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THE POETIC OF GAIETY:

WALLACE STEVENS'S THEORIES OF THE IMAGINATION

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CHARTUREE TINGSABADH

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

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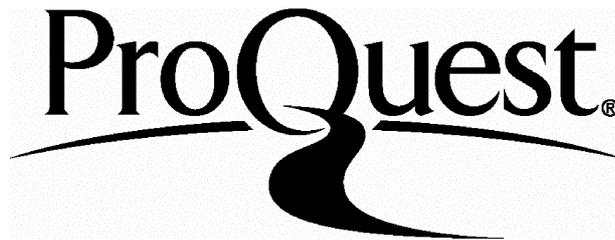
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Stevens's evolving Modernist poetic: his thinking, both in poems and in explanatory prose, about the nature of poetic creativity, about the uses of language, and about the cultural function and value of poetry (what he called its 'gaiety').

The method adopted is two-fold: 1) an examination of the ways in which Stevens transformed Romantic and Symbolist poetic tradition, incorporating (often in a significantly modified form) concepts developed by Valéry, Mauron, Focillon, Nietzsche, Whitehead, and Planck; 2) an assessment of the consequences of that incorporation for a critical understanding of poems written during each stage of his career. The thesis will trace the process by which concept becomes figure in the making of the poem, and is then reconceptualized in the act of reading.

The thesis consists of four lengthy chapters, each divided into subsections. Chapter 1 considers Stevens's critics, and their understanding of the philosophical basis of his poetic. Chapter 2 discusses Stevens's conversion of the Romantic concept of joy from a privileged power of vision to the intensified power of abstraction and intensified play of language envisaged by Valéry. Chapter 3 assesses Stevens's 'scientism' (his use of Mauron, Focillon and others) as an attempt to extend and strengthen the cultural claims of poetry, and compares it to that of contemporary poets like Eliot, Pound and Williams. Chapter 4 assesses Stevens's interest in Nietzsche's concept of gay science as an attempt to resolve the problem of belief in modern poetry.

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Introduction

In a letter (May 4, 1948) to Paule Vidal, his art dealer in Paris, who helped Stevens resist the pressures of reality with ‘something exquisite but cheap’ (*L* 581) from abroad at his request, Stevens tentatively asked if she could find out about and perhaps procure for him a work by a still obscure painter called Tal Coat. He had apparently read about him in a review in *Le Point*, and was intrigued by the reviewer’s praise of his use of strong colours and by the promise of ‘a new reality’ in his works. Indeed, Stevens seemed particularly interested by the latter quality for he relaxed his usual reserve and ventured his own opinion on the matter:

A painter finding his own way through a period of abstract painting is likely to pick up a certain amount of the metaphysical vision of the day. As a matter of fact, the physical never seems newer than when it is emerging from the metaphysical. I don’t object to painting that is modern in sense.... No-one is more interested in modern painting if it really is modern; that is to say, if it really is the work of a man of intelligence sincerely seeking to satisfy the needs of his sensibility. But the so-called metaphysical vision has been intolerably exploited by men without intelligence. In short, I should not object to a picture of Tal Coat exemplifying some theory of his own. (*L* 595)

His fascination also seems to have increased, despite (or perhaps because of) Miss Vidal’s initial failure to obtain the painter’s interest, for another letter (May 9, 1949) saw him abandon his financial caution as he instructed her to persist with the purchase. This time the attempt was successful, and soon Stevens was writing to Barbara Church, to whom he now spoke enthusiastically of his new still-life by Tal Coat, who ‘is not yet in categories that would interest you but he may be one of these days’ (*L* 642).

Soon after its arrival, Tal Coat’s ‘new reality’ inspired ‘Angel Surrounded by

Paysans' in which the painting's centrepiece - the glass bowl with a sprig of green - was transformed into Stevens's necessary angel through whose eye reality might again be seen afresh, cleared of stubborn clichés. Yet the painting's 'violence' continued to fascinate Stevens. 'This man puts up a great deal of resistance to penetrate him,' wrote Stevens to Thomas McGreevy, and added, 'Cogniat uses the word violence with reference to him. A violent still life sounds like a queer thing' (*L* 652).¹ On the same day, he also wrote to Barbara Church, to whom he was more explicit:

My Tal Coat occupies me as much as anything. It does not come to rest, but it fits in. R. Cogniat speaks of his violence: that of a Breton peasant from the end of the earth (Finisterre). It is a still life in which the objects are a reddish brown Venetian glass dish, containing a sprig of green, on a table on which there are various water bottles, a terrine of lettuce, a glass of dark red wine and a napkin. Note the absence of mandolins, oranges, apples, copies of *Le Journal* and similar fashionable commodities. All of the objects have solidity, burliness, aggressiveness. This is not a still life in the sense in which the chapters of *de Maistre* are bits of genre. It is not *dix-huitieme*. It contradicts all of one's expectations of a still life ... (*L* 654)

A few days later, in another letter to Miss Vidal, he sought to bring the painting and his own impression to rest:

... I have reached what I think is my final feeling about it, although one never knows what prompts an artist to do what he does. It is obvious that this picture is the contrary of everything that one would expect in a still life. Thus, it is commonly said that a still life is a problem in the painting of solids. Tal Coat has not interested himself in that problem. Here all the objects are painted with a vigor of the artist. Here nothing is mediocre or merely correct. Tal Coat scorns the fastidious. Moreover, this is not just a manifestation of crude strength of a peasant,... It is a display of imaginative force: an effort to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality... He is virile and he has the naturalness of a man who means to be something more than a follower. (*L* 655-656)²

¹. The letter was dated October 29, 1949.

². The letter was dated October 31, 1949.

What does this anecdote tell us of this most elusive poet? If we were to name the subject of Stevens's concern in one sentence, this sentence would have to be his own: 'Natives of poverty, children of malheur,/The gaiety of language is our seigneur' (*CP* 322). This 'gaiety' can be expanded into three major areas of interest: the creativity of thought, the creativity of language, and the value of poetic creativity in matters of cultural and spiritual concern. Their interrelationships become the object around which Stevens's 'never-ending meditation' (*CP* 465) evolves: the affirmation of poetry as a vital activity which, by means of the 'virile' power of the imagination and the resources of language, creates forms of 'nobility' by which to enrich reality with interest and significance and thereby fulfil the poet's need to find his own sense of the world, and help his readers to live their lives.

The anecdote also shows in what sense poetry is a 'vital' activity for Stevens. What began as a casual fascination quickly grew into a concept of poetry; and as Stevens became absorbed into what he saw as affinities of interest between him and the painter, the concept intensified into a poem which, like its central image of the angel, became a metaphor of creativity. Poetry is 'vital' first as an activity of the sensibility, an expression of the mind that perceives and delights in fresh insights into or new relations among the swarming gratuitous particulars of reality. A walk to and from the office, or around the lake, or even the sound of a cat walking in the snow can stimulate a spontaneous 'poetry' of this kind. Although Stevens never abandons his appreciation of the gratuitous, he also insists that poetry is a conscious activity: an act of the mind that seeks to engage and understand the intractable aspects of experience, to 'digest the "harde yron"' (*NA* 103), of reality as he says of Marianne Moore's poetry; and, more importantly, to forge out of its own efforts of abstraction

an exquisite plane of imaginative transformation. Poetry in this sense is 'vital' because its making is crucial for the satisfaction of the needs of the sensibility.

For this reason Stevens admires the 'violence' that animates Tal Coat's still-life. Earlier, when Stevens was preparing 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', during which he was meditating on the nature and function of poetry, he was looking for a form of poetry that, through the 'violence' of the imagination, helped resist the 'violence' of reality without. This poetry must restore the creative tension between the imagination and the real, and, in so doing, it must be favourable to contemporary reality without succumbing to the demand for realism then expected of contemporary art. Tal Coat fulfilled these requirements. His still-life ignored both the obsolete conventions of the genre, and the fashionable clichés of abstract aesthetics of the day. More important, his Venetian glass dish, and its entourage of bottles, terrine of lettuce, glass of wine, and napkins, - are all commonplace objects painted in their solidity and are now imbued with the virile vigour of the artist. It is good to have an angel, but to be necessary, this angel of reality must also be surrounded by paysans. Or, as Stevens himself puts it, while it is '*au pays de la métaphore qu'on est poète*' (OP 204), it is equally important that '*il faut être paysan d'être poète*' (L 292).

Poetry of this kind resists categorization. Stevens is intrigued by Tal Coat's rejection of modernist abstractions even though his painting still succeeds in being modern in sense. Recent criticism has shown that, although Stevens was well familiar with avant-garde experiments through his friends, he was wary of belonging to 'groups'.³ Likewise he disliked fixing his ideas into a definite theory of poetry,

³. See, for instance, Glen Macleod, *Wallace Stevens and Company: The Harmonium Years 1913-1923* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983).

preferring instead to see them as ‘notes’, an evolving prologue to what is possible. Even though his concern with the relationship between the imagination and reality clearly underlines his allegiance to the Romantic and Symbolist tradition, he also insists that the ‘reality-imagination complex’ (*L* 792) is his own. Indeed, the paradoxes of his poetry - the conjunction of the traditional Romantic ideas and meditative lyric with the range of stylistic experimentation that includes the abstract, the improvisatory, and the comic elements - often frustrate his critics’ efforts to locate his poetry within the broader contexts - ideological, historical, and literary - of modernist poetry.

It is the ‘gaiety’ of Stevens’s poetry that will be the subject of examination in this thesis. Chapter I examines how Stevens’s critics are baffled and the assumptions of their various approaches challenged in their efforts to illuminate ^{the} philosophical basis of his poetry, and to define the nature of his modernism. Granted Stevens’s reticence, it may be argued that, to approach and to appreciate Stevens’s poetry, it may be necessary to attend to Stevens’s interest in some of the contemporary thinkers, whose ideas help Stevens in defining what become major ideas in his engagement with the contemporary cultural and poetic debates. As with his interest in the uncategorizable Tal Coat, his critical writings generously and certainly bear witness to his wide-ranging and, it may be said, eccentric, reading which was then incorporated and reconceptualized, in a radically modified manner, as he evolved his own concepts and forms of modern poetry. The first of these - and the more enduring - that of ‘gaiety’ is first examined as a radical conversion of the Romantic ^{concept} of joy as a visionary power into an intensified play of abstraction and intensified play of language as envisioned by Santayana and in particular by Valéry. These concerns are discussed in Chapter II.

Chapter III assesses Stevens’s ‘scientism’ and compares it to that of his

contemporaries like Pound, Eliot and Williams. A surprising and ambivalent concept in Stevens's critical writings, its appearance is a measure of the difficulty of Stevens's engagement with the contemporary situation of poetry. Through Mauron, Focillon and others, Stevens extends and strengthens the cultural claims of poetry. Contrary to his contemporaries' assertion of objectivity as a basis upon which rests poetic authority, Stevens plays on the words 'common' and 'commonal' to propose poetry as a power that first transforms the familiar into the unfamiliar, and which then creates forms of value that may be shared through the act of reading by the poet and his reader.

Stevens's interest in the values of 'the commonal' leads him to consider the possibility of a 'supremely acceptable fiction' (NA 173) that will supply the satisfactions of belief in the modern world. He himself comes to identify the creation of this fiction as the poet's spiritual and highest role. His preoccupation with the problem of belief is examined in Chapter IV. From Santayana's aesthetic idealism and more importantly from Nietzsche's concept of gay science, he evolves a notion of poetry that, through its revaluation of forms of belief, claims the imagination as necessary creator of values the aim of which is the affirmation of reality.

Through elusive terms like 'gaiety', 'nobility' or 'new romanticism', Stevens achieves a powerful defence of poetry in which the imaginative creativity is affirmed as the power which engages in the problems of modern reality. That this is no mere indulgence in frivolity, but a necessity may be gauged from Stevens's own sense of its urgency and difficulty that is never far from the play of thought and language in his poetry, even at its most exuberant. The efforts of this 'gaiety' may be uncertain, limited and often obscure, but at least they are vital, human, and therefore sufficient.

Chapter I: The Compass and Curriculum of Stevens Criticism

'I don't like any labels' (*L* 288), Stevens once complained, and the contours of Stevens criticism bear testimony to the difficulty of defining perhaps this most elusive and paradoxical of modern poets. Frank Kermode, for instance, asks 'how *are* we to see him rightly,' and laments that 'the enormous effort to explain Stevens has failed.'¹ Kermode here is referring to the critical efforts of the Sixties, which include a significant number of influential studies by scholars like J. Hillis Miller, Frank Doggett, Roy Harvey Pearce, to name but a few, all of which later prompts Frank Lentricchia to observe that 'it is difficult to overestimate the vogue of Wallace Stevens.'² There have indeed been many 'vogues' - from the ironist and aesthete Stevens of the now supposedly discredited formalism and the belated Romantic visionary humanist or existentialist poet of many philosophical approaches, to the deconstructive poet of several contending versions of contemporary postmodernist theories. Yet to see the interest in Wallace Stevens as a mere passing 'vogue' is to overlook crucial issues central to the contemporary debate on literary history and theory that in turn inform the study of Wallace Stevens's poetry. The 'Stevens case', as Marjorie Perloff and Joseph Riddel observe, raises the questions of his relation to modernist poetry and of the meaning of modernist poetry.³

¹. Frank Kermode, *Continuities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), p.84. The article in which the remark is made was written in 1966-67.

². Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.30.

³. See Marjorie Perloff's 'Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?' in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Joseph Riddel's 'The Climate of Our Poems' in *Wallace*

In many ways the task of definition is compounded by the multifaceted nature of Stevens's poetry itself. He is a meditative poet whose thoughts evolve around traditional romantic themes, yet whose expressions are often playful; lyrical yet curiously impersonal; a traditional and experimental poet whose styles range from the comic and improvisational to the richly allusive and abstract. Indeed, it is the tension between the meditative and traditional concerns of his poetry and its stylistic virtuosity that has become one of the central issues of critical debate. Evoking Pound's and Eliot's criterion of objective seriousness and unity of form and meaning, Julian Symons censures Stevens for not having 'much to say but an unusual facility in saying it', and sees this discrepancy as symptomatic of Stevens's failure to possess an objective view of life.⁴ The same supposed limitation of philosophical content and multiplicity of styles have been valorized by other critics such as Morse for allowing Stevens the freedom of expression and thought necessary not only for a humanistic affirmation of individual creativity, but also for the apprehension of the complexity of the modern world.⁵ More recently, the issue of the play of thought and language - the endless elaboration and modification of ideas, the allusiveness of language, the mixture of the comic and abstract styles - has become one of the central matters of contention between the two main strains of postmodernist theory. On the one hand, deconstructive critics seize upon Stevens's 'gaiety of language' (*CP* 322) as a

Stevens Journal (Vol.VII, No.3-4, Fall 1983), pp.59-75.

⁴. Julian Symons, 'A Short View of Wallace Stevens', *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, edited by Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller (Philadelphia, N.Y.: Lippincott Co., 1962), p.119.

⁵. Samuel French Morse, 'The Native Element', Brown and Haller, *op.cit.*, pp.209-210.

paradigm for a proto-postmodernist poet who both endlessly repeats and transgresses all 'codes' of signification. On the other, critics like Perloff have criticized Stevens for his allegiance to the Romantic-Symbolist lyric discursive tradition and advocated instead a tradition of 'dialogic' collage form, more favourable to direct and 'impersonal' treatment of the multiplicity of the 'real'. Granted Stevens's traditionalism, Perloff argues that 'the very gap between Pound and Stevens' is 'a gap that perhaps no inclusive definition of modernism can quite close.'⁶

The 'gap' between critical approaches and between inherent ideological preferences may never be closed. Yet to acknowledge the differences between Stevens and his contemporaries is to recognize the extraordinary creative richness, diversity and complexity of modernism. More specifically it is to recognize the complexity of Stevens's poetry and its relationship to the broader context of the creative and critical efforts of modernist poetry to which subsequent debates are indebted. Given Stevens's insistence that 'my conception of what I think a poet should be and do changes, and I hope, constantly grows' (*L* 289), a critic may best question his or her own procedures as well as attend to the elusive shifts and turns in Stevens's efforts to define his modernist poetic. To trace the problems of critical engagement with Stevens will be the purpose of this chapter.

Early Critical Reception to New Criticism

Early critical reception of Stevens was ambivalent - in some ways indicative of the controversies modernist poetry generated in its early days of formation. His

⁶. Marjorie Perloff, *op.cit.*, p.2

emergence as a dandy, an aesthete, with exquisite touches of the fantastic, verbal elegance and delicacy, and wit in the French Symbolist manner elicited a mixed response both from poets and critics who were committed to more radical poetic experimentation, and from those hostile to modernist poetry in general. From William Carlos Williams, Stevens drew an exasperated plea to excise his 'pure bunk', while Pound compared Stevens dismissively with Eliot, describing him as 'a schoolgirl straining for originality' whose 'charm is due to a romantic sort of exaggeration.'⁷ Yet along with Pound and Eliot, Stevens was at the centre of the debate on modern poetry between Louis Untermeyer, who championed humanist and social concerns, and Conrad Aiken, who defended the poet's art of obscurity as a measure of the artist's 'cerebral or oblique or disillusioned' attitude that sees through the accepted orders of society and the referentiality of language.⁸

The Untermeyer-Aiken debate sets the tone for early criticism of modernism, with Aiken's criteria of the artist's complexity of language and ironic impersonality gaining recognition as attributes of modernist poetry. Yet even these criteria proved inadequate in defining Stevens's modernism. Critics were uneasily divided between acknowledgement of Stevens's mastery and 'gaudiness' of style, and his detached aloofness. Paul Rosenfeld, for instance, admired Stevens as a 'musical imagist', yet criticizes his irony which, although 'no romantic dishevelment', is 'consistently personal', 'a posture to hide inner turmoil and helplessness in the face of life.' With

⁷. Cited in Melita Schaum, *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools* (Tulcaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), pp.11, 26. Schaum also gives a useful account of critical reception of Stevens.

⁸. Cited in Charles Doyle, *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp.31-32.

a nod towards Eliot, he urges authors

to be more simple and direct, and give completely what they feel; above all to advance from behind the curtain of language. Tragical disabilities are the very ordinary stuff of life, and what today requires is impersonality, perspective, objectivity.⁹

Impersonality, intensity, directness, complexity of language and feeling, objectivity, irony and engagement - already these terms, with their implicit reference to Eliot's and Pound's notions of poetry, were emerging as acceptable criteria of modernist poetry. They were to form the basis of New Criticism, whose touchstone of intensity, complexity and resolution of form and content, grounded in Eliot's notion of the 'objective correlative', were to define the course of subsequent criticism. Formal closure and unity in turn became a paradigm for the artist's comprehension and mastery of the contradictions of experience, with irony privileged as a mode of resolution. Against this background of criteria, the tensions within Stevens's poetry again proved troublesome. One critic described the 'pure poetry' of *Harmonium* as 'a tour de force, a "stunt" in the fantastic and the bizarre,' and complained that 'there is not an idea that can vitally affect the mind, there is not a word that can arouse emotion.'¹⁰ The task of reconciling the gaudiness and the obscurity of language with the perceived intrusiveness of the abstract and the lack of concrete particulars of feeling was the concern of R.P. Blackmur, whose essay on the nature and function of ambiguity in Stevens's poetry became the paradigm of subsequent New Critical analyses. Evoking Eliot's idea of the violent 'dissociation' of language operative in the

⁹. Doyle, *op.cit.*, pp.72-78.

¹⁰. See Doyle, *op.cit.*,p. 89.

wit of the Metaphysical poets, Blackmur sees Stevens's odd combination of words as a way of condensing, intensifying and unifying sound with sense, and word with thought and feeling. The result is, Blackmur argues, a special kind of 'nonsense', that 'adds to our knowledge', and which it is 'one business of poetry, to use words to give quality and feeling to the precious abstract notions, and so doing to put them beyond words and beyond the sense of words.'¹¹ Nevertheless, it is precisely the 'precious abstract' that continues to trouble Blackmur. In his later essays, the abstract tendency of Stevens's poems seems more a measure of the poet's mental laxity: 'Certainly Stevens ... has been contented or been able only to make all his definitions out of fragments of the actual.' Likewise his ambiguity, formerly a mark of his grasp of experience, degenerates into 'an obfuscation of sensation'.¹²

The interrelated issues of ambiguity and the role of abstraction would continue to remain central to Stevens criticism. They also came to preoccupy Stevens himself, and were highlighted in the critical essays Stevens wrote. What is significant about these essays is that, through the suggestive development of key terms like 'pure poetry' or 'new romantic', Stevens carefully and deliberately uses the critics' own critical terms to defend and define his own sense of the function of poetry, the nature of poetic language and poetic communication. 'Pure poetry', for instance, comes to suggest a mode of poetry in which continued attention to and renewal of the resources of language is central to the function of poetry as an act of making abstract fictions

¹¹. R.P. Blackmur, 'Examples of Wallace Stevens', *Hound and Horn*, Volume 5, Winter 1932, pp.223-255, reprinted in Doyle, *op.cit.*, pp.95-125.

¹². Subsequent citations of Blackmur's articles are taken from Schaum, *op.cit.*, pp.60-70, 74-76. See also Schaum for a summary of Blackmur's long engagement with Stevens's poetry.

of reality by which the poet helps the people live their lives. These ideas gain increasing recognition from later critics, who, while seeking to safeguard the autonomy, coherence and value of poetry, also seek to move away from the confines of New Critical formalism towards accommodating Stevens's ambiguity and explicating Stevens's poetry and its significance. For them, Stevens became an affirmative humanist whose penchant for philosophical generalization was a measure of the difficulty and necessity of defending poetry as a means towards order in a modern world.

Louis Martz is one early critic who sought to come to terms with Stevens's penchant for abstraction. He sees Stevens as a humanist, a poet who must 'by his own mind and senses' recover his relation to the modern godless world and effect a resolution to the contradictions of experience.¹³ Evoking Eliot's distinction between the philosophically rigorous wit of the Metaphysical poets and the 'associative' logic of the 'reflective' poet, Martz claims that Stevens achieves mastery of experience not through resolving his ideas into any coherent body of belief, but through the power of associative implication which endows his poetry with a 'mastery of higher reaches of precision': 'precision of complex implication, precision of complex association, precision of ambiguity.' The result is the attainment of 'moments of supreme awareness' in which the mind is integrated with the senses and a formal order is established. This order, however, is only 'an emotional resolution', and must be re-established from moment to moment through 'a thorough unblinking recognition of

¹³. Louis Martz, 'Wallace Stevens: the Romance of the Precise', *Yale Poetry Review* Volume 2, Autumn 1946, pp.13-20, cited in Doyle, *op.cit.*, pp.273-283.

the existence of pain.’¹⁴ For only on this basis can the poet establish a meaningful relationship with humanity and reality and develop an understanding and affirmation of life.

Less sure of the ground of Stevens’s humanism and his power of ‘philosophizing’ resolution is Randall Jarrell. In his earlier essay, he sees Stevens as an aesthete, whose philosophizing is a compensation for his obsession with lack, ‘a lack almost taken for granted, that he himself automatically supplies.’¹⁵ Thus his abstraction lacks ‘the immediate contact with lives’ essential for philosophical poetry. This reservation becomes particularly evident in a later review of the *Collected Poems*. For while Jarrell claims to admire ‘the professional playfulness, even - of a large mind and a free spirit,’ which he sees is part of Stevens’s dialectic process of thought, he also warns against making a ‘rhetoric of fooling around ... accompanied, as it sometimes is, by little content and less emotion,’ a flaw that he sees in the ‘inhuman’ style of *The Auroras of Autumn*. Indeed, the strain in Jarrell’s argument becomes apparent as he struggles to justify Stevens’s aestheticism as a measure of his humanism:

If Stevens could stay at home, except for trips, it was because he had made for himself a Europe of his own, a past of his own, a whole sunlit, and, in the end, a twilight - world of his own. It is an extremely large world, the world that an acute mind, varied interests and sympathies, and an enormous vocabulary can produce....

Throughout half this century of the common man, this age in

¹⁴. Martz, *Yale Review* Volume XXXVII, number 2, December 1947, pp.339-341, cited in Doyle, *op.cit.*, pp.298-300.

¹⁵. Randall Jarrell, ‘Reflections on Wallace Stevens’, *Partisan Review* Volume 18, May-June 1951, pp.335-344; and ‘The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens’, *Yale Review* 64, number 3, March 1955, pp.340-353. Both articles are included in Doyle, *op.cit.*, pp.328-340, 411-424.

which each is like his sibling, Stevens has celebrated the hero, the capacious, magnanimous, excelling man; has believed, with obstinacy and good humour, in all the heights which draw us toward them, make us like them, simply existing.

The problems of engagement inherent in the abstract style also become the focus of Frank Doggett's sustained efforts to grapple with the issue of philosophizing in poetry. While, unlike Jarrell, he sees Stevens's 'gift for the irrelevant' as a crucial strategy for the creation and imposition of formal order, he also seeks to claim humanistic and cultural value for this order by resorting to an 'organic' theory of metaphor. According to Doggett, 'within language itself is a residual life that comes from its origin in the activity of the inanimate creature. Language cannot be separated from the function in living, from movement, feeling, interpretation of perception, from circumstance.'¹⁶ For Doggett, it is the origin of Stevens's metaphors of power in the shared 'moralizing strain' of the American literature that bestows on Stevens's poetry its significance, and makes it part of the broader values of the common and human world beyond.

What does one make of the critical assessments of Martz, Jarrell, and Doggett, perhaps the earliest critics to grapple with the question of defining Stevens's modernism both in terms of the formal characteristics of his poetry and its significance? On the one hand, they highlight the inadequacies of critical orthodoxies that emphasize the unity of form and content and that see this formal value as a function and measure of the poet's larger epistemological or ontological concerns. On the other and more specifically, their efforts highlight Stevens's concerns with the role

¹⁶. Frank Doggett, 'Wallace Stevens's Later Poetry', *English Literary History* Volume XXV, June 1958, pp.137-154.

of poetic creativity, with the importance of language and its instability, and with poetry as acts of the mind, engaged in discontinuous though sustained efforts to address the pressures of reality. These concerns, traditionally associated with the Romantic tradition of philosophical idealism and poetic meditation, together with Stevens's own speculation on a 'new romantic', renewed an interest in Stevens's relationship to the Romantic tradition of philosophical idealism and poetic meditation. Hand in hand with this shift of focus has come a broader reassessment of modernism as a modified and problematic continuation of Romanticism. As the efforts to illuminate the significance of Stevens's abstraction and to reconcile the humanistic concerns of his poetry with the ambiguity of his language continue, a new turn of criticism is needed to address these questions: the nature of critical procedures, the problematic relationship between Romanticism and modernism and Stevens's position.

'As part of nature, as part of us': the New Romanticisms

One critic who undertakes a new critical shift is Frank Kermode, whose brief but important studies define not only an influential theory of modernism but also place Stevens in its broader context. In *The Romantic Image* he offers a broader interpretation of modernism as a modified and problematic continuation of the Romantic-Symbolist visionary strain. Central to modernist poetic is the paradoxical notion of the Image: a belief in it as the poet's privileged act of immediacy and unity of perception and speech whose powers nonetheless derive from the dichotomy between the poet's visionary self and the empirical world, and between the poetic speech and the communicative and referential functions of language. According to

Kermode, these contradictions are manifest in the major ideas of modernism: the notion of crisis, a nostalgic myth of history, the cult of the isolated artist enshrined in the concept of impersonality and the distrust of the discursive function of language, prevalent in the poetics of Pound, Yeats and Eliot. They are also traceable in the New Critical tenets of aesthetic closure and concreteness.

Stevens's preoccupation with the 'Supreme Fiction' that envisions a marriage of the mind and the world places him in the same tradition. For Kermode, however, Stevens provides 'a unique, perhaps un-repeatable solution to the image-and-discourse problem by making the problem itself the subject of poems.'¹⁷ The solution is grounded in Stevens's meditation on the dynamic interdependence between the imagination and reality from which Stevens insists poetry springs. By virtue of this 'endless elaboration', poetry becomes an act of abstraction by which the poet transforms reality into values in the light of his imagination and experience. The implications with regard to the status of poetry are two-fold. Not only does Stevens succeed in avoiding the isolation and rupture from reality to which his contemporaries are doomed, he also saves poetry from a mimetic and deterministic relationship with reality which modernists hold in contempt. In Stevens's own words: 'the poem is the cry of its occasion/Part of the res itself and not about it' (*CP* 473). More importantly, Stevens's theory provides for a different function of poetry, not as a revelation of some ultimate order and reality, as Eliot and Pound would wish, but as a making and renewing of images and values. Although this implies discontinuity with history, it also enables a remaking of the past and offers creative possibilities for poetic

¹⁷. Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p.153; references hereafter are included in the text.

engagement with the modern world. Finally, in so far as criticism is still dominated by its allegiance to the Image, Kermode concludes that it is Stevens's unique insights into the problems of modern poets and his efforts to find ^a solution to these problems that point a way beyond the impasse of modernism and modern criticism:

Stevens's problems are the problems also of modern criticism.... The unique power of the poet, however one describes it, is to make images or symbols, however one understands these, - as somehow visual, or in the tradition of the new semantics, as the neologisms created by shifting contexts.

