot tell. But we know that 'Rushing from what was

real', he sweeps down upon the sleeping village of the populace with tremendous effect:

> Time swished on the village clocks and dreams
> were alive,
> The enormous gongs gave edges to their sounds,
> As the rider, no chevalere and poorly dressed,
> Impatient of the bells and midnight forms,
> Rode over the picket rocks, rode down the road,
> And, capable, created in his mind,
> Eventual victor, out of the martyrs' bones,
> The ultimate elegance: the imagined land.

The man who achieves the 'ultimate elegance' is one who does not dwell on the inexplicable but one who has a belief which can carry him over the obstacles of intransigent fact. Stevens's ambivalence towards belief reveals itself in the balanced structure of this poem and in contradictions between other poems of this period. It finds its fruition in that paradoxical proposal of the 'supreme fiction', the suggestion that,

> . . . in the various predicaments of belief, it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield, ourselves to a declared fiction.
> This is the same thing as saying that it might be possible for us to believe in something that we know to be untrue. Of course, we do that every day, but we don't make the most of the fact that we do it out of the need to believe.

This comment is contained in a letter to Gilbert Montague (<u>L</u>, 443), a long-standing friend, a letter in which

Stevens explains the idea underlying 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', a poem which delineates what he later regarded to be the central theme of his work (L, 820). The poem was first published privately by Cummington Press in 1942 then later was included in the Knopf edition of Transport to Summer (1947), a volume in which many minor themes from 'Notes' are developed to become independent poems.

The tendency among critics has been to assume that the supreme fiction, for Stevens, must be poetry and there is, indeed, a letter to Henry Church, written December 8, 1942, which says as much. However, in a later letter he, typically, qualifies that statement considerably:

> I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction. A man as familiar with my things as you are will be justified in thinking that I mean poetry. I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean. The next thing for me to do will be to try to be a little more precise about this enigma. I hold off from even attempting that because, as soon as I start to rationalize, I lose the poetry of the idea. In principle there appear to be certain characteristics of a supreme fiction and the NOTES is confined to a statement of a few of those characteristics. As I see the subject, it could occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations. In trying to create something as valid as

> the idea of God has been, and for that matter remains, the first necessity seems to be breadth. It is true that the thing would never amount to much until there is no breadth or, rather, until it has all come to a point (L, 435).

Thus, paradox and contradiction surround a paradoxical proposal.

The eight lines of dedication which open the poem have been interpreted in several ways. We can eliminate the possibility of reading them as being addressed to Henry Church, since we now have the Letters to tell us that Stevens went to some pains to avoid that possibility by requesting that the inscription to Mr. Church be placed above the title, not as it now appears in Collected Poems (L, 538). Frank Kermode says, 'This poem is, of course, addressed to the "interior paramour". The imagination resembles light in that it falls on reality, "adding nothing but itself."'[13] It is, however, reality seen in 'the uncertain light of single, certain truth' as well and, therefore, it is reality as that supreme fiction which is the 'ever-present difficulty and inamorata' (OP, 241).

The three sections of the poem are projections of something ultimately undefinable. That they are three is purely arbitrary and it is an error, I believe,

to read too great a significance into that number since Stevens seriously considered adding other sections, particularly one to be entitled 'It Must Be Human' (L, 863-4). While these projected additional sections do not deny that a dialectical process of thought is taking place, the three we have cannot be taken as some mystical triad or trinity.[14]

'It Must Be Abstract' initiates, in the first poem, the process of moving towards the supreme fiction and consists of an attempt to 'get rid of all existing fictions' (L, 431) in order to get at the irreducible essence that remains after the interpretations of the world which have come down through centuries of man's existence have been discarded:

> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
> And see it clearly in the idea of it. (CP, 380)

The idea of an inventing mind as First Cause or Creator, any notion of a transcendent God as pre-existent Being is to be set aside as well:

> Never suppose an inventing mind as source
> Of this idea nor for that mind compose
> A voluminous master folded in his fire.
>
> How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
> Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
> That has expelled us and our images . . .

> The death of one god is the death of all.
> Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
> Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,
>
> Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
> A name for something that never could be named.
> There was a project for the sun and is.

The reduction is to continue beyond the level of language,[15] even beyond the elementary symbolizing process through which the raw percept becomes a concept to which a name can be assigned:

> There is a project for the sun. The sun
> Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
> In the difficulty of what it is to be.

By definition then it is an 'inconceivable idea', certainly, yet it is only in the realm completely innocent of thought that the sun can purely 'be'.

The reason for such a retreat to the bare 'what is' is a 'celestial ennui of apartments', the weariness of all the structures of ideas that have been created by man to provide himself with security against the enigma of being,

> . . . 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 [.]

With typical ambiguity Stevens speaks of the 'ravishments of truth' thereby conveying the paradoxical fascination that truth continues to hold. It has a continuing allure yet every attempt to seize it, to define or fix it, serves only to hide it from sight. Yet there may as well be 'an ennui of the first idea'. Indeed, if the 'first idea' were ever reached it must, according to the natural course of events as described in 'Extracts' also be assassinated by a successor. But single truth, the hermit or 'monastic man', is an artist, a creator of desire.[16] By being and remaining inaccessible, he keeps man constantly in pursuit for 'not to have is the beginning of desire / To have what is not is its ancient cycle'. Thus, like the indescribable longings of springtime that, in the face of 'effortless weather turning blue', spurn the loveliness that is present and continue in their yearning for what is not there, so the desire for truth continues as part of the absurdity of the human being.

For Stevens, the poem permits us to 'share, / For the moment, the first idea' in that it is, if a true poem, a completely new perception, a newly created world. Its emergence 'satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning' and in its progress we see a parallel to the

course of human life, which proceeds from a conception through development to completion. This we perceive 'by an unconscious will', that innate capacity for perceiving resemblances of which Stevens speaks in 'Three Academic Pieces' (NA, 75), and we are 'winged . . . to an immaculate end' which is immaculate in that it comes without the evil of pain. As Stevens develops the idea, then, he plays upon the parallel: 'We move between these points: From that ever-early candor to its late plural', and he plays upon the obsolete definition of 'candor' as 'purity'. Man is born in purity, innocent of any of the 'ravishments of truth'; a poem is (or should be) pure of any attempt to perpetrate such a 'ravishment'. It takes its beginning in a fresh perception of the real world, faithfully gives it form, puts it into language and thus into thoughts which then are a 'late plural'.[17] In this way the emotion that resides in the first perception is carried over into thoughts,

> And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
> Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
> Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,
>
> An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
> The poem, through candor, brings back a power
>   again
> That gives a candid kind to everything.

Stevens then provides an illustration of the effect:

> We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
> With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
> Inscribes a primitive astronomy
>
> Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
> And throws his stars around the floor. By day
> The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo
>
> And still the grossest irridescence of ocean
> Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
> Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.
> (CP, 383)

The Arabian, according to a letter to Hi Simons, is the moon, 'the undecipherable vagueness of the moonlight is the unscrawled fores: the unformed handwriting' (L, 433). We cannot understand the 'hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how' of moonlight nor can we understand the wood-dove or the ocean for the world is ultimately without meaning. Through the pure poem which makes that reality available to us 'Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.' We are made emotionally aware of our blood-relationship with earth. That is the 'candor' of the poem and the emotion it releases is a power that refreshes life.

Why such an awareness is unavailable to us under ordinary, non-poetic circumstances is explained in Section IV for which the Letters provide the poet's

paraphrase: 'Descartes is used as a symbol of the reason. But we live in a place that is not our own; we do not live in a land of Descartes; we have imposed the reason; Adam imposed it even in Eden' (L, 433). Further, with reference to the clouds of the third stanza:

> If "I am a stranger in the land," it follows that the whole race is a stranger. We live in a place that is not our own and, much more, not ourselves. The first idea, then, was not our own. It is not the individual alone that indulges himself in the pathetic fallacy. It is the race. God is the centre of the pathetic fallacy. In all this the clouds are illustrative. Are they too imitations of ourselves? Or are they a part of what preceded us, part of the muddy centre before we breathed, part of the physical myth before the human myth began? There is a huge abstraction, venerable and articulate and complete, that has no reference to us, accessible to poets -- in which abysmal instruments etc. (L, 444).

Reality reduces all the systems of philosophy, 'the sweeping meanings' to 'sounds like pips'.

The fifth section is fiercest irony. The animals of nature, lion, elephant, bear, and even the 'glitter-goes', the vibrancies of light (L, 434), 'on surfaces of tanks' confront and challenge the hostile environment with courage. Civilized man does otherwise:

> But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,
> Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

> In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
> Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
> A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,
>
> Yet voluble dumb violence. (CP, 384)

The dumb writhing of the ephebe is 'voluble' of the violence of his emotion and also of the violence his nature has undergone. Of the next lines Stevens said, 'What I mean by the words "sigil and ward" is that the person referred to looks across the roofs like a part of them: that is to say, like a being of the roofs, a creature of the roofs, an image of them and a keeper of their secrets' (L, 434). The roofs stand as synecdoche for the years of civilization and the structures of reason that stand between him and the first idea. The scorn of the last stanza is unmistakable. The ephebe is but one of

> . . . the heroic children whom time breeds
> Against the first idea -- to lash the lion,
> Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle.
> (CP, 385)

Compared with 'The Latest Freed Man' who has been released from history's devotion to truth, the ephebe is a lamentable sight, indeed.

Of the sixth section Stevens wrote:

> This was difficult to do & this is what it means:

> The abstract does not exist, but it is certainly as immanent: that is to say, the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract. First I make the effort; then I turn to the weather because that is not inaccessible and is not abstract. The weather as described is the weather that was about me when I wrote this. There is a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro (L, 434).

The 'real' in this instance is the accessible which, therefore, is not 'real' in the sense of being nuomenal reality. It is the visible, our mirror-image of our own senses, 'Weather by Franz Hals'. The abstract is 'not to be spoken to, without a roof'; the visible is 'without / First fruits, without the virginal of birds'. In our act of seeing, 'The dark-blown ceinture' that imprisons us is 'loosened, not relinquished'. The 'abstraction blooded', then, must be imagined and 'imagined well' and therein lies the difficulty.

The seventh section meditates upon the possibility of having moments of access to that abstract truth behind the world we ordinarily see, although the first line reminds us that 'It feels good as it is without the giant / A thinker of the first idea.' Even with the 'dirt and varnish' (L, 427) of generations, the

world is pleasant. The 'Notes', however, are directed toward the possibility of regaining that moment of primal innocence, a moment in which the mind evades, eludes, the habits of reasoned thought, moments that are 'not balances / That we achieve but balances that happen' when, completely passive, one gains an intuitive perception of the 'academies like structures in a mist', the abstract centre in which truth resides. The reference to 'balances' recalls the passage in 'Extracts' (CP, 257) where that state of 'the redeeming thought' was said to be successfully achieved 'Sometimes at sleepy mid-days'. Here the possibility is introduced with the tentative 'Perhaps'.

If the fortuitous moment of passive intense awareness is rare and uncertain, there remains the alternative, suggested in VIII, of actively attempting to recreate the 'structures' in the form of a 'castle-fortress-home'. The allusion to Viollet-le-Duc, French architect of the Gothic revival, gains in its importance to interpretation when we discover the following reference in Focillon's The Life of Forms in Art, a work quoted by Stevens in the essay, 'The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet' (NA, 46):

> Relying upon the height of the bases and the dimensions of the portals, Viollet-le-Duc makes it clear that even the largest cathedrals are always at human scale. But the relation of that scale to such enormous dimensions impresses us immediately both with the sense of our own measure -- the measure of nature itself -- and with the sense of a dizzy immensity that exceeds nature at every point.[18]

The structure, then, that Stevens contemplates would be an enormous enlargement of nature as we know it 'with MacCullough there as major man'. Like the 'first idea' it is a creation of the imagination in which the MacCullough assumes the role traditionally assigned to God: 'Logos and logic', but in this case, clearly a 'crystal hypothesis', never to be mistaken for anything other than a fiction, 'Incipit', as the first word in a medieval text, Plato's form to give meaning to the confusion of the world. The proposal has its weaknesses for 'MacCullough is MacCullough'. As Stevens explains the passage: 'MacCullough is any name, any man. The trouble with humanism is that man as God remains man, but there is an extension of man, the leaner being, in fiction, a possibly more than human human, a composite human. The act of recognizing him is the act of this leaner being moving in on us' (L, 434). Such recognition would deliberately give meaning to the confusion of

appearances:

> As if the waves at last were never broken,
> As if the language suddenly, with ease,
> Said things it had laboriously spoken. (CP, 387)

Section IX attempts to describe the source, the origin of this giant, majestic figure. Even though poetry's 'romantic intoning' and 'declaimed clairvoyance' differ from reason's 'click-clack', and though these are 'parts of apotheosis' they are also tied to language. The emergence of the major man demands a larger, more fundamental base. The ideal that is envisioned is completely severed, 'Compact in invincible foils, from reason', arising instead from the seat of the emotions and instinctive responses of the kind that link man to 'the good of April'. This ideal is to be sought 'in the mind' but not at the level of discursive thought, the level which permits articulation in speech, or even at the level at which clear, concrete images emerge. The only means we have for communicating this feeling for the 'major man' is music: 'My dame, sing for this person accurate songs.' Stevens's recognition of the peculiar gift music has for articulating that which is beyond reason reminds us of Susanne Langer's views on

the subject:

> There is . . . a kind of symbolism peculiarly adapted to the explication of "unspeakable" things, though it lacks the cardinal virtue of language, which is denotation. The most highly developed type of such purely connotational semantic is music.[19]

Unlike speech or imagery which fix the idea in a rigid form, music maintains a fluidity of expression capable of representing what is 'purest in the heart'.

The last poem of 'It Must Be Abstract' reiterates and clarifies the relationship between the 'major man' and man as he is encountered every day. The supreme fiction, the major abstraction, is man raised to his ideal possibilities, but without form, completely abstract, and major man is its 'exponent'. 'Exponent' is used with double meaning, I believe, as symbol and as speaker. To read this as meaning that major man is the poet does not necessarily follow. MacCullough we were told in VIII is any man. As major abstraction he is incapable of speech but even in his symbolic form he is 'abler / In the abstract than in his singular, / More fecund as principle than particle'. To define him precisely would be to lose the essentially abstract

nature of his cause and would establish a new hieratic without escaping the flaw of rigidity that Stevens condemns in the old. He is however, the 'flor-abundant force', the 'heroic part' of the commonal and upon him depends the translation of the major abstraction, 'the inanimate, difficult visage', into articulate speech.

The commonal is incredibly difficult to describe and the difficulty is the theme of an earlier poem, 'United Dames of America' (1937). (The irony in the choice of epigraph for that poem has generally escaped notice, but it must be ironic for how can a poet deal with such undefinables as the commonal, 'the face of the man of the mass' (CP, 206), when, like Jules Renard, he has declared, 'I seek by remaining precise, to be a poet.') Yet every leader within the social structure, every rabbi or chieftain who strives toward the realization of the basic 'human wish' for a better world, though he deals with individuals, 'separate figures one by one', sees them all as well in the one representative, sorry figure, 'in his old coat, / His slouching pantaloons', looking for the lost reality somewhere 'beyond the towns' that have imposed their complexity and confusion upon the natural world. Yet even when he looks to nature, he is

still 'Looking for what was, where it used to be' for he is still the son of Adam who 'awoke in metaphor'. It is this sad figure that the young 'ephebe' is challenged to transform into a 'final elegance', that image of the 'major man'. The transformation must be accomplished, however, without providing consolation for his plight or sanctifying his weaknesses as religion and sentimentality have done. The duty of the poet is 'plainly to propound'.

The second characteristic of the supreme fiction is that 'It Must Change' and this section opens with a scene in which all the elements have been arranged, from which all sense of spontaneity has been removed. The 'old seraph, parcel-gilded' appears as a rigid, static, lifeless ornament surrounded by odours, doves, girls, jonquils and hyacinths that are a profusion of colour, but are, nonetheless, merely repetitions of what was here last year or in the previous generation. The recurrence of natural cycles gives the effect of permanence even though all these items 'Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause / In a universe of inconstancy.' Even the 'seraph is satyr in Saturn'; even a being to all appearances completely impervious to change alters

if placed within another setting or if there are internal alterations of perspective, as when he changes 'according to his thoughts'. The repetition of seasonal changes, regular as the calendar, is not in itself the renewal, the kind of change to which Stevens refers. For a moment the speaker's ability to express the difference that he desires fails him: 'The bees come booming / As if -- The pigeons clatter in the air' (CP, 389).

The spirit knows, however, 'what it intends' and the change desired is not resident in the external scene, in landscape alone. In contrast to the clatter, Stevens presents an image of 'An erotic perfume, half of the body, half / Of an obvious acid' (the 'visible change' [L, 434]) in which both the desire for change and the delicate vibrations which would satisfy that desire are merged. It is a fragile sense of evanescence rather than the blunt booming 'not broken in subtleties'. Glauco Cambon reads this passage as a demand for the 'rawness of immediate sensation', which seems to me to be an unfortunate interpretation of the ethereal poignancy that the 'erotic perfume' implies. That the experience the speaker desires is the immediate and intense apprehension, I agree. But the booming that

he hears is 'blunt', unable to penetrate the heavy overlay of habitual thought that average man in ordinary circumstances wears as the burden of civilization in general and the accretion of his own years of experience in particular. That overlay is like that which covers the gilded seraph, but, we recall, even he can change, 'according to his thoughts'. The poem, therefore, is not a 'negative approach to what Stevens considers the second basic postulate of his 'supreme fiction'.[20] It is instead a rejection of the superficial, simplistic interpretation of the desire for change as a pursuit of novelty or increasingly intense sensual experience that he is presenting. Such an interpretation would grossly misrepresent the much subtler process that is intended.

The second poem, then, is not an inversion of the first, but an elaboration of the concept that the external is not sufficient in itself to provide renewal. Not that the power of external physical forces is to be denied by the assumption of authoritative stance or by issuing a fiat setting forth a more desirable set of conditions:

> The President ordains the bee to be
> Immortal. The President ordains. But does
> The body lift its heavy wing, take up,

Again, an inexhaustible being, rise
Over the loftiest antagonist
To drone the green phrases of its juvenal?
(CP, 390)

The mind is powerless against that 'loftiest antagonist' of all mortal beings. It cannot ordain immortality, and it cannot bring about a return to 'the green phrases' of youthful exhilaration either. Furthermore, why should it be considered desirable to do so?

Why should the bee recapture a lost blague,
Find a deep echo in a horn and buzz
The bottomless trophy, new hornsman after old?

Life, not so totally painful as the plague, yet so much without meaning that it is a blather, is best described as a 'blague', a 'bottomless trophy'. Return to life after death would be mere repetition, a 'new hornsman after old'. Nonetheless, the President of the mind has the advantage of being able to command the good of natural existence, 'the apples on the table', and to determine the degree of his concern with metaphysical questions. He can command 'barefoot servants' to adjust the curtains that limit his field of enquiry until they satisfy his personal requirements 'to a metaphysical t' ('t' for truth?). Once they are so arranged,

> . . . the banners of the nation flutter, burst
> On the flag-poles in a red-blue dazzle, whack
> At the halyards. (CP, 390)

The dazzle is 'red-blue' because it is in part the creation of his own imagination or mind and part the reality that he cannot evade. With all this good available

> Why, then, when in golden fury
>
> Spring vanishes the scraps of winter, why
> Should there be a question of returning or
> Of death in memory's dream? (CP, 390-1)

The fact of death cannot be ignored nor should we live in the past which is a 'death in memory's dream'. Spring, symbolic of the good that occurs and recurs to compensate for the harsh cruelties of life, is a part of what is real. It is this aspect we must live in and we are free to do so. Stevens said in reference to this section: 'Life is always new; it is always beginning. The fiction is part of this beginning' (L, 434).

The third poem illustrates this point by contrasting the 'great statue of the General Du Puy', epitome of permanence and immobility, with the 'warmth' of that which is ever new, always becoming. Unlike the people who live in its noble place and, therefore, die in

succession, the statue remains, a moment arrested, removed from the flow of time. The general, as statue, does not obey the law of change and so he is unbelievable. The lawyers disbelieve him even as an aspect of the past. And doctors, experts in the origin of physiological structures, recognize that he belongs to one of our 'vestigial states of mind', a type that evolutionary development has rendered useless. Immortality always escapes us, even the limited kind of immortality the statue was designed to provide.

That 'the General was rubbish in the end' serves as an object lesson on what to avoid in creating a supreme fiction. As Sukenick says, 'The ideal and its representation, for not changing with the change of reality, have become obsolete.'[21] As we recall from 'The Poems of Our Climate' (1938), 'The imperfect is our paradise' (CP, 194).

The first four stanzas of the fourth poem provide examples of the conjunction of opposites as the origin of a new reality:

> Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body.
(CP, 392)

The fifth stanza contrasts the fecundity of such interaction with the sterility of solitude, a state of single, simple truth which produces only echoes of the self. It is like a trumpet note, producing only one tone no matter how loudly it resounds. The little string of the guitarist-poet, however, has the capacity to produce the reverberations of a crowd of voices. The trumpet speaks of the one, the guitar of the many and by inference from the evidence of the first four stanzas, it therefore is potentially productive. With this example Stevens moves from the concept of simple dualism, the intercourse of opposites, to the more complex, less dramatic forms of interaction that produce the subtlest changes. Not always can the interplay of forces be outlined distinctly nor can they be identified as separate entities:

> The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
> The child that touches takes character from the thing,
> The body, it touches. The captain and his men
>
> Are one and the sailor and the sea are one. (CP, 392)

Thus the speaker making his plea to that force which for him personally shall act as the origin of the constant spiritual rejuvenation he desires, must address himself to something that defies the process of symbolization. It can be addressed only in terms that bespeak the warm emotions its influence arouses:

> Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,
> Sister and solace, brother and delight. (CP, 392)

It is both part of the self and the 'other', both a feminine and masculine principle, and, in total effect, a source of 'solace' and 'delight'.

Stevens confided to Hi Simons that the fifth poem of 'It Must Change' 'is one of the things in the book that I like most' (L, 435). We would probably agree with him, for in these lines we return to the concrete world of lush vegetation, pungent perfumes, pulsating colours and succulent fruits, a world that dominated the pages of Harmonium but one which more and more often seemed to have become blanketed by the very evil

against which Stevens's attacks were so consistently directed, the layers of the 'squamous mind'. Appearing where it does in the 'Notes', after the immobile statue and the discursive abstractions of IV, this patch of the real is a tribute to Stevens's continuing artistic power for it produces precisely the effect of which the whole section speaks.

> What it means [Stevens's letter continues] is that, for all the changes, for all the increases, accessions, magnifyings, what often means most to us, and what, in a great extreme, might mean most to us is just as likely as not to be some little thing like a banjo's twang. This explanation should make it clear that the planter is not a symbol. But one often symbolizes unconsciously, and I suppose that it is possible to say that the planter is a symbol of change. He is, however, the laborious human who lives in illusions and who, after all the great illusions have left him, still clings to one that pierces him (L, 435).

Presumably then, the supreme fiction must accommodate both the giant major man and the minutest particulars of his world.

Again for VI, we have Stevens's explanation given in another letter to Hi Simons:

> You ask about the relation of this poem to the theme of change. There is a repetition of a sound, ke-ke, all over the place. Its monotony unites the separate sounds into one, as a number of faces

> become one, as all fates become a common fate, as all the bottles blown by a glass blower become one, and as all bishops grow to look alike, etc. In its monotony the sound ceased to be minstrelsy, all the leaves are alike, all the birds in the leaves are alike; there is just one bird, a stone bird. In this monotony the desire for change creates change.
>
> We have in our garden half a dozen evergreens In a group which, for convenience, we call our coppice; for no particular reason a change of sound takes place in the coppice. Of course, there may be a psychological reason for the development of the idea. The change is an ingratiating one and intended to be so. When the sparrow begins calling be-thou: Bethou me[22] (I have already said that it probably was a catbird) he expresses one's own liking for the change; he invites attention from the summer grass; he mocks the wren, the jay, the robin. There was a wild minstrelsy, although inarticulate, like clappers without bells: drops of rain falling made lines which were clappers without bells. The change destroys them utterly *** In the face of death life asserts itself. Perhaps it makes an image out of the force with which it struggles to survive. Bethou is intended to be heard; it and ke-ke, which is inimical, are opposing sounds. Bethou is the spirit's own seduction (L,437-8).

Although in this explanation Stevens makes no reference to Shelley, the poem clearly does bring the Shelleyan type of idealistic transport down to earth with a thump. 'It is / A sound like any other. It will end.' The ego's error, however, is not 'the fallacy of wanting to be identified with any one form of nature' that William Van O'Connor reads as the point of 'parodying Shelley's

"Be thou me"'.[23] The fallacy lies in hoping to escape the 'inimical "ke-ke"', the 'thorns of life' by projecting our human emotions into any form of nature or by anthropomorphizing the world of nature in some form of Pantheism or Platonism. Death is 'the granite monotony', 'the tale of all leaves . . . that never changes'. Yet the drama of the spirit's struggle against the inimical initiates a change which relieves the sound of inescapable 'minstrels without minstrelsy'. An honest recognition of the 'seduction' for what it is need not, according to Stevens, subvert the pleasure we can derive from it, but such recognition is essential if we are to enjoy that pleasure without loss of integrity and if we would prevent the supreme fiction that arises out of the interaction from becoming another statue of General du Puy or another pseudo-religious cult.