... Art was always made *for* men who habitually move in space and time, whose language is propelled onwards by verbs, who cannot always be asked to respect the new enclosure laws of poetry, or such forbidding notices as 'No road through to action'. Somehow, and probably soon, the age of dissociation - which is to say, the age that invented and developed the concept of dissociation-must end. (154, 161)

A 'new' direction away from the closure of New Criticism is signalled in Kermode's brief introduction, *Wallace Stevens*. Here he identifies and focusses on the function of abstraction, the form of poetic meditation and communication. Against Jarrell's view of abstraction as a disciplined and disinterested form of meditation, and against Doggett's notion of irrelevance as a mastery of order and closure, Kermode argues for the 'gaiety' of abstraction, the fortuity of the act of the mind as it meditates on and discovers 'poetry' in moments of fresh and unexpected imaginative conjunctions of mind and reality, or even moments of fresh insight into the play of thought itself. Thus the abstract is already present even in the 'imagistic' concreteness and rhetorical bravura of *Harmonium*. Poetry of this kind of meditation is always 'disorderly' (83), provisional, even repetitive and obscure, for it follows the ebbs and flows of the sensibility. Its aim is to make fictions by which the mind fulfils its needs for imaginative enrichment of, as much as for fusion with, reality. Narcissistic

Stevens's poems certainly are, yet, as such, they fulfil the self-affirmative function of what Stevens, following Simone Weil, calls 'decreation' - namely the revelation of 'modern reality in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers' (*NA* 175). For Kermode, the leisurely development of ideas in 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction', together with its stylistic fusion of the abstract and the fortuitous, makes it the fulfillment of Stevens's poetic meditation. Besides, the mixed style is crucial to the engagement of the reader 'either above or below the intellect' (103), and thus helps fulfil Stevens's concept of the broader function of poetry to find what will suffice. Indeed, for Kermode, it is Stevens's sustained meditation on the role and values of the imagination, his insistence on the exercise of abstraction as a fiction-making power, and on the presence of the determining personality that makes Stevens, 'in an age of poetic myth-making ... almost alone in his respect for those facts which seem "in disconnexion, dead and spiritless"' (92).

Kermode's introduction marks a new critical trend in which Stevens's position is perceived to be integral, not marginal, to the mainstream of modernism. He also draws attention to the aesthetic aspect, to the importance of the fortuitous in Stevens's 'blessed rage for order', and to the role of ambiguity and stylistic variety in the making and renewing of fiction. Yet, in so far as these characteristics distinguish Stevens's poetry from the aspirations to permanence and clarity of form in the poetry of Pound and Eliot, they also put into question Stevens's relationship to his contemporaries as well as Kermode's interpretation of modernism as an implicitly monolithic continuation, however problematic, of the Romantic-Symbolist tradition. The question of Stevens's modernism, or of his modification of romanticism, it

appears, begins to be inextricable from the question of modernism itself.

It is these questions of the nature of modernism, its genealogy and Stevens's modification of romanticism and placing that Roy Harvey Pearce addresses in *The Continuity of American Poetry*. He advances an argument in which Stevens is seen as the culmination of the Adamic tradition of self-celebration and self-affirmation in American Romanticism. Yet this culmination is no victorious 'song of myself', but a means of sustaining the self in a hostile if inescapable environment. Contrary to Pound's and Eliot's commitment to the 'mythic' ideal of cultural authority and poetic transcendence, Pearce sees Stevens as envisioning a 'significant poetry of humanity' in which human limitations are transformed in such a way as to allow creative potentials to radiate forth.¹⁸ This effort calls for a poetry in which the self must strive for a direct look at reality as 'ground' that both marks the self's limits and its creativity. For Pearce, the effort implicates a paradoxical relationship with 'the overplus of language' (350), since through the mediation of language reality is known and yet distorted. The endless elaboration on the opposition between the mind and the real is Stevens's exploration of the limitations and possibilities of this crucial paradox. For Pearce, Stevens's poems do envision and move towards a resolution by means of a 'decreative' process that involves stripping language of all its prior versions of reality and even moving beyond poetry itself so as to know reality directly. 'At the end, Stevens wants to conceive of confronting and knowing reality directly.... Poetic form is made to negate itself and to point to ultimate vision beyond poems, to poetry as an ultimate and inclusive poem' (382). Although the reward is the recovery of

¹⁸. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p.378. Further references are included in the text.

reality as 'ground' for humanity through 'directly confronting the rock of reality and knowing what we are, as and where we are' (410), the price is high, since the effort involves surrendering the 'creative (or recreative) function' of language for 'an abstractive language and syntax so close to prose' (413) in the later poems. Above all it involves the surrender of humanity for which Stevens strives so hard to attain.

Pearce observes:

Stevens's quest for an ultimate humanism ... leads him towards curious dehumanization. It urges (or forces) him in the end to purify his poems until they are hardly the poems of a man who lives, loves, hates, creates, dies. Rather they are the poems of a man who does nothing but make poems. (413)¹⁹

The problem of the mediation of language and the paradox of Stevens's language are also central to J. Hillis Miller's effort to affirm Stevens's romantic humanism.²⁰ He advances a phenomenological reading in which the disjunctive style of Stevens's poetry is symptomatic of his search for 'some escape' from the dilemma of the modern man in which he finds himself as 'inner nothingness' in a world without gods. Through the radical discontinuity of the poems, Stevens hopes to find a mode of poetry that is 'true to life ... a constant flowing of images which come as they come, and are not distorted by the logical mind in its eagerness for order' (147). This disjunctiveness is carried to the extreme in the late poems which become a 'series of momentary crystallizations or globulations of thought, followed by

¹⁹. Pearce adheres to this view in his later articles on Stevens. See Melita Schaum, *op. cit.*, pp.100-111.

²⁰. J. Hillis Miller, 'Wallace Stevens's Poetry of Being', in *The Act of the Mind*, eds. Pearce and Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965); further citations will be included in the text.

dissolution, then re-conglomeration in another form' (147).

A certain ambivalence, however, emerges from Miller's consideration of the implications of Stevens's disjunctive style. Contrary to Pearce's claim that Stevens's decreation is a direct apprehension of reality, Miller sees it as indicative of man's paradoxical relationship with reality: the contradiction between the will to possess reality through his imagination and the will to see it in its exposed clarity. For Miller, decreation is a means to achieve a 'willed disencumbering of ... all the corpses of the past' (150), a process which is endless. Yet Miller argues that this is no defeat for the imagination, since out of the alternating rhythm of the cycle rises a possibility, for life and for poetry, for freedom and newness to be discovered in a momentary achievement of radical identity between the mind and reality:

as his work progresses, Stevens comes more and more to discover that there is after all only one realm, always and everywhere the realm of some new conjunction of imagination and reality. Imagination is still present in the most absolute commitment of the mind to reality, and reality is still there in the wildest imaginary fiction.... The real thing is already imagined, and 'imaginative transcripts' are as much a part of reality as anything else is. (154)

The aim of Stevens's late poems is to grasp this radical identity in a 'poetry of flickering mobility' (155). Although this involves nihilism in an extreme form, Miller sees the 'more and more disembodied' style of Stevens's late poems as moving towards a definition in which the universal ground of being as nothing is the nearest man can come to possess reality. For Miller, Stevens's achievement of 'a poetry of being' is his contribution to modern poetry, his prophecy of 'the next step in the spiritual history of man ... toward the end of ontology,' a step involving the belief that 'all our spiritual height and depth is available here and now and nowhere' (161-

162).

Miller's view of Stevens's achievement as deeply problematic and precarious is shared by Joseph Riddel. In *The Clairvoyant Eye* Riddel sees Stevens as a modern poet, committed to the reaffirmation and redefinition of the Romantic-Symbolist value of the imagination as an act of the mind creating forms of continuity and identity - what Stevens calls forms of 'nobility' - compatible with and acceptable to the contemporaneous. What empowers the imagination is not its metaphysical origin, but its normative, generative function which all men share. Riddel locates this function in the act of abstraction, defined as an attempt to 'discover the common denominator of the human, ... a search within the common and the ordinary for the "substance that prevails".'²¹ For Riddel, the search entails a decreative act of stripping the mind and language of old notions right down to 'ignorance, meaning not so much an escape from knowledge or a transcendence of it as the beginning of the right to know,... the starting point of the human' (151).

Ironically, Riddel's desire to anchor Stevens's poetry of meditation and humanism in the common ground of humanity is thwarted by the increasing abstraction of the late poems. In his view, the process of self-creation is fraught with inherent risks. Although abstraction reveals to man the centre of his being, it also isolates him from the commonplace within which his humanity must be sought. Again language is at the root of this problem, marking the limits of the imagination's efforts. 'Metaphors are necessary instances of failures of knowledge, precisely for their function of being forms by which that knowledge is conceived' (226-227). These

²¹. Joseph Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p.35. Further citations are included in the text.

failures are evident in the late poems, which are ‘over-committed: not to being poems, but to seeing how far the mind can go through language to apprehend reality beyond language’ (225). *The Auroras of Autumn* demonstrates this excess of abstraction in the extreme, for its relentless pursuit of ‘mere being’ often fails to be more than an ‘empty form of a meditation’ (226). The poem’s excess prompts Riddel to ask of Stevens’s humanism:

Are these poems not utterly solipsistic? Rather than inducing abstraction, are they not engaged in the pulverizing of forms?

The answer seems to be yes, that they are poems of a world (a mind) all its own. And they are to be saved from solipsism, if at all, only by Stevens’s dubious and romantic assumption that men share the community of imagination, and that by entering our own unique self we might abstract back to a common self of humanity. Indeed, this is the assumption ... on which Stevens’s romantic humanism rests most precariously. (226-227)

What can be derived from these critical attempts to reconcile the affirmation of humanistic values with the ‘open’ form of Stevens’s poetry within the diverging genealogy of Romantic idealism? Whether seen as a search for being, or a disclosure of reality, or a search for common humanity, the critics’ readings are frustrated by what they see as the reductive, self-cancelling elements in Stevens’s language. Ironically, Stevens, as emerging from Riddel, Miller and Pearce, appears an impoverished and isolated, not capable, figure; his poetic more apt to discover and confirm the limits of the imagination and language in the poet’s ‘war between the mind/And sky’ (*CP* 407) rather than to affirm the poet’s power to disclose or transform reality. This is the figure that culminates in Helen Vendler’s extreme identification of Stevens as a poet whose august but sceptical imagination achieves a tragic, sublime height only in ‘qualified assertions’ where the poet is constantly

'baffled, frustrated, and reproved'.²²

Indeed, it is the question of the paradox of Stevens's language - the tension between renewal or affirmation and negation central to Stevens's notion of decreation - that prompts Kermode later to ask 'how *are* we to see him rightly', and cautions that it is not by overvaluing Stevens as if he were a poet of thought, nor by undervaluing his 'wantonly' poetic language.²³ For Kermode, it is the question not only of Stevens's position within modernism, but the very nature of modernism itself - divided, as it were, between the formalism of the earlier modernists, and the anti-formal tendency of the later modernists. Likewise Riddel voices a concern in the conclusion to his survey of Stevens criticism. There he goes beyond the question of critical methodology, and identifies the problem as being the failure of the canon of literary modernism and its New Critical foundation which valorizes humanistic values and formal inclusivity. Speaking in particular of the problematic 'open' meditative form of the late poems, Riddel observes:

Whether relevant or not - and it seems to me that above all Stevens was constantly trying to realize his life of the mind in recognizable form - the very fact that this question can be raised at all makes the development of Stevens criticism more than peripheral in our literary history. Most of the criticisms of Stevens, of course, accept without reservation that the poems are poems, of a man speaking to men, or speaking to himself by way of speaking for man.... The unresolved critical problem would now seem to be how these poems, which on the surface reflect so much conventional Romantic doctrine, add new dimensions to the experience of the modern self - not as doctrine but as poems of the life of the mind ... the intrinsic worth of the later poems remains to be discovered, and with it the worth of the entire

²². Helen Vendler, 'The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens', in Pearce and Miller, *op.cit.*, pp. 163-179; and *Part of Nature, Part of Us* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp.41-42.

²³. Frank Kermode, *Continuities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), p.84.

canon.²⁴

Riddel is here anticipating the advent of a new postmodernist debate not only on Stevens but also on literary modernism. It seems that the critics' new search will be for a more comprehensive framework - one that will accommodate the difficulties of Stevens's poetry, and, more radically, one that will also be a reevaluation of the conventional view of the ideological assumptions of modernism, of criticism and its rules of engagement. In other words, the issues of the mediate and self-cancelling nature of language, the diminished and problematic role of the poet and poetry, together with the critic's concerns with formal and semantic analyses, now move to the centre of the critical debate.

'A world of words':

Intertextuality, Deconstruction and Bloom

It is perhaps not surprising that the critics who spearheaded one new critical approach on Stevens - that of deconstruction - are Miller and Riddel, already dissatisfied with the restraints of their own orthodoxy. In his writings on critical theories and on Stevens, Miller now calls into question his own earlier phenomenological paradigm of criticism and poetry. Poetry is now no longer a realization of 'being' through an identification, however limited and ambivalent, with

²⁴. Joseph Riddel, 'The Contours of Stevens Criticism', in Pearce and Miller, *op.cit.*, p.275.

reality, the labour of which the critic painfully albeit faithfully captures.²⁵ Instead, its task, as with criticism, is now 'a search for grounding or such a testing of the ground' upon which metaphysical values and ideas are constructed, maintained and reified. This testing is not by means of thematic statements, nor by authorial intention, but is implicated in the nature and function of language itself. Through what Miller calls 'the linguistic moment', language suspends its own process of writing, comments and reflects upon its own medium, and exposes the illusion of its own transparency or referentiality.²⁶ Following Foucault, Miller shows this 'ground' to be an 'abyss of interpretation', an unstable, and ever-receding web of relationships between texts, each text being already an interpretation of other texts. As with the New Critical Blackmur before him, Miller implies that the complexity and ambiguity of Stevens's poetry makes him the perfect paradigm for such operations, the results of which are nevertheless radical revisions of New Critical tenets. For Miller, Stevens's poems now

contain within themselves discussions of what they are and what they mean. They enact or embody in themselves that function of poetry about which they explicitly talk. This self-labelling opens an abyss of interpretation not so much through the slipping away of an apparently solid origin as through the effacement of extra-linguistic reference initiated by the apparent act of self-reference. The language of the poem both performs its function and defines that function, in a self-mirroring that seems to make the poem a self-sufficient entity. This entity already contains signs and other signs interpreting those signs, both textual origin and the commentary on that origin, so that the

²⁵. See Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Methuen, 1982), pp.92-96.

²⁶. J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.xiv. The book incorporates 'Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens' and 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure: I', earlier published in Doggett & Buttell (eds.), *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), and *The Georgia Review* XXX, 1 (Spring 1976) respectively. Further citations will be included in the text.

critic's work is already done for him... (4)

Miller applies his new deconstructive approach in a reading of 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'. Here his shift from the earlier subjectivist phenomenological search for the originary ground of being is clearly evident. Instead of the tensions brought about by the mind's endless struggle to get beyond the mediation of language, the poem is now 'a battleground among conflicting theories of poetry', namely mimesis, revelation and the nominalistic tradition of poetry. These theories are not tied to any specific historical period, but are part of the western tradition, and their conflict is implicated in the very fabric of language. The very act of *using* language already embroils the poet in the interplay and contradiction of the theories. Indeed, it is 'their contradictory inherence in one another' (5), and not the poet's authorial choice, that generates the meditative search for 'what will suffice' in Stevens's poetry. In other words, not only the poet's epistemological and ontological struggle but also the poet's authorial presence are now but a condition of the abyss of language. Denying any effort to interpret a poem by means of origins, Miller says

The power of Stevens's poetry, the power, in fact, of the work of any great writer, cannot be explained by its sources, even sources that enter so intrinsically into the writing as these three traditional theories enter into Stevens's poetry. The authentic voice of Stevens as a poet is not touched by such explanations. That voice is something unpredictable, savage, violent, without ascertainable cause or explanation, irrational, as he said genuine poetry must be. It is both a voice and a way of writing. It is something continuous, murmuring or muttering, sometimes a singsong rhyme or a stammering alliteration. Continuously present in his work, it is nevertheless a principle of discontinuity. (13)

This 'doubling voice' is discernible, among other forms, in the 'enigma' at the centre of Stevens's poems that cannot be named or identified. As Miller argues, it is in fact

the resistance to identification that constitutes the 'linguistic moment' in Stevens's work, when the poem foregrounds its own conflict and reveals, in Stevens's words, the 'theory of poetry as the life of poetry' (14).

Miller returns to the issue of the dissolution of the self and ground as origins of meaning, together with the abyss of language, in his reading of 'The Rock'. He traces the play of the word 'cure' both through its etymological derivatives and recurrences within the poem to show its unresolved contradictions. The play of deferrals and displacements of Stevens's vocabulary cannot be gathered into a 'closed system', but remains always 'dispersal, a scattering' (394). This scattering effectively dissolves the illusion of a distinct personal voice and of reading as an intersubjective communication that a reader has come to expect. Similarly and more radically, the poem's intertextual echoes of Emerson and Whitman dissolve, rather than confirm, the priority of the American Romantic tradition and, with it, the Emersonian fiction of the strong representative self as bedrock of meaning. In his description of Stevens's deconstruction of his precursors, Miller also 'shatters' his earlier paradigm of Stevens's precarious humanism. The passage may be quoted in length to observe the distance Miller has now travelled from his earlier bleak vision of 'nothingness' as Stevens's ontological ground:

Who, in contrast, is the 'we' of Stevens's 'The Rock',... The general collective first person plural standing for all men and women together, all folk of seventy? There is a bleak impersonality of tone and locution in Stevens's poem that forbids thinking of it or feeling it as the autobiographical statement of a recognizable person,... This impersonality is thematized in the way the personal self in the poem dissolves into a plural self, all mankind and womankind, the *ourselves* of 'a cure of ourselves', and that *ourselves* into a collective impersonal consciousness, 'the main of things, the mind,/The starting point of the human and the end' (lines 75-76), and that mind, beyond any personality, into the rock, the rock into nothingness. Self in the sense

of individual personality is one of the major illusions dissolved by the poem. This dissolution, paradoxically, takes place not by a movement into a more and more vacuous solipsism, as it is sometimes said to be Stevens's fate as a poet, but by incorporating that doubling of self and other which Emerson so resolutely, and by the necessity of his more genuinely solipsistic definition of the strong self, rejects. (414-415)

The onto-epistemological problem of language becomes the question of writing and authorial presence for Riddel.²⁷ In his reading of 'Esthétique du Mal', Riddel engages Stevens's meditation on the notion of the 'Book' as a 'Description Without Place', a nostalgic reimagining of the Sublime, the unity of the world. Given the disruption of the 'hierarchy of signifieds' that ensures a transfer of centre from God to man, 'the modern writer signifies the exile of all writing' (310). What ensues is that 'the self no longer governs language, but is governed by it,' and 'an emptying out of all those follies of a "paradise of meaning" or transcendental signifieds that have accounted for the place of a self between sun and moon, as in a theatre of the proper images' (311). Writing now becomes a 'Satanic tragedy', a Nietzschean play of repetitions and displacements of language that both projects and denies the nostalgia for totalization, an "'assassin's scene'", a dissemination that exposes and undermines all illusions of wholeness, centrality and meaning.

According to Riddel, this condition reflects what Derrida calls an *aporia*, an insoluble paradox central to the idea of the book that 'prefigures or represents a unity that it at the same time produces and commands' (315). For him, 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction' exemplifies 'this writing against the "book"' (316). The poem scrutinizes its own projection of desire to begin again, to return to the 'immaculate

²⁷. Joseph N. Riddel, 'Metaphoric Staging: Stevens's Beginning Again of the "End of the Book"', Doggett & Buttell, *op.cit.*, pp.308-338. Citations will be included in the text.

beginning' by means of 'forgetting' the metaphoricity of 'the sun'. Yet this forgetting is already precluded, given the inescapable figurality of language: 'this beginning again can only occur with/in a representational system (metaphor) that is marked through and through by a contradiction' (318). In this abyss of language, there is no longer the possibility of an author or a 'text': 'There is no proper word or master text and no master of repetition in this "war" of differences that plays in the margin that we can only call language' (325). 'Notes' throughout examines the 'narcissism' of its own textuality, negates previous fictions of 'the absolute' only to substitute and displace new ones. Through the play of repetition and difference, the poem denies 'the bliss' of the dream of 'the golden centre' and exposes it as a 'violent abyss' of writing. No more a precarious humanistic affirmation of the centrality of the poetic self, Stevens's poems have become for Riddel 'a theatre of trope' (334), trapped in and aware of the endless and 'aberrational' play of the 'narcissism' of language (337).

Through its rigorous disclosure of the anteriority of language and the 'genealogy' of meaning and knowledge, and the involvement of the author's interpretative gesture in language, deconstruction opens up new and far reaching implications about the dynamic complexity of a text and its relationship with reality, the problematic of meaning, the role of the author and of criticism. In terms of the criticism of modernism, its strategies of questioning the 'genealogy' of centrality, presence and ontology implicated in language and meaning amounts to a radical undermining of the romantic idealism perceived to be the basis of modernist poetry. The result is a new debate about the canon and nature of modernism itself. In addition, as the gap between text and commentary narrows, deconstruction also opens up new possibilities for a dynamic engagement of the reader in the creative processes of the

text - another issue crucial to modernist poets' defence of the cultural values of poetry. Nevertheless, it is the rigors and scepticism of the deconstructive perspective that are to become its own limitations. For although the deconstructive perspective may come close to the issues of the author's problematic relationship with reality and with tradition at the heart of modernism, its excesses of scepticism allow no possibilities for engagement or for interpretation itself. In the case of Stevens, the limitations of deconstruction are manifest in that it overlooks Stevens's own emphasis on the play of repetition and deferral as a revaluation and enrichment of the resources of language so crucial to the empowering of the author's creativity and the making of fiction by which the poet may hope to fulfil his efforts to 'find what will suffice' and to help the people to live their lives.

It is these limitations of deconstruction that are taken to task by Harold Bloom. His full-length study of Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, sets out to reclaim the author and the Romantic tradition. The book is an application of the 'revisionary dialectic' of 'limitation/substitution/representation' or 'ethos/logos/pathos' that underpins Bloom's critical theory of 'misreading' formulated in earlier books. Up to a point, Bloom draws on the practice of deconstruction - what he calls 'the most clarifying mode of criticism available to us'²⁸ - for his equally intricate and elaborate paradigm of 'misprision' by which an author 'misreads', that is to say confronts and evades the anteriority of texts. The paradigm implies an 'intertextual' view of literary history as that in which texts exist in a process of perpetual displacement of one other^{an-}_^ which is rhetorically inscribed in later texts. It also implies a dismissal of the author

²⁸. Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p.385. Further citations will be included in the text.

as a discrete individual expressing the unique meaning of his authentic vision. Yet where Bloom parts company from deconstruction is his insistence that a 'strong' poet always strives to revise and appropriate anterior texts so as to clear a space and a 'voice' for his own imagination. In other words, what Bloom wants to do is to go beyond the deconstructive abyss of writing and its focus on the 'figuration of doubt' (385) towards a renewal of interest in the creative drama of the author as he 'misreads' his predecessors. 'The issue of the limits of deconstruction will be resolved only if we attain a vision of rhetoric more comprehensive than the deconstructors allow, that is, if we can learn to see rhetoric as transcending the epistemology of tropes and as re-entering the space of the will-to-persuasion' (387-388). For Bloom, this is only possible if the 'asceticism' of deconstruction be replaced with the view of language as 'an ancient identity between rhetoric and psychology that is still partly obscured by that endless clearing or curing of the ground now being called "deconstruction"' (396-397).

It is hardly surprising that Bloom should find the Emersonian tradition of pragmatic idealism a perfect vehicle for his theory. Emerson's paradigm of fate/freedom/power, in itself a reversal of the Romantic pattern, is indicative of his scepticism of the comforting illusions of the Sublime of Wordsworth and Shelley, as well as of their successful transplanting in the American soil of belatedness and new strenuously wilful beginnings. Indeed, Emerson's paradigm already anticipates deconstruction in its overt awareness of its own reductiveness and rhetoricity (12). As a true Emersonian 'strong' heir, Stevens adopts and wilfully transfigures the Emersonian reductiveness into his own new system: 'In Stevens, we will see Emersonian fate turning into ... the First Idea. Transcendental Freedom in Stevens

becomes the refusal to bear so dehumanizing a reduction. Power or Will in Stevens's mature poetry is the reimagining of a First Idea' (27). Throughout *The Poems of Our Climate*, Bloom traces the 'negative moments' or 'poetic crossings' that 'collect meaning in the post-Romantic crisis-poem' (400) where Stevens retrieves and reimagines the first Idea in a successful new form. Thus Stevens becomes, for Bloom, a 'figure of capable imagination' who provides salvation for the modern poetic imagination:

Stevens had the uncanniness and the persistence to get about a generation ahead of his own time, and he is still quite a few touches and traces ahead of ours. His major phase, from 1942 to his death in 1955, gave us a canon of poems themselves more advanced *as interpretation* than our criticism as yet has gotten to be. (168)

Bloom's assessment of Stevens's achievement implies of course that Stevens is also a salvation for modern criticism. For, if to 'read' is, as deconstructive critics insist, to trace and expose the moments of *aporia* in the labyrinth of tropes, it is, for Bloom, already to participate in the will-to-power that animates the text with its own strategies of 'misreading'. Indeed, Bloom comes provocatively close to claiming that a 'strong' critic, like a 'strong poet', is one who invests the text with the labours of his own 'misreading':

Why do we believe one liar rather than another? Why do we read one poet rather than another? We believe the lies we want to believe because they help us to survive. Similarly, we read (reread) the poems that keep our discourse with ourselves going. Strong poems strengthen us by teaching us *how to talk to ourselves*, rather than to talk to others. (386)

Armed with his 'theory of crossings', Bloom concludes, a reader can now hope to find

Stevens 'more truly and more strange than ... has yet been found' (406).

Frank Kermode remarks that 'Bloom's interpretations and judgments of Stevens, extricated from their sometimes obnoxious packaging, nearly always strike me as right, and as having their own exactness.'²⁹ Kermode's ambivalence both guardedly acknowledges Bloom's sensitivity to the rich allusiveness of Stevens's 'venerable complication' (CP 311) that the deconstructive critics prefer to dissipate, and at the same time makes clear his objection to the 'violence' of Bloom's schema. It may be said that, just as the excesses of deconstruction may have reduced authorial presence to an intertextual condition, so Bloom's revisionary ratio presents a view of the author as simply a 'belated' heir of the Romantic visionary tradition, and thereby reduces the poet's own achievement to an unending psychic drama of confrontations and evasions.

Both deconstructive and Bloomian schemata also raise the question of the relationship of modernism to its cultural and social matrices. For deconstruction, modernism as a battleground of anterior tropes becomes yet another *aporia* in the endless series of repetition and deferral. For Bloom, it is only a psychic drama, a belated version of romanticism, or 'rather, it has been exposed as never having been there.'³⁰ By the same token, just as deconstruction allows no possibility of interpretation, so Bloom's methodology raises doubt over the possibility of making a 'strong' reader upon which rests Bloom's claim of Stevens's 'humanistic' achievement. Either via deconstructive abyss or Bloom's 'vast accumulation' (CP 366)

²⁹. Frank Kermode, 'Notes toward a Supreme Poetry', *The New York Times Book Review* (June 12, 1977), p.9.

³⁰. Harold Bloom, *The Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.28.

of revisionary misreading, it seems that the criticism of modernism, and Stevens, has reached an impasse, sealed off within their respective play of endless elaborations.

Yet, if, as deconstruction and Bloom both maintain, the author is inevitably implicated in the language through his use of the language, then it may be argued that the same interpretative gesture involves the author and modernism in a complex and dynamic relationship with reality. In Stevens's terms, this is to attend to the poet's efforts to engage the pressures of reality, to transform it into something rich and strange, on which Stevens insists as the function of modernist poetry. Besides, the same implication applies to the relationship between text and criticism. As the gap between text and reader narrows, it also opens up the question of the critic's own implication in the text he or she seeks to illuminate, and of his or her own situatedness within history. It may be that, in the final analysis, the contribution that deconstruction makes to Stevens criticism is, ironically, the reinstatement and reassessment of Stevens and his achievements, and by implication, of modernism, within the complex dynamism of the real.

Description with/without Place:

Text and Context

One critic who seeks to redefine and relocate modernism is Marjorie Perloff. In 'Pound and Stevens: Whose Era?', she distinguishes between two major contending versions of modernism as propounded by Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* and Harold Bloom's *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. 'Poundian' critics, according to Perloff, are concerned with 'technique', the 'how' of poetry, while Stevensian

critics are interested in poetry of 'thought', the 'what' of poetic discourse.³¹ The latter see Stevens's poetry as manifesting the difficulty and achievement of seeking belief and value through sustaining fiction. For them, Stevens is essentially in the Romantic-Symbolist tradition, which privileges the lyric voice; their description of Stevens's poetic form also indicates the retention of the New Critical criteria of 'organic' form' and closure. Thus, among some Stevensian critics this attempt to reaffirm 'the autonomy of the redemptive imagination' implicates an antagonism to reality and a 'ruthless elimination of the past' (19).

According to Perloff, 'the Pound case is precisely the opposite' (19). In contrast to Stevens, whose 'denial of the past as not only dead but deadly goes hand in hand with the inability to escape it,' Pound is seen by his critics as essentially 'modern', due to his 'lively explorer's interest in particulars, that one can grasp simultaneously' (10). This objectivism underpins Pound's reverence for the past, as Denis Donoghue - himself a Stevensian critic - admits. In contrast to Stevens's internalizing of conflicts into a single, solitary voice, Pound's explosion of the lyric form into a collage-like constellation of modes and material draws attention to the 'surface' and 'process' of poetry: to the 'transparent overlay' (12) of poetry and 'its capacity to include domains of experience long since considered alien territory' (16). In this way, Perloff observes, 'the *how*, for Poundians, thus becomes more interesting than the *what*: if poetry teaches how to talk to ourselves, it is not because it provides us with a vision of reality, but because its processes imitate the processes of the external world as we have come to know it' (22).

³¹. Marjorie Perloff, 'Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?', *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Further citations will be included in the text.

Perloff concludes that the ‘very real gap’ between Pound and Stevens - for her ‘a gap that no inclusive definition of Modernism can quite close’ (2) - becomes the split between Romanticism and Classicism. The Stevensians believe that ‘the best twentieth century poetry ... carries on the great tradition of Romantic visionary humanism, a tradition Anglo-American to its roots, with a slight influx of French Symbolisme to add piquancy’ (21). To believe in the Stevens Era is to believe, with Bloom, that ‘Modernism in literature has not passed; rather it has been exposed as never having been here’ (21). By contrast, the Poundians are ‘classicists’ who view Pound’s enterprise as an attempt to ‘bypass Romanticism, to get back to something *prior* in time even as one is MAKING IT NEW’ (22). For them, the greatest achievement of ‘the Pound Era’ is the rejection of the tyranny of the Romantic lyric as the exclusive domain of poetry, and ‘poetry found that it could once again incorporate the seemingly alien discourse of prose without losing its identity’ (22).

Perloff’s discussion (and disapproval) of Stevens’s dismissal of history is taken further in ‘Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric’. Contrasting Stevens’s interest in genealogy, the Princeton Chair of Poetry, and book-binding, with an outline of war time events during the composition of the poem to identify its ‘historical and social context’, Perloff indicts the poem as ‘a kind of antimeditation, fearful and evasive, whose elaborate and daunting rhetoric is designed to convince both poet and reader that, despite the daily headlines and radio bulletins, the real action takes place in the country of metaphor’(42).³² Besides, the poem’s ‘Mallarméan’ (49) aesthetic elitism and lyrical purity, while it no doubt provides

³². The essay is included in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.42. Further citations will be included in the text.

'some comfort in a dark time', nonetheless casts doubt over Stevens's pronounced insistence in 'The Noble Rider' on the 'interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals' which envisages 'the pressure of reality' as a factor in the making of poetry (48). This search for comfort takes a sinister form as Stevens's covert fascism, which, according to Perloff, is already discernible in his ambivalent remark on European intellectuals then in exile in America. While Stevens is 'clearly drawn' to the intellectual brilliance of men like Leo Spitzer, Rahv, and Borgese, whom he 'condescendingly calls "these people"', he 'instinctively withdraws' from their Jewish origins, catholic or communist beliefs (46). Stevens's political leaning finds an expression, 'however evasive and coded', in the meditation on the Major Man in Canto VIII of 'It Must be Abstract'. Commenting on the canto's opening question, Perloff asks: 'What does it signify, in the middle of World War II - when the real Major Men included such names as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin - to posit the desirability, however fleeting, of Major Man?' (59). The poem's political import, observes Perloff, has been persistently glossed over (and perhaps ignored) by commentators 'who are in surprising agreement': from Bloom's 'poetic humanism' to Riddel's 'seemingly antithetical' reading which sees Stevens, now 'decentered', but still 'dreams recurrently of restoring word to thing, of achieving a natural language ... even if in a fiction he knows not to be true' (53-58). 'This mastery of critical repetitions' (or simply critical impasse), implies Perloff, cannot be turned full circle, 'unless we are willing to ask not just *how* meanings are created in the poem but *why*' (58). Here is the answer (and a new direction) Perloff supplies, by way of 'decoding' the canto's 'coded' politics:

Despite Stevens's disclaimer that 'MacCullough is any name, any man',

the name MacCullough obviously carries particular overtones.... MacCullough is, of course a good Wasp name: it is not, assuredly, Spitzer or Rahv or Borgese. Again, MacCullough connotes racial purity; unlike, say, MacSweeney, which is Scotch-Irish, it is not contaminated.... *the* MacCullough connotes masculinity, a strong 'hard-headed clan', as Bloom puts it, with a tradition of prowess in combat - ~~the~~ very opposite, surely of the feminine, the weaker vessel. Indeed, given the context of European fascism, the very naming of 'the MacCullough' brings to mind the stereotype of Aryan purity, the master race. (59).

This harbouring of racial and aesthetic purity also results in the 'impasse' of the lyric. Here Perloff applies Bakhtin's distinction between *monologic*, the unified discourse of poetry, and *heteroglossia*, the multiplicity of discourses within a novel, to her own distinction between Stevens's 'straight lyric' and the "impure" collage of the Pound tradition. More specifically, she applies Bakhtin's description and disapproval of the former to what she sees as the 'problematic' of 'Notes': its 'repeated gestures' towards what Stevens would call 'the normal' which nevertheless is held in 'deep-seated suspicion' (61). Here is Bakhtin:

the language of poetic genres, when they approach their stylistic limit, often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative, sealing itself off from the influence of extraliterary social dialects.... It is noteworthy that the poet, should he not accept the given literary language, will sooner resort to the artificial creation of a new language specifically for poetry than he will to the exploitation of actual available social dialects.³³
(61)

This limit, concludes Perloff, has already been reached and, what is worse, is still perpetuated by the critics' own evasion of history.

Stevens's supposed ahistoricism, and his critics', also comes under the more severe scrutiny of Frank Lentricchia. Already in his early book, *The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of Yeats and Stevens* (1968), he carefully

33. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin + London: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 287.

distances his own version of Stevens from what he sees as the gestures towards 'romanticist' transcendence implicated in the then-current theories - be they through New Critical formal autonomy, metaphysical resolution or humanistic affirmation. His Stevens is an 'existential' fictionalist, whose recognition of and insistence on the imagination as 'finite energy' in the 'poetics of will' 'invite[s] rather than discourage[s] historical probing ... in Camus's world of "irrational bitterness", a "semi-world" with no transcendental completion.'³⁴

Lentricchia's 'historical probing' goes even further as this view of Stevens's as a self-conscious existentialist is rejected in *After the New Criticism*. Stevens's fictions - once a token of his recognition of the limits and the provisional necessity of the 'gaiety' of the imagination and language - now become 'pitifully unheroic lies', indicative of a 'last-ditch humanism' in the face of modern nihilism, whose achievement is 'an antipoetics whose constant lament and wearisome message is the futility of all human efforts.'³⁵ This tendency also permeates the whole 'conservative fictionalist tradition', which evolves from Kant and Nietzsche through to Vaihinger, Sartre and Kermode, and of which Stevens is the 'culmination and summary representative' (31). In Lentricchia's view, this tradition is 'radically dualistic and very often paranoid' (33), for while it seeks to privilege fiction either as escape from or ordering of, or discovery of the truth of the real, it also implicitly trivializes fiction as 'lies' (36), aesthetic 'play' (42) distinct from reality. No longer a token of the

³⁴. Frank Lentricchia, *The Gaiety of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1968), p.189. My summary of Lentricchia's approaches in *The Gaiety of Language* and *After the New Criticism* is indebted to Schaum, *op.cit.*

³⁵. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1980), p.33. Further citations will be included in the text.

‘openness’ of fiction that anchors us in the real, the self-consciousness of fictionality reminds us now of the ‘impotence of fantasy in the face of truth’ (44), a result of

an unresolvable dialectic of guilt and desire that will characterize the entire tradition of fictionalism: ‘guilt’ because we recognize our indulgence in art as mere play, a holiday from the real business of our cognitive and ethical life; ‘desire’ because the aesthetic idea is a representation of that for which we eternally yearn but can never have in human time - a way it will never be. (42)

This debilitating legacy of ‘guilty aestheticism’ (53), isolation and hedonism is perpetrated by the advent of deconstruction. In ‘History and the Abyss: Poststructuralism’, Lentricchia examines its implications in deconstructive writings, especially by Yale practitioners. Again, Lentricchia locates Stevens centrally in the contemporary American critical scene with his appearance as model for the ‘deconstructive poet’ in Miller’s two-part essay, ‘Stevens’s Rock and Criticism as Cure’, which, according to Lentricchia, introduces Derrida to American critics. He sees pervasive in the writings of American Derrideans an emphasis on ‘terms like "joy" and "activity" and their variants’ (169) that recall the preoccupations with pleasure and freedom in a variety of post-Kantian criticism including New Criticism and fictionalism that are disposed towards privileging formalism and literary discourse over historicism. Thus, for Lentricchia, ‘the Yale Derrideans will not in the long run threaten every partisan of traditionalism, because they will turn out to be traditionalism’s last formalist buttress’ (169).

This ‘new hedonism’ and ‘ultimate formalism’ (169), however, is a misappropriation of Derrida’s principles of free-play, decentering and ‘differance’, Lentricchia argues that in Derrida’s own writings, they function as a ‘subversion of all ontological versions of the centre’, including of their absence (171), and not, as the

Derrideans would claim, 'as positing an ontological "nothing" outside the text' (171) that would underpin their privileging of writing. Although he concedes that Derrida's own reduction of the diversity of western philosophical traditions to their 'common logocentrism' does encourage the 'pleasure-oriented formalism of the Yale critics' and their evasion of history, and his strategies are in themselves 'formalist through and through' (176-177), nonetheless in positing 'différance' as a subversion of the metaphysics of presence and thereby disclosing it as a 'sign' or 'trace' of the play of writing, Derrida already signals a significant direction towards historicity:

Derrida's point is that once we have turned away from various ontological centerings of writing, we do not turn to free play in the blue, as the Yale formalists have done. Rather, it would appear that our historical labors have just begun. It is in the very trace-structure of the sign ... that the present as an in-itself is broken up ... Thus the 'substance' or 'the subject' of metaphysics, which is inevitably founded on the basis of the presence of the present, is dispersed in an ineffaceable historicity of discourse....

Consciousness, the subject, the presence or absence of being, apparently forever dissolved as versions of the untouchable transcendental signified, now suddenly return as they all become situated as intertextual functions of semiological systems which do recognize the 'rights of history, production, institutions' to coerce and constrain the shapes of free-playing discourse. Semiological systems based on the principle of difference 'have been produced', and the key questions become what and by whom ... If Derrida concludes the project of Nietzsche, which he defines as the 'liberation of the signifier from its dependence or derivation with respect to the logos and the related concept of truth or the primary signified,' then he also suggests the initiation of a new project ... already handsomely underway in the poststructuralist writings of Michel Foucault: to uncover the nonontological reincarceration of the signifier within cultural matrices. (175-176)

In Lentricchia's view, then, Foucault offers a more satisfactory alternative to the 'abyss' of deconstruction: a theory of reading that situates texts in the dynamics of history and sees them as a struggle to define meaning and value within and against

the systems of values at work in the cultural forces at large. According to Foucault, notions of continuity, totality, and other ramifications like influence, development and evolution, favoured by traditional historicism, are but efforts to efface the discontinuity of history, to draw 'all phenomena around a single centre - a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an over-all shape' (191). They are, besides, strategies to secure 'the sovereignty of the subject' as ontological origin and determining principle that eventually lead to a privileged view of the subject as 'a transcendental consciousness' that evades history: 'Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him' (192).

Contrary to this view and to the Yale Derrideans' own dissolution of the subject and determinacy of discourse, Lentricchia argues that Foucault insists 'that a power of determinacy may play within discourse,' but not through 'a freely individuated authorial presence intention which seeks to impose itself upon language from "outside"' (189-190). These authorities of delimitation derive from what Foucault variously calls '*episteme*', 'archive', 'effective statements', or 'rules of formation', a subtle and complex network of mutually reinforcing social, economic, political and cultural powers, institutions, and ideas. Lentricchia takes care to insist that, as an historical *a priori* that normally functions through repression, these factors exist 'only as historical beings', and are 'themselves subject to appropriation' (194). As such, they constitute conditions for historical appearance and disappearance, maintenance, coexistence and modification, and, in addition, for the authoritative discursive representation of history. As Lentricchia points out, 'Foucault says that it is not enough to speak the truth - one must be "within the truth" (*dans le vrai*)' (196).

The implications of Foucault's historicist project pose a radical challenge to the practices of historical and critical writing, and to the formation of literary canons. History and historical (and critical) discourse become no longer 'fixed paddocks of meaning' (189) but 'textuality': a dynamic field of discourse saturated (not emptied, as the Yale Derrideans would insist) in its smallest details by these determinant forces. Contrary to deconstructive *aporia* or formalist irony, Lentricchia argues that 'undecidability in Foucault's genealogical sense is a fact of historical struggle rather than a fact of transcendence of it' (200). The task of a historian and critic alike is to trace the 'genealogy' of the tensions of the forces of repression, emergence and descent that compose the 'history agonistes' (200) of the text and which constitutes its significance.

Lentricchia himself performs a 'historical labour' on Stevens by placing modernism in the context of American capitalism. He sees modernist poetics, 'especially Stevens's version of it', as a search for authority (and sexual identity) embedded within the contradictions of the American framework of gender-defined bourgeois social and economic values, which characterizes and favours the pursuit of economic fulfillment as 'masculine', while marginalizing and trivializing the pursuit of a genteel culture of literary life as 'feminine'.³⁶ Through a close reading of the gender discourse in 'Sunday Morning', Lentricchia traces the contradiction in Stevens's stance and his dissatisfaction with the feminine writerly discourse then enforced as a 'genteel tradition' by the machinery of literary magazines and academia. While he is attracted to (and in real life enthusiastically follows) the 'feminine'

³⁶. Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1988), p.146. Further citations will be included in the text.

hedonistic search for 'commodity fetishism' (151) obtained through internalizing and displacing their economic values into images for aesthetic consumption within the 'green freedom' of private lyric space, his 'male obligations' cannot choose the renunciation of these pleasures which this freedom, in its extreme and paradoxical form, implicates (154). Indeed, Lentricchia argues, all forms of idealism, including the ideals of aesthetic autonomy and inutility favoured by the Romantics and inherited by their genteel and modernist sons for their power to redeem human divisiveness and alienation, are not free from all social institutions. Rather they are but strategies of trivialization that marginalize poetry and enthrall it to the very same conditions it seeks to redress. Nor is the contradiction resolved in 'Sunday Morning'. For while Stevens attempts to break the dilemma through a utopian vision of male paganism and brotherhood, 'naked' of gender-related social codification, the poem's twice repeated assertion, 'Death is the mother of beauty', signals a resurgence of nostalgia for the female origin of this new-found poetic virility; and hence a sign of Stevens's 'radical discontent ... alleviated only by a return to origin, by a son's desire for his mother's breast that would, if granted, simply set aside all of his male obligations in the world of capital' (176).

For Lentricchia, the embeddedness of the poem in American social and economic reality and its discursive representations, and its failure to break free of these conditions, has long been obscured and ignored by Stevens's critics, more attentive to the literary history of the poem's thick layers of allusions and more concerned with affirming 'the quasi-theological atmosphere of idealism, high humanism, formalism, and (more recently) the new idealism of the intertextual method (both Derridean and Bloomian) of anxiety-ridden historicisms' (158). Yet it is the writings of feminist

critical theories which are singled out for Lentricchia's attack. Despite their emphasis on the creation and imposition of gender-values and identities as cultural constructions, there is 'a disabling contradiction' (177) in their view of women writers as 'history's privileged victims' of patriarchal power (178), and relegation of male writers 'to a parenthesis' (177). For Lentricchia, just as the quest for autonomy proves illusory for male writers, to insist, as feminist critics do, on the celebration of the autonomy and ownership of the 'female imagination' that sanctions woman's literary autonomy is only 'bluntly to insist on the values of the phallus that patriarchy invents' (182). In their eagerness to condemn patriarchal imprisonment of women, especially of upper-class women writers chosen as models for the struggle for female autonomy, feminist critics are also guilty of simplifying the economic and social conditions to which *all* writers are subject in favour of the 'psychosexual proposition' (187) of oppression.

Returning to Stevens, Lentricchia sees Stevens's contradiction continue into his later poems where they are perfected into 'poetry of deferred desire' (205). The long poems, with their loose, improvisatory movement, become a kind of 'epic of bourgeois interiority' (204), an instrument for anticipating and elaborating desires, providing the only possibility of relief from the monotony and boredom of the quotidian world. These poems are not, as some critics would prefer, a measure of Stevens's humanistic affirmation of the redemptive creativity of desire. Rather, Lentricchia argues, they are indicative of a bourgeois anxiety arising from the 'classic contradiction of the middle-class world' (207): the desire to retreat to the privacy and pleasures of the interior world, accompanied by the dissatisfaction with all private and aesthetic solutions to problems whose causes are social and historical rather than personal. Indeed, the desire to seek refuge in aesthetic interiority, untouched by history, is - and here Lentricchia

turns to Foucault and Orwell - a covert desire for 'disciplined society'; and as such, perhaps not so different from a vision of totalitarianism itself. Thus, despite Stevens's disavowal of political aim for his poetry, Lentricchia concludes,

The fundamental hope in Stevens is political ... and he is politically hopeful, moreover, in the idealist tradition running from Schiller to Marcuse in which the aesthetic is the antithesis to the totalitarian story Foucault narrates in *Discipline and Punish*, but an antithesis that may well be one of the subtlest effects of an incipient totalitarianism and its culture. (217)

In the final analysis, both Lentricchia and Perloff concur on Stevens's 'incipient totalitarianism'. Although their readings do find support in Stevens's own unguarded remarks, the differences between them raise questions about what constitutes historical context, its relationship with text, and the situatedness of the critic's own position. To begin with, in the case of Perloff, is the writer's relationship with his contemporary context merely constituted of simultaneity of dates and poems? Does mere simultaneity itself imply poetic responsibility or irresponsibility? And does Perloff's reduction to simultaneity of context and text not imply a 'mimetic' relationship that ignores the 'intertextual' complexities and dynamics which both she and Lentricchia are at pains to stress? Further, what is the theoretical validity of Perloff's equation of a 'closed' monologic text with racial purity and elitism and with dangerous antisocial solipsism, especially if the same criterion is applied to Pound's dialogic collage that explicitly harbours fascism? Finally, the reduction of history to events and ideologies (in themselves already shaped by our perceptions of history) already implies criteria of what constitutes history, and thus raise questions about situatedness, change and interest that inevitably shape historical consciousness.

This last consideration is particularly evident in Lentricchia's hermeneutically

self-aware procedure which takes pains to be 'in the truth' not only of the social and economic determinants but also the literary context of Stevens's position. His own analysis of Stevens is thought-provoking in disclosing the web of social and political tensions hitherto overlooked by other critics, and particularly in broadening the frame of historical reference to other areas of interest. Notwithstanding the complexity of Lentricchia's historicist project, it may be argued that its Foucaultian paradigm of tensions of repression and confinement that will inevitably be subjugated by and subsumed into the insidious and ubiquitous hegemony of dominant discourses implicitly denies the dynamism and *differences* that Lentricchia himself wants to rescue from the 'monolithic' project of traditionalist historicism or deconstructive abyss. Thus, while Lentricchia seeks to restore the participation of text and author in the context of historical production, this participation, however, is already inevitably passive, 'spoken' through and through as it were by the dominant discourse. At times, Lentricchia sounds wistful for the 'radical', 'existentialist' Stevens that he has earlier proposed, but which, now under the Foucaultian banner, Stevens has failed to become:

The particular mix of ... desire and fatality [in Stevens] might have been a kind of subjective political nitroglycerin. But it never went off. Stevens was never able to believe that the social ground of his life and writing was itself unstable, never able to believe that the personal subjects it contained and restrained (like himself) might in their discontent make it unstable. (198)

Whether 'history' or the 'abyss', the poststructuralist debate raises a number of questions about the need to reassess the nature of text and context and their complex relationship. Does a literary text consist merely of a self-reflexive tangle of linguistic signifiers, or literary allusions and conventions which it ceaselessly seeks to

revise and engage as the deconstructive critics or Bloom would have it? Or does its relationship to its context consist merely to evade, through sophisticated strategies that literary conventions put at the disposal of the author, its historical responsibility (Perloff) and inevitable participation in the processes of culture (Lentricchia)? And does participation in historical or social reality in itself necessarily imply conformity to the dominant ideologies? Is historical context itself confined to main currents of events and ideologies? A political critique of the kind that Perloff and Lentricchia propose³⁷ also raises a question about the implication of ideologies that determine the selection of material and the outcome of critical investigation. These questions become particularly acute in the case of Stevens, who, while he acknowledges the inevitable effects and importance of socio-economic forces and historical events, consistently eschews political engagement, and above all conformity to political ideology, preferring instead an open-ended engagement with what he calls 'the problems of the normal' (NA 156): an engagement that allows a degree of freedom, change and interest, however limited, in shaping his own sense of the world.

It appears that criticism that seeks to situate Stevens in his contemporary context must take account not only of the elusiveness of his stance³⁸ but also of the larger dynamism of forces that make up social reality. One critic who attempts to define Stevens's relationship with his contemporary context is Lisa Steinman.³⁷ She examines the use of the rhetoric of science and technology by modernist poets, namely William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Stevens, to defend and define the place and values of poetry in relation to the specifically modern American context.

³⁷. Lisa Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Drawing upon popular perception of the prestige and understanding of science, especially of modern physics, these poets sought to claim objectivity, relevance and modernity for poetic values of subjectivity, humanity and creative experimentation. Nevertheless, according to Steinman, while in the public mind, science, was associated with intellectual creativity and objectivity, it was technology that was preferred for its practical and commercial value. The conflation of the terms in the poets' rhetoric was indicative of the difficulties they faced in their defence of poetry to an inappreciative public. Indeed, in Steinman's assessment, the strategy is 'double-edged' (76), for they were compelled to appeal and conform to values they did not endorse.

In Steinman's view, although Stevens's interest in American culture was 'less outspoken' (134) than his contemporaries, he was 'more deeply rooted' in the American context than he appeared. Although his poetry shows little enthusiasm for the machine aesthetic and for urban modernity, he 'made the most serious use of the new physics, especially of quantum theory' for its view of reality as an unending and ambiguous process to '[envision] the poetry he wrote as grounded in the *real* world' (134). Through ideas gleaned from Charles Mauron, Whitehead and Planck, Stevens resolved the contradiction between his desire for specific details of observation and his desire for imaginative evasions through an abstract system of interrelationships. His interest in science was crucial to his defence of the function and nature of poetry as transformation of the normal in contradistinction to the call for political engagement of the Thirties and Forties. In particular, Stevens was attracted to the emphasis in physics - what Planck called 'the supreme hesitation' (*OP* 280) - on the provisional nature of scientific descriptions, seeing in it a confirmation of his insistence 'that poetry involves "the joy of language",... that the unending process of describing and

redescribing parts of the world, and thus one's encounters with the world, in language was the most accurate picture of reality available' (162).

Another critic who places Stevens in the American context is James Longenbach. Although Longenbach confines his context only to main political events, he analyses the changing currents of American politics in relation to Stevens's career, and traces the changing contours of Stevens's response. According to Longenbach, Stevens's supposed double life as poet and insurance lawyer enables him to be 'aware of events around him'.³⁸ This awareness underpins Stevens's ambiguous attitude to his own poetry - his consciousness of the dangers and limits of aestheticizing experience and of its inevitability and necessity. In political terms, it can lead to 'self-conscious conservatism' (162) and an unwillingness or inability to recognize political commitment as productive, it is nevertheless integral to Stevens's poetry: a condition of his achieving 'a middle ground' (viii) on which to test and eschew aesthetic and political dogmatism while still making poetry a part of reality.

Stevens's awareness of the ambiguous and troubled relationship between poetry and reality and his distrust of dogma manifests itself first in his early support for Bryan's populism, with its brand of conservative individualism, a distrust of collective or social vision, and therefore a tendency towards potential hero-worship. During the Thirties and Forties, the strain of Stevens's search for the middle ground marks the shifting contours of his poetry as he distances and negotiates himself from the changing political and ideological climates. Throughout the mounting pressures and conflicts of the pre-war years, the calls for dogmatic commitment and action both on

³⁸. James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.v. Further citations will be included in the text.

the left and the right, together with their claims for literature as 'politics of despair' (177) - apocalyptic analogue of the world's disorder, prompted Stevens to reply with his own 'politics of comedy' and 'ideas of ambiguity' (175), such as manifest in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' or 'The Idea of Order at Key West'. The same effort to sustain the ambiguity also helped Stevens to counter the cult of the hero with his own idea of the hero as an abstraction of the 'common man'. This emphasis on the abstract became particularly important after the invasion of Pearl Harbour that led to the American entry into the World War and subsequent coercive nationalist propaganda. As with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism and wartime internationalism, it allowed Stevens and other avant-garde artists a 'healthy kind of "political apoliticalism"' and 'viable political alternative' (254) - a measure of their sense of social commitment that called for an aesthetic and political world order that transcended the barriers of nationality and class.

The connection between the political events and poetry of the wartime years however slackened into 'a stronger division between public and private realms' as the war ended and was followed by the cold war. Yet Longenbach argues that even this move towards greater abstraction was politically encased, and 'was not exactly a retreat from political exigency but part of a more widespread movement among American intellectuals and artists' (280) to champion poetic freedom against repressive politics. The endless elaboration of the late poems allows Stevens precisely this freedom, enabling him to 'sustain a hovering vision that occluded the possibility of interrogating the vision's principles' (294). Although this leads Stevens to 'a poetry of impasse' (291), of which Stevens is aware, the formal rigour of his late short poems helps to overcome his limitation and fulfil the most important purpose of the

imagination: 'the recovery of the ordinary from the extraordinary' (299).

All in all, Steinman's and Longenbach's efforts may be said to redress the critical imbalances incurred in the ideological and political critique attempted by Perloff and Lentricchia. They also draw attention to the diversity and mobility of historical and cultural context that escapes Lentricchia's paradigm and Perloff's chronology of events. However, it may be argued that their desire to integrate Stevens into his context also reveals the dangers and limitations inherent in critical historicism of assuming a direct relationship between text and context. How, as Steinman claims, with Stevens's dislike of machine aesthetic and urban modernity, and his interest in science, can he be said to be 'more deeply rooted' in American culture, more oriented towards the practical and commercial value of technology? Likewise, Longenbach's argument that Stevens's ambiguity is a self-interrogating 'hovering vision' is also hard to reconcile with his own assertion that it is also a 'carefully modulated effort to assert ... the political powers of poets' (279). Indeed, both critics' claims run the risk of overlooking Stevens's own reticence regarding his relationship with reality and his efforts to forge his own sense of modernism. Historicism, old or new, may reveal the dynamic complexity of Stevens's context, but not of Stevens's mediation of that context through his sense of the world.

It is ~~not~~ this need to meet the challenge of Stevens's search for his own sense of modernism that underlines Charles Altieri's concern with what he sees as the failure of criticism:

The criticism of Stevens has not yet taken up the arguments the new historicism poses. Nor can it ... so long as it remains dominated by three attitudes ... For example, Harold Bloom's Nietzschean Stevens in pursuit of an imperial self engages in dramas is impossible to socialize at all. At the other extreme, the Stevens of Helen Vendler's *Part of*

Nature, Part of Us ... is all too typical of contemporary society's willingness to identify with the august imagination only when it is 'checked, baffled, frustrated, and reproved'. Finally, Joseph Riddel's Deconstructionist Stevens, who seeks 'a writing that kills' by constantly disclosing the artifice in our fictions, never ceases from decreasing long enough to adopt a stance one can demystify or, one must add, that society can care about as a fiction.³⁹

While recognizing the historicist challenge and contribution, Altieri casts doubt over the ideological slant in its approach and which its practitioners often fail to interrogate. He himself suggests that as critics, 'before we allow ourselves such distanced analytic stances for reading *against* texts, we must learn to read *through* them' (7) by seeking to appreciate the 'complex double bind' of the poets' dilemma as 'history's exiles'. For him what is needed is not only an emphasis on social and cultural practices, but also 'a labour of provisional identification' (7) which seeks to restore a sense of the authorial intention of the poets, not as free-floating individuals, but as active participants in the struggle to define self-representation and their own sense of modernism.

In his view, what is at stake is the need for criticism to reassess the question, central to modernist poetry, of the function of poetry as an agency by which to construct modes and values of individual sensibility as alternatives to the values of mainstream culture, and to preserve their social significance. According to Altieri, modernist ahistoricism illustrates the struggle of modern poets to address the problem, and 'the complex double bind' that confronts them. While they are deeply sceptical

³⁹. Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must Be Abstract, or What a Poet Can learn from Painting', included in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.116. The essay is expanded and incorporated into Altieri's *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), from which further citations will be made and included in the text, unless otherwise indicated.

of the values of the imaginative traditions in post-enlightenment culture and distrustful of modern culture, the same suspicion however sanctions the belief in and the efforts to engage with 'other, potentially deeper levels of history, where one can locate the sense of abiding needs, energies, and power' (6). For Altieri, the issue becomes no less than the need to harness the values of modernist art for post-modernity itself, for by seeking to demystify the ideologies of modernism: '"advanced" contemporary criticism', either of the new historicist or deconstructive kind, 'risks losing sight of the many different social roles that art's constructive energies make available' (7-8).

Stevens's imperative, 'It Must be Abstract', becomes the focus of Altieri's study of the efforts of modernism to forge alternative modes of agency whereby imaginative values can be reclaimed and shared. Modernist abstraction is a strategy of testing old modes of seeing, and more important, of intensifying the interpretative action of seeing and reading, making art both a 'commentary' and 'testimony' of the powers of the sensibility. Moving through an intricate argument through the Romantic and Symbolist heritage, Kant's idealistic philosophy, and the concepts of modernist painting, Altieri shows that abstraction is a way of solving the dualism, inherited from the Romantics, of the expressive lyric that marginalizes the sensibility, whether through the Wordsworthian claim of morality based paradoxically on the identification of the visionary self with nature or with socially marginal figures, or through the Keatsian mode of self-absorption. Altieri argues that though Kant's idealist philosophy contributes to the dualism, his critique of empiricism and practical ethics also paves the way for the role of abstraction both as a mode of self-empowerment and as a transpersonal mode of self-defining value-creation in art.