The lyrical stanzas of VII speak of those moments of reconciliation with the environment that occur under the aegis of the imagination, the 'lustre of the moon'. In such a moment when man's 'easy passion, the ever-ready love' that is part of his 'earthy birth' is not interfered with by mental associations, the beauty of the lilacs is free to arouse only the positive emotions. The perfume evokes nothing, is perceived absolutely with 'nothing

known', none of the hindrances of knowledge. Such unimpeded perceptions give a sense of certainty, are intimations of the 'accessible bliss' for which the 'lover' within every human being sighs. They carry the conviction of ancient authority, 'the book' in which 'the ignorant man' finds his chant and that of the scholar who continually presses against the receding horizon of knowledge, 'the change / Of degrees of perception' that are for him the 'accessible bliss'.

In the confrontation between Nanzia Nunzio and Ozymandias in VIII we have a dramatization of the process of the human mind in its movement toward 'the contemplated spouse', the final, uncovered truth, 'the first idea', the ultimate satisfaction of man's innate passion for certainty. The spouse, the female, is nature; Ozymandias is the ordering faculty of the mind. Gradually, under his scrutiny, she removes the glittering ornaments, the fictions which have adorned her 'on her trip around the world', in her passage through time. When she has been 'stripped more nakedly / Than nakedness', has yielded, seemingly to 'an inflexible / Order', when a complete system of laws has been set forth to disclose the secrets of the whole universe, she demands recognition in that form as a conception fit to bear 'the

spirit's diamond coronal'. She demands that the human mind accept her as the ultimate truth. But the ordering mind itself, like Shelley's statue, reveals its own limitations.

> Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
> Is never naked. A fictive covering
> Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.
> (CP, 396)

Her name tells us Nanzia Nunzio is always the ambassador, never the spouse despite her assertion, repeated each time an item of the clothing that she wears is removed. Though science repeatedly uncovers new secrets of nature her essence is hidden by our means of observation.

Part of the 'fictive covering' that shields nature's secrets from our knowledge is created by the difficulty of finding words to accurately represent reality in its totality. Thus in IX the poem, the process dramatized in the previous poem, 'goes from the poet's gibberish' of words to 'the gibberish of the vulgate and back again'. The words are 'gibberish' because they ever fall short of providing a completely satisfactory understanding. The facts of reality are 'gibberish' because we fail to apprehend totally and thus are doomed to fail to comprehend completely as well. The series of questions that follow the opening statement

constitute Stevens's analysis of his own poetry:

> Does it move to and fro or is it of both
>
> At once? is it a luminous flittering
> Or the concentration of a cloudy day?
> Is there a poem that never reaches words
>
> And one that chaffers the time away?
> Is the poem both peculiar and general?

The reaction of the public to such poetry is summed up:

> There's a meditation there, in which there seems
>
> To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or
> Not apprehended well. Does the poet
> Evade us, as in a senseless element? (CP, 396)

Stevens defends himself spiritedly:

> Evade, this hot, dependent orator,
> The spokesman at our bluntest barriers,
> Exponent by a form of speech, the speaker
>
> Of a speech only a little of the tongue?
> It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks.
> 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.

The suggestion that he (and the truly personal note, so rare in Stevens's poetry, is unmistakable here), driven by a passion for reality, dependent on the necessary angel of reality, and 'spokesman at our bluntest barriers', storming at our limitations (L, 435) in a

speech that is inadequate for the expression of all the tongue would say, should deliberately 'evade' meaning or obscure his poetry is preposterous. His defense for the seeming peculiarity of his style is that it is essential for speaking the 'peculiar potency of the general' that can so easily deteriorate into the truism, the platitude, the cliché. His aim is to combine the language of his imaginative vision, a language foreign to the ordinary way of looking at the world, with the everyday language of the human comedy and thereby arrive at 'the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks'. Again, through the principle of the conjunction of opposites he attempts to derive something new in order to meet the demand that 'it must change'.

In the last poem, we see the poet in his 'place of trance' (L, 435), on a bench in the park. The motion of the lake water, the swans, the wind, produce a changing scene that illustrates the 'necessitous / And present way'. Like the scene of girls and flowers in the first poem in this section, it is a will to change 'too constant to be denied', but by reason of that constancy as well, not sufficient for the human need. 'The casual is not / Enough.' The supreme fiction must not only bring a change but a transformation which is actively sought for in

'rubbings of a glass in which we peer'. Again, as in the first poem, the transformed world meets an inner need and is a product of that necessity exerting itself in our perceptual processes. The new forms in which the world appears are 'the suitable amours' which we propose as part of the supreme fiction and, 'Time will write them down.' The ideals we propose for ourselves will find fruition in the future and become part of history, but even as they are written down they are subject to the inexorable processes of change and will go down before new beginnings.

The third characteristic of a supreme fiction is that 'It Must Give Pleasure' and, though we take pleasure from the changes spoken of already, there are other aspects of the pleasurable that merit exploration. The first instance is that which arises from the fact that we have alternatives to choose from in our encounter with the world within the limitations that being human imposes on us. We choose that way of seeing which best satisfies us personally. Moreover, we can choose on the basis of the kind of satisfaction or pleasure we most desire. The first choice outlined here is between those pleasures easily achieved and those more difficult but also more deeply satisfying. To 'sing jubilas exact', precisely

as set forth by tradition in 'accustomed times' and to conform to conventional habits of mind and expression is a 'facile exercise'. The first four stanzas evoke the scene of a parade in which a multitude moves to music as set forth by St. Jerome who 'begat the tubas by translating the Bible' (L, 435).

> But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
> On the image of what we see, to catch from that
>
> Irrational moment its unreasoning,
> As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
> Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall
>
> Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed
> Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
> We reason about them with a later reason.
> (CP, 398-9)

The more profoundly moving experience is achieved when, by ardent effort, we see with immediacy, in the moment before the rational processes can order the raw data into discursive patterns; in that moment we come as close as is possible to the 'first idea' of natural events. These intense perceptions are not the transformations achieved through the imagination in the 'Theatre of Trope', the transformations spoken of in the last poem of 'It Must Change'. But they are equally moving and when we reason about them they are already gone, for reason is an

after-the-fact process which can take place only when our mental machinery has clicked the bare percepts into the configuration of concepts.

The imaginary 'blue woman' of II is one who seeks the real, desiring no part of transforming metaphor. Stevens's letters provide an interesting comment on this section:

> One of the approaches to fiction is by way of its opposite: reality, the truth, the thing observed, the purity of the eye. The more exquisite the thing seen, the more exquisite the thing unseen. Eventually there is a state at which any approach becomes the actual observation of the thing approached. Nothing mystical is even for a moment intended.
>
> The blue woman was probably the weather of a Sunday morning when I wrote this. . . . Obviously in a poem composed of the weather and of things drifting round in it: the time of year and one's thoughts and feelings, the cold delineations round one take their places without help. Distinguish change and metamorphoses (L, 444-5).

The poem, then, is a return to the ordinary, every-day way of seeing things and a taking of pleasure in the familiarity that natural, orderly change permits. Without regularity, naming would not be possible and each occurrence would be strange. In that 'It was enough / For her that she remembered' we may assume that some past experience of imagination's metamorphosis has taken place

within her to provide the contrast that makes the ordinary pleasurable. In 'A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream' (1947) Stevens will take up this theme again.

Out of the scene of bush and stone, weathered slate and vine, that confronts the eye in III, 'the lasting visage' of a God emerges, 'face of stone', forehead, throat, lips, and crown taking shape through the anthropomorphizing, Narcissistic tendency of the eye and the passionate-red longing for a deity to provide certitude.[24] Even a 'lasting visage in a lasting bush' gradually undergoes change, and as the memory of the God whom Moses encountered in the burning bush grew fainter, his 'red renown / Blowing itself upon the tedious ear' indicated a loss of force. The reference to 'the dead shepherd' is suggestive of the reincarnation of the Jehovah of Psalm XXIII, a God whose 'effulgence' had faded seriously by the time it received renewal through the life, and even more, through the death of Christ. Still critical of orthodox theology, Stevens makes ironic comments on a fiction which combines 'tremendous chords from hell', the obsession with sin and guilt, with enjoining 'the sheep' to 'carouse'. The brief, 'Or so they said' succinctly states Stevens's judgement of the

historical validity of the religious version of man's place in the universe. The concluding lines: 'Children in love with them brought early flowers / And scattered them about, no two alike,' may be sly reference to the proliferation of Christian sects even in the period of early flowering, a proliferation that he treated with even greater asperity in 'Gray Stones, Gray Pigeons' (1934).

In IV the opening lines link us securely to the last line of I and the difficulty of seeing, directly, intuitively, the reality which surrounds us:

> We reason of these things with later reason
> And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
> And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.
> (*CP*, 401)

The 'mystic marriage in Catawba' is a dramatized presentation of such a moment of perception in which the mind, 'the great captain', comes face to face with the elusive 'maiden Bawda'. The play on 'Catawba' and 'Bawda' emphasizes the naturalistic implications of the maiden's role. The 'ceremonial hymn' is a recognition of the fleeting quality of the 'marriage':

> . . . Anon
> We loved but would no marriage make. Anon
> The one refused the other one to take[.]

As in 'Extracts from Addresses to The Academy of Fine Ideas', the moment in which the mind feels confident in its meeting with the external world, when the 'eye believes', is described as a sacramental experience. Here 'the sipping of the marriage wine' can take place only when each is taken by the other, not for what each appears to be, but for what pleasure the conjunction can yield:

> Each must the other take not for his high,
> His puissant front nor for her subtle sound,
>
> The shoo-shoo-shoo of secret cymbals round.
> Each must the other take as sign, short sign
> To stop the whirlwind, balk the elements.

The meeting is but a brief illumination, a momentary shelter amid the confusion of experience. The reasoning mind loves 'the ever-hill Catawba' of its ever-challenging environment and 'therefore married Bawda', its sensuous manifestation, despite the taint of evil which surrounds a figure compounded of pleasure and transience. 'Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun,' for just as the world is dependent on the sun as source of energy and organic life, so is Bawda dependent upon the perceiving mind for her existence in any form meaningful to human consciousness; she is 'a place dependent on ourselves'. The naturalism remains fundamental, however,

for the marriage-place is 'neither heaven nor hell', but a place where 'love's characters come face to face' in brief moments of unmediated perception.

For the two poems which follow, V and VI, Stevens has provided unusually lucid explications:

> The sophisticated man: the Canon Aspirin, (the man who has explored all the projections of the mind, his own particularly) comes back, without having acquired a sufficing fiction, -- to, say, his sister and her children. His sister has never explored anything at all and shrinks from doing so. He is conscious of the sensible ecstasy and hums laboriously in praise of the rejection of dreams etc.
>
> For all that, it gives him, in the long run, a sense of nothingness, of nakedness, of the finality and limitation of fact; and lying on his bed, he returns once more to night's pale illuminations. He identifies himself with them. He returns to the side of the children's bed, with every sense of human dependence. But there is a supreme effort which it is inevitable that he should make. If he is to elude human pathos, and fact, he must go straight to the utmost crown of night: find his way through the imagination or perhaps to the imagination. He might escape from fact but he would only arrive at another nothingness, another nakedness, the limitation of thought. It is not, then, a matter of eluding human pathos, human dependence. Thought is part of these, the imagination is part of these, and they are part of thought and of imagination. In short, a man with a taste for Meursault, and lobster Bombay, who has a sensible sister and who, for himself, thinks to the very material of his mind, doesn't have much choice about yielding to 'the complicate, the amassing harmony' (L, 445).

In Canon Aspirin, then, we see personified the dilemma that Stevens had been waging in his poetry from the time of the 'Comedian', when he 'laboriously hummed' the praise of common sense indifference, through to the sense of human responsibility in Ideas of Order which resulted in the themes recurring throughout the major poems of this middle period: the necessity of belief in the face of the impossibility of belief in a world where contradictions rule. The decision to include the whole, the 'complicate, the amassing harmony' is easier to make than to fulfill for, though it is the only reasonable decision open to the man who has 'explored all the projections of the mind', it still demands an exercise of mind beyond that to which the reason is adapted.

In VII we are reminded that Man's intelligence differs from that of animals in degree rather than in kind and its primary purpose is to subdue the environment in order that he may survive in it. To this end 'He imposes orders as he thinks of them, / As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair.' But Man goes beyond that elementary purpose when he

. . . builds capitols and in their corridors,

> Whiter than wax, sonorous, fame as it is,
> He establishes statues of reasonable men,
> Who surpassed the most literate owl, the most
> erudite
>
> Of elephants. (CP, 403)

He is capable of making value judgements and symbolizing the objects of his veneration. Notably, he values the 'reasonable men'. But reason imposes rather than discovers, it is the outgrowth of the necessity to survive, to do battle with an opponent, rather than an instrument for making a discovery such as that which may come from intuitive sympathy:

> 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 [.]
> (CP, 404)

The last stanzas are an expression of continuing hope 'that in time / The real will from its crude compoundings come', and that man will be able, by stripping away the fictions of orders that the reason has imposed, to come upon 'The fiction of an absolute', a discovery that will encompass all of the complications. When that time comes the form in which the fiction appears will be unlike

anything we have known before: 'Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike, / Warmed by a desperate milk.' To this end he pleads with the Angel of Reason, 'Be silent in your luminous cloud' so that other modes of consciousness may be attentive to the 'luminous melody of proper sound'.

The need for the 'fiction of an absolute' raises the question 'What am I to believe?' and the answer is in accord with the dictum that 'it must give pleasure'. The imagination, if it can construct the angel satisfied, 'warm', in the face of the 'violent abyss' and without regard of 'golden destiny', because it is a part of the self, must in so doing give satisfaction to that self as well. The imagined experience is as genuine an experience as any other the self may undergo. If the creation of such an experience is possible for a moment in time, the idea is capable of being projected, extended into the future, to an imagination of a time in which the supreme experience is dependent on no possession of belief or thing and is purely a state of being, a time in which 'I am and as I am, I am'. That would be the supreme fiction then and of no other order than those which constitute the 'external regions' of the physical

world, filled with reflections of ourselves.

The sense of power provided by VIII calls for the rejoicing of IX:

> Whistle aloud, too weedy wren. I can
> Do all that angels can. I enjoy like them,
> Like men besides, like men in light secluded,
>
> Enjoying angels. (CP, 405)

The joy is self-created to meet a need of the self, is self-perpetuating and thus, like the repetitive cycles of nature each part of which is prelude, it is a continual process which proceeds toward no purpose other than its own self-fulfillment. Our repetitive songs of desire, fulfillment and new desire are the way in which

> . . . we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
> Above the table spins its constant spin,
> So that we look at it with pleasure. . . .
> (CP, 406)

The closing stanza contains the tentative suggestion that the 'man-hero is not the exceptional monster', that his mental activity is but the highest form of an activity that pervades the whole universe, that the mind-matter dualism is one of the imposed orders that will be disposed of in his new supreme fiction. This suggestion, and the reciprocal nature of the relationship entered upon by the Captain and Bawda in poem IV, implies

that Stevens would quite agree with Whitehead's theory of 'The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness' and that his new fiction would be in accord with the theory of 'organic mechanism' that Whitehead proposes as a replacement for the 'bifurcation' effected through the 'Cartesian split'.[25] From Stevens's essay 'A Collect of Philosophy' (OP, 183-202), we know he was acquainted with these theories for in that essay he quotes from Whitehead's Science and the Modern World in which these ideas are set forth.

The final poem is addressed to Stevens's eternal inamorata, the 'Fat girl', earth (L, 426), whom he can experience fully only in the irreconcilable paradoxes of constancy and inconstancy, order and chaos, unity and diversity, in which she appears, a moving contour never at rest at either pole of her essential antinomies. To see her as 'familiar' is 'aberration' for familiarity is mental habit, the carapace which blinds us to the subtleties of growth and decline which proceed continually making each encounter new. The difficulty of grasping her essential nature becomes most obvious in moments of reflection as when, 'underneath / A tree', the 'symbol of fixity, permanence, completion, the opposite of "a moving contour"'(L, 444), the desire comes to 'name you flatly,

waste no words, / Check your evasions, hold you to yourself'. At such a moment when the mind concentrates upon the attempt to fix, to define clearly, the earth's mystery becomes most apparent and the transformation to 'the soft-footed phantom' occurs. Then it is that the poet realizes that 'however fragrant, however dear', the reality of the world in relation to his mind, is 'the irrational / Distortion'. Nonetheless, even while acknowledging this fact the human wish remains:

> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
>
> They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
> We shall return at twilight from the lecture
> Pleased that the irrational is rational,
>
> Until flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.
> (CP, 407)

In total the 'Notes' represent, as Stevens has said, '. . . a miscellany in which it would be difficult to collect the theory latent in them' (L, 430-1). However, as more attention is given to the poem and as more attempts at close reading are made (the one presented here does not pretend to be an exhaustive inquiry), the theory is gradually being collected. The epilogue in which the poet's 'war between the mind / and sky' is

likened to that of the soldier engaged in a military confrontation between conflicting ideologies, is not a summation but a reiteration of his sense of the importance of his theory. The soldier's war (in World War II terms, at least) is in defense of the right to a free expression of ideas. Thus, Stevens's 'war' depends on that of the soldier. Yet, at a more intangible, more pervasive level, 'The soldier is poor without the poet's lines'. The concept is one that appears in Stevens's essay, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' (1941):

> There is, in fact, a world of poetry undistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since 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 of it (NA, 31).

NOTES

IV TO FAT ELYSIA

[1]Stanley Burnshaw, 'Wallace Stevens and the Statue', Sewanee Review, LXIX, (Summer 1961) p. 366. In this article Burnshaw reconstructs the situation surrounding the publication of his article of criticism which first appeared in The New Masses, Oct. 1, 1935, p. 42.

[2]Ibid., p. 358.

[3]William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), p. 60.

[4]Joseph Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 139.

[5]Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 394.

[6]Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 187.

[7]Sister Therese, S.N.D., 'Stevens' "Glass of Water"', Explicator, XXI (March), No. 56, unpaginated.

[8]Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963), pp. 139-142.

[9]Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 146.

[10]Fuchs, op. cit., p. 78.

[11]Riddell, op. cit., p. 160.

[12]John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 137.

[13]Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 112.

[14]Riddell, op. cit., pp. 165-185, offers a detailed reading in which he, too, rejects the suggestion (which has been strongly urged by R.P. Blackmur in Language as Gesture New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952 , p. 250, and has been implied by Louis L. Martz in 'Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963 , pp. 133-150) that the tripartite form has an unusual significance. Riddell's reading differs radically from my own, however, in I, i and II, iv.

[15]Newton B. Stallknecht, 'Absence in Reality: A Study in the Epistemology of the Blue Guitar', Kenyon Review, XXI (Fall 1959), pp. 545-62. Stallknecht says, 'Like Plato's idea of the good, the first idea is not a human invention nor is it the invention of any deity. Rather it is the idea of all invention, the idea of the "invented world."'

[16]For a very different reading of this passage see Ronald Sukenick, 'A Wallace Stevens Handbook: A Reading of His Major Poems and an Exposition of His Theory and Practice', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1962, p. 153.

[17]Margaret Lee Wilson Peterson, 'Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition: A Study of the Philosophical Background of Stevens' Poetry', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, 1965, p. 309. Peterson considers that the 'late plural' 'refers to the emotional responses of the poet's audience, who share the fresh perceptions of reality but react individually'.

[18]Henri Focillon, The Life of Forms in Art (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1948), p. 22.

[19]Susanne K. Langer, _Philosophy in a New Key: A Study of the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art_ (New York: The New American Library, 1942), p. 82.

[20]Glauco Cambon, _The Inclusive Flame_ (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 100.

[21]Sukenick, _op. cit._, p. 168.

[22]Holly Stevens, editor of the _Letters_, notes, 'At this point Stevens has written "Tutoyez-moi" in the margin.'

[23]O'Connor, _op. cit._, p. 72.

[24]_L._, p. 438. Stevens says, 'The first thing one sees of any deity is the face, so that the elementary idea of God is a face: a lasting visage in a lasting bush. Adoration is a form of face to face.'

[25]Alfred North Whitehead, _Science and the Modern World_ (New York: The Free Press, 1925), pp. 55, 58 and 79-80.

V

MOSTLY MARRIAGE-HYMNS

In a letter written in 1949 Stevens said, 'From the imaginative period of the Notes I turned to the ideas of Credences of Summer' (L, 636). And, later, 'At the time when that poem was written my feeling for the necessity of a final accord with reality was at its strongest: reality was the summer of the title of the book in which the poem appeared' (L, 719). There are, nonetheless, several poems in Transport to Summer which grow out of the subsidiary themes in 'Notes', themes which Stevens apparently felt to be worthy of further consideration. 'Certain Phenomena of Sound' (1942), for example, expands upon the theme of the epilogue of 'Notes', the assertion that we all live within the world created by the poet.

To illustrate the point, the first section of the poem presents a scene from which the human observer has been removed. 'Someone has left for a ride in a balloon / Or in a balloon examines the bubble of air' (CP, 372). Without that observer who, wherever he may

be, still goes about encased in the 'bubble' of his perceptions, 'The room is emptier than nothingness' for all the potential for the transformations the human mind can make is gone:

> The cricket in the telephone is still.
> A geranium withers on the window-sill.
>
> Cat's milk is dry in the saucer. (CP, 286)

Without the mind's efforts and interventions, the only sound in the room is a 'Sunday song' of activity suspended except for those sounds 'That do not beat by pain, but calendar, / Nor meditate the world as it goes round'. Such sounds are perfectly innocuous: 'It is safe to sleep to a sound that time brings back.'

The second section demonstrates the contrast between such recurring sounds and those of 'most prolific narrative' of human speech. As a result of the first, nothing new is initiated. The second is an occasion for celebration. Accompanied by the music of 'slick sonata' which seems 'To be a nature' linking house and garden, the narrative becomes 'A sound producing the things that are spoken' and these exceed the heights reached by the redwoods, tallest of nature's productions.

In the third section, health-giving qualities are attributed to speech, even in its most elementary form.

Eulalia, 'sister and nun' to him who lounges on the hospital porch, is recognized only from the shelter provided by the parasol which is not speech itself but a 'blank in which one sees', the mental faculties which filter the raw data of reality, permitting individual items within it to take form and assume solid proportions, to be 'of the solid of white' (CP, 412). This, in turn, permits the naming process to take place and in that process both the perceived and the perceiver are created. The speaker's name may, as Riddell observes, refer to Rossini's Semiramide or Semiramis, the Assyrian goddess who combines wisdom with voluptuousness.[1] The latter seems most likely since through his act of naming, Semiramide provides the link between physical sensations and mental being.

'Description Without Place' (1945) is a much longer exploration of this theme, so long that a full reading will not be included here,[2] but it deserves mention for the explicit statement it makes about the significance of speech:

> It matters, because everything we say
> Of the past is description without place, a cast
>
> Of the imagination, made in sound;
> And because what we say of the future must portend,

> Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be
> Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening.
> (CP, 345-7)

In the marvellous image of 'a thin bird, / That thinks of settling, yet never settles', 'Somnambulisma' (1943) portrays the process of defining the self and the world as an activity which never reaches completion. The generations 'follow after' just as 'Health follows after health' in 'Parochial Theme', and, as in that earlier poem, the endless hovering of the bird is the essence of life. Without it, existence would be a living death:

> 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: not of that land
> To which they may have gone, but of the place in which
> They lived, in which they lacked a pervasive being,
>
> In which no scholar, separately dwelling,
> Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia,
> Which, as a man feeling everything, were his.

'Repetitions of a Young Captain' (1944) examines the question of authentic selfhood within the larger context of religious, social and philosophical issues. Despite the imagery of general destruction with which

the poem opens, Stevens is not addressing himself to the conditions of the war going on at the time the poem was written. The theatre image, as in 'Of Modern Poetry' (1940), is a metaphor for the total context of belief within which modern man must define himself and the poet must construct his poems. The collapse of the theatre represents the collapse of the prevailing myths, of the religion that is the inheritance of centuries of Western culture.[3]

Notably, the ruin of what once was stands 'in an external world', external to the speaker now and one which, even when it was real, effectual,

> . . . was something overseas
> That I remembered, something that I remembered
> Overseas, that stood in an external world.
> (CP, 306)

It was part of the past, existing in memory but foreign to his own being. The association of the collapse of Christian religion with a location 'overseas' harks back to the section of 'Sunday Morning' in which the woman, meditating upon religion and the meaning of life, passes in her mind 'over the seas, to silent Palestine' (CP, 67). In both cases the emphasis is on the distance between the age of faith and the modern age of perplexity. What is

real now is not that faith in a world beyond or external to natural existence, but 'the rip / Of the wind and the glittering', the pain and cruelty of living and the delights that are also part of life. These are the 'new reality'.

In the second section the poet portrays a society that, in general, is not immediately aware of the catastrophe that has befallen it. They 'sat in the theatre, in the ruin, / As if nothing had happened', the image of a culture attempting to carry on as always when the basic sanctions of that culture have been destroyed. The actor, a figure representing the artist, the poet, in such a theatre is dimly seen and though he speaks, nothing of what he says warrants our attention. In a time when art must fill the void created by the loss of faith, 'His hands became his feelings'; art has become purely an expression of emotion. The actor's shape is thick, graceless, for his purpose has become unclear and poorly defined. He produces 'thin seconds', poor imitations of a time of poverty, 'glibly gapering', superficial and bored. The action central to the performance on this gutted stage is a polished embrace between two figures 'born old', as old as Adam and Eve, but with none of the profound significance of that myth. The vapidity of the contemporary portrayal stems from the shallow sentimenta-

lity with which it is treated. The audience has become only too 'familiar with the depths of the heart' that can be plumbed through the boy-meets-girl approach, a minor version of that which Stevens calls 'the sexual myth' (CP, 355) in a later poem. The performance is 'Like a machine left running and running down', a mechanical repetition reminiscent of the embrace of Eliot's typist and the 'young man carbuncular' in The Waste Land. To the speaker of this poem, the romantic scene is faded and, like religion, 'something I remembered overseas', not anything vital to present reality.

The third section begins with a comment on the reality of the time in which war dominated the contemporary scene. However, though Stevens addresses himself to the topical, the 'millions of major men against their like', he also clearly indicates that his concern extends beyond the immediate condition. These major men 'make more than thunder's rural rumbling'. Stevens is more intent upon the spiritual or cultural effect of the conflict upon those caught up in the struggle than upon the changing conditions of immediate circumstance. As he notes in the later poem 'Gigantomachia' (1947), the concerted, concentrated effort exerted in war makes each man engaged therein a giant, gives him an enlarged

conception of his own power and importance. The person who 'takes form / From the others', who acts in conformity with a popular cause, is armed with only a small portion of the total energy of the universe, but his participation in the mass effort 'sweats up', works up, an exaggerated sense of his own importance in his 'make-matter' materialistic and essentially undiscriminating 'matter-nothing' mind. This 'matter-makes in years of war'. The sense of 'being in a reality' beyond that of a previous era 'makes him rise above the houses, looking down', a militant superman, looking down upon humanity, who fails to recognize himself as part thereof.

The course taken by the super-hero, like that of the speaker, is governed by the constructs, 'the image in his mind'. The difference between the two is that the speaker's route, one taken by 'milky millions', untold numbers of unidentified, obscure people, 'leaves nothing much behind' because it refuses to accept any one idea as the total, final truth. It does not permit the expansion of the ego gained by the soldier. Significantly, the speaker is merely a captain among 'millions of major men'.

In III, Stevens argues that speech is a reality, an element of the real equal in its operational effect

to that of the physical elements which exist in time and place. As in 'Description of Place', words matter very much. Moreover, 'If these were only words that I am speaking / Indifferent sounds and not the heraldic-ho', not the true emblem, 'Of the clear sovereign that is reality', the ultimate power of the real, he would no longer be able to repeat and keep repeating them. The argument calls to mind a passage from Susanne Langer's discussion of the origin and development of speech in human beings:

> In a social environment, the vocalizing and articulating instinct of babyhood is fostered by response, and as the sounds become symbols their use becomes a dominant habit. Yet the passing of the instinctive phase is marked by the fact that a great many phonemes that do not meet with response are completely lost.[4]

In adults repetitions of a 'know-and-know' unrelated to external reality are 'Central responses to a central fear, / The adobe of the angels', like the meaningless incantations which derive from an instinctual fear of inhuman forces in the environment, a primitive kind of fear that is the source of religions and superstitions.

The transformation that speech effects in formulating and communicating a complex structure of

feelings associated with a generalized conception is presented in the metaphor of the soldier at the railway station, leaving his civilian life to take up military duties. The transformation effected by a new description is likened to his experience of seeing 'a familiar building drenched in cloud'. The familiar item of the world as he has conceived of it disappears when he encounters 'an external world', a world that exists beyond the confines of his own mind and its conceptions, a world of communal experience in which his individual selfhood is absorbed. The world he enters 'has nothing of place', has no geographic location, nor does his journey to a new world take place in time. Though 'the departing soldier is as he is, / Yet in that form will not return' for he becomes a new person. There is a play on 'form' here; though the soldier becomes a giant, partakes of the 'giant of sense', he becomes a 'giant without a body'. Like the Great Gatsby, he is 'the product of his own immaculate conceptions'. Unlike Gatsby, however, who is destroyed because his conceptions do not conform to the larger reality of the America in which he attempts to realize his dream, Stevens's soldier is accorded the possibility of sharing a gigantic life. The possibility is a function of the degree of concordance between his

conceptions and those of the larger community, the 'gigantic' which 'has a reality of its own'. Students of Whitehead's philosophy will recognize the similarity between Stevens's 'reality' and Whitehead's definition of 'actual entities', of 'really real' things.[5]

The interpretation of reality is of the essence for the speaker in V: 'On a few words of what is real in the world / I nourish myself.' And those few words are his defense against 'whatever remains', the remainder of experience which threatens to cloud or obscure his words. That is not to say that Stevens has come to a final decision about the nature of 'reality'; in the few words of the second stanza, he includes the three basic and supposedly mutually exclusive interpretations that, repeated in variations since man first attempted a systematic, self-consistent explanation of the whole of experience, have constituted the body of philosophy. He first asks whether reality is 'the old, the roseate parent', the continuing permanent Substance, the constant nuomena out of which all the changing phenomena that we experience arise. Secondly, he questions the concept of Substance, asking whether reality, perhaps, consists of the phenomena alone, 'the bride come jingling, kissed and

cupped' the ever-changing Heraclitan flux, the dynamic principle which never reaches the consummate form of static substance. Or, thirdly, does reality exist only in the self, in the mind, as the idealist school contends. These few words Stevens calls

> . . . a memorandum voluble
> Of the giant sense, the enormous harnesses
> And writhing wheels of this world's business,
>
> The drivers in the wind-blows cracking whips,
> The pulling into the sky and the setting there
> Of the expanses that are mountainous rock and sea;
>
> And beyond the days, beyond the slow-foot litters
> Of the nights, the actual, universal strength,
> Without a word of rhetoric -- there it is.
>
> A memorandum of the people sprung
> From that strength, whose armies set their own
> expanses. (CP, 308-9)

They bespeak the giant, general sense of the total strength or energy resident in the huge relationship of forces that is the universe. Further, these few words are evidence that human beings, one manifestation of that fundamental energy, constitute a form of life which makes its own world. 'A few words of what is real or may be' prove that humanity sets its 'own expanses'. By 'real' Stevens means, I believe, the real of present physical

fact; the 'may be' is not a reference to the question of which of the interpretations given is true, but is a usefully ambiguous expression which serves as a pivot upon which Stevens turns from a consideration of the 'real' as the 'true' to a consideration of the 'real' in contrast to the 'ideal' or a contrast between what is and what may be.

The 'glistening reference to what is real' suggests that realm of the ideal which exists only in the mind yet in the existence of which lies 'the universe that supplements the manqué'. The soldier in actual war, of course, is involved in a conflict of ideals, fighting what is for the sake of what ought to be and thus is 'seeking his point between the two'. As the exemplar of the human condition he is the 'organic consolation', the living reconciliation of the ideal and the real, the mental and the physical, the entity that is the individual person as a 'society of the spirit when it is alone', made up of two half-arcs. The one 'hanging in mid-air' is 'composed, appropriate to the incomplete' because only that which is not actualized in the living real of the earth's business can be static, composed and unchanging. Although it is not part of the earth it is

'supported by a half-arc in mid-earth', that region of the physical from which no human escape is possible. The final line, 'millions of instances of which I am one', serves to emphasize that the young captain stands as surrogate for us all.

The seventh section is the section of decision and it seems to consist of choosing between opposing modes of interpreting the nature of things. There is a choice of one theatre or another, the 'powdered personals' of romantic egoism in which all is interpreted in relation to a personal emotion, against 'the giant's rage' of the epic hero who exists only as the huge projection of the ideals of a whole people. Stevens describes the first as 'Blue and its keep inversions in the moon', a product of the imagination in which the only distinctions of colour are gradations in intensity of the same blue which, in the final analysis, is a feminine attempt to hide from reality. The second is 'gold whipped reddened in big-shadowed black', a pattern of sharply defined, forcefully exaggerated contrasts, a masculine conception of order achieved by abstracting general laws from the confusion of experience.

With these as alternatives, 'The choice is made.' But the choice he makes is neither the monochromatic blue

composition nor the abstract system of sharp contrasts. He selects instead the colour that is not one of the primary shades, the green that bespeaks a world of growing things, of organic life. For it is only in living fully that man finds 'the orator / Of our passionate height', and only in attending to the vigorous abandon of him who 'wears a tufted green, / And tosses green for those for whom green speaks' do we find the mode which will 'secrete us in reality'. Only in the process of being does reality consist. The answer is, of course, the existentialist's choice, a rejection of both the 'giantness' of classical sublimities and the 'rainy arcs / And pathetic magnificences' of romantic emotionalism in favour of a process of discovery. That which he hopes to discover is a 'civil nakedness in which to be', and the description implies the paradox he desires to maintain: it is a combination of the civilized and the primitive in which he may face with dignity and without histrionics or evasions, 'with the exactest force / The precisions of fate, nothing fobbed off, nor changed / In a beau language without a drop of blood'.

'The Creations of Sound' (1944) relates the choice of the green orator to the writing of poetry. Just as in 'Notes' where music was said to be the fitting vehicle for conveying the idea of the major man because it could

tap the common reservoir of humanity's capacity for idealism and self-fulfillment, so in this poem music is considered to be nearer to the 'accretion from ourselves' (<u>CP</u>, 310) than is speech. When we use language we discover that 'X is an obstruction' to our attempts to approach 'the secondary expositor, / A being of sound, intelligent beyond intelligence', the major man who can objectify the universal human wish. For all the creative power Stevens attributed to speech in 'Certain Phenomena of Sound', he still maintains an ambivalent attitude towards it:

> Tell X that speech is not dirty silence
> Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.
> It is more than an imitation for the ear. (<u>CP</u>, 311)

Poetry should include 'the second part of life', the part that the rational processes of the intellect cannot express.[6] That does not mean, however, that it should become the means of expressing personal, individual emotions. According to Stevens, poems in which the poet is 'a man / Too exactly himself' and which 'do not make the visible a little hard / To see', fail to yield the full scope of human possibilities:

> We do not say ourselves like that in poems.
> We say ourselves in syllables that rise
> From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak.

One would suppose that neither do we 'say ourselves' like that in pictures, but 'Holiday in Reality' (1944) illustrates how difficult it is for the artist to escape from being 'too exactly himself'. The first section, indeed, seems to be an affirmation of the artist's right to express the purely individual and personal imaginative experience: 'After all, they knew that to be real each had / To find for himself his earth, his sky, his sea. / And the words for them and the colors that they possessed' (CP, 312). However, that independence, that individualistic approach to reality, is not without its drawbacks. In creating such singular worlds, the artists of Durand-Ruel's gallery deny any basis for communication with their fellow-beings. No one else is free to enter their world because 'It was impossible to breathe at Durand-Ruel's.'

The second section affirms the necessity of drawing upon the common springs of human feeling, springs that have their origin in man's physical, earthly dimension, in creating the work of art. However, by referring to that work as the 'flowering Judas', Stevens admits

what he had already discovered in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', that no matter how the details of reality are approached, it is impossible to escape completely the traitorous intervention of the individual way of seeing:

> These are real only if I make them so. Whistle
> For me, grow green for me and, as you whistle and
> grow green,
>
> Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin
> And I taste at the root of the tongue the unreal
> of what is real.

Frank Doggett, in his chapter on 'Variations on a Nude', has pointed out that Stevens's awareness of this inescapable element in the artist's work is similar in concept to what Whitehead terms 'prehension'.[7] It is this awareness which constantly drives Stevens to reassert the necessity of returning to primary experience. 'From the Packet of Anarcharsis' (1946) and 'So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch' (1947) both describe the distancing process and the desire for 'the floridest reality' (CP, 366).

Despite the significance that Stevens attributed to 'Credences of Summer', which celebrates the 'real', 'Esthétique du Mal' (1944) has emerged as the most fascinating poem of Transport to Summer, perhaps because of its provocative theme, but equally so because in it the

discursive mode reaches a felicity of expression that approaches lyricism. Its theme is one that has appeared briefly in various poems from the time of 'Sunday Morning' (1915) and 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' (1922). It was part of the meditation in 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery', was discussed in 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas' and in the 'Notes'. Stevens admitted his preoccupation with the subject of death in an early letter to Harriet Monroe of April 8th, 1918 and it is this preoccupation which gives the existentialist cast to his world-view. But his attempt to effect a complete transvaluation in which evil becomes an aesthetic principle and a philosophical good finds its fullest expression in the 'Esthétique'.[8]

The first canto of the poem is an example of Stevens's technique of pseudo-narrative and only if we abandon any attempt to understand it in terms of a sequence of events does the significance of the images emerge. The essential elements of the discussion are presented in the first scene:

> He was at Naples writing letters home
> And, between his letters, reading paragraphs
> On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned
> For a month. (CP, 313)

The protagonist can be seen as modern man, separated from his place of origin, the natural ground of his being, and situated in the shadow of imminent death. He is no longer one of the 'Danes in Denmark all day long', capable of communicating in 'the idiom of an innocent earth' (CP, 419), but one who must rely on that tool of human consciousness, language, in order to interpret the present and relate it to his past. Notably, he turns to the book of authority, to 'paragraphs / On the sublime' rather than to the book of experience in order to interpret his situation. The 'sultriest fulgurations, flickering, / Cast corners in the glass', a mirror perhaps, or the mirror of his perceptual machinery, which places the experience at one remove from immediacy. But the effect is removed still further by being interpreted in the light of human history:

> . . . He could describe
> The terror of the sound because the sound
> Was ancient. He tried to remember the phrases: pain
> Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,
> Pain killing pain on the very point of pain. (CP, 314)

Our protagonist is moved by feelings quite different from the sense of ecstasy, elevation or transport that Longinus and subsequent rhetoricians had felt to be the consequence of observing the 'dangerous bigness' of

Nature; he finds it mildly 'pleasant to be sitting there'.

The second stanza opens with an antiphonal alternation between observations of the young man's reactions and the poet-speaker's comment on those reactions:

> It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human.
> There were roses in the cool café. His book
> Made sure of the most correct catastrophe.

The incongruity and irony of that last phrase render succinctly Stevens's aversion to the systematizing processes of the reason, that faculty which dominates this mid-day scene. Far from evoking the grandeur of religious experience, the studied, scholarly approach serves to maintain an infinite distance between our protagonist and the full implications of events taking place. The roses remain cooly beautiful and 'The volcano trembled in another ether, / As the body trembles at the end of life.' All the metaphors of pain are evasions, variations of the pathetic fallacy, which mask the brutal fact that we live in an indifferent, unfeeling universe:

> Except for us, Vesuvius might consume
> In solid fire the utmost earth and know
> No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
> To die). This is a part of the sublime
> From which we shrink. (CP, 314)

Yet that alienation is not without its compensations for if it were not so, those whose bodies return to it would not escape the seemingly painful fact of destruction: 'And yet, except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed.'

The setting of the second canto is opposite to that of the first. It is night and book and roses have given way to unintelligible warblings and heavily scented acacias. At this time when intellect releases its hold upon the mind the subliminal 'intelligence of his despair' communicates itself truly for it exists in that realm of feelings and intuitions which music can reach but speech can not. That is why meditation fails to come to grips with the problem.

The rising of the moon reminds him that the world exists independently of the workings of his will and the realization brings to mind the fact 'from which we shrink' and which we evade by engaging in metaphoric descriptions that link the completely heedless universe to our subjective experiences. Our pain is a matter of complete indifference to the sky, the external world, in spite of 'the yellow of the acacias' representative of all the beauties of nature that lay claim to our allegiance and

affection. The mind, seat of human pain, interprets the world in the light of its own responses, its own 'hallucinations', and projects these feelings outward, attributing its own experiences to a reality which is incapable of such feelings. We make these projections not realizing that the indifference of the inanimate world is that which ultimately 'saves', or redeems, pain. The idea has been stated and remains to be elaborated.

His 'firm stanzas' flowing out of the new-found elegy of canto II, 'hang like hives in hell', heavy with the 'honey of common summer' in a world that is both heaven and hell now that the death of the gods has done away with any other realm. Like Nietzsche, Stevens sees the 'over-human god' of Christianity as detrimental to human development:

> The fault lies with an over-human god,
> Who by sympathy has made himself a man
> And is not to be distinguished, when we cry
>
> Because we suffer, our oldest parent, peer
> Of the populace of the heart, the reddest lord,
> Who has gone before us in experience.
>
> If only he would not pity us so much,
> Weaken our fate, relieve us of woe both great
> And small, a constant fellow of destiny,
>
> A too, too human god, self-pity's kin
> And uncourageous genesis . . . It seems
> As if the health of the world might be enough.
> (<u>CP</u>, 315)

Escapism, in the worst sense of the word, is the attitude fostered by 'self-pity's kin' and the uncourageous obsession with finding a way of avoiding acceptance of death as final end deprives us of the enjoyment of the 'golden combs' of our limited existence. Furthermore, when pain can be seen as a purely natural event, removed from association with the sin, guilt and punishment of 'satanic mimicry' it 'could be borne' for it would be coextensive with the good, part of the beauty of earth.[10]

The danger in the argument of III is, of course, that such an approach to pain threatens to abolish the whole basis for making distinctions, that pain and evil, seen as an inseparable part of natural life and, therefore, an inseparable part of the only good that exists, will become undistinguishable from pleasure and we will have a world that is 'Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs d'apres Nature. / All sorts of flowers.' It is a world in which 'the deer and the daschshund are one' (CP, 210). Stevens rejects that conception as weak-minded sentimentalism and asks the rhetorical questions which follow to illustrate the fallacy of such a superficial approach:

> When B. sat down at the piano and made
> A transparence in which we heard music, made
>   music,
> In which we heard transparent sounds, did he play

All sorts of notes? Or did he play only one
In an ecstasy of its associates,
Variations in the tones of a single sound,
The last, or sounds so single they seemed one?
(CP, 316)

Identification of 'B' as Bach, Beethoven or Brahms is not essential to the question. The point is that although we recognize the wholeness of the composition which is a 'transparence' in that it yields insights into otherwise inexpressible complexities, the wholeness does not prevent us from recognizing the 'Variations in the tones of a single sound'.

Similarly 'the Spaniard of the rose'[8] who perceives the beautiful in an intense moment of intuitive apprehension is not 'muffing the mistress for her several maids'. The rose seen thus is rescued from nature because it is in that moment abstracted from the flow of time and becomes part of the enduring conception of beauty. Such recognition of beauty is an unmistakeable experience and the fact that we do not find the same experience in 'barefoot / Philandering', in observing everything, is undeniable. But the differentiation occurs, not at the level of the intellect, but at the level of the 'nakedest passion'. Unlike the young man at Naples who, when he sees 'the roses in the cool café' and hears Vesuvius

rumbling, turns to his book for an intellectual explanation of the 'most correct catastrophe', the Spaniard seizes the rose, thorn and all, and knows it is beautiful. Though the sentimentalist is robbed of the most intense enjoyment by his failure to differentiate, he is not the real 'genius of misfortune'. It is the mind in its attempt to categorize and understand precisely through which 'fault / Falls out on everything'. Through its 'false engagements', attempts at definition which involve the projection of its own structure and sensations, it subverts the 'genius of the body which is our world', thereby destroying completely our spontaneous reactions. The argument of the whole section seems dependent upon an unspoken premise of the 'noble savage' variety.

Having rejected the rational and its interpretations of man's dilemma, Stevens composes a lyric to the 'true sympathizers' who take communion in the natural and spontaneous 'Without the inventions of sorrow or the sob / Beyond invention'. At the level of experience below that of the intellect, the purely natural emotional response, 'So great a unity, that it is bliss, / Ties us to those we love.' For the sake of

> These nebulous brilliancies in the smallest look
> Of the being's deepest darling, we forego
> Lament, willingly forfeit the ai-ai
>
> Of parades in the obscurer selvages.

The 'lament' is an outpouring of self-pity which finds its sanction in the 'obscurer selvages' at the edge of being, the mental configurations which obscure the essentials. The second stanza again places the minutiae of intimate personal experience in opposition to the 'clouds, benevolences, distant heads' of a rationally conceived religious system. The transient experiences are all we have when we accept ourselves as 'wholly human' but they are '. . . in-bar / Exquisite in poverty against the suns / Of ex-bar'. They are internal to natural existence and an adequate defense against catastrophe, barring a dependence upon the golden promises of an after-life, promises which are 'ex-bar' in that they postulate the existence of more than one sun, one world, and bar man from accepting his human condition.[12] To Stevens the naturalistic blessings are quite sufficient to man's desire for paradise and quite capable of

> . . . retaining attributes
> With which we vested, once, the golden forms
> And the damasked memory of the golden forms

And ex-bar's flower and fire of the festivals
Of the damasked memory of the golden forms,
Before we were wholly human and knew ourselves.
(CP, 317)

Canto VI begins with an example to illustrate that the so-called imperfections of reality, of the purely physical world, are not imperfections as much as essential elements of its nature:

The sun, in clownish yellow, but not a clown,
Brings the day to perfection and then fails. He dwells
In a consummate prime, yet still desires
A further consummation. For the lunar month
He makes the tenderest research, intent
On a transmutation which, when seen, appears
To be askew. And space is filled with his
Rejected years.

The repetitious cycles of the sun and moon are analogous to the mind's cyclic search for a perfect understanding of reality, a search that results in a recurrence of imaginative explanations (the lunar month) each of which reveals itself to be 'askew' and is rejected. This process was more fully examined in 'Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas'. The insatiable appetite for perfection, for understanding seems 'gross', offensive to the discriminating mind which demands an ultimate truth, yet when seen as part of the natural order it is

less disturbing. Though the futility of its exertions would seem to make a cessation of such effort, a lapse into indifference, advisable, the search cannot be avoided and has its incidental compensations in moments of seemingly divine insight:

> Yet, when corrected, has its curious lapses,
> Its glitters, its divinations of serene
> Indulgence out of all celestial sight.

What is more, because the mind's research is natural and nature governs all ('The sun is country wherever he is') the bird's continuing efforts are inevitable:

> . . . 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.

The mind disdains the astringent, the mixed, the bitter-sweets fruits that the natural world offers and since the possibilities for apparently perfect truths are immense, the mind continues to yield itself to the lure of 'perfections' although legitimate hope for attaining the ideal has long since been cast away.

Having delimited the area in which the good may be found (canto V) and having made a general statement

regarding the role of the imperfect within the scheme of nature as a whole (canto VI) Stevens next confronts the extreme instance of the imperfect, the mountain that is the immense reality of death. The first stanza challenges our preconceptions:

> How red the rose that is the soldier's wound,
> The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all
> The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,
> The soldier of time grown deathless in great size.

The rose metaphor not only declares death to be beautiful but the insistence on its redness emphasizes it as an intensely beautiful thing. To interpret these lines as a eulogy on the nobility of death when encountered in the service of a greater good as in war[13] is to miss the import of the fourth line, in which Stevens confers that aura of nobility on the death of Everyman, the 'soldier of time', whose death may or may not have been distinguishable by a sacrificial quality, at least not in the same sense as is that of the soldier who dies in defense of his countrymen. The stanzas which follow elaborate upon this opening statement.

The mountain of the fact of death 'stands in the dark'; we cannot know its true nature but it is paradoxically that 'in which no ease is ever found' (unless

we choose the path of indifference which is a minor death) yet it is also the state in which 'the soldier of time has deathless rest'. Death is both of these because there is no ease in it for the living and it is while alive that we are troubled by its shadow. The dead are 'deathless' for they die but once and then their rest is unending. Therein lies a part of its beauty.

The third and fourth stanzas constitute an imaginative description of that state of non-existence that is the 'summer sleep' of the 'soldier of time', a sleep 'In which his wound is good because life was'. The statement is a more restrained version of the theme of 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' in which the gaudiness, and exuberance of life derives from its continuing juxta-position with the cold and final fact of death which is always in the next room. Even so Vesuvius belches and groans its portent through the recurring cycles of our lives. Death, however, remains forever apart from the living and that, too, constitutes its beauty. As for the soldier of time, 'No part of him was ever part of death.' Only in succeeding generations of living beings does the dead man take part and in so doing finds an immortality. It is in the cause of the regenerative cycle that his life is given as sacrifice. Thus, 'A

woman smoothes her forehead with her hand / And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that stroke.' The death of the soldier in actual war is but the concentrated, particular example of what is true in a general way of every death.

The death of Satan, the Judaeo-Christian explanation for the existence of pain and death, 'was a tragedy / For the imagination' because his death destroyed the 'theatre', the whole mythological framework, within which the Western mind had found its orientation:

> . . . How cold the vacancy
> When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
> First sees reality. (*CP*, 320)

The 'mortal no' that arises from the twentieth century's inability to accede to Carlyle's 'Everlasting Yes' yields a prospect no less forbidding than that from which his Teufelsdroeck recoiled.

> 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.

The conflict between affirmation and denial resumes although in a new guise. The realist's faith in the

purely practical, the empirical is a formulation arising out of the demands of his innate being. The implicit admission that this new 'yes' is certain to be denied, that it is no more absolutely 'real' or true than the belief that preceded it, does not, however, mean that 'In the midst of his iconoclastic reveling, Stevens panics,' as Fuchs would have it.[14] Stevens is simply too 'realistic' to stop short of being completely faithful to his belief in doubt, in change, and in uncertainty and thus his view moves beyond realism.