For Kant, art becomes an analogy for an alternative mode of value-creation,

generated by the creative energies of the self-legislating mind that serves neither expressive interest nor cognitive understanding. Rather, it creates and elicits within both creator and audience self-reflexive states wherein the mind, now a faculty of intuition and construction and not mere understanding, tests and redeploys concepts in acts of defining its sense of the phenomenal world through and within the internal formal structures of art. Besides, the act of abstraction also offers a project of transpersonality, for these new values that art creates are to be assessed in accordance with the formal relations of art, and not within the contexts of individual interests alone. As Altieri explains,

our deepest passions depend on our submitting ourselves to the formal dictates of the work. We pursue a version of personal interests that requires us to subject ourselves to essentially transpersonal practices, which we try to make as articulate as possible - not in order to master them, but in order to publish our pleasure and test the degree to which we can share what can be objectively available to all. (106)

It is in modernist formal experiments with the 'grammar' of non-mimetic realization in the visual arts that the creative possibilities of Kant's aesthetic are worked out. Discussing the concepts of composition and their workings in the paintings of Impressionism, Cézanne, Cubism, Malevich and Mondrian, Altieri sees the principle of structural foregrounding as the main strategy by which works of art may be made to carry authorial creative energies and transpersonal values. By foregrounding the structuring activity of the artist, formal relations of the work are first made to act as 'commentary', resisting and reassessing received conventions of mimetic representation. They are also made to display, as 'testimony', the authorial energies in organizing the work in accordance with his perceptions. For Altieri, this testimony is at once physical and metaphorical, for the creative energies come to

occupy the formal conditions of the work of art as a 'site' and as a metaphor for the semantic significance invested in the work. By the same token, the audience is invited to suspend its practical concerns so as to participate fully in the active physical forces that take on intellectual and psychological significance created by the state of self-reflexive awareness of the work. Thus, the work of art achieves its cultural aspiration of forging modes of imaginative life.

Altieri sees the relationship between modern poetry and the visual arts less in terms of stylistic or conceptual influences than as a 'concrete drama of possibilities' (8). In the case of Stevens, he identifies the use of *as* as a central strategy for authorial activity of abstraction. A rhetorical producer of resemblances, the *as* carries with it other complex operations that introduce the interplay of the real and unreal, turning sight into insight, description into valuation. As we read, we pursue the operations of the *as* that allow us to participate fully in the processes of viewing and reflecting upon experience. Reading thus becomes a paradigm for the act of value-creation:

The *as* literally produces resemblances, affords shifts in the level of discourse, and allows us to entertain provisional sympathies with a variety of attitudes. We see our seeing of *x* as *y*. Within such self-consciousness, the abstract *as* refers directly to the way poetry crosses life, because it names the state of equivalence basic to all acts of valuing. Reading becomes a paradigmatic form for such valuing. (346)

Turning to Wittgenstein as a context for Stevens's use of *as*, Altieri claims the power of art and abstraction to mediate value and fact by disclosing the creative life at the heart of experience:

The mature Stevens, like the mature Wittgenstein, added a principle for extending the life of the deep subject into the flux of the quotidian. It seems that both the poet and the philosopher can at once disclose the

marginal nature of the willing subject and get beyond contemplation, to a sense of how the unreal permeates ordinary experience. Both ethics and aesthetics become more than abstract statements about values, and the theory of poetry becomes the basis for a complete theory of life.

... each elaborates a Modernist imperative whose quest for concreteness ... leads ultimately to locating an 'indefiniteness' at the core of human experience, which poets can try put, 'correctly and unfalsified, into words'. The theorizing of poetry becomes the theory of life by positing alternatives for both empiricist reductionism and idealistic ontologizing. The being of beings is simply and miraculously a matter of how the 'I' manipulates 'the intricate evasions of as'. (351)

Finally, Altieri concludes, through this mediating act of reading, the marginal self is aligned to a desired mode of life that everyone can share:

Reading is a form of attention to phenomena that so involves investments in both the text and the world that it also becomes a paradigm for certain attitudes towards the self. Some texts lead us to desire, not only a deeper grasp of the world projected, but a more complete identification with the power of what we might call the 'textualized agency'. As the 'I' awakens, it finds its own investments so realized in the verbal structure that it desires the full life that may be available there....

Stevens's emphasis is not on heroic creative acts, which appropriate the world under some single synthetic compositional force. There are dreams of appropriation, but they project 'the greenest cone', formed out of powers that we all share, powers that we can even imagine building a community around... (356-357)

Altieri's views of abstraction and the activity of reading offer a fresh reassessment of many issues at the heart of the critical debates about Stevens and modernism. Viewed as a formal principle of self-reflexive renewal and organization, abstraction mediates between the 'closed' and 'open' form of poetry and addresses the related role of thought and language in the creative processes in Stevens's poetry. As a mode of imaginative activity, it addresses Stevens's notion of decreation as 'a revelation of ... our own powers' (*NA* 175) that modern reality must strive to discover and sustain. In addition, Altieri's discussion brings out the philosophical and

ideological ramifications of the interrogations of the function and value of poetry which modern poets, including Stevens, address through their engagement with the cultural and intellectual heritage and with contemporary reality. In the final analysis, Altieri's emphasis on Stevens's efforts to define his own sense of modernism and his consideration of their implications and significance in the broader philosophical and cultural context of modernism and its heritage offer a stimulating perspective that complements the historical approaches achieved by Steinman and Longenbach.

All in all, what can be derived from this selective survey of Stevens criticism? With their variety of concerns and perspectives, critics have shown Stevens to be central to the on-going debates about modernism. They have also shown the complexity of his poetics that has proved elusive to many efforts to define his sense of modernism on ideological, historical, or philosophical, or formal grounds. As Altieri, Steinman and Longenbach have shown, the rich nuances of Stevens's poetry and his efforts to defend and define his sense of the values and function of imaginative life and freedom cannot be separated from his dynamic and problematic involvement with the complex cultural and political reality of his contemporary context, the pressures of which his poetry both accommodates and resists. These efforts are indeed borne out by the wealth of interest Stevens shows in the intellectual and cultural debates and developments of his own time that have attracted and assisted him in his critical writings. In this light, to appreciate the travails of Stevens's defence of poetry, it is perhaps rewarding, and at least necessary, to consider his own dialogue with some of the figures he himself acknowledges in his critical essays and more elusively in his poetry.

Chapter II: New Realization of the Motive

In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer Stevens wrote:

Instead of crying of 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. This sounds like a lot of fiddle-dee-dee, and it may be. But if it is it is probably true of the way I express it than of the thought itself.

Another point about looking to oneself is this: the fundamental source of joy in life is the instinct for joy. If that is true and a little more difficult to realize in life, it is infinitely more true in poetry and in painting, and much more easy to realize there.

(L 295-296)

The letter - dated November 21, 1935 - was written during what might have been the most challenging moment of Stevens's poetic career. *Ideas of Order*, his second collection of poems, came out just a month earlier after more than ten years of poetic silence, and was subject to a hostile critical reception for its supposed lack of contemporary relevance and ideological commitment. Yet the criticism also proved productive, for it challenged Stevens into focussing his mind on defining his ideas about the nature and function of poetry and its difficult relation with reality. What emerged was the beginning of Stevens's sustained meditations on what he came to call the 'gaiety of poetry' as the basis of his poetic and its function to provide the 'sanctions of life' (*OP* 228) for the modern world.

To be sure, there was something precious, if not simply provocative, and perhaps even obsolete, in Stevens's assertion of joy as the value of poetry in the heady years of the Thirties when Stevens's contemporaries sought to defend poetry either for its modernity or as a means towards restoring cultural cohesiveness in the high-minded terms of ideological commitment, objectivity and relevance. Nor is Stevens's

description of joy, in so far as it is a way of looking to oneself for help or ‘the exaltation of human nature,’ helpful in distinguishing his own notion from the faith in individual creativity that informs the Romantic tradition of joy from Wordsworth down to Arnold and Pater, and that continues into Yeats’s vision of ‘gaiety/Transforming all that dread’.¹ That Stevens himself was aware of the difficulty of his position is underlined by the reticence, apparent not only in this letter but also elsewhere in his reflections on the possibility of a ‘new’ Romanticism. Stevens’s diffidence notwithstanding, there is an unmistakable sense of urgency and conviction in his proposal of joy as a limited, albeit viable, response to the cultural crisis of the Thirties. This conviction proves to be the sustaining force throughout Stevens’s efforts to forge his sense of modern poetry. The purpose of this chapter is to examine Stevens’s evolving poetic of gaiety and to assess its significance in relation to wider issues of modern poetry.

‘I Quiz All Sounds, All Thoughts, All Everything’

Pater, Santayana, and Hyacinth’s Music

Stevens’s pursuit of joy needed no prompting from the young *engagés* of the Thirties. His early journal entries and poetic experiments already record his perceptions of the situation of poetry of his own generation then dominated by the influences of the American genteel tradition and the Aesthetic movement of the

¹. William Butler Yeats, ‘Lapis Lazuli’.

Nineties.² One issue that dominates the journal is the debate whether poetry should deal with facts, or with striving towards some spiritual ideal. One entry, dated March 28, 1899, ponders the tension between these two demands:

Art for art's sake is both indiscreet and worthless. It opposes the common run of things by existing alone and for its own sake, because the common run of things are all parts of a system and exist not for themselves but because they are indispensable. This argument is apparent to the reason but it does not convince the fancy - which in the artistic matters is often the real thing to be dealt with.... To say that stars were made to guide navigators etc. seems like stretching a point; but the real use of their beauty (which is not their excuse) is that it is a service, a food. Beauty is strength. But art - art all alone, detached, sensuous for the sake of sensuousness, not to perpetuate inspiration or thought, art that is mere art - seems to me to be the most arrant as it is the most inexcusable rubbish.

(L 24)

Although Stevens here follows Paterian aestheticism in preferring art as imaginative enrichment and identifying beauty as spiritual perfection of life, his reflection also already voices a criticism of the danger of isolation inherent in the Paterian pursuit of rarefied beauty. Indeed, terms like 'service', 'food' and 'strength' suggest his effort to reconcile the conflict between the idealism of art and the practical concerns of life. More important, they imply and anticipate Stevens's demand that art should be 'vital', a quality that he would subsequently define as central to poetry, and which for him would be lost should the imagination cease to adhere to the real. Another entry of the same period reveals the same uneasy ambivalence:

². For discussions of Stevens's early poetic development, see Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and George Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1986).

The feeling of piety is very dear to me. I would sacrifice a great deal to be a Saint Augustine but modernity is so Chicagoan, so plain, so unmeditative. I thoroughly believe that at this very moment I get none of my chief pleasures except from what is unsullied. The love of beauty excludes evil. A moral life is simply a pure conscience: a physical, mental and ethical source of pleasure. At the same time it is an inhuman life to lead. It is a form of narrowness ... One must make concessions to others; but there is never the necessity of smutching inner purity.... I believe, as unhesitatingly as I believe anything, in the efficacy of fact meeting fact - with a background of the ideal.

(L 32)

Stevens's debate is more than a merely personal preoccupation with the conflict between his own poetic idealism and the claims of pragmatism imposed on him by his father.³ It discloses a dissatisfaction with the broader question of the role and identity of a poet, perceived to be at odds with 'plain' and 'unmeditative' 'Chicagoan modernity'. To cultivate artistic interest was regarded as a trivial female pastime, inappropriate for the pragmatic concerns and powers reserved for American manhood. Stevens himself wrote in his journal: 'Poetry and manhood: Those who say poetry is now the peculiar province of women say so because ideas about poetry are effeminate' (L 26). Although Stevens dismissed these ideas as 'silly verse' by 'silly men', he was sufficiently troubled to defend his favourite poets (Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson, and others) as 'man-poets'. To be a 'vital' poet, it is necessary to be both 'manly' and modern.

Stevens's anxiety about the dilemma confronted by an aspiring modern poet is not unfounded. The legacy of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic is troubled, even exhausted, by many of its own concerns. As Jan Gordon has shown in an analysis of the complex

³. The point is made by George Lensing, *op.cit.*, p.22. A broader view is argued at length in Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police*, which situates Stevens's search for poetic identity in a gender-defined social and economic American context.

of ideas associated with the recurrent mirror motif in the literature and visual arts of the Nineties,⁴ the regeneration of the self through art paradoxically entails a 'burning' off of a sensitivity to the vulgarities of the phenomenal world in preparation for a revelation of the Ideal beauty possible only in intense exquisite fleeting impressions. This ideal existential condition in which art and life become one also implicates a symbolic temporal regression of the self into reconstructed moments of idyllic childhood or of myths of the golden age in which time and the self are 'suspended', saved from the corrupting progress of history. This return to origins is a transformation of the self into pure potential, a state of all-consuming intensity which, according to Pater, involves 'a moral sexlessness, a kind of impotence, an ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a divine beauty and significance of its own.'⁵ As Gordon observes, this ideal existence is highly hazardous:

There is surely an inconsistency in Pater's construction of a religion of art through which the aesthete might hope to escape the randomness of a world without a centre. Perhaps the paradox is inherent in the aesthete's posture before the world at large. After all, the desire to experience random sensations while secretly wishing for an island or similar aesthetic envelope seems as contradictory as wishing for a 'wholeness of nature' while simultaneously worshipping those moments of suspended development....

The degeneration of the self into art is paradoxically part of the generation in the realm of aestheticizing the natural world. The danger, as Sebastian van Storck discovers, is that one's entire impression of the world is 'but a thought'. For, if the self-refining process of Pater's

⁴. Jan Gordon, "'Decadent Spaces': Notes for a Phenomenology of the *Fin de Siècle*", in Ian Fletcher (ed.), *Decadence and the 1890's* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979). See also David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader* (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1984) for a discussion of the problems of narcissism in the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound; and Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) for a general discussion of the relationship between the Aesthetic Movement and Modernist poetry.

⁵. Walter Pater, 'Diaphanéité', quoted in Gordon, *op.cit.*, p.45.

aesthetic results in a condition wherein there is no longer any distinction between 'outward' and 'inward', then the narcissistic projection of the self into the 'outer' world, and the reduction of the self to the status of a passive receptor, are not opposites but identities. He who had engaged in a self-refining process, in order to purge experience of its vulgar sensations, finds himself trapped in a maelstrom of subjectivity.⁶

The aesthete is no different from the 'divided self' which Freud described in his theory of narcissism formulated during the same period. The mirror becomes the apt image of the aesthete's doomed existence, doubly removed from the mutable world of vulgarities and from the delicate glimpses of the Ideal Beauty whose fleeting images are but his own self-reflection.

Stevens later claimed that it 'would be very difficult to admit' his interest in the 'dreadful goings-on of Walter Pater', and continued that 'it would be impossible nowadays, I suppose, to concede anything at all in that direction' (*L* 606). When he did later relent, it is significant that he singled out for attention Pater's appreciation of Michelangelo's sculptures for 'their wonderful strength verging, as in the things of the imagination great strength always does, on what is singular or strange' as if to stress his distance from Pater (*NA* 137). At this early stage of Stevens's search, however, this reappraisal was not yet possible for he needed another influence that would help invigorate the Paterian aesthetic.

It was Santayana, who provided that assistance. Looking back some forty years later at his formative days at Harvard, Stevens acknowledged that Santayana 'made up in the most genuine way for many things that I needed' (*L* 482). The influence was all the more genuine because direct and personal, as Stevens's reminiscence suggests:

⁶. Gordon, *op.cit.*, pp.46-47.

While I did not take any of his courses and never heard him lecture, he invited me to come to see him a number of times and, in that way, I came to know him a little.... It would be easy to speak of his interest and sympathy; it might amuse you more to know that Sparklets were then something new and that Santayana liked to toy with them as he charged the water which he used to make a high ball or two. They seemed to excite him.... He was then still definitely a poet.

Note that it is Santayana's 'playfulness' - his delight in the gratuitous - as much as his interest and sympathy that captivated Stevens. Although the quality is here observed as part of Santayana's personality, what is important is that it is also intrinsic to his aesthetic.

Although Santayana is sympathetic to Pater's aesthetic idealism, he seeks to redress its hazards of narcissism by defining the experience and significance of aesthetic ideals in terms of their origins in a 'naturalistic psychology'.⁷ All values, including beauty, Santayana argues in *The Sense of Beauty*, 'spring from the immediate and inexplicable reaction of vital impulses' (14). They are also inextricably concerned with satisfactions or pleasures which are expressions of the fulfillment of the desire to harmonize and enrich experience. As such, values are the mind's creations, involving a dynamic interplay of different functions of the mind. In so far as the perception of beauty is stimulated and satisfied for its own sake, aesthetic pleasures become ultimate values.

Santayana's view of aesthetic values as the satisfaction of the desire for pleasure for its own sake underpins his emphasis on aesthetic activities as a form of gratuitous play, a 'useless activity, exercise that springs from the physiological impulse

⁷. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955, p.v. Further citations will be included in the text.

to discharge the energy, which the exigencies of life have not called out' (18). Its strongest manifestation is the discharge of sexual impulses which endows the object of desire with love and beauty, and are not dissipated even when they fulfil their reproductive function or when there is no specific object of gratification.

Santayana's ideas of aesthetic activities as 'play', as 'excess', of the sensibility foreshadow Stevens's assertion of the 'virile' and irrational nature of the imagination, that delights in fresh perceptions of gratuitous concrete particulars of experience. Similarly, the implication of beauty as an artifice, a transformation of experience in accordance with the needs and desires of the sensibility also anticipates Stevens's own famous description of poetry as an 'exquisite plane' of momentary existence, an abstraction with no other 'meaning' than to endow and enrich experience with 'the beauty of inflections/Or the beauty of innuendoes' (CP 93). As such, both Santayana's and Stevens's ideas differ from the visionary 'exquisite pauses in time' during which, according to Pater, the intense observer-aesthete beholds 'some consummate extract or quintessence of life'.⁸ Santayana himself compares poetry to stained glass - an image which nicely contrasts with Pater's 'diaphanous' art - colouring the monochrome flow of experience with the play of the sensibility.⁹ The image also anticipates the 'escapist' function that Stevens ascribes to poetry as an act of making metaphors. 'Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor. It is only *au pays de la métaphore qu'on est poète*' (OP 204). It may be argued that Stevens's search for poetry that expresses and fulfils the 'instinct for joy' is first and foremost a desire for

⁸. Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and History* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1910; reprinted Basil Blackwell, 1967), p.150.

⁹. George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (London: Adam & Charles Black, ed.1900), p. 256.

this 'colouring' act of poetry, for a poetry that helps fulfil the need for 'the sanctions of life, for that which makes life so prodigiously worth living' (*OP* 228). Indeed, for Stevens as for Santayana, to enhance and exult this 'instinct for joy', and above all to induce it, is to become the ultimate task of poetry. Here again Santayana provides an illuminating directive:

Life has a margin of play which might grow broader if the sustaining nucleus were more firmly established in the world. To the art of working well a civilized race would add the art of playing well. To play with nature and make it decorative, to play with the overtones of life and make them delightful, is a sort of art. It is the ultimate, the most artistic sort of art.¹⁰

Santayana's aesthetic of 'play' must have struck a sympathetic chord during the crucial period of Stevens's formative years in which he was searching for a reconciliation of art with reality. Robert Buttell has suggested that, although Stevens absorbed the possibilities offered by other avant-garde techniques, in particular those of French Symbolism and Imagism, his own use of irony went beyond the self-mocking *ennui* and satirical wit and the hard, clear imagery towards a dramatization of the mind's transformative encounters with reality.¹¹ The poems of *Harmonium* are indeed 'decorative' in their handling of the sombre overtones in the tension between the imagined and the real. The manipulation of colour and sound, the use of mixed styles of language for comic, odd and even bawdy effects recall Santayana's image of poetry as stained glass as well as his notion of 'euphony' as poetic speech that emphasizes the sensuousness of medium as a manifestation of the excess of poetry:

¹⁰. *ibid.*, p.214.

¹¹. Buttell, *op.cit.*, pp.100, 130-132.

the reader gathers, probably, no definite meaning, but is conscious of a poetic medium, of speech euphonious and measured, and redolent of a kind of objectless passion which is little more than the sensation of the movement and sensuous richness of the lines.¹²

The effects are all the more noticeable in Stevens's modification of *fin-de-siècle* or Symbolist motifs.

Take for instance 'Peter Quince at the Clavier'. The title announces a concern with the making of art. Instead of the aesthete or a dandy, Stevens chooses as his protagonist the Shakespearean clown who personifies the tension between the imagination and reality in his efforts to solve the problem of how to bring the moon into a room. The opening tercet plays a variation on the Paterian aspiration to music as an ideal, purified state of being and art while it depicts Peter Quince improvising at the clavier and trying to figure out a poetic of desire. Note how the poem, through the use of possessives and demonstratives, and of adjectives, emphasizes the specificity of the subject and the medium of art that underlines Peter Quince's analogy between the way his fingers 'make music' and the 'selfsame sounds' that affect his spirit, as if to underline an anchoring of Paterianism in the clown's body. Note next how the effect is described as 'a music', as if to distinguish it from its phonal resonances and to emphasize its nature as a 'redolent' imaginative response, both a play of the state of mind and a figuration of that state. Indeed both the gesture of specificity and the play of analogy are felt to work so well that they prompt a further analogy that boldly claims the potency of music not only to create desire but also to represent, indeed to identify with, the mind's emotional resonances: 'Music is feeling, then, not sound.'¹³

¹². *Interpretations*, p.256.

¹³. David Trotter discusses the significance of the demonstrative in *The Making of*

As the poem continues, this is exactly what Peter Quince, at this very moment, is experiencing:

And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music. It is like the strain
Waked in the elders by Susanna.

So strong is the 'strain' of desire that it is poised between evoking a memory of desire and identifying it with music, and creating a new desire through a metaphor of music as 'blue-shadowed silk'. The play is further strengthened by the shift to the simile 'like' to underline the comparison of the force of this desire to the elders' eroticism in the Biblical tale of Susanna. The second section of the poem reinforces the play by retelling the story of Susanna and the elders. Susanna is here depicted in an enclosed garden, her sexuality equally repressed as 'concealed imaginings' and delicate yearning 'for so much melody', and sublimated into 'the cool of spent emotions' and 'old devotions'. The elders, by contrast, feel in 'the basses of their beings' the discordant throbbing of their 'witching chords' and the 'pizzicati' that pulses in their thin blood. It is the meeting of these two contrary modes of desire that produce the section's violent climax:

A breath upon her hand
Muted the night.
She turned -
A cymbal crashed,
And roaring horns.

So far the poem seems to demand that we read Peter Quince's violent improvisation and the subsequent revelation of Susanna's grief and her 'shame' as intimating a consummation of the elders' desire, a transformation of eroticism into art that, Stevens later tells us, implicates the 'violence' of the imagination. Yet, the poem itself is strangely ambivalent on this crucial point.¹⁴ The poem's discourse flaunts its well-measured structure in sharp contrast to the dark experience it only furtively refers to - 'They wondered', 'They whispered'. Is the poem here betraying guilt over its complicity with the elders's dark desire which it has so far been justifying as aesthetic energy?

The passage has always been read - an interpretation which Santayana might endorse - as a transformation of the raw materials of experience into the vital form of art, an endorsement of the aesthetic process as an 'organic' process which renews itself by assuming ever more vital forms. In the context of the poem, the assertion of the immortality of beauty 'in the flesh', the dismissal of the elders' desire, and the singing of Susanna's beauty on 'a clear viol of her memory' seem to accredit the transformative process with a multiple function of vindicating Susanna's innocence, restoring her beauty, and purifying and invigorating the aesthetic energy in a new, more youthful and virile form.¹⁵ However, the question is: why does Peter Quince choose to identify himself with the elders in the first place?

¹⁴. Mary Nyquist argues in 'Musing on Susanna's Music', *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.310-327, that the ambiguity betrays Stevens's voyeuristic desire that can only claim its aesthetic virility by denying and subjugating Susanna's self-sufficiency.

¹⁵. See, for example, Joseph Riddel's pre-deconstructive reading in 'Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier";: Immortality as Form', *College English*, 23 (1962), pp.307-309; and A. Walton Litz, *op.cit.*, p.44.

The poem then casts doubt upon its own claim to the potency of its originating impulse and figuration. The poem begins, we may recall, by claiming the potency of its music as metaphor of feeling: ‘Music is feeling, then, not sound;/And thus it is that what I feel,/Here in this room.’ Yet this metaphorical identity soon flaunts its own rhetoricity in ‘Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk is music’ and is then displaced by the simile, as if the poem has been caught by the ‘strain’ that itself identifies as the elders’ lust for Susanna. In so far as Susanna is the elders’ object of desire, it may be argued that her ‘concealed imaginings’, her desire for ‘old devotions’ and ‘the cool of spent emotions’, are projections, simulacra of the nostalgia for similar sentiments that the elders secretly harbour, and, by implication, so does the poem. Overtly sustained and measured, the poem’s rhyming couplets echo like a ‘refrain’ - repetitively, self-reflexively, and also exaggeratedly (‘the refrain/Was like a willow swept by rain’) - as if to prolong and indulge in the pleasure of the telling of the wish and perhaps the deed that it also only furtively hints at.¹⁶

One may argue that the shift from the narrative to the lyric mode in the concluding section of the poem is an attempt to retrieve the lyric impulse towards which the poem aspires by distancing it from the elders’ lust. Following Santayana, the poem’s vision of music as a figure of desire whose enduring value and vitality derives from its roots in the natural world of process seems to endorse his analogy of the aesthetic activity as an excess of sexual energy that always exceeds its immediate object of gratification and constantly renews itself through new forms. Yet death is the mother of beauty, not because the poem finds physical beauty transient and the

¹⁶. Another meaning of ‘refrain’ is of course to abstain. See also Jan Gordon, *op.cit.*, pp.51-52, for a discussion of parody, gossip and scandal as symptoms of narcissism in the language of *fin-de-siècle* literature.

pleasures of sensuous forms fleeting and keen, but because it finds in the world of mutability intimations of immortality in patterned recurrences. Playing off the anaphora and the parallelism against the line-ending participles, the poem strains under the tension of seeking out nostalgic forms of repetition and sameness and conceding to the inevitability of process.¹⁷ Of course, the poem's closing image of 'a clear viol' as a new, invigorated imagination and figure of desire suggests the element of organic time and process in the making of art, and thereby re-endorses the original aspiration to the adequacy of form and feeling. By token of the poem's own musical logic then, the very preciousity of the sound of the word itself calls attention to its hidden resonances. 'Viol' suggests 'vial' and '*violé*' or violated. The word thus connotes the manner in which the new poet takes possession of Susanna's beauty - by violating the memory of her beauty and containing it as in a reproducible literary artifact that can therefore make a 'constant sacrament of praise'.¹⁸ Susanna's beauty, it appears, cannot escape 'Death's ironic scraping'.

The poem seems to be admitting, willy-nilly, that neither the imagination nor language is a well-tempered clavier that can figure forth new desires. In so doing, it also suggests Stevens's reticence regarding Santayana's claim of the adequacy of form as grounded in the naturalistic roots of the imagination. Like Stevens's later poems, *Harmonium* is marked by Stevens's attitude to the unresolved, ambivalent interrelationship between the imagined and the real. The firecat's fortuitous chase in 'Earthy Anecdote', with which the volume opens, tells of the tension between the

¹⁷. For the use of the participles, see Litz, *op.cit.*, p.110; and for the use of the parallelism, see Nyquist, *op.cit.*, p.319.

¹⁸. See Nyquist, *op.cit.*, p.326, for a discussion of the pun.

clattering bucks and the wilful firecat to dominate, to change their 'natural' course. The same tension is even more evident in the paganism of 'Sunday Morning' - the poem often considered in the spirit of Santayana - where Stevens's effort to celebrate the 'comforts of the sun' and to acquiesce in the earth as origin of beauty, 'unsponsored' and 'free', competes with the urge to possess the earth: 'Deer walk upon our mountains' (*CP* 70; my emphasis).¹⁹ As Crispin will later discover, neither earthly delights nor those of the poet's own imagination can be conjured up at will.

The *pays de métaphore* where the solitaires pursue the pleasures of 'the motion of thought/And its restless iteration' (*CP* 60) can indeed be a lonely, barren country. To begin with, the mind is prone to repetition. In 'The Ordinary Women', the poem's bawdy exuberance and persistent rhythm and rhymes propel the ordinary women away from their nonchalant sexuality toward narcissistic fulfillments in 'insinuations of desire/Puissant speech, alike in each,' yet the circularity of the poem's movement and repetition of rhymes are a reminder of the women's poverty. The mind's workings are also random and its revelations not always pleasurable. What begins as a leisurely reverie and improvisation on faint and delicate shades of analogy in 'Domination of Black' reveals no Coleridgean secret ministry of nature, but only the mind's darker and disruptive vagaries:

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.

¹⁹. The poem will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4 in conjunction with the question of belief in Stevens's poetry.

Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
 Came striding.
 And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The cry prompts no abstruser musings or companionable forms but only more obsessive echoes of the mind's own dark moods that come to dominate the whole scene:

The colors of their tails
 Were like the leaves themselves
 Turning in the wind,

erratum

p.81: insert between 'In the twilight wind' and 'Down to the ground' the following lines: 'They swept over the room,/Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks'

Turning in the wind,
 Turning as the flames
 Turned 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.

As the Prince of Peacocks himself soon discovers, the desire to seek comfort in the mind's created artifice has its own hidden risk of madness. The moonlit plain of the imagination is strewn with Berserk's dreadful traps and blocks of steel for an unsuspecting wanderer.

Stevens's quest for a revitalized poetry is further complicated by his awareness

of the limitations imposed on the mind's activities by language, its primary means of improvising pleasurable analogies for experience. As 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' - Stevens's most resolute poet - admits, language is but a labyrinth of signification composed of lifeless sounds and arbitrary abstract notations that bear no relation to each other, or to the concrete particulars of the real it is supposed to describe or represent. The Third Girl's plot to 'undo' the Giant of reality may seek to seduce him and beautify his 'world of gutturals' with her 'heavenly labials' (*CP* 7); yet it may also distort and indeed deprive the Giant of his earthly strength. In addition, language is made up of the residue of 'the old voices/That were rosen once' (*CP* 495) that become an inextricable part of the mind's ways of seeing. Not only are these voices at odds with the changing tempo of reality, they also inevitably threaten to reduce any effort at a new description of reality to nostalgia, mimicry and repetition. In 'In the Carolinas' the Whitmanian vital voice has withered as the fecund flux of nature has moved on; yet the new voice of desire has also failed to provide the satisfaction:

The lilacs wither in the Carolinas.
 Already the butterflies flutter above the cabins.
 Already the new-born children interpret love
 In the voices of mothers.

Timeless mother,
 How is it that your aspic nipples
 For once vent honey?

The pine-tree sweetens my body
 The white iris beautifies me.

Both the butterflies and the new-born children are part of the process of nature, and thus 'already' vitiated by the same flux of time that makes the lilacs wither. The discrepancy between the mannered smoothness of the reply and the raw irony of the

new-born desire suggests that the reply is a nostalgic wish for a benign vision of nature. And as such, it underlines the difficulty of seeing the world afresh. In *Harmonium* the problem is reflected in the uneasy strains of irony, parody and self-mockery that undercut the comedy of language. Even the reduction of the Whitmanian lilacs to 'the bloom of soap' and 'the fragrance of vegetal' or the efforts of virile bravura cannot disguise the bitter failure to engender fresh descriptions in 'Last Looks at the Lilacs':

Poor Buffo! Look at the lavender
 And look your last and look still steadily,
 And say how it comes that you see
 Nothing but trash and that you no longer feel
 Her body quivers in the Floréal

Toward the cool night and its fantastic star,
 Prime paramour and belted paragon,
 Well-booted, rugged, arrogantly Don John,
 Who will embrace her before summer comes.

Speech becomes particularly impotent, although passed off as comic, as it fails to conjure up a music of beauty to cure Stevens of his 'Depression before Spring':

The cock crows
 But no queen rises.

The hair of my blonde
 Is dazzling,
 As the spittle of cows
 Threading the wind.

Ho! Ho!

But ki-ki-ri-ki
 Brings no rou-cou-cou.

But no queen comes
 In slipper green.

The problematic relationship between desire and modes of revealing desire comes under the Uncle's scrutiny in 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle'. The title of the poem introduces us to the poem's *persona*, an aging man of forty looking at the world through his monocle while seeking an 'adequate' hymn to love. The clash of sounds and the slight change of 'monocle' into 'mon oncle' in the title suggests that the vagaries of words will be the concern of the poem as much as the vagaries of the uncle's vision. Their difficult relationship is dramatized not only in the abrupt shifts of diction and tone in the poem, but also in the tension between the extravagance of language and the vicissitudes of age and love which the poem addresses.

The opening mock-invocation both conjures up and denies a vision of ideal beauty, and sets up the poem's central conflict: the uncle's attempt to shield himself from the realities of his waning sexuality and mortality through an elaborate and comic blend of nostalgia and self-mockery, and his desire for new images of beauty. Although the uncle's irony ruthlessly represses his own 'magnificent measure', note how the tension just as impulsively engenders more images of desire:

And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
I wish that I might be a thinking stone.
The sea of spuming thought foists up again
The radiant bubble that she was. And then
A deep up-pouring from some saltier well
Within me, bursts its watery syllable.

The clash of diction in the vision of Botticellian beauty suggests an effort to pass off the nostalgia as comic, a trick 'foisted' up by memory and desire. Yet, while the radiant bubble of beauty may be burst, the desire for radiance itself cannot be easily dismissed. Rather it seems to gather strength from a more poignant and potent 'saltier

well' within.²⁰ Indeed, the pronominal reference in 'its watery syllable' is ambiguous: either the watery syllable of the radiant bubble is burst by a deeper, stronger desire; or this latter 'saltier' well of desire is now bursting and perhaps also bursting forth its own new and yet unformed watery syllable. Either way, the image encapsulates within itself the tension between nostalgia and the renewal of the Uncle's drama of desire.

The following three sections see this drama vacillating between its contradictory impulses as the Uncle in turns reflects upon and dismisses three historic scales of love: the birdsong of lyrical potency in Section II, the pursuit of studied eroticism in Section III, and the song of earthly love in Section IV. Of the three, the third seems the most seductive and the most ambiguous. The Uncle's 'luscious and impeccable' apple is prelapsarian and therefore wholly natural, and he reads in its 'figure' the pleasures of earth, its teeming fecundity (read 'a round' and 'around') and its transience.²¹ For the aging uncle, this combined promise of intense joy in its abundance and mutability may be excellent to trope as 'a fruit of life'; as 'a fruit of love', however, it rings too ominous - 'too mad to read/Before one merely reads to pass the time.'

²⁰. A. Walton Litz, *op.cit.*, p.85, reads the 'saltier well' as an image of reality that bursts the illusion of beauty. Eleanor Cook hears a more ambiguous and richer modulation of loss and renewal; see *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.56. Stevens's own use of the image here and elsewhere seems to have the combined modulation of loss and desire that informs the creative force of what he calls imaginative poverty. A particularly strong use of the image appears, for instance, in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar': 'But for that salty cup,/But for the icicles on the eaves -/The sea is a form of ridicule' (*CP* 181-182). My reading for this image and the pronoun is indebted to Cook.

²¹. Litz, *op.cit.*, p.87, sees the apple and the circularity of rhythms and rhymes in the stanza as an intimation of cyclic mutability. Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, pp.61-62, agrees although she points out that the apple is 'impeccable', that is not sinful and neat. I want to add that the 'luscious' apple also recalls Peter Quince's hymn to the immortality of the flesh that he finds in the cycle of recurrence and flux.

What is then a book on love that is neither too mad nor too much of a mere pastime for ‘men of forty’? This question concerns the renewal of love as well as of language, and it demands the Uncle’s resourcefulness as much as it seems to increase his anxiety. Through Stanzas VI through XI, the language of the poem shifts abruptly from mock-pedagogical, to grossly comic, then to grotesque, and bawdy, just as the uncle’s argument struggles to reconcile his sense of life’s and love’s evanescence with the lusty demands of his ‘most venerable heart’. A vision of aesthetic transcendence is first proposed to satisfy a desire for ‘a substance in us that prevails’, albeit trimmed down as a tentative pedagogical and general hypothesis (‘If men at forty will be painting lakes’). Yet even this distancing strategy is too weak to contradict the Uncle’s own discernment of the fluctuations of love that leave aspiring amorists and poets ‘breathless to attend each quirky turn’. The suggestion is also too mocking for the balding lovers’ sense that love declines with age into ‘the compass and curriculum’ for ‘introspective exiles’ to lecture on. Such, as the Uncle says dismissively, ‘is a theme for Hyacinth alone’. A parable of the ‘honey of heaven’ brought down by angelic muleteers is too unreliable, while the rough centurions’ honey ‘of earth’ is too short-lived, and the tentative speculation on the marriage of the two trails off unfinished. The attempt to see the earlier trope of the fruit of life as a fruit of love becomes too cruel a mockery of the Uncle’s own waning potency and his analogies move quickly from ‘golden gourd’ to ‘distended’, ‘distorted’, ‘warted squashes’ and ‘rotting’. Whether envisioned as a joy permanent or transient, these tropes of love are obviously all too deadly to contemplate.

For the Uncle, still a ‘ward of Cupido’ at forty, love requires a lustier music. No more the Romantic, effete language of the ‘fops of fancy’ which the Uncle has

been quizzing and now discards as ‘memorabilia of the mystic spouts/Spontaneously watering their gritty soils.’ Yet is the Uncle’s new up-pouring any lustier or less fanciful? Note how the uncle disowns all ‘magic trees’, with their ‘balmy boughs’ and ‘silver-ruddy, gold vermilion fruits’, preferring instead to return to his earlier unheavenly tree of life and love:

I know a tree that bears
 A resemblance to the thing I have in mind.
 It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
 To which all birds come sometime in their time.
 But when they go that tip still tips the tree.

The tree is both assertively cut back and appropriated, as if to stress the tree’s now unconcealed potency. The Uncle’s tree may not outshine the allure of the other tropes, yet it seems to outlive them in phallic potency. Nonetheless, while the Uncle’s tree is certainly not foppish, its flaunted potency is no less fanciful, ‘a resemblance’ as the Uncle says and the line stresses. And with this admission, the poem seems to look back to the precariousness of the ‘spuming thought’ that has been troubling the Uncle all along. ‘If sex were all’, then the Uncle’s wish for the renewal of love and language would of course be granted. So would also his wish to reconcile the persistent desire to ‘make believe a starry *reconnaissance*’ with the too painful an awareness of the rot of life. But sex is not all, and this is what the Uncle has to admit:

Last night, we sat beside a pool of pink,
 Clipped with lilies scudding the bright chromes,
 Keen to the point of starlight, while a frog
 Boomed from his very belly odious chords.

‘Clipped’ as a past participle is odd here. Its sound plays both on ‘to clip’ as ‘to cut’ and ‘to hold together’, and seems to be suggesting a gaudy cut-and-paste landscape

design rather than a mythical garden of dreamy indulgences. 'Keen' means both 'sensitive to' and 'bitter', and both senses seem to apply. Within this gaudy lily garden, the Uncle and the booming frog co-habit, not as lotus-eaters, but as unrequited lovers, whose mating calls go unanswered.

The poem's last stanza tries to resolve the dilemma.²² The Uncle returns to his earlier trope of bird, and combines it with the trope of roundness of the apple/skull. If the pigeon here is of the imaginative colouring as the sky, as if to suggest the harmony between its flight and its earthly habitat, between the pleasures of merely circulating and the cyclicity of the earth, then the white pigeon is a more limited version, whose repetitious flight ties it to the earth and brings it down, 'flutters to the ground,/Grown tired of flight.' Imaginative flight has now come to roost on its native ground, and perhaps there to renew itself. Yet the will to see a balance of the imagination and the world of fluttering passions and words is wary and wearied. The rhyme scheme here is mannered, a laboured flourish over the inner nervousness that breaks free from the Uncle's control in the second half of the stanza. Yet note how the poem also pauses as the Uncle reasserts his determination to 'still pursue, the origin and course of love', and in particular to ponder over an unexpected discovery. The tired, fluttering passions and words have an unknown shade, 'distinct', clearly perceptible and different from the flourish of gaudy colours at the Uncle's command, and 'distinct' also from the shadow of mortality that has been haunting the Uncle throughout. As the Uncle says, the pursuit of 'the origin and course of love' is endless.

²². Litz, *op.cit.*, p.89, sees the stanza as achieving an 'easy counterbalance' of the poem's contradictions. Harold Bloom in *The Poems of Our Climate*, p.44, sees it as a qualified gain after the erotic loss. A similar reading is offered in Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, p.64.

The Uncle may have learned to live with the vicissitudes of memory, desire and words; what he now has to discover is their potential for unexpected newness.

To Make a New Intelligence prevail: The Strain of Remembrance and Forgetfulness

The Uncle's muse returns in a different guise in 'To the One of Fictive Music' where she emerges from the tension between the repetition of memory and language and its displacement. Described as 'one of the fictive music', she also belongs to 'the sisterhood of the living dead' and is clearest, nearest, dearest, and most radiant when uncrowned, unadorned and unknown. A residue of the 'imperfections' of the imagination and language also forms part of the 'laborious weaving' of her music. Indeed the poem takes care to expound that not only does the feigning power of her music transform the earth into a 'gross effigy and simulacrum' of ourselves, but that her 'musing the obscure' also intensifies the familiar with its retentive power. So powerful is her music that, through it, 'we give ourselves our likest issuance'. Yet the oddity of the rhetoric here again betrays the strain of repetition that prompts the quick assertion of the necessary saving difference, the 'strange unlike', that the muse must also endow her feigning with. Born of the 'imperfections' of ourselves and our language, Stevens's muse must flutter between semblance and difference, between repetition and displacement. Her final icon is indeed anxious - 'pale', 'fatal', and 'unreal' - a reflection of the contradictory demands that she is expected to fulfil.

Of all the poems in *Harmonium*, the poem that explores most thoroughly the tension between repetition and displacement is perhaps 'The Comedian as the Letter

C'. The first of Stevens's long poems, its sense and significance have often been read as an oblique comment on the broader scene and direction of modernist poetic experiment in the new and the local, or more specifically as a quasi-autobiographical account of Stevens's revision of Romanticism and his search for a new poetic identity. Yet critics differ as to their assessment of the poem's success and the nature of its discovery, and they attribute the ambiguity to the gap between the poem's narrative plot and the language with which Crispin's progress is charted.²³ To be sure, both the plot and the rhetoric bear testimony to Stevens's anxiety about the direction of the quest, the conditions it entails as well as about his effort to relate it 'benignly'. Yet to rebuke Stevens for the discrepancy is not to acknowledge Stevens's awareness of the contradictions and the limits of the task of poetic renewal.

For the quest for the 'soil' as 'a still new continent' to describe and in which 'a new intelligence' may prevail is fraught with uncertainty. The proposition 'His soil is man's intelligence' to which the poem gives its assent is itself ambiguous. It implies two relations - one between new land and new art, and another between native land and native writing - and conflates the two.²⁴ Crispin's sea crossing is certainly

²³. Most critics also see the self-mockery in the poem's humour as a testament of Stevens's failed quest. Frank Kermode in *Wallace Stevens* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p.45, while commending the gaiety of language in *Harmonium*, nevertheless is wary of the excess of the poem's language. Helen Vendler in *On Extended Wings* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp.41-50, goes further and indicts Stevens with self-disgust for his pretense to celebrate the fertility of the earth. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, pp.68-87, describes the poem's humour as 'bitter ... to the point of rancidity', indicative of the poem's obsessive quest to undo its Whitmanian model and despair at its own failure. More recently, Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, more disposed to Stevens's word-play, detects a vein of cruelty in Stevens's self-mockery, though she praises Stevens's comedy of language for a measure of heroism not to succumb to hatred or self-pity.

²⁴. See Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, pp.73-85.

supposed to dissolve the old gods and their voices so that a 'new' and native way of seeing and writing about a new world can begin. Yet 'soil' also implies 'ground', 'origin' and 'mother earth', and thus the statement also suggests a relation between the rich history of language and the process of writing about the environment. The complexities of beginning a new poem, and of testing and redefining the limits of language and its clash or play of words are what Crispin is to discover and undertake, and this is the poem's argument.

For as the poem discloses, the sea - the dissolving agent itself - is not free. In its motions are still the old god Triton's 'faint, memorial gesturings', and in its voice is heard 'a sunken voice, both of remembering and forgetfulness, in alternate strain'.²⁵ 'Strain' here carries the meaning not only of music, but also the discord of language in its gesturings towards the land it wishes to describe, as well as the burden of discordant desire to remember and to forget - to memorialize the new land in the words of the old, or to attempt to see and describe it in its virgin beauty: 'elemental potencies and pangs/And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen.' Neither Crispin nor his language is 'made desperately clear' by the sea voyage. So potent is this strain that it propels Crispin's contradictory swings between nostalgia and realism, his 'moody rucks', 'difficult and strange/In all desires, his destitution's mark'. More importantly, it is implicated in all of Crispin's efforts to see and describe afresh, giving them strange, unexpected effects.

Take for instance Crispin's approach to Carolina:

A river bore

²⁵. According to Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, pp.73-85, other voices also pursue Crispin on his voyage.

The vessel inward. Tilting up his nose,
 He inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells
 Of dampened lumber, emanations blown
 From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,
 Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks
 That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.

The poem here both remembers and forgets Whitman, but in so doing it also remembers other Romantic precursors. The vessel 'borne inward' may be travelling to the heart of the land, or it may be travelling to the inner resonances of Crispin's rattling shell of language and imagination. 'Round' in turn recalls Stevens's earlier books of life and love in 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle'. Together the words' resonances raise the question of what strain and whose aesthetic is helping Crispin to complete and perfect his search, and what Crispin is here seeing that he, or his precursors for that matter, has not seen before. The ambiguity continues to cast a shadow on both Crispin's and the narrator's confident claim that 'Here was prose/More exquisite than any tumbling verse:/A still new continent in which to dwell.' As in the poem's second nota, this assertion is suspect. 'Still' may be 'untouched', 'virginal'; or it may be 'silent', unresponsive to the poet's wooings. If the allure of the new land lies, it seems, in its unsung, and never-to-be-sung virginity, then any attempt to possess it in words is a violation. And if Keats has found this out before, it may be that the land is neither new, and Crispin is not the first discoverer and lover. Besides, for Crispin to pursue the land's newness at all, to be released from the stale intelligence of the past, is, in practice if not in principle, to divest himself of all poetic potency. The alternative, to follow the 'more bellicose' strain of remembrance by planning a colony composed of 'commingled souvenirs and prophecies', may be more indulgent, yet it is also 'counterfeit'. Crispin may have discovered something, but is it worth crossing

the sea to find?

How then to resolve the dilemma? It is in reply to the problem that Stevens becomes ambivalent and strained. Not exact and exacting realism, ‘veracious page on page, exact’, for this entails ‘grotesque apprenticeship to chance events’. Yet even this project only adds to Crispin’s list of bungled dreams. Not the narrator’s suggested ‘prickly realism’, either, for this sounds wistful and fantastic:

Perhaps if discontent
Had kept him still the prickling realist,
Choosing his element from droll confect
Of was and is and shall or ought to be,
Beyond Bordeaux, beyond Havana, far
Beyond carked Yucatan, he might have come
To colonize his polar planterdom
And jig his chits upon a cloudy knee.

One is tempted to add ‘beyond Carolina’. Least of all Crispin’s contented realism for it means the death of poetry: ‘The words of things entangle and confuse./The plum survives its poems.../Yet it survives in its own form,/Beyond these changes.’ The prospect of Crispin’s poetic death so appalls the narrator that he is driven to ask a series of questions. Yet these questions ask not how to dismiss or to be resigned to Crispin’s demise, but how to view the contradictions and failures of his search. The question is both a matter of perspective and mode of writing; and the answer, tersely given, is a significant alternative to the other versions of realism earlier envisaged: ‘The very man despising honest quilts/Lies quilted to his poll in his despite./For realist, what is is what should be.’

How does this new ‘realism’ translate into a new poetic? The poem gives a hint at the end of Part VI:

the quotidian

Like this, saps like the sun, true fortuneer.
 For all it takes it gives a humped return
 Exchequering from piebald fisci unkeyed.

Stevens keeps returning to the last line in his letters, pointing out that the ‘hissing and screeching’ sounds of the letter C is an instance of the poem’s design to play on the comic aspect of the sounds of the letter, in ‘all its shades’ (*L* 294). The result, however, is more uncertain. The sun, ‘true for-tuner’, here offers a return of the familiar Romantic marriage of soil and poet, of soil and language; yet its mode of return is both ‘humped’ and ‘unkeyed’, - mishapened, loosened, but also unidentifiable, and even lost (‘unkeyed’ here echoing to the Third’s girl plot to ‘undo’ the Giant).²⁶ One wishes that one could see the fruits of the marriage as the narrator tells, ‘four mirrors blue/That should be silver, four accustomed seeds/Hinting incredible hues, four selfsame lights/That spread chromatics in hilarious dark,/Four questioners and four sure answerers.’ There is to be no harmonious music, but only cacophony; no renewal, but only ‘the same insoluble lump’.

After this irresolution, how is one to take the narrator’s benign conclusion? There is perhaps in the unexpected ‘benignly’ a note of effort to see and commend the fate of Crispin’s late-found stoicism for its resilience and lack of self-pity. More important perhaps is the resilience, on the part of the narrator as Crispin’s amanuensis, to persist with the effort to find a mode of poetry that would satisfy Crispin’s aspirations. Yet the word is also hemmed in by the two commas, as if to underline the nervousness of the gesture, aware of the limits of the effort to ‘clip’ language. ‘Clip’ of course means ‘cut off’ so as to ‘renew,’ and the word applies neatly both to writing

²⁶. The same point is made by Cook, *op.cit.*, p.83.

and yeomanry. Yet, as Stevens knows and the poem shows, language cannot be 'clipped'. The admission is made as Stevens was writing the poem:

I find that this prolonged attention to a single subject has the same result that prolonged attention to a senora has according to the authorities. All manner of favors drop from it. Only it requires a skill in the varying of the serenade that occasionally makes one feel like a Guatemalan when one particularly wants to feel like an Italian. I expect that after a while Crispin ... will become rudimentary and abhorrent. (L 230)

Soon the discontent was to extend to other poems in *Harmonium*:

The reading of these outmoded and debilitated poems does make me wish rather desperately to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluent speech for myself. (L 231)

New Romanticism and a Skeptical Music

Ideas of Order appeared after a decade of silence for a variety of professional and personal reasons. Yet during the Twenties and Thirties, there were beyond domestic and business concerns other matters that Stevens could not have remained ignorant of and that might have even stimulated his thinking about poetry. A concern with the tension between the soil and the poet's intelligence certainly was not confined to Crispin; and throughout these two decades, it was at the centre of the intense and prolonged debate between the young radical writers and the traditionalists over the values of literary innovation and tradition, and the cultural and social role of

literature.²⁷ While both envisaged literature as a solution to the cultural desiccation and materialism in America, aggravated by technological dehumanization, they differed as to the nature of the cure to be prescribed. For the young radicals, what was needed was not only literary innovation that grew out of the sensibility and reality of the 'soil', but also a viable native literary tradition. For the traditionalists, what was necessary was the reinforcement of the values of the humanistic European 'roots': decorum, continuity, universality. For both, the Romantic ideals of freedom, of the poet's integration with his soil, and the sensibility of the individual, together with its excesses of subjectivism, became the battle-ground. The radicals, despite their denunciation of subjectivity and Romantic rhetoric, nonetheless heralded Whitman as model for native vitality and realism. The traditionalists, on the other hand, indicted him for anarchy, and found an unwilling champion for their 'new humanism' in the arch-anti Romantic Eliot and his vision of tradition, especially of European tradition, as 'the life of the significant soil'.²⁸

The Great Depression and the social unrest of the Thirties gave added political urgency to the debate. For Babbitt, the main advocate of the New Humanism, Mussolini became an example of 'the right man' who would stem the tide of crass industrialism and democratic individualism, and substitute 'the doctrine of the right

²⁷. The discussion of the conflict in this chapter is confined only to the situation in America. For general discussions of the American debate, see Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episode in American Literary Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) for a good account of the Radical scene. See also William Chace, *The Political Identities of Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973) for their involvement in the European political and ideological conflict.

²⁸. T.S. Eliot, 'Dry Salvages', V.

man for the doctrine of the rights of man.’²⁹ For the radicals, the call for ‘native’ and ‘new’ literature came to mean not only nativist vitality, realism and creative freedom, but an ideological commitment to an objective and impersonal analysis of the economic and political reality of the time, and to revolutionary changes in preparation for a Marxist utopia of freedom and equality. ‘To the Left: to the Subsoil’, rallied Carl van Doren; and Edmund Wilson pondered upon the possibility of a revolutionary role for pioneers:

It seems such a long time today since anybody has written anything stirring about the embattled farmers and the shot heard round the world.³⁰

Ideas of Order appeared against this background of ‘the poets’ politics’ (*OP* 89). As the title suggests, the volume concerns a plurality of orderings, and its miscellaneous and ambivalent attitudes are a good measure of Stevens’s uncertainty about the directions of his poetry. ‘It is the word *pejorative* that hurts’, complains Stevens in ‘Sailing after Lunch’ - the first poem of the volume as it first appeared - and continues, ‘I am in any case,/A most inappropriate man/In a most unpropitious place’ (*CP* 120). The comic, mock-Poundian tone here may have disguised Stevens’s anxiety, just as the poem’s mock-Romantic imagery may have been provocative; for the poem concludes by hinting at the crucial direction in Stevens’s evolving poetic was

²⁹. Irwin Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, quoted in John Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.209. Diggins also shows that many American businessmen and intellectuals saw Mussolini as an American hero, embodying the Puritan virtues of practical idealism.

³⁰. Carl Van Doren, ‘To the Left: To the Subsoil’, *Partisan Review*, III (February 1936, number 1), p.9; and Edmund Wilson, ‘Art, the Proletariat and Marx’, *New Republic* LXXVI (23 August, 1933), pp.41-45.

then taking: the 'slight transcendence' of the 'new romantic'.

Stevens first used the term in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer (March 12, 1935), in which he comments on 'Sailing after Lunch' as 'an abridgment of at least a temporary theory of poetry', without which 'one gets no where' (*L* 277).³¹ What Stevens is trying to get away from is first the 'pejorative' sense of the Romantic defined by Babbitt as 'the strange, unexpected, intense, superlative, extreme, unique, etc.' and which Stevens dismisses as obsolete like 'garden furniture or colonial lingerie' (*OP* 221). He is also attempting to get away from the covert Romanticism which connotes the social realism of the left-wing critics and writers. The strain of the effort to define his stance is apparent in the two essays on William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore in which he probes the sense of the Romantic.

Central to these essays are two related issues of how the poet imaginatively perceives and describes reality to achieve the 'slight transcendence' proposed in 'Sailing after Lunch'. In the essay on Williams, Stevens draws attention to the co-presence of two contradictory elements in Williams's poems: the sentimental and the anti-poetic. Of the two, it seems that it is the latter that troubles Stevens most, for he takes pains to preclude from it the connotations that are associated with the demands of social realism:

His passion for the anti-poetic is a blood passion and not a passion for the inkpot. The anti-poetic is his spirit's cure. He needs it as a naked

³¹. For some discussions of Stevens's concept of new romanticism see Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp.155-194; A. Walton Litz, 'Wallace Stevens' Defence of Poetry', *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), edited by George Bornstein, pp.111-132. See also James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, for a discussion of Stevens's relationship with the contemporary political scene.

man needs shelter or as an animal needs salt. To a man with a sentimental side the anti-poetic is that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing.

The anti-poetic has many aspects. The aspect to which a poet is addicted is a test of his validity. Its merely rhetorical aspect is valueless. As an affectation it is a commonplace. As a scourge it has a little more meaning. But as a phase of a man's spirit, as a source of man's salvation, now in the midst of a baffled generation,... the anti-poetic acquires an extraordinary potency... (*OP* 213-214)

It is this 'passion' that gives a peculiar force to the conjunction of the unreal and the unreal, the anti-poetic and the sentimental from which results 'the essential poetry' (*OP* 214), and which makes Williams

a romantic poet now-a-days.... one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life would be intolerable except for the fact one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider's Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet cars; he is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper.

It is, however, the analogy that gives away Stevens's unease over the need to accommodate reality while at same time seeking to evade it, for he then compares Williams to 'that grand old plaster cast, Lessing's Laocoön: the realist struggling to escape from the serpents of the unreal,' and not to a 'Diogenes of contemporary poetry,... a much more vital matter' (*OP* 214²¹⁵). Consequently he feels more at ease with Marianne Moore, whom he praises for her 'inapposite language', a term which contrasts with Williams's own search for 'apposite' poetry.³² Although Moore too writes about the common-place, her 'subject ... is often incidental' (*OP* 218). Her 'romantic' pursuit of the 'contemporaneous', the 'living', becomes an expression of her 'uncommon intelligence', her 'violent feelings' necessary for the time of violent

³². Williams's use of the term will be discussed in Chapter III.

feelings (*OP* 220). This quality is achieved not only through the breaking up of the old forms, but also and more specifically by the process of ‘cross-fertilization’ between the language of the past and the present. In a deliberately provocative comparison, Stevens then cites Eliot, who ‘incessantly revives the past and creates the future’ (*OP* 221) as an instance of this process.

The poem that comes to mind as an illustration of Stevens’s new sense of the Romantic is ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’.³³ The poem records an effort to go beyond the genius of the sea, beyond the minds and voices that have haunted the place. Unlike the sea in ‘The Comedian’, the sea’s movements are no ‘memorial gesturings’, only ‘like a body wholly body, fluttering/Its empty sleeves’; its cry no ‘sunken voice’, but ‘inhuman, of the veritable ocean’. The emphasis on the separate distinctness of the sea and the singer of course raises the question of the identity of the singer and of the relationship between the song and the place. Although the poem concedes that a relationship may exist, ‘it may be that in all her phrases stirred/The grinding water and the ^{wind} grasping’, it also takes pain to deny the place as origin of the song’s power and mystery, just as it avoids accrediting the song and its singer with any visionary transcendence. The song’s mystery seems to derive from and reside in its own rhetorical eloquence and fictional nature:

But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

³³. The poem’s possible allusion to the Cuban crisis is made by Longenbach, *op.cit.*, p.156.

The metaphor of the theatre is appropriate, suggesting an imaginative space which is also an analogy of the real. Note how the poem now is able to stress the power of the singer's voice as a maker of artifice that enacts this mysterious transformation in which the desired conjunction of the imagined with the real takes place. Indeed, it is the power of the voice, this time the speaker's, that recreates the mystery of the transformation:

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

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
 The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
 Words of its fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
 And of ourselves and our origins,
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

The syntax becomes more involved as the speaker ponders upon the experience. Ramon Fernandez, we have been told, is one who has converted from 'new humanism' to the left. Note that the lights are 'glassy', both a reflection of the lights of the boats and an imaginative light of the rage of order that marks out the order and masters the night and the sea. Yet even here the poem is careful to stress both the power and limit of this 'blessed rage'. The lights and their demarcations are 'ghostlier' - paler as they recede into the dark of the night and into the mind of the speaker where they remain an 'idea of order' as he and his interlocutor leave the scene. Yet the sounds are also 'keener', more powerful just as they are vanishing from ordinary hearing, perhaps to linger in the memory, there to remain the power of the 'blessed rage' to evoke and

create new orders.