The 'Panic in the face of the moon' which opens canto IX is a reference to the initial response of the imagination to the loss of its traditional stock of images. In a purely realistic picture of the world the moon is no longer

> . . . round effendi
> Or the phosphored sleep in which he walks abroad
> Or the majolica dish heaped up with phosphored
> fruit
> That he sends ahead, out of the goodness of his
> heart,
> To anyone that comes. (CP, 320)

Here the separation of 'moon' as symbol for the imagination and 'moon' as physical object is impossible; the meaning hovers and flows between the two for the references in

the lines just quoted are to the moon as purveyor of dreams and source of prophesies. The denial of all that is mystical means a denial of all these imaginative or fanciful conceptions and then

> The moon is no longer these nor anything
> And nothing is left but comic ugliness
> Or a lustred nothingness.

Stevens himself does not share the faith in that conception, although it is one that he sees as prevalent in the Western world and a conception near to that held by the Stevens of the 'Comedian' who, like most of his contemporaries, found in indifference the only 'ease' possible. His recognition of the spiritual suicide inherent in that earlier position (see canto VII) is evidence of a considerable alteration in point of view:

> Effendi, he
> That has lost the folly of the moon becomes
> The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty.
> To lose sensibility, to see what one sees,
> As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,
> To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone,
> As if the paradise of meaning ceased
> To be paradise, it is this to be destitute.
> This is the sky divested of its fountains.
> Here in the west indifferent crickets chant
> Through our indifferent crises.

The naturalism that Stevens espouses is significantly different from strict realism. The realist's view of

the world stems from a failure to recognize the full range of possibilities that lie within the scope of natural occurrences and that failure is due to his reliance upon the intellect as the only means for a valid appraisal of the world. For Stevens the intuition or the subconscious, the realm of human sensibility that is man's inheritance from his primitive past is quite as valid in its reaction to the environment and much more capable of recognizing the positive possibilities of existence. It is on that primitive response system man must rely for his new affirmations:

> . . . we require
> Another chant, an incantation, as in
> Another and later genesis, music
> That buffets the shapes of its possible halcyon
> Against the haggardie . . . A loud, large water
> Bubbles up in the night and drowns the crickets'
> sound.
> It is a declaration, a primitive ecstasy,
> Truth's favors sonorously exhibited. (_CP_, 321)

Frank Doggett in his _Stevens' Poetry of Thought_ provides a convincing interpretation of the first eleven lines of section X in his chapter on 'Variations on a Nude'. He points out that in Stevens's poetry the female figure is the archetypal image of reality or earth and that Stevens follows Jung in his use of the image for both inner and outer reality. She is a product of the

unconscious and a projection of his 'homesickness', his 'nostalgia', for his earthly origin.[15] It is not really necessary to go to Jung for an interpretation of this image, however, because Stevens provides us with his own explicit explanation of the image in his later poems, 'The Woman in Sunshine' and 'Madame La Fleurie'. In the first, Stevens tells us how experiences of physical warmth and pleasure become associated, quite naturally, with the concept of the female:

> It is only that this warmth and movement are like
> The warmth and movement of a woman.
>
> It is not that there is any image in the air
> Nor the beginning nor end of a form:
>
> It is empty. But a woman in threadless gold
> Burns us with brushings of her dress
>
> And a dissociated abundance of being,
> More definite for what she is --
>
> Because she is disembodied,
> Bearing the odors of the summer fields,
>
> Confessing the taciturn and yet indifferent,
> Invisibly clear, the only love. (<u>CP</u>, 445)

In 'Madame La Fleurie' we have an explanation of the meaning of the 'moustache' that his 'softest woman' wears. This poem was written when Stevens was seventy-two and it is heavy with the anticipation of death. The beloved earth has become the 'mother that should feed on him', 'a bearded queen, wicked in her

dead light'. In 1944 when 'Esthétique' was written the hostility of nature was still a more distant prospect and thus a mere 'vague moustache'. Here she is the seat of the 'primitive ecstasy', the spirit that 'liked its animal', a spirit that, unlike the Christian concept of 'soul', is not at war with the body. She is not 'the mauve <u>Maman</u>' of delicate, civilized, genteel sensitivities but the projection of a savage spirit, 'child of a mother fierce / In his body, fiercer in his mind, merciless / To accomplish the truth in his intelligence' (<u>CP</u>,321). A force that will not be denied in his conceptions about the true nature of his own identity and his relation to the world. He compares this figure with others that myth has offered as interpretation:

> It is true there were other mothers, singular
> In form, lovers of heaven and earth, she-wolves
> And forest tigresses and women mixed
> With the sea. These were fantastic.

They do not offer the solace to meet his need. In contrast his

> . . . softest woman,
> Because she is as she was, reality,
> The gross, the fecund, proved him against the touch
> Of impersonal pain.

She provides the satisfactory justification for and

defense against the presence of evil, 'impersonal pain' in the abstract.

> Reality explained.
> It was the last nostalgia: that he
> Should understand. That he might suffer or that
> He might die was the innocence of living, if life
> Itself was innocent.

Having come to terms with the problem of evil, having accepted its presence as an intrinsic part of earth's innocence, he is free of the desire for the 'sleek ensolacings' that promise an after-life to assuage the painful thought of death.[16]

Canto XI faces the harsh realities of existence squarely and the brevity of the hard statements with which it opens contributes to the brutality of the truths they present: 'Life is bitter aspic. We are not / At the centre of a diamond.' Contrary to the tradition of Western thought, man does not occupy a special position in the universe. Disasters occur without reasonable justification and beauty springs from poor, dishonest people. Poetic justice is a fanciful fabrication.

The interjection sums up the limitations and possibilities of man's situation:

> Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
> The gaiety of language is our seigneur.

The meaning of 'seigneur' is ambiguous and deliberately so, I believe, because that ambiguity conveys the ambivalent properties of the word, the tool that is both the means of releasing thought and providing communication, and an intransigent medium which restricts the nature of the matters that can be communicated. To function at best, however, in relieving the human condition of poverty, it must be used with integrity and thus the 'man of bitter appetite' who has reconciled himself to the limitations of his being, despises the falsified representations of life that always have a happy ending or at least depict 'select adieux' in which justice is neatly served. Stevens places sentimental theatricals and the steeple of religious faith in the same category. He suggests instead

> The tongue caresses these exacerbations.
> They press it as epicure, distinguishing
> Themselves from its essential savor,
> Like hunger that feeds on its own hungriness.

Painful experiences act upon our sensibilities and in so doing make us aware of the difference between the inimical and the self.[17] Riddell has noted the 'curious syntax' of these lines[18] but has missed the significance of that peculiar construction. The 'exacerbations' are the

referent of 'they', as Riddell surmises, and Stevens has them assume the active role in the tasting process, I believe, in order to emphasize the independence of external circumstance. We are helpless in the face of death but the distinction between evil (which portends death) and the 'savor' of being alive heightens our awareness of being. Thus our state of natural deprivation 'feeds on', is enhanced by, the pressure of deprivation. Thus 'mal' is in essence an aesthetic principle.

Canto XII seeks a means of verifying this new aesthetic and begins in the best analytical manner, establishing first the basic categories of experience from which verification may be sought: 'the peopled and the unpeopled world'. In the peopled world the general consensus would deny that pain is a principle of beauty and the speaker's 'knowledge of them' would confirm the validity of that opinion because people generally do not respond to pain as though it were a part of the beautiful. In the unpeopled world he has only his knowledge of himself by which to judge. Can he project his own experiences and assume them to be applicable to others? If so 'they have / No secret from him'. Yet to assume they

feel as he does is to deny what he observes of them. In the contradiction and conflict between his peopled and unpeopled worlds, the validity of both is denied; each negates the other's claim to knowledge.

If that is so, then there must be a 'third world' in which there is no knowledge of 'them' or of 'himself', a world

> In which no one peers, in which the will makes no
> Demands. It accepts whatever is as true,
> Including pain, which, otherwise, is false.
> In the third world, then, there is no pain.

But neither is there any experience in such a world where all distinctions are subsumed under the broad canopy of Nothingness. To be alone there is a form of isolation beyond that forced upon us by the limitations of the senses. It is to exist in complete abstraction, a Platonic realm of Forms.[19] The resolution is hardly conducive to life: 'What lover has one in such rocks, what woman, / However known, at the centre of the heart?' The escape from the experience of pain is then made at the cost of all experience of the good as well, and thus at the cost of being human and of being alive.

Stevens dismisses the doctrine of original sin in the first three lines of canto XIII as subordinate to the question which leads out of the argument of the

previous section:[20]

> It may be that one life is a punishment
> For another, as the son's life for the father's.
> But that concerns the secondary characters.
> (CP, 323-4)

The theory of inherited evil avoids the primary question of why one must be at all:

> . . . the unalterable necessity
> Of being this unalterable animal.
> This force of nature in action is the major
> Tragedy.

This question remains forever unanswerable except by unverifiable fictions. Thus paradox is the essence of human existence and therefore Stevens describes it in those terms:

> This is destiny unperplexed,
> The happiest enemy.

The only course man can take in face of the irreconcilable is to retire to his Mediterranean cloister (in mid-earth -- the zone of the 'middling beast') 'eased of desire' for absolute certainty, to establish his own truth, 'The visible, a zone of blue and orange / Versi-colorings', and rest secure in the knowledge that within 'the maximum, / The assassin's scene', the limits imposed

by death, he has at his command the ultimate good if he is prepared to 'watch the fire-feinting sea', the world of change, and call it good. Then, 'Evil in evil is / Comparative.' Seen as the end of life, death is evil. If seen as the concomitant of life, it can be endured:

> The assassin discloses himself,
> The force that destroys us is disclosed, within
> This maximum, an adventure to be endured
> With the politest helplessness. (CP, 324)

In contrast to the life-denying resolution of the previous section, this solution contributes a sense of vigour.

The desire for certainty, that 'last nostalgia' for understanding of which we must be 'eased', arises out of man's rationality. Intellectual understanding demands a logical explanation for its satisfaction, but logic, Stevens asserts in canto XIV, is not infallible. He opens the poem by quoting the Marxist historian and novelist,[21] Victor Serge, who wrote an exposé of the Stalinist purges:[22]

> "I followed his argument
> With the blank uneasiness which one might feel
> In the presence of a logical lunatic."
> He said it of Konstantinov.

Marx's logical theory of dialectical materialism was

formulated with a view to redressing the evils of economic oppression growing out of industrialization. In the hands of single-minded, emotionally committed disciples such as Stalin and his apologist, Konstantinov, the theory of the dialectic led to fanatical oppression of unbelievable proportions. Such a turn of events is not without precedent:

> One wants to be able to walk
> By the lake at Geneva and consider logic:
> To think of the logicians in their graves
> And of the worlds of logic in their great tombs.
> (_CP_, 325)

The central concept and the imagery take us back to the impotent rage of 'The Doctor of Geneva' whose system of thought was hopelessly inadequate to meet the chaotic surge of the sea of reality. The logician becomes so enamoured of his own invention that he can no longer see those aspects of reality that conflict with his system. Though the reference to Geneva here again calls Calvin to mind, the logicians in their graves could be the founders of any and all 'isms'. All are guilty of the one-sided vision of Konstantinov who

> . . . would not be aware of the lake.
> He would be the lunatic of one idea
> In a world of ideas, who would have all the people

> Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
> In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the
> clouds,
> Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.
> His extreme of logic would be illogical.

The final canto opens with what remains Stevens's credo:

> The greatest poverty is not to live
> In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
> Is too difficult to tell from despair.

Desire for escape from life because of its pain would be such despair. If -- and Stevens is willing to concede the possibility for the sake of strengthening his argument in favour of the physical world -- if there were 'non-physical people in paradise', they would experience but the shadow, 'The minor of what we feel'. But to admit that we are no more than physical beings would put Stevens in the camp of the realists and he has already declared their position to be inadequate. Moreover, as we recall from 'Phosphor Reading by His Own Light', perfect realism is beyond us. However, the 'mataphysicals' that 'Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat, / The rotund emotions, paradise unknown', present some difficulty for interpretation. It seems, however, that Stevens is using the term 'metaphysical' in the sense that it is used in 'metalanguage' and 'Metazoa', referring to a more fully developed form rather than to one that transcends physicality. Thus his 'metaphysicals' represent the full

range, the 'majors', of possibilities for greater happiness, possibilities completely within the realm of the physical yet beyond it in the sense of constituting an ever-receding horizon of promise, that process of becoming which always extends beyond present 'fact'.[23]

The intent of the questions of the final stanza is to suggest the realm of possibility open to us. Would not the present state of our development have been impossible for the past to foresee? Furthermore, we do not even understand fully the profound depths of experience available in the present. Are not the complexities of the human personality and the innumerable perceptions it makes almost inconceivable?

> 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. (CP, 326)

The Letters tell us that the 'last poem ought to end with an interrogation mark' and though it does not, simply because Stevens could not bring himself to end it that way (L, 469), the 'open-ended' ending is quite apparent and quite reasonable in the light of the contents of the poem. How else could an apostle of doubt conclude a 'statement' of affirmation or an anti-theorist expound a new theory?

The degree of systematization that has taken place in 'Notes' and in the 'Esthétique' is defended in 'The Pure Good of Theory' (1945) as a development arising out of an innate need of the human animal. The four-part analysis begins by setting forth 'All the Preludes to Felicity', the boundaries within which happiness can be attained. The fundamental limitation is time, that which 'batters against the mind, silent and proud, / The mind that knows it is destroyed by time' (CP, 329). Everything within and without reminds us of time's passing. If in defense against the onslaught 'we propose / A large-sculptured, platonic person, free from time', as for example, a god, he must, because he exists outside of the destructive element, be incapable of speech, of communication with us. Speech is tied to time for it is sequential and cannot exist otherwise. The dilemma is clear. Felicity, the state of perfect happiness, cannot be reached in natural life for

> Time is the hooded enemy,
> The inimical music, the enchantered space
> In which the enchanted preludes have their place.

The 'Description of a Platonic Person' consists of an anecdote. Brazil, the South of Stevens's imagination

and of natural, experiential existence, comes 'to nourish the emaciated Romantic' who dreams of the luxury of living in a non-rational world 'in which the memory had gone / From everything', (a southern version of 'The Snow Man') 'flying the flag of the nude', the primitive, barbaric, above the holiday hotel, the enjoyment of sensual experience. Unfortunately, the hotel contains one blot, one limitation, an invalid 'who was what people had been and still were'. Thus the illness he suffers from is endemic to all humanity -- 'a constant question in his thought, / Unhappy about the sense of happiness', a natural desire to know, to find an explanation for happiness. His illness prevents him from experiencing, from enjoying fully. His question produces the concept of 'a soul in the world', a concept to explain the sense of continuity in reality and his discovery is the malady of Western man for whom that which cannot be thought does not exist. The 'Jew from Europe' cannot enjoy because he cannot understand an existence without purpose.

The first example of 'Fire-monsters in the Milky Brain' is that monstrous conception of Man 'not born of woman but of air, / That comes here in the solar

chariot' (CP, 331), and Stevens immediately pitches a rock at that idea which is 'Like rhetoric in a narration of the eye', a description at one remove from primary experience, a construction of the opaque milky brain. All that Stevens will admit is that 'one parent must have been divine' but in his view that inheritance is not the key to felicity that myth and religion would have it be. Rather, it has been the source of our separation from the fat Elysia of natural existence. It was Adam, the divine parent, whose 'mind made morning, / As he slept' and it is the invention of time, a product of the mind, that separates man from felicity. 'He woke in metaphor' for his innate perceptions cause him to interpret the actual in terms of his internal system of reference. Thus 'the world was paradise malformed' by consciousness and, as a result, man's 'ear attends the varying / Of this precarious music' and 'attends the difficult difference' between it and paradise.

Stevens's interpretation of the story of Genesis as an allegory of the inception of human intelligence seems to offer so little to contradict the orthodox interpretation that he feels compelled to assert that a fundamental difference exists: 'To say the solar chariot

is junk / Is not a variation but an end', and so it is for it repatriates the human figure, long exiled from his native ground by mysticism and religion. The natural world is home not exile from a supernatural realm. The new interpretation is not immune to error, however, for 'to speak of the whole world as metaphor / Is still to stick to the contents of the mind'. There is no means of escape from the limitations of our way of seeing, no transcendental ego capable of observing objectively our own perceptions 'And the desire to believe in a metaphor'. All that can be achieved is 'the nicer knowledge', the more precise and honest knowledge which admits 'that what it believes in is not true'.

The first two stanzas of 'Dry Birds Are Fluttering in Blue Leaves' (a title illustrative of the metaphoric process) are a list of illustrations in support of the concluding statement of Section III. In spite of this knowledge that 'it is never the thing but the version of the thing' that we see, the 'destroying spiritual' demands the 'divertissements', the entertainment of *linguistic interpretations*, 'the weather in words'. It strives furiously to overcome its limitations and to produce something worthy of acknowledgement,

. . . digs-a-dog,
Whines in its hole for puppies to come see,

Springs outward, being large, and, in the dust,
Being small, inscribes ferocious alphabets,
Flies like a bat expanding as it flies,

and in so doing 'its wings bear off night's middle witch', the dark, enchantress of the unfathomable regions of the mind in which the enigmas of being reside.

Although the 'spiritual' thus conquers perplexity it 'remains the same, the beast of light', the intellect, which, 'Groaning in half-exploited gutterals', imperfectly expresses its innate desire, 'The need of its element, the final need / Of final access to its element', that of understanding of final, complete knowledge,

. . . like the page of a wiggy book,

Touched suddenly by the universal flare
For a moment, a moment in which we read and
repeat
The eloquences of light's faculties.

The pure good of theory, then, is that it serves to satisfy the mind's need, but ultimately we must return to the necessary angel of reality, 'the great _fond_' (_L_, 505), 'the footing from which we leap after what we

do not have and on which everything depends' (L, 600). 'Credences of Summer' (1947) is Stevens's most jubilant return, and its tone is set in the lyric to midsummer with which it begins:

> Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
> And spring's infuriations over and a long way
> To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
> Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
> Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.
> (CP, 372)

The moment of fulfillment is described by Frank Doggett as 'the present moment with everything behind and nothing of actual time beyond, the self poised in existence, surrounded by its images of love and desire that consummates its moment of realized life'.[24] This moment is what we are given to 'comfort the heart's core against / Its false disasters', those experiences of time's evil which, as the 'Esthétique' has shown, are 'false' because they are in truth part of the good. This is the time to 'Postpone the anatomy of summer', and all desires, both 'The physical pine, the metaphysical pine', and simply be without making any analyses, interpretations, 'Without evasion by a single metaphor'.

This moment of pure existence is the 'natural

tower of the world, / The point of survey, green's green apogee' in which man looks out upon the world 'more precious than the view beyond'. The tower rests upon the mountain of reality, 'the final mountain' which, like the rock in the late poem of that name, includes all things within it. The refuge of this moment is created by the awareness that it must end and it is the basis for the wisdom of all time, 'the old man standing on the tower, / Who reads no book'.

Oley, a valley in Eastern Pennsylvania that Stevens knew in his youth, is for him the setting which epitomizes 'One of the limits of reality', that of the greatest good. It is 'a land too ripe for enigmas, too serene', one whose pleasant vistas provoke no questions, evoke only responses of pure delight.

The questioning is not suspended for long, however, and in V the relation of this peak of experience to the remainder of existence is examined. Does the day, like a woman of perfect beauty, make 'the rest look down' in disgrace because they are less so? 'Or do other days enrich the one?' Does this one derive its aura of perfection from the contrast with those less fortunate? Stevens decides 'The day / Enriches

the year, not as embellishment'. It is part and parcel of the whole. Yet it stands complete in itself, 'Stripped of remembrance, it displays its strength -- / The youth, the vital son, the heroic power.' Like Heidegger's concept of Being which is both the particular and the general,[25] this moment is both unique and part of ordinary experience.

The rock of truth (VI) which cannot be broken displays the same all-inclusive proportions as the mountain in III and is of a dual nature like that of the day in the fifth section. It both 'rises from land and sea and covers them'. Moreover,

> It is a mountain half way green and then,
> The other immeasurable half, such rock
> As placid air becomes. (_CP_,375)

In part it is the 'green' of physical reality but it is more as well. The 'immeasurable half' is made up of the sprawling 'metaphysicals' which only the imagination's eye can see, for they are part of the visible truth and not a secret hidden away:

> But it is not
> A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage.
> 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.

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.
(CP, 375)

In section VII Stevens compares his view of truth with that which prevailed in the past, in a time when men were afraid to place their trust in the world of appearances and looked instead for a transcendent, supranatural object for their devotion:

Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs,
Secure. It was difficult to sing in face
Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
Or else avert the object. Deep in the woods
They sang of summer in the common fields.

They sang desiring an object that was near,
In face of which desire no longer moved,
Nor made of itself that which it could not find . . .
(CP, 376)

Far more courageous and honest, to Stevens's mind, is the straight-forward approach of perception, cognition and expression. He describes this process which we normally take for granted in terms of a magical rite:

Three times the concentred self takes hold,
three times
The thrice concentred 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.

As in 'Esthétique' and in the description of the rock of truth, physical and metaphysical appear as one, the first comprising the visible, the second the potential within what is visible. Both are announced in the sunrise, the 'trumpet of morning' which wakes us to an awareness of existence which is the ground of possibility, 'the successor of the invisible'. Its appearance, however forcefully real it may seem, is dependent upon a perceiving mind which is 'aware of division, aware / Of its cry as clarion' and that each perception is partial 'as that of a personage in a multitude: / Man's mind grown venerable in the unreal'.

In section IX the speaker addresses 'cock bright' who represents a point of view that is not his own.[26] It is probably that collective sensibility which has caused Stevens much concern. The bird is admonished to 'watch the willow, motionless', the symbol of that which remains immutable, unchanging, the contingency of existence. Gone is the gardener, the deity who once kept 'salacious weeds' in check, but so is the 'gardener's cat', Satan,

who made the prospect of death a fearful thing. With the departure of the restraints and controls exerted by this complex of symbols: 'A complex of emotions falls apart, / In an abandoned spot.' The decay has touched 'the arranged', the system of belief, and 'the spirit of the arranged', the general social order dependent on those sanctions. The whole range of experience, '<u>douceurs</u>, / <u>Tristesses</u>, the fund of life and death, suave bush / And polished beast, this complex falls apart'. The bird has just begun to bask in the warmth to which he now has access but he may, perhaps, 'detect / Another complex of other emotions, not / So soft, so civil' preparing to replace the old. The sound he makes in response is 'not part of the listener's own sense' because, presumably, it expresses a fear for the future which the listener, on this day of perfection, cannot share.

The 'personae of summer' in section X can hardly be the creations of the poet's mind, his 'forms or poems of reality' that Riddell reads them to be,[27] for they are 'the characters of an inhuman author'. Unusual though it may be in Stevens's poetry, this 'inhuman author' is the principle of order, of natural law, within the universe. Though the principle is referred to as

'He' to indicate the masculine quality of rule and regularity, 'He does not hear his characters talk' for he is completely indifferent to the individual items of the 'huge decorum' that in this perfect day overpowers the sense of natural disorder that usually dominates Stevens's consciousness. Although the experience is temporary, as we shall discover as we examine the last two volumes, for the moment Stevens has achieved the sense of final accord with reality that he has desired so long.

NOTES

V MOSTLY MARRIAGE HYMNS

[1]Joseph Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 295n.

[2]Of this poem Stevens has said, 'It seems to me to be an interesting idea: That is to say, the idea that we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself, and in every vital sense we do' (L, 494).

[3]J. Hillis Miller, 'Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being', The Act of the Mind ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 144.

[4]Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1942), p. 99.

[5]Alfred North Whitehead, Modes of Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 204-6.

[6]For a somewhat different reading of this poem see Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963), p. 107.

[7]Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 50.

[8]Many readings (with varying degrees of 'closeness') of this poem have been produced. The following are the most detailed:

Fuchs, op. cit., pp. 169-83.

Riddell, op. cit., pp. 202-16.

Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought (New York: Gordian Press, 1968) pp. 34-49.

Ronald Sukenick, 'A Wallace Stevens Handbook: A Reading of His Major Poems and an Exposition of His Theory and Practice', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1962, pp. 130-47.

Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 24-36.

[9]I cannot agree with Wells, op. cit., p. 24, that 'here the delicate inference is that his letter concerns personal grief but that a certain distance lies between the cause of the sorrow and him who experiences it. Very simply, one must somehow survive pain. Life must go on.' In general, Wells's reading errs in remaining too close to the literal level.

[10]Sukenick, op. cit., p. 134.

[11]Fuchs, op. cit., p. 176, tells us that '"The Spaniard of the Rose" is Senor Pedro Dot, a hybridizer of roses.' This in itself seems to add little that is essential to interpretation although it links the way in which the Spaniard sees the rose with the intensity of feeling which is aroused by the 'hybridization' process Stevens recognized in Marianne Moore's poems (OP, 247-54).

[12]For a different interpretation of this passage see Sukenick, op. cit., p. 135.

[13]Wells, op. cit., p. 29.

[14]Fuchs, op. cit., p. 178.

[15]Doggett, op. cit., p. 39.

[16]Sukenick, op. cit., p. 141.

[17]Ibid., pp. 142-4.

[18]Riddell, op. cit., p. 212.

[19]Sukenick, op. cit., p. 144, considers this third world to be a 'passive state of sensual gratification in which thinking is eclipsed'.

[20]For a very different reading of this and the previous canto see Pack, op. cit., pp. 44-6.

[21]Sukenick, op. cit., p. 146.

[22]Riddell, op. cit., p. 214.

[23]Whitehead, op. cit., pp. 128-142. This passage, too long to quote in its entirety, is similar to Stevens's thought. Its central concept is that 'The notion of potentiality is fundamental for the understanding of existence, as soon as the notion of process is admitted. . . . Immediacy is the realization of the potentialities of the past, and is the storehouse of the potentialities of the future.'

[24]Doggett, op. cit., p. 176.

[25]William J. Richardson, S.J., Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), pp. 6-10.

[26]Riddell, op. cit., p. 221. Riddell, who considers 'Credences of Summer' to be directed toward 'the old task of affirming the self by affirming its primacy in a world which without it is unreal', interprets the flight of the cock as 'the poet's imaginative journey among the growth and decay of his earth, a physical world no longer delightful in itself'. The last line of IX seems incompatible with such a reading.

[27]Ibid., p. 221.

VI

IN WINTER'S NICK

The designation of the last two volumes of Stevens's poetry to a separate chapter of this study is not purely arbitrary for, despite critical comments to the effect that there is nothing new in the later poetry, that it is made up of old themes re-imagined, a subtle shift in emphasis, a slight change in focus takes place. Riddell assesses the change as a departure from the exploration of ideas in favour of 'a poetry purely contemplative, issuing from a mind which is exploring itself'.[1] There is, however, a modulation of thought as well which is signalled in the title piece of The Auroras of Autumn, a modulation which reveals itself most clearly in subsequent poems through the appearance of several new images and in a modification of the treatment afforded one of Stevens's earliest and most persistent images, that of the archetypal woman. Though the alteration is in one sense only a slight 'flick' of the imagination, a bit of the new colour

that in no way contradicts the fundamentals of his philosophic position, it is just the kind of alteration that can create 'a fresh universe . . . by adding itself' (CP, 517).

Certainly a new vigour announces itself in the colour, movement and density of connotation with the first of 'The Auroras of Autumn' (1948). There is a shimmering brilliance here that one welcomes after the long, discursive repetitions which mark so many poems of Parts of a World and Transport to Summer. Obscurity or difficulty increases, however, particularly where the metaphor becomes the entire poem as it does when aurora borealis, serpent, the movement of thought and material change merge to form the surface beneath which a rational argument takes place.

It may well be that the 'exact iconography' of the serpent in the first canto 'will remain conjectural', as Enck has said.[2] We can, however, make some reasonable deductions from the description provided. He has appeared before in Collected Poems in 'Bagatelles the Madrigals' as a sinister force 'beneath the snow' from whose presence people shield themselves in trivialities. Too, in 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery' he is 'Ananke', figure

of necessity. In Owl's Clover, not part of Collected Poems, he appeared as the only god of 'The Greenest Continent' where 'Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne' (OP, 54, 58). Now he assumes a not unrelated but considerably altered significance. 'Bodiless' with a head that is 'air' he is non-physical, an abstraction assuming no recognizable form yet occupying a position of complete dominance, overlooking the world 'in every sky', timeless as the stars that are a part of, yet appear beneath, his omnipotence at night:

> This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
> His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
> Eyes open and fix on us every day. (CP, 411)

The initial description is barely complete when doubt is cast upon its validity. Is this merely another product of the prolific mind, 'another wriggling out of the egg' or 'another image at the end of the cave', another opinion to be cast off like the skin shed upon the floor by the snake in 'Farewell to Florida'? As if in vindication, the third stanza affirms the dual nature of the serpent. Though 'bodiless' he resides in the physical realities of 'These fields, these hills, these tinted distances, / And pines above and along and beside the sea'. Although the serpent is 'air' he makes his flashing

appearance in the physical world where everything is 'form gulping after formlessness', a struggle to exist that brings about its own destruction in 'wished-for disappearances' of decaying and dying. Thus, if he is part of that which has 'form' yet is himself 'formless', 'bodiless', the serpent must represent the principle of change or transformation, not that which changes but change itself, a flickering within the seemingly solid reality that moves with the swiftness of the aurora.

Instinctively we respond to the connotations of evil surrounding the image with a feeling of revulsion. Yet Stevens declares it to be 'the height emerging and its base', that which includes the extremities, whether of quantity or quality, and all dualities whether of subject-object, mind-matter or interior-exterior description. The lights which trace the changing

> . . . 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.

The hope or possibility being suggested here is, I believe, that the lights which are as well our means of seeing and knowing may permit an apprehension, an awareness extending to the centre of man's being that will

find such accord with the process of the serpent that the unhappiness arising from the dissonance between subject and object, mind and body will be mastered. However, 'This is his poison: that we should disbelieve / Even that.' The seventh stanza echoes the doubts already expressed in the second. Yet the certain, predictable movements of the physical world, such as the movement of plants which turn 'to make sure of sun', movements which are evidence of the serpent's 'meditations in the ferns' should make us 'no less as sure'. Because the principle persists even in the realm of thought and operates between the poles of certainty and doubt, affirmation and negation, we cannot consciously attain the pole that makes us sure despite the evidence that is everywhere:

> We saw in his head,
> Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
> The moving grass, the Indian in his glade. (CP, 412)

'Farewell to an idea . . .' and in the sense that serpent was idea, the speaker abandons the 'cabin', that haven of certainty, the sense of permanence provided there. Here, in the ordinary world of experience, 'being visible is being white, / Is being of the solid of white', not like the flickering, shimmering, serpent-change of

the borealis. Such certainty is 'the accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise', a coming to rest at one pole of a continuum that, like the colour spectrum, extends from white to black. The completely achieved integration is as solid as visible, physical fact, yet imperceptibly and inevitably, time affects a change in the whiteness of the flowers, emblems of the attractiveness, the beautiful appeal, of the idea in the moment of its perfection. The flowers now are 'a little dried' and the mind cannot even quite recall their colour 'last year / Or before'. All images in this canto combine to speak of a time of decline: 'an aging afternoon', 'the wind . . . blowing sand across the floor', 'a cold wind chills the beach'. With the onset of old age in which 'a darkness gathers though it does not fall', the 'whiteness', that which gave a sense of ontological certainty to the idea, 'grows less vivid on the wall'. The man in whose actions the speaker's thoughts become objectified 'turns blankly on the sand', looks toward the flickering aurora, and observes that the north, region of eternal winter, 'is always enlarging the change'. The consciousness that death is near makes his awareness of life's transience more and more vivid:

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

Again the movement of thought reverses its direction, flicking to the opposite pole and the image of the mother's face, supreme embodiment of the life-giving principle. This, we are told is 'The purpose of the poem'. The shifting of thought from a preoccupation with approaching death to a concentration upon the life that remains is to step from the cold, windy beach into the warm cabin once again. Momentarily, the speaker escapes 'the prescience of oncoming dreams', but the fact of time's passing remains: 'The house is evening, half-dissolved. / Only the half they can never possess', the unknowable region of the future and of death, remains. Life 'is the mother they possess, / Who gives transparence to their present peace', for only when alive do we know we are at peace. Her presence more than compensates for the pain that necessarily accompanies the 'transparence' of knowing and thus 'makes that gentler that can gentle be'.

The moment of security passes quickly for

. . . she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.
She gives transparence. But she has grown old.
The necklace is a carving not a kiss.

> The soft hands are motion not a touch.
> The house will crumble and the books will burn.

Still beloved, the archetypal figure becomes touched with chill and the failing intensity of experience is but a prelude to the inevitable destruction of the whole, 'the shelter of the mind', a destruction that will wipe out place and time and all in a 'Boreal night'. The approach of death is almost tenderly rendered as a falling asleep, a passing to a time or state in which 'the windows will be lighted, not the rooms'. No longer will the light penetrate to enter the mind; it will be a time of being seen but not of seeing. As consciousness recedes

> A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round
> And knock like a rifle-butt against the door.
> The wind will command them with invincible sound.
> (CP, 414)

'Farewell to an idea . . .'; even at the zero point the negations are not final and from the mother image thought moves to its opposite again. The father who 'sits / In space, wherever he sits' is securely part of the natural world although not of a particular place or a particular time. A picture of serenity and strength when 'He says no to no and yes to yes', he becomes identifiable when 'He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell.' He is that part of mind which

orders man's responses, controls man's actions, to suit the demands placed on him by the environment, rejecting the inimical and acceding to the salubrious. When his response fails, when he says 'yes to no' he departs and death enters the house. The analytical processes are part of his domain, 'measuring the velocities of change', and the imagination is part as well, leaping 'from heaven to heaven more rapidly / Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames'. His range in height and depth, 'In flights of eye and ear', and his capacity for mentally manipulating what he sees and hears is such that he creates 'supernatural preludes', sees with 'angelic eye', and constructs from the raw stuff of experience visions of what has never been. In this canto the verse gradually builds a hymn of praise to human imaginative intelligence, the centre of being sitting 'in quiet and green-a-day', part of world's body, 'the king and yet the crown', that which is both ruler of human life and symbol of human pre-eminence. Stevens asks of this mind, asks it to observe the seat of its existence, 'this present throne' of natural life, 'What company, / In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?' That is, what imagined assemblage of actors, what work of art, can sing it without distortion?

That question paves the way for a new thought.

Casting a doubt upon the hymn that preceded it, it constitutes an unspoken 'Farewell to an idea'. Again the mother appears, this time to introduce a canto dedicated to examining differing aspects of the male principle. Her appearance, however, does not merely serve the structural need of the poem; as the seat of intuitive feeling, man's bond with earth, she constitutes the common denominator which permits social intercourse. Thus, 'The mother invites humanity to her house / And table.' With that as a base, the father's imaginative activity may turn life into a festival as it is exercised in various modes:

> The father fetches negresses to dance,
> Among the children, like curious ripenesses
> Of pattern in the dance's ripening. (CP, 415)

First, he provides the forms, the dark outlines, for productions that delight in a superficial way, making 'the children laugh and jangle a tinny time'. These are seductively easy 'sing-song' creations, products of Coleridgean fancy, and 'For these musicians make insidious tones'.

A second type of creative activity, however, provides a whole new world of 'vistas and blocks of woods'

among which 'the musicians strike the instinctive poem' of more profound reverberations. For these are needed the 'unherded herds, / Of barbarous tongue', language, ugly in its crudity of 'slavered and panting halves / Of breath' yet servant of his will, 'obedient to his trumpet's touch' and therefore capable of being mastered for the creation of the clarion call to a new order. What may result is a world of 'Chatillon', gracious as a French chateau, 'or as you please'. For a moment the poet is bemused by the spectacle he has conjured forth: 'We stand in the tumult of a festival.' But that moment of exhilaration is shattered as the reality of what is breaks in upon the exciting vision of what might be: 'What festival? This loud, disordered mooch? / These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?' Life as it is seems formless, neither comedy nor tragedy but mere confusion lacking any sense of direction. The musicians who express the tenor of the time are 'dubbing at a tragedy', clumsily creating a semblance of form while actually 'There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here.' Chatillon is pure imagination; actuality is but 'sound and fury, / Signifying nothing'. This means another 'farewell'.

Canto VI is Stevens at his pageant-painting best,

describing the world as 'a theatre floating through the clouds, / Itself a cloud' (CP, 416), ephemeral and transient although it is of 'misted rock', a firm, continuing reality that we but dimly perceive. The natural transformations it undergoes are multiplied by the transforming processes of our perceptive mechanism. Thus we see 'mountains running like water, wave on wave, / Through waves of light'. The natural changes in the theatre occur 'idly', without purpose except 'the lavishing of itself in change', the expression of an inherent tendency toward 'magnificence' which makes for grandeur, 'And the solemn pleasure of magnificent space'. But the forms in which these transformations appear to us are half our own creation: 'The cloud drifts idly through half-thought-of forms.' The theatre is filled with events, incidents of experience, 'flying birds' that are as evanescent and fragile as 'a web in a corridor'. Though they occur haphazardly, they leave a widening train of consequences in their wake for they are 'Wild wedges'. Nations, epochs, rise and disappear but the ultimate 'denouement has to be postponed' for the theatre drifts on.

Again there is a break in thought, a farewell to an idea:

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

For man all things have their being within the individual perceiving mind and thus the world can be defined as nothing other than a continual process toward nothingness for that is the course of each existence, 'this named thing' which ultimately 'nameless is / And is destroyed'. As in 'Domination of Black', the speaker, despite the elaborate turnings of his thought, is overwhelmed by the realization of the implacably destructive fate awaiting him:

> He opens the door of his house
>
> On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
> An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
> Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (CP, 416-7)

Through implications of description and the catechistical format of canto VII Stevens virtually contrives to 'say God and the imagination are one' (CP, 524):

> Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
> As grim as it is benevolent, the just
> And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops
>
> To imagine winter? When the leaves are dead,
> Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself,
> Goat-leaper, crystalled and luminous, sitting
>
> In highest night? And do these heavens adorn
> And proclaim it, the white creator of black, jetted
> By extinguishings, even of planets as may be,

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

In its ambivalence the imagination prevents us from enjoying fully but also from suffering hopelessly. The sight of 'these heavens' is a reminder of its sovereignty for has it not, through observation of the stars, seemingly discovered the secrets of the universe? It is the 'White creator of black', for in its passion for certainty it extinguishes those aspects of reality that contradict its certainty. Its 'extinguishings', the existences it ignores, may include planets, earth, any evidence we see except that which contributes to its sense of control, its 'majesty / . . . as crown and mystical cabala'. Its power is double-edged, however, for if all reality for us is mind, we are trapped in a solipsistic existence surrounded by airy nothings:

> It leaps through us, through all our heavens leaps,
> Extinguishing our planets, one by one,
> Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where
>
> We knew each other and of each other thought,
> A shivering residue, chilled and foregone,
> Except for that crown and mystical cabala.
> (CP, 417)

Described in this way, the imagination seems all-powerful

and self-perpetuating, an entity with all the attributes of divinity. But that, even for Stevens as sometime protagonist of the imagination, cannot be believed and the description must be qualified so drastically that it is virtually emasculated. Despite its grandiose leaps, imagination 'dare not leap by chance in its own dark'. It is not destiny but 'slight caprice', that sudden, unexpected turn or change that it contributes toward the appearance of that which already exists 'out there' beyond its control.

> And thus its jetted tragedy, its stele
>
> And shape and mournful making move to find
> What must unmake it and, at last, what can,
> Say, a flippant communication under the moon.
> (CP, 417)

In giving form and shape and providing the 'stele' (from the Greek 'pillar') for reality, it makes that which is inimical to itself. In reacting against that foreboding prospect it may at last retreat from reality altogether and 'unmake' itself in inconsequential fantasies.

The reminder of the apparent hostility of reality prompts an examination of its possible innocence instead. The discussion of canto VIII, falling as it does into

the discursive mode, constitutes something of a lapse in style and the transition from the previous idea seems a trifle forced as does the affirmation it strives towards. The first part of the argument is that, though innocence be only an idea erected as a 'sense against calamity, / It is not less real'. Though it may not occupy space as substance does, it has an operational effect on us that argues for its reality.[3] As Stevens said in the essay 'Imagination as Value', 'We live in the mind' (NA, 140). Only for 'the oldest and coldest philosopher', someone removed by age and intellectualism from the world of experience, may there be 'a time of innocence / As pure principle'. Yet 'its nature is its end' for as soon as it enters the world of visible fact, it becomes part of the imperfect and exists no more. Thus it is a creature of the imagination, a fiction, 'Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue, / Like a book on rising beautiful and true'. It appears and disappears according to our state of receptivity and the circumstances of experience. 'It is a thing of ether that exists / Almost as a predicate', and as such cannot be demonstrated by rational argument. Thus, Stevens abandons ratiocination in favour of the vehement assertion of an immediate, intuitive, non-rational apprehension: 'It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.'

With that conviction as his base, Stevens is free to look upon the colossal panaroma of swiftest change appearing in the midnight sky and see it, not as a phenomenon epitomizing the evil of earth, but of its innocence, not a malicious piece of sorcery or a 'saying out of a cloud' that emanates from a being of an other-than-natural order.

Grammatically, the last stanzas of canto VIII which flow on into the first of canto IX make an interesting point:

> That we partake thereof,
> Lie down like children in this holiness,
> As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,
>
> As if the innocent mother sang in the dark
> Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,
> Created the time and place in which we breathed . . .
>
> IX
>
> And of each other thought -- in the idiom
> Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth,
> Not of the enigma of the guilty dream. (CP, 418-9)

The whole passage is a conditional clause, an integration or perception of a state of being that depends upon the premise that nature is innocence. Since that premise is beyond proof, what follows from it cannot be a statement of fact.

The idea provokes a further reverie upon the

time before mankind awakened to 'the guilty dream'. Before the advent of conscious thought

> We were as Danes in Denmark all day long
> And knew each other well, hale-hearted landsmen,
> For whom the outlandish was another day
>
> Of the week, queerer than Sunday. We thought alike
> And that made brothers of us in a home
> In which we fed on being brothers, fed
>
> And fattened as on a decorous honeycomb. (CP, 419)

Before the ordering mind appeared we were at home in our environment. As completely physical beings acting upon instinct we had no ideas to separate us from our brothers.[4] In that state of primal innocence 'the outlandish was another day / Of the week, queerer than Sunday'; it was some deviation from the natural, unconscious existence such as the dawning of awareness of time, the realization that there is more than one day, which would seem even 'queerer' than the weekly cessation of activity that the advent of religion has imposed. All was decorous before the mind began creating distinctions.

The reverie cannot maintain itself for long. The sense of our present state of consciousness intrudes. 'This drama that we live' contrasts with that ancient, imagined past in which 'We lay sticky with sleep'. Now

we have 'This sense of the activity of fate' that makes our final end a doom. Then

> The rendezvous, when she came alone,
> By her coming became a freedom of the two,
> An isolation which only the two could share.

When death came unattended by the fears our awakened intellect creates, her coming meant a release into inanimate existence wherein even the intuitive communication as between 'brothers' came to an end. As life is now, we are haunted by the knowledge of imminent non-being, 'Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?' The thought forces a return to the present, the cold beach and the presentiment of his own death which

> . . . may come tomorrow in the simplest word,
> Almost as part of innocence, almost,
> Almost as the tenderest and the truest part.
> (<u>CP</u>, 420)

The idea of innocence has worked its effect to the farthest extent possible for modern man. The imagined retrogression has not been able to return the speaker to the state of ignorance but has restored him to the calm of that imagined time.

If such a calm is attainable, why are we 'An unhappy people in a happy world --'? Various possible

relationships between happiness, humanity and the world are tested: 'An unhappy people in an unhappy world --'. Such total misery would be unbearable. We reject it as untrue. Similarly,

> A happy people in an unhappy world --
> It cannot be. There's nothing there to roll
>
> On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.

What most appeals is 'A happy people in a happy world -- / Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.' Since we are able to choose our truth, why have we not chosen to describe it so? We 'Turn back to where we were when we began', and discover that the formula has been solemnized out of 'This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres' who, as a product of the rationalizing mind, contrives a 'balance to contrive a whole'. From incomplete evidence, the sight of

> . . . these unhappy he meditates a whole,
> The full of fortune and the full of fate,
> As if he lived all lives, that he might know,
>
> In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
> To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
> Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick.
> (CP, 421)

In the passion for a completely satisfactory theory, a passion man reveals in creating dogma, the vagaries of the world and its untold possibilities are ignored.

The totality cannot, in any event, be perceived in the brief lifetime given us.

While 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' may be 'Stevens's major statement of what may be believed in'[5] and 'Esthétique du Mal' an elaboration of that statement, 'Auroras of Autumn' affords the most accurate paradigm for the processes of thought that occur in striving toward belief. The direction of the poetry in the two volumes of the middle period has been, generally speaking, a movement towards a reconciliation of the disparate aspects of existence and though that movement has been qualified by the full knowledge that the perfect reconciliation is impossible, the emphasis, the motivating vision has always been that moment of ultimate understanding. We need only compare the conclusion of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' with that of 'Auroras of Autumn' to notice a significant change in emphasis. In the first the scene closes on the imagined moment when 'I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo. / You will have stopped revolving except in crystal'. In 'Auroras' the last picture is one in which the brilliant 'blaze of summer straw' is seen in contrast to the dark cold of 'winter's nick'; the opposing poles of being and non-being are

thrown into relief, and the effort towards reconciliation gives way to an appreciation of the movement to and fro between polarities. The emphasis is on difference as though Stevens were echoing the assertion of Heraclitus that 'that which tends apart also tends together; there is a harmonia stretching in both directions, as there is in a bow and a lyre'.[6]

Though the flickering, fleeting movement between the poles of negation and affirmation, birth and death, is endowed with splendour in 'Auroras of Autumn', 'This Solitude of Cataracts' (1948) apparently reflects the 'poison' of the serpent as it expresses the inescapable, undeniable longing for permanence. Here the opening lines not only echo the aphorism commonly attributed to Heraclitus, but include the self as part of the vista of endless change. The expression is not quite as straightforward as it might seem, however. Though the speaker desires

> To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis,
> Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass,
> Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury centry of time,

the poem implicitly acknowledges that such permanence is reached only when the heart stops beating and the mind rests 'In a permanent realization' (CP, 425). The

repetition of 'bronze' and 'bronzen' remind as well that to know 'how it would feel, released from destruction' is the province of the 'soldier of time' and is to be found in his 'deathless rest' alone. The desire is unquenchable simply because the price is not only too high but impossible; to pay it is to lose the feeling desired.

'Large Red Man Reading', which was published as a companion piece to 'This Solitude of Cataracts' in Halcyon in 1948 points out the consequences of having desire for permanence satisfied. The ghosts who have, presumably, escaped the continuing destruction,

> . . . would have wept to step barefoot into
> reality,
>
> . . . would have wept and been happy, have shivered
> in the frost
> And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers
> over leaves
> And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on
> what was ugly
>
> And laughed. . . . (CP, 424)

The panegyric on mortality is not new, but it moves a step beyond the reconciliation with evil and pain that 'Esthétique du Mal' achieved. The role of poetry lies now not in finding a supreme fiction but in providing

> The outlines of being and its expressing, the
> syllables of its law:
> _Poesis_, _poesis_, the literal characters, the vatic
> lines,
>
> Which in those ears and in those thin, those
> spended hearts,
> Took on color, took on shape and the size of
> things as they are
> And spoke the feeling for them, which was what
> they had lacked. (_CP_, 424)

The 'Reply to Papini' (1950) is a firm letter of abdication from the position of prophet or priest in favour of retirement among the general 'confusions of intelligence' (_CP_, 446). The 'hymn of victory' and 'psalm of supplication' demanded by Celestin are not possible for those who seek to find a 'way through the world' rather than the easier 'way beyond it'. Imagination can provide 'hard poetry', that is, poetry with firm, definite outlines of belief, but 'This pastoral of endurance and of death / Is of a nature that must be perceived / And not imagined.' A letter (_L_, 711) written by Stevens at about the same time as the poem expresses a similar thought:

> Isn't it the function of every poet, instead of repeating what has been said before, however skillfully he may be able to do that, to take his station in the midst of the circumstances in which people actually live and to endeavor to give them, as well as himself, the poetry that they need in those very circumstances?

The 'ever-living subject' of Celestin is a 'remove' from reality which, like the 'removes toward poetry' in the sense of the 'poetic', must be put aside in favour of the real.

The second part of the poem opens with suave sarcasm: 'Celestin, the generous, the civilized, / Will understand what it is to understand.' For Stevens, 'to understand' is to arrive at a 'final belief' and for him the journey never ends:

> The world is still profound and in its depths
> Man sits and studies silence and himself,
>
> Abiding the reverberations in the vaults. (CP, 447)

The poet 'accumulates himself and time / For humane triumphals' which, unlike the celestial, encompassing vision of Celestin, are a plurality of partial triumphs. The 'politics of property' in which one possession is absolute truth 'is not the area / For triumphals'. Having achieved the perfect understanding, it permits no further victories. But the complexities and intricacies of the world and appearance are never wholly appropriated, 'They become our gradual possession.' Stevens goes beyond the theme of 'Add This to Rhetoric' and 'Large Red Man Reading':

The poet

Increases the aspects of experience,
As in an enchantment, analyzed and fixed

And final. This is the centre. The poet is
The angry day-son clanging at its make:

The satisfaction underneath the sense,
The conception sparkling in still obstinate thought.
(CP, 447-8)

As poet, his role is final and fixed; he writes because he must. As 'day-son' he is product and heir of reality, bewitched by a vision of the unattainable truth and destined to a lifetime of continuing efforts to create that which lies at the centre of his enchantment. His 'victory' is the 'heroic effort to live' amid 'This pastoral of endurance and death'. His lines are 'vatic' only insofar as they reveal and enhance 'things as they are'.[7] The burden of the whole poem reveals an increasing consciousness of the impossibility of the task as opposed to an appreciation of the transforming powers that ensue as part of the ongoing process.

'Page From a Tale' (1948) is one of the bleakest, iciest commentaries on this 'pastoral' and one of the most vituperative attacks on poetry which seeks to avoid facing that which is. One of the most obscure poems of the generally difficult late period, it has in the main,

escaped the attention of critics and, to my knowledge, no explication of the whole has yet been offered. Riddell says of it, 'The poet seems less intent on making poems than on living within their forms -- Like Hans . . . who weaves the nostalgic autumn tones of Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" through the frigid winter of his discontent, at once mocking Yeats's romantic wish and taking warmth from it.'[8] Wells considers it to be 'fairly straightforward melodramatic narrative'.[9] Yet Stevens rarely, if ever, writes straightforward narrative. The basic structure, again, is a system of polarities and adequate interpretation demands that images be grouped accurately and that the opposing attitudes they represent be identified correctly.