Whether one sees the deliberate ambiguity of the poem, together with its implications of solipsism and fictionality, as a measure of Stevens's uncertainty, or poised ambivalence, or attempted mediation between the real and the unreal, it is hardly surprising that *Ideas of Order* failed to win approval from Stevens's contemporaries. Stanley Burnshaw attacked the volume as 'the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in tiny doses.'³⁴ The year 1935 when *Ideas of Order* was published was the *annus mirabilis* for political gestures, with Pound's *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* urging 'the fascist axe for the clearing away of rubbish' on the one hand; and, on the other, the 'call for an American Writers' Congress' to 'take a stand for proletarian revolution'.³⁵ Stevens's initial reaction to the criticism was politely cool and dismissive: the review was 'a most interesting review, because it placed me in a new setting. I hope that I am headed left, but there are lefts and lefts, and certainly I am not headed left for the ghastly left of MASSES' (L 286). He nevertheless also admitted that 'they have the most magnificent cause in the world'. Indeed, the review proved to be ^{So} 'extraordinarily stimulating' that Stevens was soon to reply with *Owl's Clover*.

Stevens's own concern, also seen in his admiration of Marianne Moore's pursuit of the new romantic, is 'to make poetry out of commonplaces: the day's news' (L 311n). This project concerns an effort of style as much as of point of view. The

³⁴. Stanley Burnshaw's review was published in *The New Masses* XVII (October 1, 1935), pp.41-42.

³⁵. Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, p.113; and quoted in Aaron, *op.cit.*, p.282.

volume mixes traditional blank verse and ‘a good many stock figures,... now called *Victorian ideology*’ (L 289), with contemporary imagery, as Stevens responds to Marxist ideals of revolution and proletarian utopia and evolves his own vision of the future. In ‘Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue’, while Stevens might sympathize with the Marxist’s call for change and freedom, he could not concede to the finality of the revolution. For, if the millennium is to be achieved through change and destruction, there is no reason why change and destruction should cease once the millennium arrives, and even the Marxist monument to revolution may itself become ‘a trash can at the end of the world’. A new order that evolves randomly in tune with change may yet enjoy greater peace and vital^{-ity} and even enduring achievements, as Stevens now envisions one such that is intimated in the dance of the earth. In contrast to the broken marbles, the dancers proclaim the vision of the ‘drastic community’ to come:

In the glassy sound of your voices, the porcelain cries
 The alto clank of the long recitation, in these
 Speak, and in these repeat: *To Be itself*,
 Until the sharply-colored glass transforms
 Itself into the speech of the spirit, until
 The porcelain bell-borrowings become
 Implicit clarities in the way you cry
 And are your feelings changed to sound, without
 A change, until the waterish ditherings turn
 To the tense, the maudlin, true meridian
 That is yourselves, when, at last, you are yourselves,
 Speaking and strutting broadly, fair and bloomed,
 No longer of air but of the breathing earth.

What follows in *Owl's Clover* may be seen as an attempt to evolve a form and a speech for this spirit. Certainly not the European gods transplanted to Africa, for that can only underline the bankruptcy of old forms, ‘the concentric bosh’. In their place, Stevens envisions ‘Fatal Ananke ... the common god’, who transcends all differences,

yet who also is attentive to the inner needs of the individual: 'He sees but not by sight./He does not hear by sound. His spirit knows/Each look and each necessitous cry' (*L* 59). This is the creative spirit, in whose mind the confused lives of the disinherited are ennobled and appeased, and who alone 'caused the statue to be made/And he shall fix the place where it will stand.' He is the opposite of the Bulgar, the Proletarian leader of 'The Duck for Dinner', who, in pursuit of a common destiny for humanity, ordains a reductive, mechanized life for all men that denies all possibilities of difference or change. To make all thoughts of the future possible, he must be subverted by another orator, whom Stevens characterizes as

Some pebble-chewer practiced in Tyrian speech,
An apparition, twanging instruments
Within us hitherto unknown.

In 'Sombre Figuration', this apparition becomes the 'subman', the modern hero who is the exponent of the imagination in its 'sub-conscious' (*L* 373-4) aspect, and who is the origin of all activities of the mind. It is the subman who experiences the pressures of the contemporaneous in Section III. In the densely symbolic rhetoric of the section, Stevens considers three possible ways by which the darkness and paralysis of fear and despair may be dispelled: revolution, resignation, or salvation through an obsolete belief. The first entails destruction, the second acquiescence, the third a negation of change. All three deepen, rather than resolve, the despair of chaos. Stevens suggests that only through the subman whose mind feels the pains of evil can a future be evolved. 'The imagination ... is the irrepressible revolutionist' (*NA* 152), he later says; and this is what he proposes:

A passion merely to be

For the gaudium of being, Jocundus instead
 Of the black-blooded scholar, the man of the cloud, to be
 The medium man among other medium men.

Here then are disseminated the ideas which Stevens is to enunciate in 'The Irrational Element in Poetry', his first poetic manifesto. They are to be 'revolved' over and over both in principle and form in the essays and poems of the war years, including in 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction', his most assertive defence of the irrational, written soon after Pearl Harbour. To his contemporaries, however, *Owl's Clover* must have appeared ideologically confused and its rhetoric unacceptable. One reviewer remarks:

His problem has been a curious one: moved to formal discourse in the quest for order and certitude, his art has not up to the present permitted him to pursue such discourse or his temperament to accept it.³⁶

For if the poems are seeking the poetry of today's news, and decidedly not the news itself, is their rhetoric that of the 'heart's desire' that must seek its satisfaction from within the depths of the mind, and still speak as 'a mode of common dream'? Stevens himself is aware of the discrepancy between the principles the poems are enunciating and the language in which they are expressed. The 'struggle with clichés, both of word and thought' which he has deliberately adopted as an approach to the new romantic is to trouble him throughout the writing of the poems.³⁷ As the engagement with the contemporaneous continues, so does the search for the realization of the medium man to go beyond the poets' politics. Three years later, after sailing through

³⁶. Ben Belitt, Review of *Ideas of Order and Owl's Clover*, quoted in *L* 314n.

³⁷. A letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, dated March 23, 1936, cited in Bates, *op. cit.*, p.188.

the troubled waters of politics, he was confident enough to announce his future direction:

What counts, I suppose, is one's relation to contemporary ideas.... I am, in the long run, interested in pure poetry. No doubt from the Marxian point of view this sort of thing is incredible, but pure poetry is rather older and tougher than Marx and will remain so. My own way out toward the future involves a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet.... in restoring to the imagination what it is losing at such a catastrophic pace, and in supporting what is gained. (*L* 340)

The Central Man, the Man of Glass

The term 'pure poetry' has often been used interchangeably with the 'new romantic' in discussion of Stevens's poetry of the Thirties, although closer inspection shows that it is less fruitful. It is regarded as Stevens's early aesthetic inheritance from Mallarmé and Valéry, later to be discarded in favour of the more robust poetry of the contemporaneous,³⁸ dismissed as an idealist aesthetic out of balance with the time,³⁹ or accepted only when identified as a prelude to the new romanticism in the model of Croce.⁴⁰ Yet these views ignore the polemical significance of the term when it appears in 'The Irrational Element in Poetry'.⁴¹ There Stevens suggests that 'pure poetry' - 'poetry in which not the true subject but the poetry of the subject is

³⁸. Milton Bates takes this view, see Chapter 4, *op.cit.*, pp.127-154.

³⁹. See Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, p.142.

⁴⁰. A. Walton Litz, 'Wallace Stevens' Defense of Poetry: *La Poésie Pure*, the New Romanticism and the Pressure of Reality', in George Bornstein (ed.), *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition*, pp.111-132.

⁴¹. According to Daniel Aaron, *op.cit.*, pp.163, 289, pure poetry was denounced as 'bourgeois' literature in the political Thirties.

paramount' (*OP* 227) - may be the way to achieve the qualities of gaiety and youth crucial to 'the poetry of the contemporaneous' by which to resist the pressure of reality. To understand the significance of the term and its pivotal place in Stevens's search for a poetic of the future, a critical reassessment is necessary.

Stevens's attention to the potential of pure poetry for the realization of the poetry of the contemporaneous might have been kindled by Latimer's inquiry about his interest in Valéry while he was engaged in the writing of *Owl's Clover*. He himself acknowledged that

If there is any relation in my things to Valéry's, it must come about in some such way as this:

It is difficult for me to think and not to think abstractly. Consequently, in order to avoid abstractness in writing, I search out instinctively for things that express the abstract and yet are not in themselves abstractions. (*L* 290)

Stevens seems to be suggesting here that he finds in Valéry a model for a poetry that reflects the mind in the act of thinking and yet is free from the barrenness of the abstract style, a rather surprising suggestion if one thinks of Valéry's own penchant for rarefied abstraction. Yet Stevens knows too well the importance of the effort and limit of thinking, the shocks and surprises of the mind as a source of enriching life with its desires and fears, and the barrenness of the solitude of thought when it strays too far from the concrete particulars of experience. His careful emphasis on the fortuitous and on the irrational element as the unpredictable aspect of the process of the rational mind in its interaction with reality may be seen as a safeguard against the mind's own tendency towards abstraction. 'The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself' (*OP* 199): so goes one of Stevens's observations. At the time when Stevens wrote to Latimer, and indeed well beyond it, never was the mind's

violence more necessary as a means of self-preservation against the violence of the pressure of reality. In brief, what Stevens seems to be implying here is an interest in Valéry and in pure poetry as a model for what modern poetry must be and do: 'the poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice' (*CP* 239). An examination of Valéry's notion of pure poetry may then help to trace Stevens's attempt to find his 'way out' of the Thirties towards a spiritual role of poetry.

For Valéry, pure poetry means an attempt to create and enhance, through the pursuit of poetic self-consciousness, the freedom and creative powers of the mind. These are achieved when the mind is in what he calls an emotive state: a state of heightened consciousness in which it forms an imaginative order of cohesive and fluid interrelationships, co-extensive with but independent of those of everyday life. Valéry is fond of comparing this creative act to hunting: an act that requires both the agility of thought as well as attentive watchfulness and directive concentration, both physical and mental, in which the mind, spider-like, weaves its webs of words and thoughts while alert to their surprising resonances.

It is Valéry's concern with the creative powers of the mind that leads him to his preoccupation with what he calls the impurities of language and their effects on the creative processes. In his meditations on the problems imposed by language, he often returns to the arbitrary relationship between, on the one hand, the *sons* of language - its sensuous qualities of sound and rhythm, including the tone and accent of the voice; and, on the other, the *sens* - ideas, images and other semantic and mental factors. In ordinary and other utilitarian forms of discourse, 'meaning' is achieved by the speed of communication which annuls the sensuous qualities of language in the act of comprehension. In time, these arbitrary meanings fossilize into clichés which come

to circumscribe the mind's perception of the world.

Yet if Valéry thinks that language hinders the mind's capacity for perception, he also knows that language is the mind's only means of bestowing form and value on the inchoate flux of experience, and more importantly, the only means of defining value. He calls it a 'saint', the only power to illuminate the dark labyrinth of thought:

Honneur des hommes, Saint LANGUAGE,
Discours prophétique et paré,
Belles chaînes en qui s'engage
Le dieu dans la chair égaré,
Illumination, largesse!⁴²

The metaphor of language as salvation and restraint aptly anticipates Stevens's 'Natives of poverty, children of malheur,/The gaiety of language is our seigneur' (*CP* 322). For Valéry, if language constitutes the mind's limits, the thing to do is to resist and overcome the mind's habitual exchange of words into ideas by a rigorous examination of the 'utilitarian' meanings of words. Although the process admits of obscurity, Valéry insists on its aesthetic function as a step towards mobilizing the resources of language and thought. He often describes this strategy as keeping in play the swing of the pendulum between the *sons*, or what he comes to call the voice in action, and the *sens* of language. In other words, the aim is towards poetic discourse as a supremely self-conscious act of utterance in which the exploration and realization of the expressive potentiality of the voice is as important as the multiplicity of meaning. Indeed Valéry takes pains to emphasize the active role of the voice as an important aspect of his poetic that distinguishes it from that of the other pursuer of pure poetry, Mallarmé, his own poetic master:

mon 'rêve du poète' eut été de composer un discours, - une parole de

⁴². 'Le Pythie', *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, ed. Jean Hytier (Gallimard), p. 136.

modulations et de relations internes - dans laquelle le physique, le psychique et leurs conventions du langage pussent combiner leurs ressources. Avec telles divisions et changements de ton bien définis.

Mais, au fait, qui parle dans un poème? Mallarmé voulait que ce fût le langage lui-même.

Pour moi - ce serait - l'Être vivant et pensant ... et poussant la conscience de soi à la capture de sa sensibilité ... sur la corde de voix. En somme, le langage issu de la voix, plutôt que la voix du langage.⁴³

Seen in this light, pure poetry is less an aim than a method, an exercise in exploring and enhancing the creative potential of the mind and language by keeping in play the action of the voice.

Here, in Valéry's concern with the self-conscious exercise of the voice and mind in action we may locate his interest in the figure of Narcissus. For him, the self-absorption of Narcissus, together with the clarity of the mirror image of the self, becomes an apt figure of the supremely conscious and active play of the mind. The image in the mirror is also the mind looking at its 'figure' of thought, the means by which it comes to know itself. The image in the mirror is of course limited and defective; the mirror can only show one facet of the mind in reverse and no more. Yet Valéry conceives of this distortion as a resistance to the mind's habit of abstraction, as a way of teasing the mind into an act of self-exploration. He compares this act to the strange urge to talk to oneself, to hear oneself think and speak, an act that is akin to poetry as an interplay between the voice and words. For him, it is as if the mind needs to divide itself, to complicate itself, to question itself in order to achieve greater agility and clarity:

Qui est là?

⁴³. Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, I, 293, edited by Judith Robinson.

Moi.
 Qui, Moi?
 Toi.
 Et c'est le reveil - le Toi et le Moi.⁴⁴

It is Valéry's interest in pure poetry as a conscious exercise of the creative mind, and in the interplay of the voice with language as a way of renewing the creative resources of language and the mind that may appeal to Stevens. His assertion of the creative process in 'The Irrational Element in Poetry' as a process that involves the fortuitous elements of the rational mind bears resemblance to Valéry's idea of the creative act as a hunt. Like Valéry, Stevens observes that the mind has a tendency to engage in its own strange monologue: 'When the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice, the voice is always that of someone else' (*OP* 194). This disembodied voice signals an elusive authorial presence, shaping, changing, renewing and intensifying formal orders of words and thoughts with the modulation of its accent, rhythm and tone. By focussing on the variety of the voice, Stevens is drawing attention, as he has earlier in 'Idea of Order at Key West', to the act of utterance as a creative act: 'Thou art not August unless I make thee so' (*CP* 251). This speech constitutes a poetic language that describes the mind in the act of describing and renewing itself. While this results in poetry that resists the intelligence almost successfully, Stevens, like Valéry insists on resistance as an index of value, a measure of the mind's effort to create a language that would allow the mind full freedom to describe itself in its own terms, an exercise that, according to 'The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet', is crucial to the attainment of poetic nobility and power and to the transformation of the real into the unreal. As Stevens himself puts it, 'A poem

⁴⁴. Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres* II, 880.

should stimulate some sense of living and being alive' (*OP* 201). Indeed Valéry's concern with the play and potential of the creative act and his image of the mind in the mirror find their way into many of Stevens's poems that are written after *Owl's Clover* and now collected in *Parts of a World* in which Stevens explores and asserts the value of the poetry as the creative act.

The poem in which Valéry's influence as a model for Stevens's exploration of the creative act, and the one which may be said to be pivotal to Stevens's search for a poetry for the future is 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'. The apparition twanging its instrument in 'Sombre Figuration' has now fully emerged in the figure of the guitarist, manifesting his creative will and intensity in the very posture of his creative act: 'The man bent over his guitar'. Although in the poem Stevens turns his glance from the social vista of *Owl's Clover* to the solitary poet, the pressures of reality are internalized in the strange dialogue which he is now having with unidentified interlocutors on the tension between the contradictory call for the tune of 'things as they are.../A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,' and his own desire to transform reality. The poem bursts into life suddenly in Canto II with the direct speech, with the poet defining the thoughts to be revolved: the problem of the creation of an ideal order and an ideal self through whom the poet can be reconciled to his world. The play on 'man' throughout the canto suggests the problematic choice that the guitarist has to face. The indefinite article in 'a man' can be either a generic signifier, denoting an individual who is also a representative, or simply an individualized entity; and both possibilities seem to be playing against each other. Even though the guitarist seems to be implying his preference for a limited serenade of a self over a lofty ideal and for an uncertain audience ('almost to man'), the ambiguity of language seems to warn that the matter

may not be as straightforward.

It is this question that the guitarist hears in the 'tick-tock' of the guitar. If to 'tick-tock' is to tune the buzzing of language so as to realize the buzzing of thought, it is also to hear the discrepancy between the 'murderous alphabet' (*CP* 179) and the other dead and deadly voices that give language its 'acid colors'. The discord is heard most keenly in the tension between the jangling rhythm of the pentameter and the relentless wilful repetition of the infinitive phrase. That Stevens is aware of the deception of language is made clear as he tries out and exposes the facile accords that are claimed of poetry - from realism, the apotheosis of the self and art - from Cantos IV to X. 'It is the chord that falsifies', the guitarist observes of one of his own self-mocking transformations of the metropolis in Canto XI. Yet note that he also says, quite unexpectedly, 'The discord merely magnifies', as if in the process of probing language some surprising possibilities have been discovered as the canto goes on to say: 'Deeper within the belly's dark/Of time, time grows upon the rock'. 'Discord' is after all an amplification of 'chord', just as 'tick-tock' is also the vital rhythm of life, the beats of the heart and of thought. The image of growth emerging out of darkness here recalls Valéry's suggestion that Saint Language may shine out of the dark labyrinth of uncertainties and the mind may find its strength of clarity and agility from within its self-division. To accept time as a regenerative factor is of course to accept 'the exquisite errors of time' (*CP* 254) as necessary elements of the creative act: the unpredictable modulations of voice, the discord of words, the incompleteness and repetitions of the act of seeking an accord of the mind and world and language. The exuberant self-assertion in the next canto subsides with the music into an unexpected and uneasy recognition:

Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar
And I are one. The orchestra

Fills the high hall with shuffling men
High as the hall. The whirling noise

Of a multitude dwindles, all said,
To his breath that lies awake at night.

I know that timid breathing. Where
Do I begin and end? And where

As I strum the thing, do I pick up
That which must momentarily declares

Itself to be I and yet
Must be. It could be nothing else.

Like other claims arrived at earlier, this one is put to test, and the guitarist turns to his earlier assertion to 'sing serenade almost to man' that will also 'miss things as they are'. Stevens himself says that Canto XIII 'deals with the intensity of the imagination unmodified by contacts with reality,' and adds 'if such a thing is possible' (*L* 785). The scepticism shows in the 'corrupting pallors' induced by the lack of contact. 'Unspotted' is a pun on 'immaculate', the pure power of the Divine Light/Logos that breathes life into words, turning them into things and dispelling darkness. Yet this mystical power is not intended, for Stevens has in mind a more human form of madness, 'imbecile revery'. This is the power that intensifies words into 'the Amorist Adjective aflame'. Even this does not last, and the adjective's incandescence is rewritten into a solitary candle that lights the world. As in 'The Idea of Order', the light of this small candle is measured against the dark. Yet here the guitarist goes further than the previous speaker's contentment with the 'blessed rage for order' that masters the sea and deepens the night; for this time it is the ghostlier demarcation, 'the chiaroscuro' where the guitarist sits and plays that is subject to

scrutiny:

Is this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard
Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves,

Now, an image of our society?
Do I sit, deformed, a naked egg,

Catching at Good-bye, harvest moon,
Without seeing the harvest or the moon?

Things as they are have been destroyed.
Have I? Am I a man that is dead

At the table on which the food is cold?
Is my thought a memory, not alive?

Is the spot on the floor, there, wine or blood
And whichever it may be, is it mine?

The canto is itself a double interpretation of Picasso's '*somme de destructions*', cited by Christian Zervos, who sees the painting as Picasso's response to social reality by delving into the unconscious. Stevens's translation adds a sense of treasure saved, adding even more to the paradoxical power of words to murder and create that the guitarist explores in the 'tick-tock' canto. In this canto, the paradox is heightened further by the addition of memories that speak of loss just as they seek to resurrect. To catch at the moon is pure fancy, just like trying to stay the fleeting moment of farewell. 'Spot' here echoes to the 'unspotted' pure imagination of the earlier canto; yet even the guitarist's effort to resurrect the most potent memory of the transubstantiation and the crucifixion fails to bring it to life. The painting remains a 'spot', resistant to the interpretative play of memory and words by which the mind seeks to appropriate ^{it} into an expression of the self.

Yet it seems that it is just this resistance that the guitarist, after the bitter self-

deprecation in Canto XVI, comes to accept as prior condition to creation itself. Eleanor Cook has argued that Stevens's emphasis on the creative power as 'the animal' in Canto XVII is his covert disagreement with Brémond's mystical theory of pure poetry, and dismissal of the debate.⁴⁵ Yet there is another animal in the pure poetry debate: Valéry's spider that watches and preys on unexpected surprises of language and the mind. Stevens's animal is even more eager because hungrier: 'its fangs articulate its desert days'. And what it is hungry for is 'a dream in which it can believe' of a shadowy form for an earthly self to be played, not on a hierophantic purple guitar, but a 'poor pale, poor pale' one:

A substitute for all the gods:
 This self, not that gold self aloft,

 Alone, one's shadow magnified,
 Lord of the body, looking down,

 As now and called most high,
 The shadow of Chocorua

 In an immenser heaven, aloft,
 Alone, lord of the land and lord

 Of the men that live in the land, high lord .
 One's self and the mountains of one's land,

 Without shadows, without magnificence,
 The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.

This is no Eden, nor the Uncle's fallen garden of fallen pleasures and memories, nor Crispin's Yucatan or plantation, but the self and its magnified shadow, 'alone'.

It is this hunger for the earthly and the impure that the guitarist now turns to meditate on in 'a few final solutions, like a duet/With the undertaker'. Note that the

⁴⁵. See Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, pp.146-147.

undertaker does not speak, although he returns dead voices to the soil, perhaps for regeneration; and a 'refrain' is both a repetition of and an abstention from speaking. Yet this strange speech may be what Stevens, following Valéry, has in mind when he proposes, somewhat enigmatically, that poetry is 'an absence in reality' forever suspended between issue and return, or between the multiplicity of and fluidity of thought and voice. At any rate, it is the hunger for this 'absence' that drives the guitarist's scholar, hawk-like, to find nourishment in the mud:

A poem like a missal found
In the mud, a missal for that young man,

That scholar hungriest for that book,
The very book, or less, a page

Or, at least, a phrase, that phrase,
A hawk of life, that latined phrase:

To know; a missal for brooding sight.

'A missal' may also be more deadly - 'a missile'; yet that would make it an appropriate matter to satisfy and challenge the hawk-like poet. Stevens himself says that 'a hawk of life' is 'one of those phrases that grips in its talons some aspect of life that it took a hawk's eye to see' (*L* 148-149). It is this strange hunting game where to be prepared for the unexpected and the hazardous is the rule that takes the guitarist's scholar beyond Crispin:

In the Cathedral, I sat there, and read,
Alone, a lean Review and said,

'These degustations in the vaults
Oppose the past and the festival,

What is beyond the cathedral, outside,
Balances with nuptial song.

So it is to sit and to balance things
To and to and to the point of still,

To say of one's mask it is like,
To say of another it is like,

To know that the balance does not quite rest,
That the mask is strange, however like.'

The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false.
The bells are the bellowing of bulls.

Yet Franciscan don was never more
Himself than in this fertile glass.

What does the don see in the glass that hints at the form of the much needed self and the tune to be played? The first step is hinted at in Canto XXVII that 'I am a native in this world/And think in it as a native thinks.' 'This', though a demonstrative, is yet non-specific in its referent, as if the guitarist is thereby acknowledging the limits of the mind and language to describe the world of Oxidia, while at the same time asserting their power to create an autonomous world in which 'Oxidia is Olympia'. This power is that of the 'jocular procreations' that come out of the dark and surprise the guitarist in Canto XXXII and lead to the prophetic vision in the concluding canto:

That generation's dream, aviled
In the mud, in Monday's dirty light,

That's it, the only dream they knew,
Time in its final block, not time

To come, a wrangling of two dreams.
Here is the bread of time to come,

Here is its actual stone. The bread
Will be our bread, the stone will be

Our bed and we shall sleep by night.

We shall forget by day, except

The moments when we choose to play
The imagined pine, the imagined jay.

Here the guitarist rejects the facile tunes of the Thirties in which dreams of time in its final block are conjured up. His own tune is harder, for not only will it play the 'actual stone' that will also be 'our bed', but because it will also resist the sleeping and forgetting of the quotidian life by inducing the state of wakefulness and remembrance when we 'choose to play/The imagined pine, the imagined jay'. Both 'choose' and 'play' here are the key words, underlining the effort of wilful creation. The mind may have to submit to things as they are, yet it can also choose to resist the deadly weight of the world by coming alive in its fictions of the jay and the pine. During this tune the player is also the listener as he listens to and is surprised by the sudden configurations of sounds and images that his strumming makes. This is 'the poem of the act of the mind' that Stevens will come to propose that the modern poet must play in 'Of Modern Poetry': a tune that will adapt itself to the demands of the contemporaneous, and of the player himself as the 'insatiable actor'. In this music the player is to find 'an invisible audience' who will be listening 'not to the play, but to itself, expressed/In an emotion as of two people, as of two/Emotions becoming one'. The 'way out' beyond the divisiveness of the dogmatic Thirties is towards a poetry of the future in which not only the poet but also his audience may find satisfaction in an intimate yet shared creative act of finding 'what will suffice'. The spiritual and cultural role of the poet is to become the main preoccupation of Stevens's later poetry and meditations on 'the supreme fiction'; and the direction he is now seeking is towards 'the commonal' and 'the central'.

Chapter III: The Plain Sense of Things

In 'Imagination as Value', one of Stevens's late and important essays, he asks if poetry might not be a 'science of illusions' (NA 139) that might provide a clue to reality and a basis of civilization. Underlying this speculation is one issue with which Stevens became increasingly concerned: to redefine the function and nature of poetry and the poet in matters of cultural responsibility and imaginative values.¹ Stevens's suggestion is surprising and provocative, not least because it contradicts the view of science as an objective description of reality prevalent among his contemporaries. Given the unexpectedness of Stevens's speculation, and the scarcity of references to science elsewhere in Stevens's essays, his interest in science invites further examination. Indeed, for Stevens and his contemporaries, their use of scientific rhetoric and ideas is a measure of the urgency and complexity of their defence of poetry against the pressures of reality that include the increasing challenges and authority of the development of modern science. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the nature and extent of Stevens's use of contemporary scientific ideas in his efforts to define his sense of the cultural role of poetry.

Stevens's first extensive use of science is signalled in 'The Irrational Element in Poetry'. The essay is also his attempt to assert pure poetry as an alternative to political and moral dogmatism of the Thirties. What is interesting about the essay is Stevens's own ambivalence ^{-wards} to the scientific rhetoric - in this case that of psychology -

¹. A study of Stevens's use of science for his defence of poetry is given in Lisa Steinman's *Made in America: Science, Technology and American Modernist Poets*, a summary of which is given in Chapter I. As I hope to show, although I agree with Steinman's argument that Stevens is concerned with the cultural role of poetry, it is more to do with enriching reality than providing an accurate description of the real.

with which he seeks to define and justify pure poetry as the 'poetry of the contemporaneous'. While Freud is duly acknowledged as 'giving the irrational a legitimacy that it never had before', he is also dismissed for being 'responsible for very little in poetry' (*OP* 225).. The essay takes pain to recast the aestheticism of the Symbolist inheritance in scientific terms as if to claim its contemporaneity and relevance. At the same time, it is careful to distinguish its own sense of the irrational from the Freudian psychology of the subconscious. By the term 'irrational' Stevens means the creative process as 'a particular process in the rational mind which we recognize as irrational in the sense that it takes place unaccountably' (*OP* 225), a process which manifests both the individuality and freedom of the poet as he takes delight in gratuitous particulars of experience. As Stevens goes on to claim, the process underpins the function of poetry to provide resistance to the destructive pressure of reality by converting it into 'an exquisite plane'. Nevertheless, despite the essay's careful and provocative assertion of the role of the irrational, its conclusion is a curious *volte face*, for Stevens expresses dissatisfaction with the *terms* of the defence of poetry he has so painstakingly defined:

Clearly, I use the word irrational more or less indifferently, as between its several senses. It will be time enough to adopt a more systematic usage, when the critique of the irrational comes to be written, by whomever it may be that this potent subject ultimately engages. We must expect in the future incessant activity by the irrational and in the field of the irrational. The advances thus to be made would be all the greater if the character of the poet was not so casual and intermittent a character. (*OP* 232)

Stevens's ambiguous scientific rhetoric here is characteristic of his cautious attitude to science that is manifest in other essays. Clearly it seems that, while the use of science as a strategy to defend and define poetry is important and urgent, he is

reluctant to adhere to current notions of science, and above all to identify poetic activities and values with those of science. To understand the significance of Stevens's reticence, a brief examination of the relationship between modernist poetry and science may be necessary.