The obvious contrasts are day-night, water-wind, red-blue, sound-speech, and man-men or Hans-men. Hans, we are told immediately, discovers 'In that hard brightness of that winter day' 'the difference between loud water and loud wind' (<u>CP</u>, 421). Parallel grammatical structure links water with 'sound without meaning' and wind with 'speech'. Like an ironic descant sung against the bleak landscape, Yeats's wistful lines are carried on the wind to the solitary Hans. In the refrain of '<u>so blau</u> . . . <u>so lind</u> / <u>Und so lau</u>' which is woven into the

descant, the long vowels, the 'l' sounds and the soft German 's' express more clearly than the translation ('so blue, . . . so soft / And so gentle') the soothing quality of the wind's speech. In German, too, 'blau' is symbolic of Romanticism and bears a more markedly pejorative connotation stemming, perhaps, from Goethe's denouncement of the Romantic as 'sickly' compared with classicism's vigour and health.

The steamer foundered in the ice is linked at first with the sentimental lyric merely by bracketing the first reference to it within the Romantic phrases, '<u>in the deep heart's core</u>' and '<u>So blau</u>, <u>so blau</u>'. Later the association becomes more explicit in the statement that the men on the steamer 'would be afraid of the sun'. The ship has foundered in the ice that is Hans's element. His is the world of stern fact and 'hard brightness' like the winter day in which he stands as individual observer of the disaster that has fallen upon the crowd which entrusted its well-being to the great ship 'Balayne'. The name itself has a lovely, romantic sound. New stars are rising, 'couriers of its death', unlike the 'tepid stars and torpid places' congenial to the sentimental visions of the steamer's

passengers. These new stars offer no consolation to Hans either, but he confronts them with a bravery equal to their own: 'They looked back at Hans's look with savage faces.' The confrontation is different from that postulated in 'The Man With the Blue Guitar' where the hope is to 'reduce the monster to / Myself' and confront it as 'the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone'. The stars remain in space; their separation and hostility are unassimilated. Even a stronger contrast is this image of recalcitrance to that of the face to face meeting of the Captain and Bawda in 'Notes'. Structurally, all three situations are the same but the difference in affective content is noteworthy.

Hans dreams just as do the steamer's passengers, 'The sea was a sea he dreamed. / Yet Hans lay wide awake.' He suffers the same limitations as do other men, but he is 'awake' to those limitations. He knows he cannot see the sea of reality; it is locked in the ice of his perceptual machinery. However, to acknowledge that ultimate certitude is beyond man's capacity for realization is quite another thing from that of seeking escape from the glimpse of reality available to us by means of our natural endowments. Hans, confronting the stars of his

destiny, adopts a stance which contrasts sharply with that of men 'afraid of the country angels of those skies', men who, in a world of ice and cold, sing melodiously of 'the bee-loud glade'. They are afraid that the 'finned flutterings and gaspings of the ice', the feeble struggles of the mind, a mind that both protects us from the chaos of the sea and hides its truth from us, will by its efforts destroy the soothing evasions they have constructed out of speech. Within their wishful flights they protect themselves from the workings of intelligence 'As if whatever in water strove to speak / Broke dialect in a break of memory'. As if they may discover 'chaos is come again'.

The flights to Innisfree were largely of the past, however, when this poem was written. By 1948 most poets had been forced from the foundering ship of the 'noble savage' type of Romanticism. In Stevens's view, however, the departures being made by his contemporaries did not exhibit a more honest, more intellectually rigorous attitude. Thus the men on the 'Balayne' reveal their unwillingness to face the real by inventing fantastic suggestions about what the new reality will bring:

> The sun might rise and it might not and if
> It rose, ashen and red and yellow, each
> Opaque, in orange circlet, nearer than it
> Had ever been before, no longer known,
> No more that which most of all brings back the known,
> But that which destroys it completely by this light
> For that, or a motion not in the astronomies,
> Beyond the habit of sense, anarchic shape
> Afire -- it might and it might not in that
> Gothic blue, speed home its portents to their ends.
> (CP, 422)

They have never known the sun 'which most of all brings back the known', yet have thought they did. The impending departure from the security of held belief, 'no longer known', brings fear of anarchy. Their anticipations are still within that 'Gothic blue' of Romanticism.

The fifth stanza appears to be a survey or rather a montage of the radically new myths in which men's fearful anticipations for the future were finding formulation:

> It might become a wheel spoked red and white
> In alternate stripes converging at a point
> Of flame on the line, with a second wheel below,
> Just rising, accompanying, arranged to cross,
> Through weltering illuminations, humps
> Of billows, downward, toward the drift-fire shore.

The first vision is suspiciously like a kaleidescopic glimpse of elements of Yeats's Vision interacting furiously with Eliot's 'still point' and 'flame' with

additional infusions of 'weltering illuminations'. The whole tends downwards, however, towards Hans's 'drift-fire shore' of less splendid pretensions.

The second vision is actually a corollary of the first or the reverse side of the same coin. It expresses the fear that the destruction of old conceptions, brought about largely by the sciences, will bring to the fore a new race of men, descendants of the alchemists, 'Smeared, smoked, and drunken of thin potencies', men whose 'eyes are held in their hands', whose view of reality is that yielded by the microscope, and whose empirical observations are completely in the service of technology. These men are feared to be inevitably a Mr. Hyde triumphant over Dr. Jekyll and thus

> . . . capable of incapably evil thought:
> Slight gestures that could rend the palpable ice,
> Or melt Arcturus to ingots dropping drops,
> Or spill night out in brilliant vanishings,
> Whirlpools of darkness in whirlwinds of light . . .
> (<u>CP</u>, 423)

The reader's eye is brought back to the world as it is with Hans, intrepid watcher, surrounded by the obscure, unintelligible 'miff-maff-muff of the water, the vocables / Of the wind', and the brilliant but fragmentary 'glassily-sparkling particles / Of the mind', particles

which resist all efforts to unite them into a crystal-clear comprehensive conception. His world is far less dramatic than those embodied in the whirling fantasies of his contemporaries, yet he knows that necessity will compel them one by one to seek a place beside his feeble drift-fire on the shore. However, because of their fear of the sun, they will, even in that flight, cling to their artificial lights and remain 'alert / For a tidal undulation underneath' which, hopefully, would signal a return, in new form, of the myths they prefer to a realistic, courageous acceptance of 'things as they are'.

The 'tough-minded' philosophy behind 'Page from a Tale' extends beyond the attack upon the sentimental. It began by telling us that the incident was illustrative of 'the difference / Between loud water and loud wind . . . between sound without meaning and speech'. If we take those terms literally and extend to the latter the condemnation implied in the allegory, the possibility of poetry expressed in language (and, admittedly, such is but a minor form of what Stevens considers poetry to be) would disappear and the products of Stevens's own life-long exertions as poet would stand condemned as worthless. In one sense such a radical interpretation is justified,

for insofar as the poems reach conclusions or offer solutions to the enigma of existence, they have no value. Only as 'sounds without meaning', integrations that are tentative and respect the fundamental incomprehensibility of being are they true to the light of day.

For that reason 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' (1947). It is a poem that exists only in our conception of it because the completely meaningless is beyond our reach; it can only be imagined as a possibility. On the other hand, the achievement of perfect meaning, one that accords perfectly with every facet of multifarious reality, is also beyond our reach; it also can only be imagined as a possibility. Therefore,

> This day writhes with what? The lecturer
> On This Beautiful World Of Ours composes himself
> And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe,
>
> And red, and right. The particular question -- here
> The particular answer to the particular question
> Is not in point -- the question is in point.
>
> If the day writhes, it is not with revelations.
> One goes on asking questions. That, then, is one
> Of the categories. So said, this placid space
>
> Is changed. (CP, 429)

There is a touch of self-mockery here for Stevens, as advocate of a 'chant in orgy on a summer morn' and a 'boisterous devotion to the sun' (CP, 69-70), has been a

'lecturer / On This Beautiful World Of Ours'. And could not the 'Esthétique du Mal' be considered as an effort in which he 'hems the planet rose and haws it ripe, / And red, and right'? Had that been the perfect answer, the questions would have ceased, the mind would have established its supremacy, and the case for solipsism would have been established. But 'One goes on asking questions' revealing that the world is beyond the meaning of the mind:

> It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
> There must be no questions. It is an intellect
> Of windings round and dodges to and fro,
>
> Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
> Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present
> Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole
>
> Of communication. It would be enough
> If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
> In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,
>
> Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
> Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
> And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy. (CP, 429-30)

One senses a strong feeling of ambivalence for to be 'at the middle' is to be 'fixed / In This Beautiful World Of Ours', is to be immersed, selfless and mindless, in the physical world which, whatever else it may be, is purposeless, meaningless. Yet, by implication, such an

escape from questioning would be ours as well if we possessed 'an intellect in which we [were] fleet: present / Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole / Of communication'. Neither extreme is attainable and the poet wavers between them.[10]

The mind's desire for full contact with reality remains, but in 'Saint John and the Back-Ache' (1950) a realization of what that conjunction implies again emerges. The opponents in the debate are the author of the Apocalypse, who epitomizes the complete visionary, and the 'Back-Ache', who as all sense-perception, is the complete empiricist. But they are not separate individuals; both are part of Saint John and the arguments each aspect presents is the reverse of what one would expect. Physical sensation argues for the primacy of mind; mind argues for the primacy of 'Presence', the physical, the actual that is the origin of sensory experience. The transposition is a comment on the mind-body dichotomy.

As 'Saint John' holds forth he sounds remarkably like Stevens arguing for a return to the 'first idea', a nuomenal reality that

> . . . fills the being before the mind can think.
> The effect of the object is beyond the mind's
> Extremest pinch and, easily, as in
> A sudden color on the sea. But it is not

> That big-brushed green. Or in a tragic mode,
> As at the moment of the year when, tick,
> Autumn howls upon half-naked summer. (CP, 436-7)

Reality exceeds anything the mind can 'pinch' forth and its effect on the mind is a minor version of its actuality, either in its benign or in its tragic guise. Powerful as it is, the effect does not reveal the naked reality, 'It is not the unravelling of her yellow shift.' The play on 'shift' makes the statement an admission of our ignorance of the 'why' of the changing seasons and the processes they represent. Nor is reality the world of appearance, 'not the woman, come upon' in our everyday encounters, not the environment to which we are 'Not yet accustomed' and with which we have not yet achieved a harmonious relationship. Even so she is 'at sight, humane / To the most incredible depths'. The observation is intuitive, 'below / The tension of the lyre', in the manner of 'loud water' rather than 'loud wind'.

> My point is that
> These illustrations are neither angels, no,
> Nor brilliant blows thereof, ti-rill-a-roo,
> Nor all one's luck at once in a play of strings.
> (CP, 437)

His interpretations, and the encounters with the real, are not revelations such as visitations from angels might afford, or the trumpetings of such angels, or the final

idea, the complete knowledge about the question. These fragmentary 'particles'

> . . . help us face the dumbfoundering abyss
> Between us and the object, external cause,
> The little ignorance that is everything [.]

The abyss, could it be breached 'in a composite season, now unknown', a season composed of both mind and object in a unity,

> . . . may hold a serpent, loud
> In our captious hymns, erect and sinuous,
> Whose venom and whose wisdom will be one.

The reference to 'captious hymns' suggests the serpent is, like the Judaeo-Christian symbol, the essence of material existence, resident in nature yet in the invisible tree that constitutes the gap between ourselves and the 'other'. He represents a conjunction or link between the two in which the difference would be dissolved and we should know fully and be fully. The extreme opposites of 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' then will have merged and everything will be at the centre. Suddenly the projected apotheosis of our deepest desire reveals itself to be as much defeat as victory: 'Then the stale turtle will grow limp from age. / We shall be heavy with the knowledge of that day.' The turtle,

symbolic of natural evolution and change (both mental and physical, since the conjunction would eliminate distinctions) is 'stale' because we have become accustomed to the monotonous recurrences of changing seasons, growth and decay. Presumably, the pattern of recurrence depends upon the conflict of opposites and, therefore, when there is no conflict all change will cease. Such knowledge would, indeed, be 'heavy' for it would mean an end to being as we now know it. That the occasion would be death is not as clearly implied as in 'This Solitude of Cataracts', but it would be a death of knowing, of cognition, in any case. We know only as we differentiate and abstract elements from the chaos of impressions. We know ourselves only when we differentiate between 'self' and 'other', the internal from the external.

'The Back-Ache', therefore, responds without enthusiasm, 'It may be, may be. It is possible.' At the outset he took the position of the absolute idealist in saying 'Presence is Kinder-Scenen.' Now, although he is the manifestation or symptom of a form of Presence, he can say only, 'Presence lies far too deep, for me to know / Its irrational reaction, as from pain.' These lines can be interpreted as an admission that a nuomenal reality,

such as that argued by Saint John, may exist, and as a reiteration of his conviction that it cannot, in any event, be known. Moreover, there is an oblique suggestion that the argument of the saint is 'irrational as from pain', that in the positing of any millenium the rational reveals its irrationality and that the 'terriblest force in the world' finally takes its direction from its awareness of the physical. Thus both 'Saint John' and 'The Back-Ache' acknowledge within their speeches the significance of the transposition of speaker and argument that we noted at the outset. Cognition depends upon an awareness of difference, 'The little ignorance that is everything'. Riddell reads the poem as a 'plea for the imagination'.[11] As such its conclusion is singularly flaccid. What is more to the point is the modification of view that has occurred since 'Notes' was written. Then the possibility of a day in which the 'Fat girl' 'will have stopped revolving except in crystal' was greeted with excitement: 'That's it: the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that' (CP, 406). Now it has struck home that she must be found 'in difference' or not at all.

'The Novel' (1950) exhibits a similar preoccupation with the 'fatality of seeing things too well'

(CP, 457-9). The opening stanzas speak metaphorically of the autumn of life and the awareness of an impending passage into the 'rodomontadean emptiness' of the past. Then an anecdote told by José intrudes. (That the anecdote is taken from a real letter received from an actual José of Havana adds little or nothing essential to an interpretation of the poem [L, 617n].)

> Mother was afraid I should freeze in the Parisian
> hotels.
> She had heard of the fate of an Argentine
> writer. At night,
> He would go to bed, cover himself with blankets --
>
> Protruding from the pile of wool, a hand,
> In a black glove, holds a novel by Camus. She begged
> That I stay away.

José has left 'vividest Varadero' where living was tranquillity. In Paris he, like the young man in the anecdote, discovers that 'tranquillity is what one thinks'. The move from South to North is the equivalent of a change from innocence in which all things simply are as they seem, to a world of conscious and continual questioning. In the world of thought, which is modern man's prison, 'The fire burns as the novel taught it how.' Everything in the young man's environment arranges itself in his mind according to conceptions expressed in language. Nothing is simply seen in and for itself. The '<u>retrato</u>',

at one remove from the real is 'strong because it is like'. It is a 'second that grows first' in that thought, which is imitation or copy, is the first product of consciousness. We cannot know reality in itself, as 'Saint John' has argued, and thus it remains 'hidden and alive' within the 'black unreal' of human conceptions that mask rather than reveal.

The speaker returns to his own surroundings which become (as they truly have implicitly been from the outset) synonymous with those of José in Paris:

> Day's arches are crumbling into the autumn night.
> The fire falls a little and the book is done.
> The stillness is the stillness of the mind.
>
> Slowly the room grows dark. It is odd about
> That Argentine. Only the real can be
> Unreal today, be hidden and alive.
>
> It is odd, too, how that Argentine is oneself,
> Feeling the fear that creeps beneath the wool,
> Lies on the breast and pierces into the heart,
>
> Straight from the Arcadian imagination,
> Its being beating heavily in the veins,
> Its knowledge cold within one as one's own;
>
> And one trembles to be so understood and, at last,
> To understand, as if to know became
> The fatality of seeing things too well.

Only from 'beneath the wool' can one safely look upon the real. The fear that 'pierces into the heart' is

that 'to understand', 'to know' becomes the equivalent of knowing nothingness.

An appreciation of the paradox is not necessarily devastating, however, and 'Prologues to What is Possible' (1952) illustrates that there are distinct advantages to be gained from it. Frank Doggett interprets the 'ease of mind' (CP, 515) of the first line as 'the instant of time that is the present moment of consciousness . . . this now . . . familiar and appropriate to the self'.[12] He notes the similarity of that image to one used by William James in his Psychology to define our awareness of the present as an interval of time: 'The unit of composition of our perception of time is a duration, with a bow and stern, as it were.' The interpretation of that image in its relation to the boat as the 'continuing identity of the self in the midst of time and change' is quite valid but we should note that the 'ease of mind' is a product of the movement forward with a sense of rowers 'sure of the way to their destination'. This sense of direction echoes the passage in 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain' (1952) in which the writing of the poem is compared to the challenge of climbing a mountain and its completion like arriving at a peak which provides a comprehensive view of 'his unique and solitary home',

a satisfactory explanation for his existence. In 'Prologues' the movement toward that destination is what gives the sense of ease. The striving toward the supreme fiction is what gives life its sanction.

The stones out of which the boat of the self has been built are possibly the recurring burdens of a Sisyphus, the individual aspects of '_Mal_' which, once accepted as part of life's essential innocence 'had lost their weight and being no longer heavy / Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin'. They have become part of the splendour of being and in the process of transformation have contributed to the creation of the self. Construction of the boat out of the material of misfortune is a condition endemic to the normal course of events, 'So that he that stood up in the boat leaning and looking before him / Did not pass like someone voyaging out of and beyond the familiar'. Like the 'chrysalis' of the self described in 'Ordinary Evening in New Haven', the boat is not a completely unified entity. In that poem we are told:

> One part
> Held fast tenaciously in common earth
>
> And one from central earth to central sky
> And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind
> Searched out such majesty as it could find. (_CP_, 468)

Here the three-part structure is repeated and in the same order:

> He belonged to the far-foreign departure of his
> vessel and was part of it,
> Part of the speculum of fire on its prow, its
> symbol, whatever it was,
> Part of the glass-like sides on which it glided
> over the salt-stained water. . . . (CP, 516)

Again there is an emphasis on the solitude of each man's search for the meaning of existence, a search that is motivated by an awareness of its absurdity, a sense that lures men like the song of the Lorelei, 'a syllable without any meaning'. The desire to find that meaning is part of man's fate, 'an appointed sureness, / That it contained a meaning into which he wanted to enter'. Yet, like the serpent in Saint John's 'invisible tree', that meaning is 'venom and wisdom' in one:

> A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter
> the boat and leave the oarsmen quiet
> As at a point of central arrival, an instant
> moment, much or little,
> Removed from any shore, from any man or woman,
> and needing none.

The moment of truth is the moment of death. To perceive the essence of Being is to lose the being of the self.

In 'Saint John and the Back-Ache' the analogous metaphor provokes a tentative assent as if the full

implication were but dimly apprehended. Here the response is sure: 'The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared / Was beyond his recognizing.' Metaphor, despite all claims for its clairvoyant power, is a limited instrument of the imagination. As a projection of himself its validity is circumscribed by the boundaries of mind and natural existence. As Stevens said in 'Three Academic Pieces', 'The statement that the imagination has no level of resemblance is not to be taken as a statement that the imagination itself has no limits. . . . There is a limit to its power to surpass resemblance and that limit is to be found in nature' (NA, 74). The only means to getting beyond himself are inherent structural affinities, the 'this and that intended to be recognized' and then only in fragmentary, intuitive recognitions 'in the enclosures of hypotheses / On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep'.

Because the 'ultimate poem' is inaccessible, the realm of possibilities remains endless and the realization of reason's limits allows it to relax its efforts, to become quiescent, and permit an opening of the mind to possible new configurations. Each new possibility constitutes a new self:

> What self, for example, did he contain that had
> not yet been loosed,
> Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions
> spread. . . .

Each alteration is like a rebirth within a form of increased amplitude:

> As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly
> increased
> By an access of color, a new and unobserved,
> slight dithering,
> The smallest lamp, which added its puissant
> flick, to which he gave
> A name and privilege over the ordinary of his
> commonplace --
>
> A flick which added to what was real and its
> vocabulary,
> The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
> Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
> The way the earliest single light in the evening
> sky, in spring,
> Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by
> adding itself,
> The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected
> magnitudes. (CP, 517)

Out of the shattering vision of what an arrival at absolute knowledge implies comes a fresher, fuller awareness of the possibilities that remain to be explored within the limits of finite being.

Comparison of the attitude toward the female figure in the middle period with that of the late poems is to the point as well. Of the earlier examples, 'Bouquet of Belle Scavoir' (1959) and 'The Hand as a

Being' (1942) are especially suited to our purpose, not because they offer a unique view, but because they focus on the relationship of ordering mind and elusive reality to the exclusion of peripheral concerns. The title of the first is significant. An ear attuned to the Stevens idiom promptly recognizes the echo of the French _savoir_ in 'Scavoir' and finds the key to the poem. It is knowledge, the _the_ of absolute truth, whose fragrance pervades the lyric and 'It is she that he wants to look at directly' (_CP_, 232). That she is synonymous with that essence of nature which creates the 'dark, particular rose', 'the freshness of the leaves', 'the burn / Of the colors' suggests that at this time when seeking to know, Stevens was still seeking the 'substance that prevails' (_CP_, 15) as a means to restoring a sense of one-ness with his environment. The poem remains an expression of desire and no more. No prospect of a complete accomplishment of desire is envisaged.

In 'The Hand as a Being', the union desired is depicted as attainable through the mediation of the creative principle which is common to man's subconscious impulses and to the 'naked, nameless dame' (_CP_, 271) of the natural world.[13] Here the male principle, the ordering mind, is described as 'conscious of too many

things at once'. The woman reveals her creative activity in all the glittering aspects of life: 'She held her hand before him in the air, / For him to see, wove round her glittering hair.' When 'Her hand took his and drew him near', he, as artist, participates in the act of creation: 'Her hair fell on him'. In the process 'the mi-bird' (me-bird?) of the conscious self 'flew / To the ruddier bushes at the garden's end' and the longed-for pre-rational intuitive state of reconciliation is accomplished: 'Of her, of her alone, at last he knew / And lay beside her underneath the tree.' The reunification, as in 'Notes', is presented as the state most devoutly to be wished, a knowledge to be desired and sought without reservation.

In the last volumes only 'The Woman in Sunshine' (1950) yields a similarly uncomplicated view of the figure and in that poem the stress is upon explaining the image as one arising out of associated experiences of warmth and delightful movement. In 'A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror' (1949) the woman, again as image of perfect knowledge, 'mistress of the world' (CP, 460), wearing a

> . . . glittering crown,
> Sound-soothing pearl and omni-diamond,
>
> Of the most beautiful, the most beautiful maid
> And mother,

is desired. Now, however, the poem ends on a note of futility: 'How long have you lived and looked, / Ababba, expecting this king's queen to appear?'

'The World as meditation' (1952) is particularly interesting for the way in which a deft change in structure alters the import of an incident which in its isolated features is the same as other depictions of the pursuit. In previous poems in which the man-woman imagery is used to convey the separation of subject and object of man's estrangement from his own nature, the drama has been presented from the male point of view or has been related by an omniscient observer focusing on the masculine principle. Here the situation is reversed. We view it with an eye on Penelope and we do so, perhaps, because at the age of more than seventy the poet is more conscious of the fact that his rendezvous with elemental nature is not far distant and that the perfect recognition sought for so long will mean that all adventures will dissolve into 'the final fortune of their desire'. Penelope is no longer the fleeting unattainable phantom that evades his passionate attempts to seize her. She is a force 'Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells'. Her supremacy, her position as ruling force, no longer requires proclamation or defense:

> The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
> In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.
> No winds like dogs watched over her at night.
> (<u>CP</u>, 521)

She has become the tireless watcher and 'The barbarous strength within her would never fail.' That which warms her pillow is Ulysses' continuing approach, the journey not yet complete. 'Repeating his name with its patient syllables' with a certainty his experience of her has never known, 'she combs her hair'; her beauty persists as long as she awaits his coming.[14]

In 'Madame La Fleurie' (1951), a poem which needs no explication, the indomitable female assumes her most malevolent aspect and the poem is Stevens in his darkest mood:

> Weight him down, O side-stars, with the great
> weightings of the end.
> Seal him there. He looked in a glass of the earth
> and thought he lived in it.
> Now, he brings all that he saw into the earth, to
> the waiting parent.
> His crisp knowledge is devoured by her, beneath
> a dew.
>
> Weight him, weight, weight him with the sleepiness
> of the moon.
> It was only a glass because he looked in it. It was
> nothing he could be told.
> It was a language he spoke, because he must, yet
> did not know.
> It was a page he had found in the handbook of
> heartbreak.

The black fugatos are strumming the blackness of
    black . . .
The thick strings stutter the finial gutturals.
He does not lie there remembering the blue-jay,
    say the jay.
His grief is that his mother should feed on him,
    himself and what he saw,
In that distant chamber, a bearded queen, wicked
    in her dead light. (CP, 507)

The limitations of the human ability to know have always been tacitly if not overtly acknowledged. Yet as exponent of the imagination, as the 'major man' who speaks for the 'major abstraction', 'the idea of man' (CP, 388), Stevens has been 'spokesman at our bluntest barriers' (CP, 397), storming against the limitations and calling the struggle good. In these later poems he becomes spokesman _for_ the bluntest barriers, insisting that an awareness of those limitations be placed in the foreground of the consciousness. If we look back to the 'Esthétique du Mal' and compare it with the later view the change reveals itself. Then the striving toward the 'last nostalgia' which was 'that he should understand' made recognition of a 'third world' of nothingness psychologically untenable. It was thrust aside as

. . . a third world without knowledge,
In which no one peers, in which the will makes no
Demands. It accepts whatever is as true,
Including pain, which, otherwise, is false.

> In the third world, then, there is no pain. Yes, but
> What lover has one in such rocks, what woman,
> However known, at the centre of the heart? (<u>CP</u>, 323)

Now the knowledge of the infinite woman and the knowledge of the 'third world' have become synonymous and become incorporated in the new image of 'The Rock'. This image has appeared incidentally elsewhere, to be sure, but now it becomes the focus of attention and reveals itself to be not inimical to 'the woman . . . at the centre of the heart' but that which encompasses her essence.

'The Rock' (1950) depends upon the central image and innumerable interpretations of its significance have been offered. All testify to its inclusiveness but the way in which such inclusiveness is achieved without sacrificing the existence of contradictory elements, the principle of the paradox, is sometimes overlooked. Frank Kermode, for example, sees the rock to be 'Like the tree of Attis image in Yeats; it represents the reconciliation of opposites'.[15] Others describe it as a 'joining' of the primary components of Stevens's poetic cosmos, the brute material fact and the imagination which lends it meaning.[16] Doggett is on surer ground, I believe, when he sees it as an image which communicates the 'belief in substance' yet remains sufficiently 'loose and shapeless'

to permit the maximum flexibility of reference.[17]

A cursory glance at the context within which the rock is mentioned in the poem reveals the necessity for flexibility. In the first part of the poem it is the 'nothingness' (CP, 525) which is covered with green leaves that are 'a particular of being'. In the second section it is that 'barrenness' out of which 'the poem makes meanings' so that it 'exists no more'. In the third, it is 'the gray particular of man's life', 'the stern particular of the air', 'the habitation of the whole' and so on. Thus it is the epitome of paradox itself. It is both nothing and everything, existing nowhere and everywhere, the encompassing Being-process that is manifested in everything that is but which can never be seized in itself, because, in its totality, it exists in no single thing.[18]

If we now return to the beginning of the poem we find a process unfolding which illustrates the contradiction that is the essence of the rock. Entitled 'Seventy Years Later' it is a meditation in search of some event, circumstance or action that remains, something that retains its value, something that represents a solid achievement in which a meaning of those seventy years

could be considered to reside. But nothing that had value, that was an incident of warmth or pleasure remains. All the past has vanished and must, therefore, have been an illusion:

> It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
> Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
> By our own motions in a freedom of air.
>
> Regard the freedom of seventy years ago.
> It is no longer air. The houses still stand,
> Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness.
>
> Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
> The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
> They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar
>
> Were not and are not. (CP, 525)

The mind refuses to accept such total negation: 'Absurd. The words spoken / Were not and are not. It is not to be believed.' The incongruous, 'queer assertion of humanity', the 'embrace between one desperate clod / And another in a fantastic consciousness' seems an absurd 'theorem' that was, nonetheless, an inevitable outgrowth of total absurdity:

> As if nothingness contained a métier,
> A vital assumption, an impermanence
> In its permanent cold, 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. (CP, 526)

The satisfactions accrueing from the natural processes of birth and regeneration had to be self-justifying, self-induced, and self-contained. Growing out of nothingness, they define themselves within that ambience, giving evidence of no purpose beyond their momentary existence.

Though this is the 'content' of the poem, a marvellous transformation occurs as it is given form. A statement that begins in bleak negation and has all the ingredients of despair becomes as it progresses expressive of a panorama of delight. Nothing could be more stark than the first five stanzas and what follows in no way contradicts the ideational content of that beginning. But from the point at which the desperate clods propose their 'theorem', establish their own meaning, the rhythm and imagery flow into a spontaneous exclamation at the burgeoning good within the totally inimical.

The second section begins, however, by denying the sufficiency of the 'vital assumption' which proceeds casually, with no awareness of the implications of the process. That by itself would leave man helpless before circumstance:

> It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.
> We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground
> Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure
>
> Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness.

The word 'cure' is problematic. It may, as noun, be a spiritual charge or care, it may be a recovery of health, and it may be a process for keeping or use. All three seem to be implied. The 'cure' hinges upon an inter-related series of events. The leaves which cover the rock are the natural sequence of seasonal change. But they are also the poem and the icon and the man. All three have a naturalistic base but their efficacy lies in our acceptance of them as a part of our individual being: 'if we ate the incipient colorings / Of their fresh culls . . . . In the predicate that there is nothing else'. The word 'culls' reminds us that poetry is a process of selection and the creation of the man results from such a process as well. The same concept is at the base of the short poem 'Men Made Out Of Words':

> What should we be without the sexual myth,
> The human revery or poem of death?
>
> Castratos of Moon-mash -- Life consists
> Of propositions about life. The human

> Revery is a solitude in which
> We compose these propositions, torn by dreams,
>
> By the terrible incantations of defeats
> And by the fear that defeats and dreams are one.
>
> The whole race is a poet that writes down
> The eccentric propositions of its fate. (CP, 355)

The 'propositions about life' occur as naturally as do the 'blooming and the musk' but they are part of human revery which, if it occur without 'forgetfulness' of the nothingness beneath, can effect a 'cure of the ground and of ourselves'. The resulting 'leaves' yield a marvellously satisfying good in giving life a vigour and savour extending far beyond the immediate functional service their formulation provides:

> 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,
>
> The body quickened and the mind in root.
> They bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love.
> They bear their fruit so that the year is known,
>
> As if its understanding was brown skin,
> The honey in its pulp, the final found,
> The plenty of the year and of the world.
>
> In this plenty, 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. This is the cure
> Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves.
> His words are both the icon and the man. (CP, 527)

The third section elaborates upon the 'Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn' and it is only in a night-hymn, an obscure apprehension articulable in a medium suited to pre-logical thought, that an awareness of the nature of Being becomes available to us. Though it appears everywhere, it remains concealed from us. It is the gray in which all colours of the spectrum are merged and out of which they emerge 'through man's eye' which cannot see the whole. His failure to see fully becomes a good for only thereby does he make 'Turquoise the rock'. In making life a delight, however, he also makes hateful the thought of leaving it

> . . . at odious evening bright
> With redness that sticks fast to evil dreams;
> The difficult rightness of half-risen day. (CP, 528)

The 'strength and measure' of the whole rests in the rock which is 'point A', the centre of the perceiving being, 'In a perspective that begins again / At B: the origin of the mango's rind', the external world of nature. Notably, we are told of the rock's dimensions at the base and it includes the 'imagination' and 'reality' and all the 'dumbfoundering abyss' between that is the unexplored realm of possibility, but of its ultimate height and depth, its final or outer limit nothing is said for,

presumably, it extends into infinity. Thus, while the image evokes the sense of substance, it is a peculiarly intangible, 'insolid' substance conveying an impression of unyielding indifference and an air of complete freedom. It is 'that which is near' but infinitely extendable. An area in which man must create himself, his world, his happiness or despair,

> It is the rock where tranquil must adduce
> Its tranquil self, the main of things, 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.

The 'cure of the ground' needs to be demonstrated as well as argued and though 'Seventy Years Later' has done so indirectly, Stevens, in not placing 'The Rock' at the end of his final volume emphasizes that its significance is not that of final belief but of a generating force. The apparent dialectical opposition between it and the final poem 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself'[19] demonstrates anew what Stevens has always known, that 'It is here, in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good' (<u>CP</u>, 294):

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mache . . .
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry -- it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality. (CP, 534)

The winter experience is that of 'The Rock', an apprehension of the nothingness that completely surrounds the human being. Out of that nothingness he has come and to that nothingness he must return and in that nothingness all sense of difference will disappear. Therefore, the 'scrawny cry from outside' which at first 'Seemed like a sound in his mind' gradually assures him of its origin 'outside' and thus the evidence that the 'little ignorance that is everything' still exists. The significance of that distance, still unbroachable,

gradually builds to a sense of exultation. The sun's rising, too, still 'would have been outside'. The cry is 'part of the colossal sun', happily 'still far away'. Roy Harvey Pearce sees 'the acknowledgement that it is all "far away", "outside"' as a 'terrible knowledge . . . that "What reality lacks is a _noeud vital_ with life."'[20] Quite the contrary. The knowledge of that distance is what constitutes an assurance that life still exists. The difference tells him that he is and is not nothing.

NOTES

VI IN WINTER'S NICK

[1]Joseph Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965), p. 225.

[2]John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 183.

[3]The concept is similar to Whitehead's philosophy. See Alfred North Whitehead, Modes of Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 87: 'The sort of ideas we attend to, and the sort of ideas which we push into the negligible background, govern our hopes, our fears, our control of behavior. As we think, we live.'

[4]J. Hillis Miller, 'Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being', The Act of Mind, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 143. Miller reads this passage as a reference to the time when 'a unified culture, a single view of the world' made all men feel 'at home' in the world.

[5]Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 395.

[6]Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments, ed. G.S. Kirk (Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 95.

[7]Riddell, op. cit., p. 234.

[8]Riddell, op. cit., p. 235.

[9]Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 58-9.

[10]Riddell, op. cit., p. 233, says of this poem, '. . . Stevens has gone one step beyond the symbolic formula of "Description without Place" with its embrace of a world of words. The self not the world becomes mediate; that is, becomes the container of the real -- the "mind"'.

[11]Ibid., p. 233.

[12]Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966). pp. 56-7.

[13]Doggett, op. cit., p. 43.

[14]See Louis L. Martz, 'Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 147-8, for a very different interpretation of this poem.

[15]Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), pp. 124-5.

[16]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., 'Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 101.

[17]Doggett, op. cit., pp. 195-6.

[18]Miller, op. cit., p. 157.

[19]Roy Harvey Pearce, 'Wallace Stevens: The Last Lesson of the Master', The Act of the Mind, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 126.

[20]Ibid., p. 125.

VII

A FREEDOM OF AIR

Stevens's final position, then, might well be described as an abdication from the quest for certainty in favour of accepting perplexity as the indispensable ingredient of humanity. The difficulty such an attitude has caused all those members of the 'Stevens industry' who have attempted to assess his relationship to the cultural tradition of which he is a part is attested by the variety of troubled responses which have been made in the critical literature devoted to his poetry. Joseph Riddell's essay on 'The Contours of Stevens Criticism' in The Act of the Mind (1965) provides an overview of the positions taken by critics to the time of its publication. His own full-length study The Clairvoyant Eye, has appeared since that essay was written and in this later work he declares:

> It is idle to attempt 'placing' Stevens at this time, idle and pointless. His place in modern poetry is assured but not fully assessed. In him we find no sudden and radical break with the past, no spectacular gestures of rejecting tradition, no formulations or manifestoes to 'make it new'. He simply found it necessary to make it new, and did.[1]

In philosophical terms, Riddell 'places' Stevens as a modern humanist when he tacitly agrees with Roy Harvey Pearce's analysis. He says, however, '. . . the claims of modernism I make for Stevens are not for the contemporaneity of his ideas so much as the contemporaneity of his "modes of thought", which is to say, his responses to the world.'[2] The distinction virtually dismisses Stevens's ideas (which he has referred to elsewhere as 'simplistic') as insignificant. Other critics have found the thoughts in the poetry inadequate. Louis Martz considers Stevens to be a lesser poet than Eliot or Yeats because his 'sceptical music offers no all-embracing solution'.[3] Similarly Morton Dauwen Zabel judges poets like Eliot and Hart Crane to be men of 'larger historical or moral vision', of 'superior capacities in scope and judgement'.[4] And William York Tindall would completely deny any philosophical substance to the poems because 'Nothing here approaches systematic thought.'[5] The most extreme example of such criticism is Yvor Winters's assertion that Stevens's philosophy led inevitably to a degradation of his style.[6] Obviously the 'suspension of disbelief' demanded by this poetry is of such an order that many find it impossible to achieve.

The recently published essay by Frank Lentricchia

entitled The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens deserves mention. Lentricchia points out the essential differences that exist between both Yeats and Stevens and the traditions of romantic idealism, literary naturalism and maginal symbolism which preceded them. For these poets subject and object are not spiritually continuous as the romantics would have them be, the mind is not merely a passive instrument for recording nature as the naturalists believe it to be, nor is the poem an inviolable, self-existing world as the symbolists would have made it be. From the evidence of 'Page From a Tale' we can imagine how Stevens would have reacted to being considered kin to Yeats. Certainly, Stevens's firm resistance to the seduction of arriving at a conclusion[7] constitutes an important difference between his view and that of Yeats whose capacity for the 'egotistical sublime led him to formulate the involuted system of The Vision. This difference Lentricchia virtually overlooks. But as far as his assertion of Stevens's radical break with the nineteenth century heritage is concerned, the analysis is long overdue and refreshingly to the point. He describes the attribute common to the poetics of both Yeats and Stevens as the definition of 'the imagination

as a finite energy that seeks to ground itself in the linguistic medium and isolates poems as the artifacts of the private self operating in a particular place at a particular time'. About Stevens's poetics in particular: 'The poem is order, a dike holding back the waters of chaos. But the order of the poem exists only as the aesthetic interrelations of language and does not prophesy ultimate ontological order.'[8]

Pointing out the fundamental distinctions between Stevens and the literary past leaves him in an anomalous position, especially so if we concur with his own rejection of Yeats's company. We are still left with the question asked by William Van O'Connor in <u>The Shaping Spirit</u>:

> Does Stevens' employment of generalized statements and elaborations of his stated themes imply that he is a ruminative poet? Do his thoughts engender a kind of passivity in which one line or word is associated somewhat loosely with another? If we say, for example, that he is not strictly in the tradition of modernist poets who would create a language in which the images and symbols themselves, rather than generally abstract statements carry the meaning, does it follow that he, like Wordsworth, say, reports his feelings . . .? In other words, if Stevens is not employing the manner we associate with Wordsworth, what manner precisely is he employing?[9]

Manner and thought are so closely interrelated that discussion of one quickly becomes involved with

the other. Several critics have noted the similarity between Stevens's world-view and that of existentialist thinkers.[10] Certainly the resemblance reveals itself in any survey of his views on the human situation. Man lives in a world without absolutes in 'a speech / Of the self that must sustain itself on speech' (CP, 247). Finitude is the most significant feature of his condition and his consciousness, his imagination, is as much a liability as it is an asset for, while it enables him to survive, it makes him aware of the paradox of struggling to survive in a world without ultimate meaning or purpose. Stevens's early poem 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' (1922), which is philosophically equivalent to Camus's 'Live as if . . .',[11] demonstrates that long before existentialism had become a commonplace in literary discussion he had accepted its basic premises. By the time such notions became popular, in the post-Second-World-War years he was concerned with what follows from those premises, that is, 'How to Live. What do Do'.

The similarity of ideas, however, has not invited extensive comparison and that may be due to an awareness that, despite the similarities, certain differences exist which overshadow the likeness. First, the novel and the play rather than the poem have been the vehicles chosen

by the major writers of the existentialist movement for the expression of their ideas. In the second place, the epistemological questions that Stevens concentrates upon do not figure to any extent in their work, and thirdly, and this is perhaps the most significant difference of all, though Stevens does not maintain the gay tone of 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' throughout, even his most sombre notes do not match the desperation and morbidity of existentialist fiction. Stevens remains to the end the poet of 'In the Carolinas', one who is amazed that the Timeless Mother's 'aspic nipples / For once vent honey' (CP, 5), one who says, 'Crow is realist. But, then / Oriole, also, may be realist' (CP, 154), and he chooses, mainly, to be oriole.

Existentialism, in the words of Alain Robbe-Grillet, decides otherwise:

> . . . instead of seeking the good, it now blesses evil. Misery, failure, solitude, guilt, madness: such are the accidents of our existence that we are now expected to welcome as the tokens of our salvation. Welcome, not merely accept; for we are supposed to nourish them at our own expense while continuing to struggle against them. Tragedy wishes neither a true acceptance nor an outright refusal. It sublimates the state of disparity.[12]

Robbe-Grillet attributes this 'tragification' of the universe to the spirit of humanism which, in its intensified

consciousness of the self, demands of the world of objects what it is unable to give and is disappointed accordingly. Stevens, on the other hand has said, '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 brought up to believe. Humanism would be the natural substitute, but the more I see of humanism the less I like it' (L, 348). Confident in man's ability to understand the world, humanism seeks to impose order without taking into account human limitations. Stevens is much less assertive than Camus who engages, finally, in a Promethean type of revolt. For Stevens, the effort of the imagination 'is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains' (NA, 171). The 'if' precludes either romantic or existentialist egocentricism,

> . . . that evil in the self, from which
> In desperate hallow, rugged gesture, fault
> Falls out on everything . . . . (CP, 316)

The result is a poetry in the unique 'manner' that William Van O'Connor finds so difficult to assess.

Roy Harvey Pearce has mentioned a 'curious

dehumanization' in the later poetry[13] But the truth is that from the first volume to the last a cool detachment prevails. Daniel Fuchs has observed that 'even the masks of Stevens represent only rarified though intense human beings recognized not by the fullness of a personal identity, but by the ideas they embody.' This quality, he says, is part of Stevens's 'method of wit', a method involving self-parody, arising out of 'the desire to exorcise obsolete and ridiculous ways of feeling and thinking'.[14] Sentimentality and romanticism are the chief victims of that exorcism but the motivation is, I believe, as much a tendency toward generalization and abstraction as it is a form of wit. Not only people and _personae_ but places as well become emblematic of rather general conditions. Thus Tennessee represents untamed nature, Jersey City typifies a loss of cultural standards, Florida is nature's fecundity, and so on. Even on an 'Ordinary Evening in New Haven' the streets are mainly those of which the 'eye's plain version is a thing apart' (_CP_, 465). What seems to have been removed from them all is the dimension of time.

We need only recall the number of poems that lend themselves to diagrammatic illustration to realize

the extent to which the poetry exemplifies what Joseph Frank has called 'space-logic', and, as a corollary thereof, how infrequent are the examples in which the 'time-logic' of sequential narration appears. 'The Comedian as the Letter C' and 'Page from a Tale' are two poems in which the sequence of events is significant to their meaning, but even in the latter instance the import of the narration can be understood only when the structural pattern of polarities has been 'unkeyed'. Though the dualistic form is one which appears most frequently, other patterns of space-logic are utilized as well. 'Anything Is Beautiful if You Say It Is' (CP, 211) presents three ways of responding to the environment and the three speakers occupy positions in space which correspond to the attitudes expressed. In 'Of the Surface of Things' (CP, 57) a somewhat similar idea receives like treatment: three different locations in space afford three different interpretations of the world. 'Loneliness in Jersey City' (CP, 210), too, uses three points on a vertical scale, the steeple, the window of 'twenty-nine three' and the cobblestones, to represent three sets of cultural standards. And, of course there are many poems that move in a circle as does 'Sailing After Lunch' (CP, 120) where the poet struggles to break free from centrifugal force, or

'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating' (CP, 149) where 'that things go round and again go round / Has rather a classical sound'. A sketch of the movement of 'Auroras of Autumn' (CP, 411) would, however, consist of a zig-zag line tracing the to and fro of the speaker's thought and the flickering light of the borealis. In some poems, such as 'So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch' (CP, 295) and 'The Rock' (CP, 525) a diagram is almost explicitly drawn. A much more complex structure governs 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery' (CP, 150) but here, although the precise pattern of relationships is undetermined, the sequential order has been deliberately fragmented. One could go on adding examples almost indefinitely, but what seems to be the common denominator everywhere is that the 'and then, and then' has been abandoned for the 'now'. As far as exigencies of language permit, a simultaneous apprehension of structural components is intended and is indeed necessary for a satisfactory reading.

In the emphasis on spatial relationships and the symbolic use of colour, Stevens's poetry resembles the trends in contemporary painting. Robert Buttell has devoted one chapter of his study, The Making of 'Harmonium',

to examining and illustrating these resemblances as they occur in the early poetry.[15] The move towards abstraction in the later poems also parallels the direction being taken in both painting and sculpture in recent decades. Though this phenomenon of modern art in general is readily recognizable and has elicited considerable comment, interpretations of its significance vary. Ortega y Gasset considers the 'dehumanization' of modern art to be symptomatic of a feeling of revulsion toward civilization and its work ethic. In his view the result is art that expresses a hatred for art, that ridicules art itself, and turns it into a form of sport and play in an attempt to save man from the seriousness of life.[16] To see Stevens's use of wit, irony, and spatial form as indicative of a 'hatred' for art is an inadequate assessment of the whole of Stevens although, as Herbert J. Stern has pointed out in Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty, there is more than a suspicion of an ambivalent feeling toward his craft in the Harmonium period when the poet-hero is described as 'profitless philosopher', one who illuminates by distorting, 'proving what he proves / Is nothing' (CP, 46) and is brought to an undistinguished end. In the subsequent volumes, and especially in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' and 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', the poet figure is rehabilitated, however, to become

arbiter of the general sensibility of his age.

Joseph Frank tells us that Wilhelm Worringer, from whom he derives the concept of 'spatialization' attributes the emergence of a non-organic style in various art forms to a disturbance of man's relationship with the cosmos. He says that when man 'has a relationship of confidence and intimacy with a world in which he feels at home . . . he creates a naturalistic art that delights in reproducing the forms and appearances of the organic world'. When, on the other hand, he lives in fear of the universe as the primitive man does, or when he looks at the world through the eyes of religion and sees it as a place of evil, his art is characterized by an emphasis 'on linear-geometric patterns, on the disappearance of modeling and the attempt to capture the illusion of space'.[17] Furthermore, the phenomenon of modern art is, according to this theory, 'the transformation of the historical imagination into myth -- an imagination for which historical time does not exist, and which sees the actions and events of a particular time only as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes'.[18]

Wylie Sypher has come to a somewhat similar conclusion with regard to Stevens's poetry. He notes:

> . . . in spite of Eliot's much-quoted opinion that poetry ought to be an escape from personality, Wallace Stevens was the one who probably liberated modern poetry more completely from the romantic self. Stevens said that romantic poetry was merely a "minor wish-fulfillment" closer to sentimentality than to liberty of imagination because it made literature a reflection of life, whereas life is a reflection of literature. That is, literature frees us from actuality, and from the pressures of emotion, by establishing an abstract mental geography, which is the extreme feat of the poetic imagination. This geography exists "in the crystal atmospheres of the mind" -- what Stevens calls "the poetry of thought." To exist in this geography, the poet must abandon all romantic gestures and center his vision on a supreme fiction, "which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else." Eliot wanted to make poetry impersonal by exploiting a medium, not emotions. Stevens proposed something more radical, perhaps, in saying that "the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry," delivering us from the "corruption of reality" by "the momentum of the mind." The poet must get beyond romantic melodrama by a pure construct that has some similarity to abstract painting by Mondrian, filtering emotions and perceptions through an idea of an order. The poem that remains after such filtering is, in Stevens' phrase, "the form of life," Projection C, the scheme of relations between thing and idea, or the apparition of So-and-So reclining on her couch as if suspended . . . To see her thus is to cleanse the imagination of romantic sentiment, along with the weight of actualities.[19]

The full import of Sypher's evaluation becomes clear when, in a later passage, he says that the abstraction of Mondrian is close to 'a theory of relativity that is able to abbreviate reality into the equation $E=mc^2$' and that 'In his thirst for ideal forms he is curiously

sympathetic to Plato, who turned his back on the muddled world of things'.

That Stevens, the poet whose strongest attacks have been directed against mythologies of the past, who repeatedly asserts that 'nothing mystical is intended' in his search for a supreme fiction, who distrusts myth for the fact of its denial of the natural flux, should be myth-maker and rationalist in the end seems the supreme irony. The emergence in overt human behavior of unconscious or subconscious desires which are diametrically opposed to consciously held opinions is, of course, a commonplace of psychology and Worringer's analysis is based on that foundation. Moreover, we do not need to turn to psychoanalytical theory to find an explanation for this apparent contradiction between manner and thought in the poetry, for Stevens, as we have seen, was not only unconsciously but consciously aware of the human desire for certitude. The dehumanized, impersonal style is undoubtedly partly a reflection of that desire.

However, before we concur wholeheartedly and go on to attach the label of Platonist or myth-maker to one who said, '. . . I do not like any labels. I am not doing one thing all the time' (L, 288), we need to distinguish

carefully between two forms of thought and expression which may easily be confused despite the fundamental differences between them. Ernst Cassirer in Language and Myth says:

> Now, when the growth of language achieves the liberation of the concept of Being from its bondage to some specific form of existence, it thereby furnishes mythico-religious thought with a new vehicle, a new intellectual tool. Critical, or "discursive," thinking, it is true, finally progresses to a point at which the expression of "being" appears as the expression of a relation, so that, . . . Being is no longer a "possible predicate of a thing," and therefore can no longer be an attribute of God. But for mythic thought, which recognizes no such critical distinction, but remains "substantive" even in its highest reaches, Being is not only a predicate, but at a certain stage of development actually becomes the Predicate of Predicates; it becomes the expression which allows one to subsume all the attributes of God under a single rubric.[20]

When discursive thought resorts to the use of models in order to illustrate the scheme of relations it envisages, the transition to substantive thinking in respect to that model is perilously tempting and often occurs without detection. Max Black in his recent study on Models and Metaphors provides a number of examples from the history of science to illustrate the way in which theoretical models have become expressive of an ontological commitment on the part of their begetters.[21] Such a

commitment is what Sypher seems to find in Stevens.