Science, Modernity and Modernism

The literature of the twentieth century bears witness to the writers' fascination with modern scientific notions and procedures and to their assimilation of scientific advances into their aesthetics.² This interest was due in part to the radical changes in scientific concepts of reality and in modes of investigation, heralded by modern physics. The discoveries of the dynamic interrelationship of space and time, matter and energy, in quantum physics and Einstein's theory of relativity, together with Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy, revolutionized and extended the ways in which reality was perceived. Instead of the old mechanistic view of reality as a set of distinct, static entities, separate from the observer, reality was now seen as a dynamic system of configurations and interrelationships of which the observer was intimately a part. Similarly, the emphasis in scientific modes of analysis changed from scrupulous observation and classification to experimentation, and the function of scientific theories itself changed from being explanations of general laws of causality to being, according to Bertrand Russell, a "working hypothesis", provisional, approximate and merely

². For a general discussion see Carol C. Donley, *Modern Literature and Physics: A Study of Interrelationships*, (Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1975). See also Lisa M. Steinman, *op.cit.*

useful'.³ In other words, they became abstract constructs, instruments by which to interpret and describe reality, themselves subject to revision by experimental evidence.

For modern writers, the scientific view of reality as a dynamic interplay of the subject and object must have appeared to affirm the veracity and sanction of the perceptions and values of the imagination. Einstein in particular was proclaimed a figure comparable to a poet. For William Carlos Williams, he was, along with the Curies and Whitehead, central to the efforts to redefine the Whitmanian cult of nativist vitalism. Equally important were the analogies between scientific experimentation and formal innovation by which artists sought to underwrite their avant-gardism. Edmund Wilson noted that Einstein was believed to 'have revealed to the imagination a new flexibility and freedom'.⁴ Even Wyndham Lewis, not always responsive to science, wrote that experimentation in art inspired by physics involved 'not only technical and novel combinations, but also the essentially new and particular mind that must underlie, and should even precede, the new and particular form, to make it viable.'⁵ As for Williams, Einstein's theory of relativity underpinned the objectivity of his search for 'a new measure ... commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living.'⁶ In short, Einstein made possible a new theory of art that could also claim to be 'real'.

³. Bertrand Russell, *Preface to Henri Poincaré, Science and Method* (tr. Francis Maitland, 1916), quoted in Ian Bell, *Critic as Scientist: The Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 24.

⁴. Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p.297.

⁵. *New York Times*, 27 April, 1921, p. 21, quoted in Donley, *op.cit.*, pp.65-66.

⁶. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays*, p.283; hereafter abbreviated as *SE* and citations will be included in the text.

Yet the poets' adoption of science was, as one critic puts it, 'a double-edged strategy'.⁷ Not only were they uneasy about the risk of being seen to be acquiescing in values to which they did not subscribe, but the rhetoric of their strategy often exposed the uncertainty they felt about the burden of gaining public recognition for their defence of the function and authority of poetry. Kenneth Burke, among others, wryly wrote that 'One cannot advocate art as a cure for toothache without disclosing the superiority of dentistry.'⁸ Behind Burke's comment was the awareness of the cultural prestige accorded to science and scientists, and in particular to technology. One newspaper report on Einstein's visit to America described him as clutching a 'shiny briar pipe' in one hand and a 'precious violin' in the other. The report continued:

He looked like an artist, a musician. He was. But underneath his shaggy locks was a scientific mind whose deductions had staggered the ablest intellects of Europe.

He was also hailed as 'an universal man, an international figure', whose 'brilliant and penetrating mind ... has so greatly enriched the philosophy of ultimate truth.'⁹ Implicit in the relief that Einstein's abilities belied his appearance was a certain contempt for 'poetic' subjectivity and eccentricity. Defending poetry was an anxious business, as Williams's resort to the authority of science makes plain: 'The variability of all the

⁷. See Steinman, *op.cit.*, pp.76, 56.

⁸. Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (1931), p.90, quoted in Steinman, *op.cit.*, p.49.

⁹. *New York Times*, April 27, 1921, p.21; quoted in Donley, *op.cit.*, pp.65-66.

values must be recognized in our verse, mathematics itself demands it of us.’¹⁰ Even more strenuous was Wilson’s effort to salvage aesthetic innovations from charges of obscurity and subjectivity. While seeking to defend stylistic experimentations by modern writers as ‘a literary shorthand ... evidently working, like modern scientific theory, towards a new conception of reality’, he admitted that they were ‘rather formidably complicated and sometimes rather mystical’. The strain was particularly apparent as he envisaged a reconciliation of science and art in which the present difficulties of art would be resolved and its ‘objectivity’ and ‘universality’ finally recognized:

... but this complexity may presently give rise to some new and radical simplifications, when the new ideas which really lie behind these more and more elaborate attempts to recombine and adapt the old have finally begun to be plain.... And who can say that, as science and art look more and more deeply into experience and achieve a wider range, and as they come to apply themselves more and more directly and expertly to the needs of human life, they may not arrive at a way of thinking, a technique of dealing with our perception, which will make art and science one?¹¹

It is in the context of these troubled efforts to reconcile science with literature that Stevens’s reticence must be viewed. Lisa Steinman has suggested that Stevens’s attitude is due, on the one hand, to his reaction to American view of science and technology, whether defined as an intellectual quest for knowledge or as a mode of utility, both antithetical to poetry; and on the other, to his own vacillations between the desire to escape quotidian ‘Chicagoan’ reality and the contrary desire to observe the particulars of the physical world and the fortuitous delights they occasion. While

¹⁰. 2 November, 1955 letter to Young, YALC; quoted in Steinman, *op.cit.*, p.75.

¹¹. Wilson, *op.cit.*, p.297.

Steinman is right in suggesting that Stevens's hesitant use of science was prompted by a need for an adequate defence of poetry in the American context, it might be argued that this defence was less to seek 'a description of poetry's connection with practical reality', or, for that matter, to claim that the poet's imaginative descriptions of the real are 'the most accurate picture of reality available'.¹² Rather it was to defend the imagination's function to enrich and ennoble reality; or in Stevens's own provocative words, to 'resist', 'evade' or 'escape' from the pressures of the real. Stevens himself approvingly cites Planck's view of science as 'the provisional and changing creation of the power of the imagination', the supreme fiction by which to fulfil the need for, according to Jean Paulhan, '*confiance au monde*' (OP 278). In other words, science was, for Stevens, a mode of free imaginative creativity, and not of practical utility or objectivity, which he admired in scientists such as Planck or Whitehead. To exercise and enhance this power, and above all to stimulate it in other people was central to Stevens's belief that the modern poet's most important function was to help the people live their lives. In brief, to examine Stevens's relation to science is then to trace his efforts to define and defend the cultural sanction of poetry in response to the pressures exerted by the modern technological society; to affirm, that is to say, that the poet's 'major abstraction is the communal' (CP 388).

Mauron and the Noble Rider's Violence

One figure that helps Stevens in his defence of poetry is André Mauron, whose *Aesthetics and Psychology* informs both 'The Irrational Element in Poetry' and 'The

¹². Steinman, *op.cit.*, pp.12, 162.

Noble Rider and the Sound of Words'.¹³ A chemist turned aesthete, Mauryon views the relation between art and science with cautious scepticism. On the one hand, he believes that both disciplines stress the importance of close and detailed observation of particulars of experience, and allow scope for imaginative intuitions. On the other, he emphasizes the difference between the scientist's impulse to reduce observations to universal principles and practical use, while the artist, whom he describes as an amateur, prefers to engage in the contemplation of the dynamics of the sensibility for its own sake. As Bobby Joe Leggett has suggested, Mauryon's scepticism and his theory of 'the psychology of pleasure' (*AP* 106), together with its emphasis on the individuality and irrationality of aesthetic response, might have appealed to Stevens's effort in 'The Irrational Element in Poetry' to distance himself from the call for political action and 'scientific' objectivity of the Thirties.¹⁴ Equally important is Mauryon's theory of the aesthetic attitude, considered as a mode of perception or 'extraction' of fresh and strange subtleties of experience, which Stevens acknowledges as showing how the poet's abstraction may 'help people to live their lives' (*NA* 30). While Leggett is right in drawing attention to the escapist implication of Stevens's adoption of Mauryon's aesthetic, his argument overlooks Stevens's insistence that the imagination's adherence to reality and, indeed, the pressure of reality are, paradoxically, just as crucial to the creation of poetry. As the tension between the real

¹³. André Mauryon, *Aesthetic and Psychology* (translated by Roger Fry and Katherine John, Hogarth Press, 1935); hereafter abbreviated as *AP* and citations will be included in the text.

¹⁴. Bobby Joe Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). I hope to show that Mauryon's theory of ambiguity is not only a means of defamiliarizing words to achieve strange aesthetic effects as Leggett argues (see pp.91-96 in particular), but also a means of using the 'familiar' in words to engage the reader's response.

and the imagined is central to Stevens's poetic, a closer look at Mauron's notion of ambiguity here may be helpful.

According to Mauron, one of the consequences of the aesthetic attitude is 'increased sensitiveness' (AP 40). He defines the term in a 'scientific sense' as 'the perception of differences', and describes its effect:

The artist's eye, by the more brilliant light of an attention concentrated on the present, sees more details, discerns finer shades. *Differences, and therefore originality, is accentuated.* The aesthetic universe thus becomes at once richer and stranger. (AP 40)

This is the effect of the contemplative attitude, the aim of which is to prolong the pleasure of the dynamism of the sensibility by suspending the mind's natural tendency towards understanding and utilitarian action. So precarious is this attitude that any impulse, even the sexual instinct, or daydreaming, can upset its concentration. Worse still are the conscious mental activities that involve the will, reason, or conviction that must be rigorously resisted. On this point Mauron is adamant:

Most of the movements of our mind, whether feelings or convictions, are like instinct, turned toward future action, and for that reason, as soon as they become at all evident they threaten the aesthetic attitude with the same dangers. That is why so many artists dislike making their work a profession of faith or an act of propaganda. That is why Théophile Gautier, Flaubert, Baudelaire protested so strongly against the intrusion of morality into art. Others to-day are protesting against the intrusion of politics,... here too we have an imperative... (AP 66)

On the contrary, the artist's most valuable and most important activity is to cultivate and create a state of mind conducive to the aesthetic attitude: a function which Mauron compares to a chemical act of extraction:

The same oddly fascinating glance which the creator makes us cast on his work, he must himself have cast, in the first place, on the world

around. If I may trust my own experience, there is no essential difference between the two attitudes. Obviously the artist's task is heavier: he has to discover the possible work of art in the real world, then to extract it, when he does not compose it entirely,... all the efforts of the artist's are directed to giving the spectator *his own vision*. (AP 39)

One inevitable consequence of Mauron's theory of aesthetic is the ambiguity of the work of art. Mauron himself welcomes ambiguity, for it helps prevent the impulse towards understanding and practical use: 'The "expressive" artist uses language without really aiming at being understood' (AP 59). This effect is sometimes achieved in works of art whose original meanings, like fossils, have become obscure and obsolete but are still admired for their technical virtuosity:

their exact sense has vanished ... yet their trace remains, like an imprint left in the rock long ago by a creature today unknowable. The slightest shade has been transmitted to us, but in the form of a graphic or sonorous inflection. We do indeed attempt to attribute to these curves certain meanings, suggested by our own inner echoes; but the diversity of our interpretations proves them so fanciful that it would be better, perhaps, to admit the brutal fact; the hieroglyphic has become in great part indecipherable.... Fortunately, it often remains beautiful, for if the evocation of *something else* is a part of beauty, and indeed often necessary to it, there is another beauty which evokes nothing, and is content merely to be. (AP 76)

The question arises, however, as to how the artist creates and presents the effect of ambiguity, and how he induces the reader to participate in his work. And here is the central paradox of Mauron's aesthetic. First, since the aesthetic attitude cannot be created or maintained in practical life organized by the intelligence, the artist is required to strip away the familiar ways in which reality is perceived and described:

The 'zero' from which the artist starts is not ... pure chance, but a certain pre-existent organization of the world which he will have to destroy in order to create new combinations. (AP 40)

This displacement has two important paradoxical consequences pertinent to the new aesthetic order to be created and presented. On the one hand, the natural order of things cannot be destroyed without protest; on the other, the artist cannot remain at 'zero' without reducing his audience to indifference. He must contrive to deal cunningly with old mental habits in pretending to copy nature, while superimposing the aesthetic effects that interest him. With a metaphor from chemistry, Mauron suggests that a new aesthetic order must be a 'combination' - a proportionate fusion - of chance and continuity, of familiarity and strangeness. Only such a formula can reaffirm the instinctive tendency towards identity intrinsic in the mind and satisfy the desire for difference that the aesthetic contemplative act provides and which is now to be satisfied by a surprise discovery of a hidden resemblance of order:

Aesthetic order is meant to be felt rather than analyzed; the existence of a combination produces a vague and delightful impression of continuity and order; we feel ourselves in a harmonious atmosphere.... aesthetic order, if it is to become a source of pleasure, must remain hidden in a sort of twilight where we may have the joy of discovering it. (*AP* 87)

Mauron's theory of defamiliarization, it may be argued, provides Stevens with a conceptual frame with which to defend how poetry can both 'evade' and yet 'adhere to' reality. His world of practical considerations and of the familiar, which the artist must suspend, becomes in 'The Noble Rider' internalized as 'the pressures of reality' which the poet, contrary to Freud's advice, must evade or resist with the 'violence' of his poetic abstraction. The same pressures also determine what form this abstraction should assume. In so far as reality is composed of preconceived mental forms, the familiar, the commonplaces must be recognized as a component of the artist's 'combination'. The modern poet cannot become too noble a rider. His problem is to

conceive 'diviner health/Disclosed in common forms' (*CP* 195). Thus the 'dear gorgeous nonsense' of Plato's charioteer must give way to the girl on the wooden horse. Yet, as in Maaron's 'combination' where the familiar and the unfamiliar co-exist in a metaphor, so Stevens claims that 'reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are' (*NA* 25). Indeed, it is this *pays de métaphore*, and here Stevens turns to modern physics for support, that science now begins to recognize as reality itself (*NA* 25).

The interrelated issues of the function of resemblance and the renewal of language become one of Stevens's concerns in the poems of the Forties. Many poems explore the possibilities afforded by the dialectic suggested in Maaron's aesthetic. 'A Study of Two Pears' is one example that illustrates this movement.¹⁵ The poem's title suggests that this is an exercise in closely observing and seeing a commonplace object in an imaginative way. The mocking Latin pedagogy of the opening lines proposes the first 'scene' of instruction to be an exercise in freeing the eye of old habits of seeing: 'the pears are not viols,/Nudes or bottles. They resemble nothing else' (*CP* 196). Freed of old resemblances, the eye proceeds to piece together the pears in a new way: 'They are yellow forms/Composed of curves/Bulging toward the base./They are touched red'. 'Composed' and 'touched' suggest that this act of close observation is already a transformative act by which the eye's clarified sensitivity begins to see a new visual order by 'modelling' it to a new effect, here described in vague geometrical terms of

¹⁵. Leggett reads the poem as an illustration of Maaron's principle of defamiliarization and sees the poem's concluding ambiguity as promising a disclosure of reality now seen 'in itself' as nonsense. Charles Altieri in 'Why Stevens Must Be Abstract, or What a Poet Can Learn from Painting', in Gelpi (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.97-99, sees the poem as an illustration of Stevens's theory of abstraction as a purposeful transformation of experience into value.

'forms', 'curves', and 'base'. Yet as Mauron argues, too defamiliarized a vision draws a protest; and Sections III and IV modify the new visual effect by resorting to a more familiar figuration: 'In the way they are modelled/There are bits of blue./A hard dry leaf hangs/From the stem.' As perception becomes more active and as the modification is felt to be successful, the poem quickly flaunts its own rhetorical virtuosity by introducing and elaborating upon more familiar metaphors: 'The yellow glistens./It glistens with various yellows,/Citrons, oranges and greens/Flowering over the skin.'

But note that the poem pauses over its rhetorical success as it comes to 'see' the pears' shadows. Stevens here adds an enigmatic remark that seems to call into question the process he has been illustrating. If 'the pears are not seen/As the observer wills,' two possible questions are implicitly raised: whether seeing can happen at the same time as willing or in accord with it, or whether seeing is at all separable from willing? At stake here is not only how one sees creatively, but also what one sees and how one sees? Focussing on the most insignificant detail of the pears' shadows, the poem shows them to be the strangest, eluding the mind's seeing and willing that can only see and describe them as 'blobs'. As 'blobs', the pears' shadows seem to rule out the possibility of transparent or immediate disclosure. Also as 'blobs', the language here serves as a reminder of the bondage of the mind's seeing and willing to the presence of clichés that inevitably reduces reality to *un pays de clichés*. Indeed, if metaphors always emerge from the familiar, is vital seeing at all possible? Whatever way one looks at the pears, the 'as' raises a difficult issue: the problematic relationship between seeing reality as it is and seeing it in a creative, vital way.

The problem may be put in a larger perspective as illustrating one concern central to modernism and one which the poets' use of science serves to highlight:

the tension between their efforts to defend the values of the poet's imaginative perception and his freedom of experimentation on the one hand, and, on the other, to claim veracity and modernity for the imagination. Indeed, the tension between seeing and willing is central to Imagism, perhaps the first modernist poetic that resorts to science for the defence of poetry. Drawing his analogy from psychology, Pound's definition of the Image as a presentation of the 'intellectual and emotional complex' by means of which the artist orders new wholes out of random experience already hints at the antagonism between the poet and the real.¹⁶ His directive that poetry must be 'a direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective' in particular equivocates between seeing as transparent 'objective' disclosure of object and presentation of the immediacy of the poetic sensibility. As Pound's own critical efforts amply show, the pressures to defend and define poetry also come from what is perceived to be the novelist's successful objective treatment of contemporary reality.¹⁷

The tension between the objective and the subjective that underpins Pound's use of science is discernible in 'In the Station of the Metro':

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet black bough.

Pound himself cites the poem to illustrate the accuracy and modernity of Imagism. In its brevity, the poem testifies to the intensity and instantaneity of the poet's perception,

¹⁶. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot, pp.3-4. Pound's use of scientific rhetoric and concepts is examined in detail in Ian F.A. Bell, *Critic as Scientist: The Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound*.

¹⁷. See Richard Sieburth, *Instigations: Ezra Pound and Rémy de Gourmont* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), Chapter 4, pp.94-128.

here in the midst of contemporaneity. The omission of the copula - a feature that anticipates the ideogrammic method's distrust of the subjective and the abstract implicit in the predicate - places an emphasis on the semicolon, making it, as it were, a 'verb' that effects a continuity between the object perceived and its interpretation. It also invests the semicolon with the power to subsume the object into its imagistic presentation. At the same time, however, the semicolon marks the arbitrariness of the poet's identification of the objective with the subjective. Their disparity is also signalled by the specific demonstrative in 'faces' and the indefinite article in 'a wet black bough'. The former asserts the concreteness of perception, while the latter beckons in a ghostly abstraction. As such, the poem illustrates Pound's anxiety both about the subjective and mastery over recalcitrant facts that the Image is intended to dispel.

The tension between the objective and the subjective implicated in Imagism is also the concern of William Carlos Williams. Of all Stevens's major contemporaries, he is perhaps the most committed to the struggle to claim that the new is the real. Underpinning his efforts is his understanding of the epistemological changes, brought about by the advent of modern physics, especially of Einstein's theory of relativity. By positing an interdependence of the subject and the object in the process of perception and by defining perception itself as a constructive, provisional act of measurement, science promises to redefine the Romantic 'organic' relationship between the poet and reality by mediating the schism between the subject and object implicated in Romantic idealism.¹⁸ The poet is now an active agent, not an inspired

¹⁸. For a discussion of the relationship between the epistemological changes in modern science and modern poetry see Carol C. Donley, *op.cit.*; see also parallel shifts from the Romantic epistemology to Modernism in Charles Altieri, *Painterly*

recipient, of perception, through whose personality and imagination - now a constructive faculty - strives to compose fragments of impressions into an aesthetic coherence that, while necessarily an abstraction, may also be claimed to be a provisional description of the 'real'. According to this new epistemology, the pears are seen as the poet wills.

Einstein's concept of the relativity of measurement underpins Williams's assertion of a new poetic that claims to encompass the multiple dimensions of American modernity: 'What I am trying to seek is a new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past (*SE* 283).' Lisa Steinman, among other critics, has shown how Williams's extension of the Imagistic principles into machine aesthetic and Objectivism bears witness to the tension in his attempt to reconcile poetic creativity with the commercial and practical values of technological American modernity.¹⁹ In his view, the imagination is a form of energy which refines and clarifies perception of old and false notions that sever man from the real. It also condenses and objectifies the poet's direct and fluid impressions into an artifact, the integrity of which resides in the 'some approximate co-extension with the universe'.²⁰ Through this 'apposite' (*I* 121) relationship ^{the} poem thus becomes a discrete object - 'a machine made of words' _^ (*SE* 256) - whose structures and dynamism follow the movements of the poet's

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¹⁹. See Lisa Steinman, *op.cit.*, Chapter 4, pp.78-112. See also Michael Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

²⁰. William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations*, p.105; hereafter abbreviated as *I* and further references will be included in the text.

perceptual act. These claims are extended and sanctioned by Williams's adaptation of the theory in his concept of a poem as a 'field of action' (*SE* 280) to underline further the poet's direct engagement with reality and to incorporate the multiplicity of perceptions by which the dynamism of reality may be 'measured'. Only by virtue of this creative force can the poem achieve a 'reality' of its own, and reconcile man to his world:

In great works of the imagination A CREATIVE FORCE IS SHOWN AT WORK MAKING OBJECTS WHICH ALONE COMPLETE SCIENCE AND ALLOW INTELLIGENCE TO SURVIVE - his [i.e. the artist's] picture lives anew. It lives as pictures only can: by their power TO ESCAPE ILLUSION and stand between man and nature as saints once stood between man and sky. (*I* 112)

Yet note that Williams's statement betrays an anxiety regarding poetry's alliance with science and reality which his own rhetoric seeks to espouse. A look at a poem from *Spring and All* demonstrates the uneasy tension implicated in Williams's poetic:

Pink confused with white
flowers and flowers reversed
take and spill the shaded flame
darting it back
into the lamp's horn

petals aslant darkened with mauve

red where in whorls
petal lays its glows upon petal
round flame green throats

petals radiant with transpiercing light
contending

above

the leaves
reaching up their modest green

from the pot's rim

and there, wholly dark, the pot
gay with rough moss.

Following upon Williams's drive to the contagious hospital, this poem may be seen as celebrating the poet's immediacy of sight that enables the recovery of common roots of the new world. The absence of punctuation and conventional line divisions - a strategy Williams admires for its 'cleansing' effect in Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein - draws attention to the immediacy of the act of perception, claiming it to be an 'apposite' equivalence to the actual objects seen.²¹ The same strategy underlines the visual effects of the dynamic interaction between forms, colours, and light.²² Their reciprocal dynamism, here underlined by the verbs, and not the seeing eye, becomes the principle of spatial organization: 'Pink confused with white/flowers and flowers reversed/take and spill the shaded flame/darting it back/into the lamp's horn.' While the presence of the consciousness is obliquely acknowledged through the intrusive use of rhetoricity like 'transpiercing', 'contending', 'modest', or the metaphoricity of 'petal lays its glow' and 'flamegreen', this rhetoricity is felt to be earned by the eye's

²¹. Williams draws an analogy between Marianne Moore's technique with the principle of multiplication in mathematics. He also suggests that Stein's strategy anticipates Pound's call to clean up words; see *SE* 122 and 165 respectively. Note that the intensification of perception Williams attributes to Marianne Moore's technique seems to operate in the poem here discussed.

²². Williams's interest in the visual arts has often been discussed. Bram Dijkstra's *Hieroglyphics of a New Speech* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) examines his interest in new ways of seeing in the techniques of fragmentation and collage in Cubism, and the intensification of objects in Charles Demuth. Henry Sayre in *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1983) studies the relationship between visual rhyme and representational and aural structures. Williams's use of the pictorial concrete effects is compared with Stevens's interest in abstraction in Bonnie Costello's 'Effects of Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting', in Gelpi (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.65-85.

increasing absorption in specific details. Indeed, as the act of perception becomes more active and the dynamism of colours and forms intensifies, grammar dissolves and the poem is carried forward through the use of the participles in one continuous movement to the end of the poem where a clear image emerges into which the energy of the eye and the flowers is condensed: 'and there, wholly dark, the pot/gay with rough moss'.

One can see this 'wholly dark' spot as a version of the 'local acme of point of white penetration' of energy that Williams admires in Marianne Moore's techniques of precision - a quality that gives her poetry the 'quality of the brittle, highly set-off porcelain garden' (*SE* 124). In this garden things grow in their absolute actuality and clarity, cleansed of the impurities of words and the sentimental, which Marianne Moore captures through her elimination of rhetoric and subjective associations so as to focus the eye on the object of perception. 'Miss Moore undertakes ... to separate the poetry from the subject entirely' (*SE* 123). Yet, paradoxically, as the poem itself shows, it is precisely at the point where perception begins to be active that language too intensifies into metaphors, and even into personification: 'petal *lays* its glow upon petal/round *flamegreen throats*.' In the final analysis, science illustrates the difficulty of making poetry and the creative intelligence survive in the modern world.

It is perhaps not surprising that Stevens should wryly remark that Williams would have been a more vital poet had he chosen to be a 'Diogenes of contemporary poetry' (*OP* 214) who sought to make the unreal out of the real. He himself dismisses imagism - or Williams's version of it - as 'a phase of realism' (*OP* 214), implying elsewhere that it is a 'somewhat exhausted phase of romanticism' (*L* 279) if compared with Marianne Moore's more vital 'inapposite' poetry. His commentary on Marianne Moore's imaginary garden shows a clear preference for what may be called, in contrast

to Williams's, the poetry of the subject - her treatment of the commonplace as an 'incidental' (*OP* 218) subject. Indeed, Stevens's own early experimentations with Imagism already display this 'incidental' quality in his attention to the process of perception and to the play of language rather than to the thing itself. Take, for example, one poem from 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird':

Icicles filled the long window
 With barbaric glass.
 The shadow of the blackbird
 Crossed it, to and fro.
 The mood
 Traced in the shadow
 An indecipherable cause. (*CP* 93)

Here are the characteristics of the play of language and perception that become main features in the later poems: the use of repetitions, elaborations and metaphors to create a verbal atmosphere in which the mind meditates upon, clarifies, and indulges in its ways of seeing and saying. What begins like an objective description of a delightful and fortuitous concrete particular of reality quickly turns with 'barbaric' into a subjective reality. Through the intricate pattern of sounds and images, the poem develops its fresh transfigurings of reality. The variation of 'window/shadow' leaves the reality of the bird open to question and thereby enhances the subtle play of light and shadow that the ice creates on the glass with a sense of strangeness already introduced through 'barbaric'. Where the semicolon might be expected in Pound's poem to reinforce the unifying power of the poet's eye, Stevens's full stop underlines the ambiguity of the bird just as it draws attention to the mind's increasing interest in the scene. Indeed, the poem becomes a metaphor for the process by which the mind meditates and even elaborates upon the mystery of perception and upon the mediation

of language. The ambiguity deepens as the repetition of 'shadow' subsumes the shadowy blackbird into the brooding state of the mind, and as the poem plays on the meanings of 'traced' - marking, probing, and also making an image - as if to insinuate the desire to capture the evanescent presence of the shadow, to illuminate its mystery, and to create of it a metaphor. Either way, the shadow remains 'indecipherable', teasing the mind with more ways of looking at the blackbird. As Stevens himself says, 'Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation' (*CP* 383).²³

It is this effort of 'tracing' that Stevens later identifies as the drive behind Williams's endless struggle to delineate images of reality. Looking at Williams's 'rubblings of reality', Stevens says,

it is easy to see how underneath the chaos of life to day and at the bottom of all the disintegrations there is the need to see, to understand: and in so far as one is not completely baffled, to recreate. This is not emotional. It springs from the belief that we have only our own intelligence on which to rely. This manifests itself in many ways, in every living art as in every living phase of politics or science. (*OP* 245)

Williams of course would insist that such 'rubblings' are evidence of the poet's close observation of life. Stevens, however, would maintain that the act of close attention is already a measure of the poet's imaginative engagement with and transfiguration of life's nonsense into interest or even significance that comes to be inseparable from life itself. 'What our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one's meditations on the text and disclosures of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality'

²³. Alan Golding in "The Community of Elements" in Wallace Stevens and Louis Zukofsky' in Gelpi (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.122-140, argues that the use of nonsense in Stevens and Williams aspires towards immediate perception and description of physical aspects of reality. Similar suggestions are made by Irvin Ehrenpreis, 'Strange Relation: Stevens's Nonsense', in Doggett and Buttel (eds.), *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, and by Bobby Joe Leggett, *op.cit.*, pp.129-130.

(*NA* 76). In so far as clichés, obsolete words and concepts already constitute the ‘common forms of reality’, their presence thus becomes, paradoxically, integral to the poet’s meditations on and enrichments of life. Like Crispin and the Uncle, Stevens well knows that the past cannot be destroyed. Its strains of memories and associations may hinder desires for freshness, yet the same strains are also part of ‘the substance that endures’ that defines one’s sense of reality and enriches and deepens one’s perceptions of life’s contradictions and complexities.