If we look at the poem he uses as evidence for his judgement, however, we note that he neglects to take into consideration the last lines, lines which constitute the return to the 'necessary angel' of reality and the weight of actualities which Stevens always makes after a sojourn in the world of the imagination where forms, models and metaphors arise:

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

Unlike Mondrian whose pictures become purely geometrical, Stevens employs structural components that remain vibrant with life. Indeed, the surface of the poems, that which is most obvious on first reading, is so sensuous in quality that early critics agreed with Yvor Winters in seeing hedonism as its prime characteristic. To make an adequate assessment of the poetry, both the structure and surface must be taken into consideration. Both aspects are essential to Stevens's mind. Thus, the creation of a meaningful structure by the imagination's 'rage for order' is essential for psychological and physical survival in a world that continually floods the mind with a chaos of

impressions. But, as ideas develop into systems and become increasingly abstract, contact with reality becomes obscured. It is Stevens's sense of the danger inherent in a continuing loss of awareness of what is physically real that, in part at least, accounts for the luxurious imagery, the strong rhythms, and the combination of harmony and cacophonies of sound in the poetry. His first appeal, even in the later poetry, is to the senses. At the same time, however, the poems do not 'evade the intelligence' completely. Perhaps the clearest prose statement about the relationship is contained in the speech Stevens made on the occasion of receiving an honorary degree from Bard College:[22]

> The poet finds that as between these two sources: the imagination and reality, the imagination is false, whatever else may be said of it, and reality is true; and being concerned that poetry should be a thing of vital and virile importance, he commits himself to reality, which then becomes his inescapable and ever-present difficulty and inamorata. In any event, he has lost nothing; for the imagination, while it might have led him to purities beyond definition, never yet progressed except by particulars. Having gained the world, the imaginative remains available to him in respect to all the particulars of the world. Instead of having lost anything, he has gained a sense of direction and a certainty of understanding. He has strengthened himself to resist the bogus (OP, 241).

The polarities remain and thus his poetry remains, to the

end, what he envisaged it to be in the 'Comedian', 'an up and down between two elements', a poetry of paradox, change and contradiction. It is so because, in Stevens's view, these qualities are those that dominate human existence.[27] Further, it is a desire to communicate his radical view, as much as any desire for certitude that is reflected in the conflicting qualities of his manner.

The ambivalence Stevens exhibits toward the mind's powers is relatively unusual to Western thought. The Greek Way by Edith Hamilton examines in detail the origin of our more customary 'bias toward the rational', a bias she attributes to our inheritance of Greek ideas. Of our world-view she says:

> The world we live in seems to us a reasonable and comprehensible place. It is a world of definite facts which we know a good deal about. We have found out a number of rules by which the dark and tremendous forces of nature can be made to move so as to further our own purposes, and our main effort is devoted to increasing our power over the outside material of the world. We do not dream of questioning the importance of what acts, on the whole, in ways we can explain and turn to our advantage. What brings about this attitude is the fact that, of all the powers we are endowed with, we are making use pre-eminently of the reason. We are not soaring above the world within each one of us by the illumination of the spirit. We are observing what goes on in the world around us and we are reasoning upon our observations. Our chief and characteristic activity is that of the mind. The society we are born into is built upon the idea

> of the reasonable, and emotional experience and intuitive perception are accorded a place in it only if some rational account can be given of them.[24]

Though that summarizes succinctly an attitude that has prevailed generally for almost two thousand years, a marked change seems to be taking place. Wylie Sypher's The Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art looks at the way that change is heralded in the arts of this century. Because Professor Sypher judges Stevens to be a neo-Platonist of sorts, he has not observed to the fullest the degree of accord existing between Stevens's ideas and the currents of modern thought that he traces in his stimulating study. (I have quoted in full the only reference he makes to Stevens see p. 419 above .) In that study, he reminds us of the change that has taken place in man's self-concept since the turn of the century and the connections that exist between the 'tendency to non-identity' in the arts and the abandonment of the notion of substance by scientists. The alteration in world-view effected by the advent of Newtonian physics was immense; it gradually led to the 'death of God' and the growth of materialistic determinism. It was, however, not as shattering as has been the effect of the new

discoveries in the realm of quantum phenomena.

Percy Bridgman, a noted American physicist, has described the old situation in this way:

> The point of view for which Newton is responsible is well exemplified by the remark often made that every particle of matter in the universe attracts to some extent every other particle, even though the attraction is almost inconceivably minute. There is thus presented to the mind a sublime picture of the interrelatedness of all things; all things are subject to law, and the universe is in this respect a unit. As a corollary to this conviction about the structure of the universe, an equally important conviction as to man's place in the universe has been growing up; man feels more and more that he is in a congenial universe, that he is part and parcel of everything around him, that the same laws that make things outside him go make him go; therefore, he can, by taking pains, understand these laws.[25]

With the emergence of Planck's quantum theory in this 'second epoch' of scientific progress, the warnings voiced by Earnest Mach as early as 1887 have been fulfilled. He said then that 'science only gives information about phenomena as apprehended by the senses, and that the ultimate nature of reality is beyond the reach of our intelligence'.[26] Since then have come the electromagnetic theory of light, the special theory of relativity, the general theory of relativity, quantum theory, wave mechanics and a welter of related theories, all of which

are backed by seemingly incontrovertible empirical evidence, yet which, in some cases, such as the relativity theory and quantum theory, proceed from entirely different assumptions, and in others, yield apparently contradictory interpretations of the nature of light, the field of energy that has replaced the old concept of matter.

The hope of the old science was the achievement of one harmonious theory that would completely define the 'manifold of nature'. That hope was based on the principle of causality but it has gradually become apparent that that principle must give way to a new one: Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty which states as a scientific law that predictions can be made only in terms of statistics and probabilities and that the individual event, for all that can be known about it, is a matter of chance. What is more, the new science has discovered that it is the very act of observation of phenomena that interferes with the certainty of observation.[27]

The philosophical implications of the new developments in physics have been commented upon by Bridgman:

> I believe that the greatest changes in our mental outlook will come as a consequence of the

> realization of just these human limitations --
> we had thought the human reason capable of
> conquering all things, we now find it subject
> to very definite limitations. We can definitely
> conjure up physical situations in which the
> human reason is powerless to satisfy itself,
> but must passively be content to accept phenomena
> as they occur, which constitutes in fact a
> reversion to the mental attitude of primitive
> man, which is purely receptive. What is more, the
> strictly scientific attitude recognizes no escape
> from the situation, but it must be accepted as
> inherent in the nature of things, and no way out
> attempted by such inventions, material or con-
> ceptual, as primitive man makes.[28]

The new sense of the unpredictability of the universe has resulted in a new attitude to scientific 'truths'. Ernest Nagel tells us that, according to the most recent school of thought, 'theories are best regarded as instruments for the conduct of inquiry rather than as statements about which questions of truth and falsity can be usefully raised'.[29]

It is impossible as yet to say to what extent Stevens's awareness of the unbridgeable gap between man and his world is a direct reflection of the climate of scientific opinion. The topics he chose for consideration in the earliest poems show, however, that he was quite conscious of living 'in the world of Darwin and not in the world of Plato' (OP, 246). There is a comment, too, in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer of 1935 which says,

'A most attractive idea to me is the idea that we are all the merest biological mechanisms' (L, 294). Such an attitude would make him more receptive to new scientific theory than is usual in the literary half of the 'two cultures'. We know, moreover, from the quotation he included in the 1941 essay, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', that he was acquainted with the philosophical implications being explored as a result of the new science. He quotes Dr. Joad, author of Philosophical Aspects of Modern Science, in support of Bergson's theory of perceptual distortion:

> Similarly with external things. Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. What is it that vibrates, moves, is changed? There is no answer. Philosophy has long dismissed the notion of substance and modern physics has endorsed the dismissal. . . . How, then, does the world come to appear to us as a collection of solid, static objects extended in space? Because of the intellect, which presents us with a false view of it (NA, 25).

Certainly by the time he wrote the late essay 'A Collect of Philosophy' (1951), Stevens was aware of the affinity between his ideas, his concept of poetry, and the trends in scientific philosophy. He mentions in the essay Jean Paulhan's observation to that effect.

Even more telling is the fact that he pointedly climaxes the essay with a reference to Planck, 'a much truer symbol of ourselves', 'a more significant figure for us than the remote and almost fictitious figure of Pascal' (OP, 201). Moreover, the point he makes with regard to Planck serves to draw an analogy between the cognitive status of modern scientific theory and that of poetry on the basis of their common origin as 'provisional and changing creation[s]of the power of the imagination' and the 'faith in reality' that both exhibit.

Although on the whole our society still displays that sense of confidence in the comprehensibility of our environment of which Edith Hamilton speaks, there is not complete homogeneity in this regard. Edgar Ansel Mowrer in a 1958 essay entitled 'The Open Universe' observed that our scientific and philosophic world when faced with any inconclusive situation such as that revealed by the impasse of modern physics usually breaks up into two great schools of opinion about the universe -- one group opting for a 'Closed Cosmos' which is intelligible, secure and predictable, and another group which leans toward an 'Open Universe' which permits freedom, spontaneity and chance at the cost of comprehensibility and certainty. Mowrer classifies the first group as 'mental agarophobes'

and the second as 'claustrophobes'. The first are those who have a 'distaste for the open and wild blue yonder'; the second are those who fear confinement.[30] Although Stevens in his middle period shows evidence of swaying toward an 'idea of order', the order he wants is at best provisional. In the main he remains with Bergson, Whitehead, Santayana and Heidegger, Bridgman, Eddington, Mach, and Heisenberg a believer in an 'Open Universe'. We need only note the ideas he considers to be 'inherently poetic' in the essay we have been discussing to recognize the claustrophobe's desire for freedom. Quoting from Bruno he chooses this passage:

> By this knowledge we are loosened from the chains of a most narrow dungeon, and set at liberty to rove in a more august empire; we are removed from presumptuous boundaries and poverty to the innumerable riches of an infinite space, of so worthy a field, and of such beautiful worlds . . . (OP, 183).

In his introductory paragraph he suggests:

> . . . the idea of the infinity of the world, which is the same thing as a sense of the universe of space, is an idea that we are willing to accept as inherently poetic. . . . The idea of the infinity of the world is a poetic idea because it gives the imagination sudden life (OP, 183).

Later on he says,

> Certainly a sense of the infinity of the world is a sense of something cosmic. It is cosmic poetry because it makes us realize in the same way in which an escape from all our limitations would 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).

The reason for his choice is clear. As Mowrer says, '. . . belief in an open universe, while critical of dogmatism, wonderfully widens the field of the imaginatively possible. By its candid acceptance of rational opposites, it frees the thinker to consider the most diverse explanations of things'. Thus Stevens can at one time espouse the imagination and at other times cling to reality. He can declare that 'For myself, the indefinite, the impersonal, atmospheres and oceans and, above all, the principle of order are precisely what I love.' And he can say

> The night knows nothing of the chants of night.
> It is what it is as I am what I am:
> And in perceiving this I best perceive myself
>
> And you. Only we two may interchange
> Each in the other what each has to give.
> Only we two are one, not you and night,
>
> Nor night and I, but you and I, alone . . . . (CP, 146)

He can speak of the 'ever-never-changing same' (CP, 353) and of the 'impossible possible philosopher's man' (CP, 250) and thus remain to the end one of the 'Thinkers without final thoughts / In an always incipient cosmos' (OP, 115).

If, as Mowrer suggests, this preference for paradox and irresolution is matter of temperament, the reader's response to the deliberate inconsistency of Stevens's ideas will also depend largely upon his own inclination toward either a Closed or an Open Universe. The significant point is that such a response is not open to argument and, what is more important, it is therefore not literary criticism either. When a subjective negative reaction to the thought expressed in the poetry becomes translated into a disparaging comment about Stevens's stature as a poet,[31] surely improper criteria are being applied in making the evaluation. If we denigrate the poetry because we fail to find in it that which, according to our habits of thought, 'Approaches systematic thought' we are making a judgement like that made by T.S. Eliot in preferring Dante to Shakespeare because Dante illustrates 'a saner attitude toward the mystery of life'.[32] Eliot's saving grace is that he acknowledges in making such a comment that 'we appear

already to be leaving the domain of criticism of "poetry".' Stevens's critics have not always been aware that they have made a similar departure.

NOTES

VII A FREEDOM OF AIR

[1]Joseph Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965), p. 270.

[2]Ibid., p. 270.

[3]Quoted in Herbert J. Stern, Art of Uncertainty (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 25. The comment originally appeared in Louis Martz's article, 'The World of Wallace Stevens', Modern American Poetry: Focus Five, ed. B. Rajan (London, 1950), pp. 105, 109.

[4]Morton Dauwen Zabel, 'Wallace Stevens and the Image of Man', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 154.

[5]William York Tindall, 'Wallace Stevens' University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 11 (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1961), p. 32.

[6]Yvor Winters, 'Wallace Stevens or The Hedonist's Progress', In Defense of Reason (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1943), pp. 431-459.

[7]In a letter to Bernard Heringman, March 2nd, 1951, Stevens stated, 'As both you and Mr. Wagner must realize, I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion' (L, 710).

[8]Frank Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 189-90.

[9]William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), p. 132.

[10]See the following:

Lentricchia, op. cit., p. 189.

Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963), pp. 64-5.

Glauco Cambon, The Inclusive Flame (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 119.

[11]Albert Camus, 'Betwixt and Between', Lyrical and Critical, trans. Philip Thody (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), p. 47.

[12]Herbert Kohl, The Age of Complexity (Toronto: The New American Library of Canada Limited, 1965), p. 233.

[13]Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 413.

[14]Fuchs, op. cit., pp. 28-9.

[15]Robert Buttell, 'A Clinging Eye', Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 148-68.

[16]José Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., no date of publication), pp. 41-6.

[17]Joseph Frank, The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 54.

[18]Ibid., p. 60.

[19] Wylie Sypher, Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), pp. 135-6.

[20] Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth, trans. Susanne Langer (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), p. 75.

[21] Max Black, Models and Metaphors (New York: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 226-9.

[22] Samuel French Morse in his Introduction to Opus Posthumous dates this speech at Bard College in 1948. In a letter of February 19th, 1951, Stevens says, however, 'On March 16, I am going to Bard College to receive a degree. I know nothing about Bard except that it seems to be a scion of Columbia . . .' (L, 707).

[23] J. Hillis Miller, 'Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being', The Act of the Mind, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 146.

[24] Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1964), p. 16.

[25] Percy W. Bridgman, Reflections of a Physicist (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1950), p. 82.

[26] Sir Wm. Cecil Dampier, A History of Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. xviii.

[27] Bridgman, op. cit., p. 136.

[28] Ibid., p. 147.

[29] Ernest Nagel, The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 129.

[30] Edgar Ansel Mowrer, 'The Open Universe', The Saturday Review, April 19th, 1958, pp. 11-13, 43-45.

[31] Joseph N. Riddell in his essay, 'The Contours of Stevens Criticism', The Act of the Mind (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 257-60.

[32] T.S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1934), p. x.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

What follows is a selected bibliography but in the third section I have included, in addition to those cited, other works I have found helpful.

I. Wallace Stevens's Own Works:

Stevens, Wallace, 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', Explicator, VII (November 1948)

Collected Poems, London, Faber & Faber Limited, 1955

Opus Posthumous, edited by Samuel French Morse, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1957

The Necessary Angel, New York, Vintage Books, 1965

Letters of Wallace Stevens, edited by Holly Stevens, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1966

II. Works Devoted to Wallace Stevens:

Benamou, Michel, 'Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination', The Act of the Mind, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965

Blackmur, R.P., 'Wallace Stevens: An Abstraction Blooded', Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1952

Bloom, Harold, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963

Borroff, Marie, editor of Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963

Burnshaw, Stanley, 'Wallace Stevens and the Statue', Sewanee Review, LXIX, (Summer 1961)

Buttell, Robert, Wallace Stevens: The Making of 'Harmonium', Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1967

Cambon, Glauco, 'Wallace Stevens: "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"', The Inclusive Flame, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1965

Doggett, Frank, Stevens' Poetry of Thought, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966

Enck, John J., Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1964

Frye, Northrop, 'The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963

Fuchs, Daniel, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1963

Kermode, Frank, Wallace Stevens, London, Oliver and Boyd, 1960

Lentricchia, Frank, The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968

Lovell, James Henry, Jr., 'Form and Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Nashville, Vanderbilt University, 1962

Martz, Louis L., 'The World as Meditation', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963

Miller, J. Hillis, 'Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being', The Act of the Mind, edited by Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965

Mills, Ralph J., Jr., 'Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963

Moore, Marianne, 'The Poetry of Wallace Stevens', Literary Opinion in America, edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1962

Morse, Samuel French, Jackson R. Bryer and Joseph N. Riddell, Wallace Stevens Checklist and Bibliography of Stevens Criticism, Denver, Allan Swallo, 1963

O'Connor, William Van, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1950

Pack, Robert, Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought, New York, Gordian Press, 1968

Pearce, Roy Harvey, The Continuity of American Poetry, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961

'Wallace Stevens: The Last Lesson of the Master', The Act of the Mind, edited by Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965

Pearce, Roy Harvey and J. Hillis Miller, editors of The Act of the Mind, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965

Peterson, Margaret Lee Wilson, 'Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition: A Study of the Philosophical Background of Stevens' Poetry' Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, 1965

Riddell, Joseph N., The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1965

Simons, Hi, '"The Comedian as the Letter C": Its Sense and Its Significance', Southern Review, V, 1940

'The Genre of Wallace Stevens', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963

Stallknecht, Newton B., 'Absence in Reality: A Study in the Epistemology of the Blue Guitar', Kenyon Review, XXI (Fall 1959)

Stern, Herbert J., Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1966

Sukenick, Ronald, 'A Wallace Stevens Handbook: A Reading of His Major Poems and an exposition of his Theory and Practice', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1962

Tindall, William York, Wallace Stevens, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 11, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1961

Therese, Sister, S.N.D., 'Stevens' "Glass of Water"', Explicator, XXI (March), No. 56

Vendler, Helen Henessy, 'Stevens' "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"', Massachusetts Review, VIII: 1 (Winter 1966)

Wells, Henry W., Introduction to Wallace Stevens, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1964

Winters, Yvor, In Defense of Reason, New York, Swallow-Morrow, 1947

Zabel, Morton Dauwen, 'Wallace Stevens and the Image of Man', Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Marie Borroff, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963

III. Other Works:

Barrett, William, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962

Bergson, Henri, Creative Evolution, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1931

The Two Sources of Morality and Religion, translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1935

Black, Max, Models and Metaphors, New York, Cornell University Press, 1962

Bridgman, Percy W., Reflections of a Physicist, New York, Philosophical Library, Inc., 1950

Camus, Albert, 'Betwixt and Between', Lyrical and Critical, translated by Philip Thody, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1967

Cassirer, Ernst, Language and Myth, translated by Susanne Langer, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1964

Cruikshank, John, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt, New York, Oxford University Press, 1960

Dampier, Sir William Cecil, A History of Science, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1961

Dryden, John, The Poems of John Dryden, edited by James Kinsley, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1958

Selected Works of John Dryden, edited by William Frost, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960

Eliot, Thomas Stearns, The Sacred Wood, London, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1934

Focillon, Henri, The Life of Forms in Art, New York, George Wittenborn, Inc., 1948

Frank, Joseph, The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1963

Frank, Phillip, Philosophy of Science: The Link Between Science and Philosophy, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957

Hamilton, Edith, The Greek Way, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1964

Mythology, New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1942

Heinemann, F.H., Existentialism and the Modern Predicament, New York, Harper & Row, 1965

Heisenberg, Werner, Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1958

Heraclitus, Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments, edited by G.S. Kirk, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1954

Hoffman, Frederick J., The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1964

Joad, C.E.M., Guide to Philosophy, London, Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1936

Johnson, A.H., Whitehead's Theory of Reality, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1962

Kohl, Herbert, The Age of Complexity, Toronto, The New American Library of Canada, Ltd., 1965

Langer, Susanne, Philosophy in a New Key: A Study of the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art, New York, The New American Library, 1942

Mowrer, Edgar Ansel, 'The Open Universe', The Saturday Review, April 19th, 1958

Murdoch, Iris, Sartre, London, Bowes & Bowes, 1953

Nagel, Ernest, The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961

Ortega y Gasset, Jose, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Company, Inc., no date of publication

The Modern Theme, translated by J. Cleugh, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1961

Richardson, William J., S.J., Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1963

Smith, Colin, Contemporary French Philosophy, London, Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1964

Sontag, Susan, Against Interpretation, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966

Stewart, George R., Names on the Land, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 1958

Sypher, Wylie, Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art, New York, Vintage Books, 1962

Tindall, William York, A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas, New York, The Noonday Press, 1962

Whitehead, Alfred North, Science and the Modern World, New York, The Free Press, 1967

Adventures of Ideas, New York, The Free Press, 1967

Modes of Thought, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1956

Whitman, Walt, 'Song at Sunset', Poems by Walt Whitman, edited by William Michael Rossetti, London, John Camden Hotten, 1868

Wordsworth, William, 'The Prelude', English Romantic Poetry and Prose, edited by Russell Noyes, New York, Oxford University Press, 1956

INDEX OF POEMS

Academic Discourse at Havana, 112-22, 140

Add This to Rhetoric, 367

Adult Epigram, 433

Anatomy of Monotony, 123-5

Anecdote of Men by the Thousand, 48, 49-52, 103

Anecdote of the Jar, 414

Anything Is Beautiful if You Say It Is, 213, 415

Apostrophe to Vincentine, The, 79-82

Asides on the Oboe, 433

Auroras of Autumn, The, 344-64, 416

Bagatelles the Madrigals, The, 344

Banal Sojourn, 142

Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws, The, 23-6, 220

Bouquet of Belle Scavoir, 389-90

Certain Phenomena of Sound, 282, 297

Colloquy with a Polish Aunt, 37-40

Comedian as the Letter C, The, 95-112, 127, 144, 315, 414, 424

Connoisseur of Chaos, 3, 214-15

Cortège for Rosenbloom, 21-2

Creations of Sound, The, 296-8

Credences of Summer, 282, 299, 333-9

Cuban Doctor, The, 77-9

Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician, The, 66-9

Description without Place, 284-5

Doctor of Geneva, The, 72-4, 214, 325

Domination of Black, 33-7, 167, 355

Emperor of Ice-Cream, The, 4, 300, 312, 411, 412

Esthétique du Mal, 212, 217, 299-327, 328, 333, 337, 363, 365, 377, 394

Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas, 215-27, 234, 239, 245, 270, 300, 309

Fading of the Sun, A, 150, 154-5

Farewell to Florida, 131, 136-43, 174, 212, 222, 345

Floral Decorations for Bananas, 85-7, 99

Forces, the Will & the Weather, 213, 233

Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs, 45-8, 52, 103

From the Packet of Anarcharsis, 299

Ghosts as Cocoons, 161-4

Gigantomachia, 288

Glass of Water, The, 214

Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror, A, 391-2

Hand as a Being, The, 389-91,

High-Toned Old Christian Woman, A, 26-7

Holiday in Reality, 298-9

How to Live. What to Do, 146, 150-4, 156, 411

Idea of Order at Key West, The, 153, 164

Idiom of the Hero, 233

In the Carolinas, 412

In the Clear Season of Grapes, 123, 127-30

Invective Against Swans, 75-7, 115

Jack-Rabbit, The, 52-4

July Mountain, 433

Large Red Man Reading, 365-6, 367

Latest Freed Man, The, 213, 243

Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery, 165-206, 208, 300, 344, 412, 416

Loneliness in Jersey City, 213, 305, 414, 415

Lunar Paraphrase, 31-2

Madame La Fleurie, 317, 393-4

Man with the Blue Guitar, The, 120, 210-12, 228, 299, 371, 417

Men Made out of Words, 399-400

Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, 231-4

New England Verses, 87-95, 108, 215

No Possum, No Sop, No Taters, 402

Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself, 402-4

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, 212, 235-78, 282, 296, 300, 328, 363, 370, 382, 417

Novel, The, 382-5

O Florida, Venereal Soil, 40-5

Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb, 22

Of Modern Poetry, 286

Of the Surface of Things, 82-5, 87, 415

On the Road Home, 213

Ordinary Evening in New Haven, An, 386, 414

Page from a Tale, 368-76, 409, 415

Palace of the Babies, 32-3

Parochial Theme, 228-31, 285

Phosphor Reading by His Own Light, 216, 233, 326

Place of the Solitaires, The, 70

Pleasures of Merely Circulating, The, 169, 416
Ploughing on Sunday, 27-30
Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain, The, 385-6
Poems of Our Climate, The, 255
Postcard from a Volcano, A, 158-60
Prologues to What Is Possible, 385-9
Pure Good of Theory, The, 328-32

Repetitions of a Young Captain, 285-96
Reply to Papini, 366-8
Re-statement of Romance, 432
Rock, The, 395-402, 416

Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz, 145-7
Sailing after Lunch, 131-6, 139, 145, 415
Saint John and the Back-Ache, 378-82, 384, 387
Six Significant Landscapes, 60-6
Snow Man, The, 58-60, 215, 329
So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch, 299, 416, 422
Some Friends from Pascagoula, 156-8
Somnambulisma, 285
Sunday Morning, 31, 217, 286, 300, 376
Surprises of the Superhuman, The, 108

Tea at the Palaz of Hoon, 55-7, 58
Theory, 48-9, 103
This Solitude of Cataracts, 364-5, 381
Two at Norfolk, 123, 125-7

Ultimate Poem Is Abstract, The, 376-8, 380
United Dames of America, 249

Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu, 147-50, 151
Wind Shifts, The, 108
Woman in Sunshine, The, 317, 391
World as Meditation, The, 392-3
Worms at Heaven's Gate, The, 21