Here is perhaps where Stevens differs from Mauron, who recognizes the power of the technical virtuosity of past words to excite admiration and to evoke strange associations, but not their enduring effects. Whether or not inspired by Mauron’s argument and its fossil image, ‘A Postcard from the Volcano’ speculates on a more dynamic relationship between the past and the present. The image of a ruined house in fact suggests more than the passing of the past, but also a civilization in ruins, the vestiges of which still survive and form the ‘common ground’ on which the present is constructed and perceived.²⁴ So considered, the poet’s task is less to cleanse sight of the residue of clichés and associations - be they of the past or of the subjective - so as to ‘see’ and partake in ‘the universality of things’ (*I* 117) as Williams would wish. Rather, his task is, as Stevens insists, to reinvigorate, by means of poetry, the resources of language and memory until they become ‘venerable complications’ (*CP* 311) that will not only make reality harder to see, but that will also, if possible, be ‘commonal’, shared. Stevens himself hints at this endeavour when he reminds his aspiring noble riders that ‘words are thought and not only of our thoughts but the

²⁴. Leggett, *op.cit.*, pp.74-75, offers a similar reading; I will return to this poem later in a discussion of Stevens’s attitude to the renewal of tradition.

thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is they are thinking' (NA 32). While this effort may result in poetry that is obscure and even unstable, it becomes an index of the poet's function to help the people live their lives, not by claiming the truth of his vision, but by inducing through the 'violence' of his poetry the 'violence' of their own creative efforts to figure forth their images of nobility with which to resist the pressures of the real. As Stevens himself emphatically says: 'the manner of it is, in fact, its difficulty, which each man must feel each day differently, for himself' (NA 35).

The question of the renewal of language forms the subject of speculations in many poems of this period. 'The Poems of Our Climate' may be seen as another exercise in seeing and saying. The poem's bold title invites a comparison with Williams's 'measure' of the new world. As with Williams's poem, Stevens's poem opens with a still-life study of flowers. Note how the poem quickly catches on the play of colours to improvise an image of clarity and freshness. Yet even this image of perfection fails to satisfy, and desire prompts a variation on the motif:

- one desires
 So much more than that. The day itself
 Is simplified: a bowl of white,
 Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
 With nothing more than the carnations there.

'Cold, cold' here hints at a reimagining of Keats' *Ode to the Grecian Urn* and Stevens's own earlier version of the Emersonian transparent vision.²⁵ While Keats teases himself into accepting the 'truth' of his own fiction, as does Stevens's earlier

²⁵. Harold Bloom sees Stevens's word play as a sign of his failure to reverse the anteriority of rhetoric so as to realize a new beginning. See *Poems of Our Climate*, pp.140-143.

Snow Man, the emergence of the image here prompts Stevens into reflecting upon the desire for simplicity itself:

Say even this complete simplicity
 Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
 The evilly compounded, vital I
 And made it fresh in a world of white,
 A world of clear water, brilliant-edged...

'Say even' suggests an effort, even the anxiety of imagining a state of complete and delightful simplicity, for the very desire for it, as well as the effort of realization, entails an admission of all one's torments which prove to be the creative force. Indeed, the poem goes on to admit that to be vital at all is never to be contented:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
 So that one would want to escape, come back
 To what had been so long composed.
 The imperfect is our paradise.
 Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
 Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
 Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

'Lies' is the operative word, for delight deceives through and inheres in the flaw of language just as Stevens's echoing of Keats and Whitman both fulfils and negates the nostalgia for freshness. Note how the pronoun shifts from the impersonal singular 'one' to 'us', as if to suggest the shared ground of words and desires that must be renewed and fulfilled by an individual effort of reimagining. In our imperfect paradise, the only possible poems of our climate are the flawed and stubborn words of our imperfect desires.

'The Man on the Dump' examines the creative potentials of flawed words in the contemporary scenario of the Depression. Once a 'new Romantic', enjoying an exceptional view of the dump from his ivory tower, the poet now joins his

contemporaries in the everyday task of making do out of what he may find in the dump. The task is endless for the dump contains only humdrum fragments of the present and stale images of the past. Its urgency and difficulty is borne out by the tension between the scepticism of the poem and the sheer persistence of the rhetoric, for 'one grows to hate these things except on the dump' (*CP* 202). The effort of not hating the dump is now all the more necessary, for even spring fails to bring the freshness so desired:

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
Between that disgust and this, between the things
That are on the dump (azaleas and so on),
One feels the purifying change. One rejects
The trash.

That's the moment when the moon creeps up
To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like an image of a man),
You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

The strain of repetition bears witness to the effort of discerning whatever beauty or freshness it may discover from the 'trash', just as the comic imagery is a measure of the tension between the effort of looking and the awareness of the stale, emptiness of the scene.²⁶

The final stanza contemplates the implications of the need to accept the dump. The ambiguity of the concluding line has often been read as showing Stevens's scepticism in the power of the poet and language to effect any meaningful

²⁶. Leggett, *op.cit.*, pp.129-130, argues that the comedy of language is a disclosure of the object, seen for the first time stripped of all its images.

transfiguration, and, consequently, his grudging acceptance of the necessary return to the commonplace.²⁷ Yet this is to ignore the relentless questioning and the determination that drives and sustains Stevens's beating of the old tin can:

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
 One beats and beats for that which one believes.
 That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
 Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
 To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
 Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
 Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
 Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
 On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
 Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
 Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
 The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The The.

While it may be true that to ask these questions may be to ask from the dump more than it can give, yet it is equally imperative that they should be asked, and what is more answered, even though provisionally. Indeed, the dump secretes one answer in reply to the final question. One first heard of the truth - 'the the' - when one puts trust in the power of language to mediate and to describe reality in order to satisfy the desire for belief. This already implicates an acquiescence in the fictionality of truth, and therefore in the provisionality of that truth. It is also to acknowledge the richness, even the mysteries and contradictions, of reality that language can only at best partially describe. Above all, it is to insist on the creative powers of oneself not only as an intimate source but as 'figure' - participant and agent - in the fulfillment of desire.

²⁷. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, pp.145-148, offers this reading. A more positive reading is suggested by James Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.205-207, who argues that the poem envisions a way of rebuilding the present and the future in reply to contemporary crisis.

The answer is reinforced in 'On the Road Home' where Stevens offers his own 'relativistic' version of reality in which poems are always 'parts of a world':

It was when I said,
 'There is no such thing as truth,'
 That the grapes seemed fatter.
 The fox ran out of his hole.

You said ... you said,
 'There are many truths,
 But they are not parts of the truth.'
 Then the tree, at night, began to change,

Smoking through green and smoking blue.
 We were two figures in a wood.
 We said that we stood alone.

It was when I said,
 'Words are not forms of a single word.
 In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
 The word must be measured by the eye';

It was when you said,
 'The idols have seen lots of poverty,
 Snakes and gold and lice,
 But not the truth';

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
 And longest, the night was roundest,
 The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
 Closest and strongest.

(CP 204)

As Stevens proceeds on this road to a 'relativistic' poetic, so does the scope of his concept of the function of poetry and its language broaden. The measure of the poet's task and authority will not merely be to withdraw into his escapist abstraction. Rather his task will be to realize 'an agreement with reality' (NA 59), that will include or co-exist with a plurality of agreements, and in so doing, to show that 'the measure of the poet is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the

sense of other people' (NA 123-124).

The Virile Poet and the Fluent Mundo

The concern with renewing poetic tradition and asserting poetic authority is one of the central issues of modernism. At stake are the efforts to reaffirm and redefine poetic tradition as authority in matters of cultural and imaginative values. The issue was particularly important to Pound and Eliot, perhaps Stevens's most influential contemporaries. Their concept of poetic tradition, and the terms they used to define that concept, came to be accepted as criteria of modernism, and highlighted the antagonism between the poets and the public.²⁸

By and large both poets sought to defend the elitism of poetry and poetic tradition and their function to restore cultural coherence. They differed, however, as to their concepts of tradition and methods of regeneration. Of the two poets, Pound's use of scientific rhetoric in his defence of poetry is more extensive.²⁹ Central to it is his belief in the poet's power of privileged direct perceptions and presentations of the creative vital energies already immanent in the physical world. According to Pound, these energies were embodied and preserved in Greek myths and Provençal

²⁸. General discussions of the concepts of history and poetic authority in modernism are legions. See, for, instance Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957); Stephen Spender, *The Destructive: Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935); and *The Creative Element: A Study of Vision, Despair and Orthodoxy among Some Modern Writers* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953); and more recently Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

²⁹. For a detailed discussion of Pound's scientism see Ian F.A. Bell, *Critic as Scientist: the Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (New York: Methuen, 1984).

poetry and formed the basis of the spiritual and cultural wholeness of their civilization. The burden of Pound's scientific rhetoric is to defend and justify the truth of this poetic vision, and to make this arcane tradition available in the modern world, to 'make it new'. Pound's problem is rendered more difficult by his distrust of the communicative function and abstract quality of language that allow the corrupting intrusion of the subjective and inaccuracies. For Pound, the attraction of the ideogrammic method is in its pictorial 'metaphoric' quality which is perceived to retain its roots in the natural world and therefore captures and presents directly the energies and processes of reality. Because 'the Chinese "word" or ideogram for red is based on something everyone knows,' both the vital energies of reality and the poet's truth can now be restored.³⁰

Eliot's view of poetic tradition is more complex.³¹ For him, tradition is an organic continuity which, although changed by subsequent creative efforts of later poets, still endures these changes and indeed subsumes them into its order. His famous doctrine of impersonality makes the poet's 'continual surrender' of the subjective a condition by which the wholeness of the poetic self, culture and poetic tradition may be restored. Unlike Pound, Eliot is more ambivalent about the vagaries of the poetic self. For although he insists that the sense of tradition can be felt only intimately and not acquired, and praises the intensity and immediacy of the poet's sensibility and its

³⁰. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p.21.

³¹. Maud Ellman in *The Poetics of Impersonality: The Question of the Subject in T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987) makes use of psychological theories of Lacan and Kristeva to examine the ambivalent role of the subjective in their poetics. See also David Trotter's use of Freud's theory of narcissism in discussing the problem of regenerating the poetic self in *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1984).

power to impose order upon random experience, his theory of the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ - drawn from psychology - chastises the self for cultural fragmentation and the failure of meaning in language and poetry. The same ambiguity that runs through Eliot’s concept of tradition and his view of the self is present in his proposal ^{of} the ‘mythical method’ as cure: a mode of ordering through a vision of parallels between contemporaneity and antiquity to be attained by means of a return to the immediacy of the ‘pre-logical mentality’.³² Through the return to myth, the poetic self can both be regenerated and chastised, and a new poetic made possible.

Pound’s ideogrammic method became the basis of his programme for political action that took him to totalitarianism, just as Eliot’s concept of tradition was embraced by the New Humanists. It is against this background that Stevens’s own speculation on the renewal of poetic tradition and his new romanticism must be seen. Stevens might have found Eliot’s concept of organic order of tradition more congenial than Pound’s and did himself cite Eliot as one possible example of the ‘hybridization’ (*OP* 221) of the old with the new that he admired in Marianne Moore. He might also have described Pound’s and Eliot’s nostalgia for transcendence and immediacy, like the Romantics’, as ‘belittling’ the imagination (*NA* 138), and dismissed their reverence for tradition along with Babbitt’s (*OP* 221). At any rate, even with Eliot as one illustration of the ‘new romantic’, there is at least one important difference to note. Stevens’s renewal of poetic tradition seeks to empower and to affirm the living, the contemporaneous and above all the creative intelligence; Eliot’s, on the contrary, strengthens tradition with each effort of the poet’s self-surrender.

³². Eliot’s review of *Group Theories of Religion and the Religion of the Individual* by Clement C. J. Webb, *International Journal of Ethics* XXVII (1 October, 1916), pp.115-117.

'A Postcard from the Volcano' perhaps best illustrates Stevens's speculation on the renewal of poetic tradition. The poem adopts a voice of the past and envisages a scene of desolate destruction, reminiscent of *The Waste Land*, that evokes an elegiac sense of past civilization left to ruins and oblivion, its past glory diminished in any surviving vestiges resurrected or imitated.³³ Yet this nostalgic reading is quickly undermined by the contradiction in the statements that this voice makes. First the voice insists that the present is distant from the past, then that the past persists into and pervades the present, and lastly that the present remains largely unaware of its inheritance:

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. 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

³³. Helen Vendler in *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp.32-33, argues that the poem expresses Stevens's vision of the past preserving its creative legacy, including his own, in future generations' creativity. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.114, sees the poem's conclusion as indicative of Stevens's failure to revise the Romantic tradition and establish himself as its strong heir. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.191-192, sets the poem in the political controversy of the Thirties, and argues that the poem suggests Stevens's disagreement with his contemporaries' politics of despair.

A part of what it is ...

‘Will’ of course denotes the inevitability of the ignorance of future generations; yet it also suggests a wish, an assertion of the ‘will to power’. The voice even seems to be insinuating that the paradox of discontinuity and ignorant continuity constitutes the condition of future acts of creativity that will themselves ensure the reconstruction of the past:

Children

Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know,

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world,
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
Smearred with the gold of the opulent sun.

The first three lines ‘children still weaving budded aureoles’ echo and reappraise the parallel lines of the first stanza ‘children picking up our bones/Will never know’, as if to stress the paradox of creation. At the same time, ‘still’ suggests that later creativity repeats, survives and perhaps surpasses the legacy of the past that it recreates. The repetitions and convolutions of the syntax also seem to empower the act of reimagining by which the empty mansion of the past is now recreated, reinhabited ‘as if’ by the storming spirit of the past, and the details of its exteriors renovated. Note too how the voice mocks its own reconstructive efforts, for just as the modern poet cannot be too noble a rider, neither can he dwell in too lofty an ivory tower.

Stevens returns to his speculation on the question of regenerating poetic tradition in ‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction’, this time with a heightened sense of

urgency:

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc,
And set the MacCullough there as major man? (*CP* 386)

'Notes', as Marjorie Perloff has observed, was written at the time of the Pearl Harbour invasion when the need to engage the pressures of reality so as to 'evade' them imaginatively by means of a 'supreme fiction' of reality was never more pressing.³⁴

This sense of the greater urgency and task of poetry is reflected in Stevens's note on the poem:

The gist of the poem is that the MacCullough is MacCullough; 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 us. (*LWS* 434)

The note suggests Stevens's desire to broaden the abstraction of poetry by ennobling the MacCullough, any ordinary man, to become a common hero or 'major man, through whom 'a castle-fortress-home' can be established in the troubled contemporary world. Humanism, with its traditionalism and ideal concept of man as a rational being, was inadequate, not least for its dogmatism, but also for its neglect of the contemporaneous and for its failure to satisfy the needs of the imagination. Stevens's

³⁴. See Marjorie Perloff, 'Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric', in Gelpi (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.41-64. Perloff sees the parable of the MacCullough as expressing Stevens's covert anti-semitism. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.189, ignores the historical context and suggests that the MacCullough, as a successful business man, is Stevens's revised version of Whitman as poet of reality. More recently Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.258-259, returns the poem, via Bloom's reading, to its historical context and argues that the MacCullough as 'a responsible citizen', is an acceptable human hero.

rejection of the Humanist ideals, and his own proposed idea of order, is hinted at in the play on words in his description of the MacCullough that qualifies and reduces the concept of man as an ideal image of God to ‘an expedient,/Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,/Incipit and a form to speak the word/And every latent double in the word,/Beau linguist.’ To drive home his point, Stevens not only provocatively evokes Whitman, whose anti-traditionalism and individualism makes him the New Humanists’ prototype of fallen man as model for his major man, but he also goes further to demythologize Whitman, who, more than other poets, claims authenticity for his ‘supreme fiction’ of America. Like Eliot’s Phlebas, the MacCullough is ‘drowned’ in the washes of the sea, there to suffer a different kind of sea-change:

He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or a power of the wave, or deepened speech,
Or a greater being, moving in on him,
Of greater aptitude and apprehension,

As if the waves at least were never broken,
As if language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken.

As recurrence and covering, either of impulses and words, ‘habit’ is equally undesirable to Whitman and Eliot, but not to Stevens, whose major man can only be conceived out of and within the repetitions of desires and words. The repetitions mime Whitman’s surging lines, while the parataxis is reminiscent of Eliot’s vision of the fragmentation of civilization in *The Waste Land*. Yet whereas Whitman’s are cumulative with no cumulation, and Eliot’s suspend meaning into uncertainties, Stevens’s have the effect of willing a hypothesis into a resemblance of continuity and fulfillment within the security of ‘castle-fortress-home towards which the ‘labour’ of

'breaking' the voices of the past aspires.

Yet what is Stevens's attitude to Viollet-le-Duc, and what kind of help is Stevens speculating upon here? Viollet-le-Duc, it has been pointed out, appears as an example of a restorer of past architecture in Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms*, a book which Stevens cites in 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet'. Due to the ambiguity of the tone in 'even', the passage has been read as implying Stevens's rejection of Focillon's theory of formal renewals for a humanistic or Emersonian re-envisioning of a poetic hero.³⁵ Yet these readings overlook Stevens's own interest in Focillon as well his scepticism of humanism and Emersonian idealism. Even Leggett, who examines Stevens's interest in Focillon in detail, as providing a conceptual frame to broaden his poetic, mistakes Stevens's direction and identifies his use of Focillon as moving away from the solipsism and hedonism of the Mauronian supreme fiction towards a vision of poetry that can account for concrete reality.³⁶ As such, he overlooks Stevens's concern in 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet' with defending the values of poetry as creating 'the non-geography' of life. To see how Focillon assists Stevens's meditation on the two related issues of renewing poetic tradition and envisioning the major man, the 'commonal', a look at Focillon's theory of formal

³⁵. For Emersonian readings see Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.189; and Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens's Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), pp.167-169. For a humanistic reading see Frank Kermode, '"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction': A Commentary', *Annali dell' Institute Universatario Orientale: Sezione Germanica* (1961), pp.173-201; and Leggett, *op.cit.*, p.150.

³⁶. Leggett, *op.cit.*, pp.85-86, 122, 151; see Chapters 6 and 7 for his discussion of Stevens's use of Focillon. Through my reading of Focillon, I hope to show that Focillon enables Stevens to arrive at a cultural role of poetry as an imaginative interpretation of reality, and not, as Leggett argues, an achievement of concrete contact with reality.

renewals may be helpful.

An art historian, Focillon is concerned with what he sees as the central problem in studying the developments and changes of art: the understanding of what he calls 'the life of forms' or the creative spirit that lies behind the genesis of any work of art. Its activity is to transform and arrange natural forms into 'formal environments' or space. Each formal environment is composed of other forms of art according to 'the principle of styles': an essentially experimental process by means of which the creative potentials and reciprocal fitness of forms are probed, modified in relation to matter and techniques, and rearranged in new configurations.³⁷ For Focillon, the emergence and renewal of each style is first and foremost an act of self-realization of the creative spirit the needs of which are to establish 'a homogenous, coherent formal environment, in the midst of which man acts and breathes' (*LF* 14). Their broadest realizations are social and cultural forms, "psychological landscapes", without which the essential genius of the environments would be opaque and elusive to all those who share in them' (*LF* 14).

Focillon's emphasis on art as a realization of space leads him to identify technique as the central problem of artistic creation. Technique is 'a whole poetry of action': a process of realization through the artist's direct engagement with and experimentation on the material of art. According to his concept of 'formal vocation' (*LF* 32), the characteristics of each kind of material impose a restraint on the artist's choice of form, while at the same time enabling him to secure certain effects.

³⁷. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, translated by Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler (New York: Witterborn and Schultz, 1948, 2nd, edition) p.6; hereafter abbreviated as *LF* and further citations will be included in the text. See also Jean Bony's introduction to Focillon, *The Art of the West in the Middle Ages*, Volume I (London: Phaidon Press, 1963).

Submitting to the matter, the artist probes and extracts its creative potentials, and thereby discovers and achieves form for his creation. Yet this realization is by no means deterministic, for through the process of experimentation, matter itself is modified by forms and thereby suggests and yields potentials for further creations. In so far as technique allows the artist to explore, pursue and realize the creative potentials of matter, it may be considered as a mode of creation that contains its own 'biological development' or 'genealogical significance' (*LF* 37) in the light of which a work of art must be understood.

Focillon's interest in technique as an experimental mode of creation underlines his rejection of the expressive theory of art in favour of an 'impersonal' but more dynamic and intense creative role for the artist. Granting the affinities 'in principles' between forms in the mind and those in space and matter, he insists that the former are 'not copied from the life of images and recollections' (*LF* 44-46). In a passage Stevens quotes to illustrate his concept of 'indirect egotism', Focillon applies the same concept of creative experimentation to the workings of the mind. While he grants that memories, feelings and temperament affect the artist's choice of and handling of form, in so far as they are creative materials to be modified by form. Indeed, he argues that just as matter demands its formal vocation, so memories possess their own formal and technical destiny that frees them from the determinism of their biological origins.

Focillon's concept of experimentation necessarily leads him to reconsider the notion of influence and the broader relationship between art and historical and cultural conditions. Just as the artist's temperament plays a role in defining and modifying his chosen forms, so it attracts him to other artists whose sensibilities are sympathetic to his. While these affinities help to 'train and tutor' the artist, their forms are modified

by the techniques and materials of the creative process. The concept also allows the artist a degree of freedom from historical and cultural conditions. Indeed, in the final chapter of *The Life of Forms in Art*, Focillon goes as far as to argue that, if art is the creation of social and cultural forms, then history is not a linear succession of events, but a 'collective fiction' (*LF* 54), made up of a concurrence of dynamic, even contradictory, contemporaneous formal environments, some of which are privileged into dominance. The dynamism of history and culture is brought about through the contact of 'families of mind' out of which issue new forms. *Life* concludes with a bold and eloquent claim for the emergence of a work of art as 'rupture' in which is manifest the influence of art as factor in the making and renewal of culture:

If a work of art creates formal environments which impose themselves on any definition of human environments; if families of mind have an historical and psychological reality that it is fully as manifest as that in linguistic and ethnic groups, then a work of art is an event. It is, in other words, a structure, a defining of time. All these families, environments, and events that are called forth by the life of forms act in their turn on the life of forms itself, as well as on strictly historical life. There they collaborate with moments of civilization, with both natural and social environments, and with human races. (*LF* 63-64)

It may be said then that Focillon provides Stevens with a conceptual frame by which to define the poet's regeneration as self-empowerment and the creation of art as an act of partaking in the communal. As in Focillon's 'families of mind', the virile poet is Aeneas to Anchises, the ancestral figure whose burden of obscurities the son bears and yet which defines him as 'still half beast and somehow more than human', and which makes him 'the intelligence that endures' (*NA* 52-53). 'The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet' in fact signals many significant changes in Stevens's poetics in the direction suggested by Focillon. Poetry is now not an escapist abstraction, but

a process of 'indirect egotism' - an act of intensifying and realizing the creative powers through the engagement with and renewal of forms, a process which Stevens claims alone 'keeps poetry a living thing, the modernizing and ever modern influence' (*NA* 45). Note too that this same process of intensification underpins Stevens's bold claim that 'poetic truth is a factual truth' (*NA* 59), a claim that, like Focillon, Stevens later in 'Imagination as Value' extends to culture as imaginative forms. In so far as the imagination creates an agreement with reality, Stevens can claim that not only 'real and unreal are two in one' (*CP* 485), but also that the imaginative powers that inform and intensify one's responses to reality are part of the real:

A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feelings has entered into it.... the world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable. (*NA* 65).

Seen in this light, metaphors are no longer escapist abstractions, but responses to the real that have entered into the real and become part of its interest and significance; 'a mythology[that] reflects its region' (*OP* 141) or Focillon's 'psychological landscapes'. What is more, in so far as the poet induces the same process of intensification in the reader, he also induces an experience of ecstatic transformation or of liberation that gives a sense of an agreement with reality towards which poetry aspires.

It is this process that Stevens claims to be operative in Whitehead's notion of prehensive event where the self and the world meet on the 'perceptual field':

My theory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-

temporal standpoint mirrors the world. (*OP* 273)

As Stevens says, 'Reality is not the thing but an aspect of the thing' (*NA* 195), or more boldly that resemblances are now the structure of reality (*NA* 71). Given the dynamism of event in which every aspectual perspective of perception mirrors the world, it may be claimed that the poet's act of perception is one that is inclusive of, or at least co-extensive with, a variety of perceptions.³⁸ 'The corporeal world exists as the common denominator as the incorporeal world of its inhabitants' (*NA* 118). As with Focillon's style that makes the genius of the place manifest to all, resemblances enable the virile youth to claim that his poem, his 'non-geography', is part of 'the commonal'.

One such mythology is envisioned in 'Chocorua to Its Neighbor'. The poem begins quietly though appropriately with the mind in an act of intense meditation. Stevens remembers here his earlier beleaguered solitary guitarist and his desire for 'one's shadow magnified' as a substitute for the gods, comparing it to 'the shadow of Chocorua/In an immenser heaven, aloft' (*CP* 176). The shadow and his abode are recalled for reimagining as a spirit of the earth. The desire is tentatively pondered as the poem's ambition in the two opening stanzas where Stevens also obliquely hints at the war as one reason for reimagining the shadow. Contrary to 'The Man with The Blue Guitar', and but for the help of the title, ambiguity surrounds the identity of the speaking voice and its neighbour, and the site of their 'dialogue'. For what matters is

³⁸. Charles Altieri argues that resemblances function as a discourse of multiple perceptions in Stevens, and that, as such they become an important strategy in Stevens's claim of poetry to engage the commonal; see Gelpi (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.86-118. See also Eleanor Cook, who argues in *Poetry, Word-Play and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, that Stevens uses poetic *topoi* that have become commonplace descriptions and perceptions of reality as a poetic of place.

not merely the entry into 'a psychological landscape', but the meditation on the 'genealogy' of creation, on how the mind gets there: the labour of desire which allows it to meet the mountain Chocorua whose voice it assumes and from whose large perspective it can hope to 'perceive men without reference to their form', to meditate on its large abstraction of a commonal hero and mythology of place.

The meditation begins with Chocorua recounting his vision:

At the end of night last night a crystal star,
 The crystal pointed star of morning, rose
 And lit the snow to a light congenial
 To this prodigious shadow, who then came
 In an elemental freedom, sharp and cold.

The moment of early morning rising is Stevens's favourite time when he experiences the rare joy of being 'at the centre of reality' (*CP* 205). Note how Stevens reworks the venerable images of mystical creation and visionary revelation to flesh out his own abstraction of a human hero:³⁹

The feeling of him was the feel of day,
 And of day as yet unseen, in which
 To see was to be. He was the figure in
 A poem for Liadoff, the self of selves:
 To think of him destroyed the body's form.

He was a shell of dark blue glass, or ice,
 Or air collected in a deep essay,
 Or light embodied, or almost, a flash
 On more than muscular shoulders, arms and chest,
 Blue's last transprence as it turned to black,

³⁹. Joseph Carroll, *op.cit.*, pp.201-211, sees Chocorua as a Romantic visionary reincarnation; Bloom, *op.cit.*, pp.221-225, argues that the poem is an 'unreserved' affirmation of Emersonian freedom. The poem is also one illustration of Eleanor Cook's argument that Stevens plays with conventions of *topoi* or 'commonplaces' to alter ways of seeing and describing reality.

The glitter of a being, which the eye
 Accepted yet which nothing understood,
 A fusion of night, its blue of the pole of blue
 And of the brooding mind, fixed but for a slight
 Illumination of movement as he breathed.

Functioning as a structuring and renewing strategy as in Focillon's principle of style, the syntax cancels the authority of these images while allowing their connotative powers to intensify the play of resemblances that make up Chocorua's meditation and attempt to define the shadowy image of his thought.⁴⁰ Contradictions and repetitions abound, as if to stress the sheer efforts and limits of thought and its creation: 'He was not man yet he was nothing else. If in the mind, he vanished taking there/The mind's own limits, like a tragic thing/Without existence, existing everywhere.'⁴¹ Yet, as Chocorua recognizes as he hears the shadow's only speech, these difficulties are precisely what makes this 'tragic' and always incipient figure a human and desirable portent of the creative powers:

He said,
 'The moments of enlargement overlook
 The enlarging of the simplest soldier's cry
 In what I am, as he falls. Of what I am,

The cry is part. My solitaria
 Are the meditations of a central mind.
 I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound
 Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice
 That is my own voice speaking in my ear.

There lies the misery, the coldest coil
 That grips the centre, the actual bite, that life
 Itself is like a poverty in the space of life,

⁴⁰. Bloom, *op. cit.*, p.224, has observed that Liadoff, a Russian pianist, has appeared earlier in 'Two Tales of Liadoff' (CP 346).

⁴¹. See Milton J. Bates, *op. cit.*, pp.241-245, 247.

So that the flapping of wind around me here
Is something in tatters that I cannot hold.'

In spite of this, the gigantic bulk of him
Grew strong, as if doubt never touched his heart.

Yet how does the shadow's speech so compel the recognition and the confidence that allows Chocorua first to invest his authority in declaring 'I, Chocorua, speak of this shadow as/A human thing', then to proclaim it 'a collective being' and 'a common self'? One possible answer is suggested: 'He came from out of sleep./He rose because men wanted him to be.' The shadow's speech is that of desire itself, the disembodied voice that, issuing out of the depths of the mind and feelings, finds fulfillment only through and within its own narcissistic acts of perceiving and creating 'strange relations' of life.⁴² Only this voice can ensure that the poet's abstractions of the world are 'human':

To say more than human things with human voice,
That cannot be; to say human things with more
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be:
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
Of human things, that is acutest speech.

'Acutest' is both 'keen' and 'painful', a reminder of the warmth and pain of the voice of desire as it seeks to flesh out the dry abstractions of words and thoughts with the rhythms and tones of emotional resonances and make them manifestations of one's sense of the world even though only by contradicting and repeating oneself. 'We never

⁴². Altieri, *op.cit.*, p.112, identifies this voice as the voice that makes and inhabits Stevens's abstractions and which allows Stevens to engage the communal. J. Hillis Miller in 'Theoretical and Atheoretical', in Doggett and Buttel (eds.), *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, p.283, sees it as a principle of disruption that allows for no engagement or composition.

arrive intellectually. But emotionally we arrive constantly' (*OP 198*), observes Stevens. What must be noted is that this is also the voice that Stevens, with a deliberate irony, likens to 'music' such as heard in Eliot's poetry and which moves the reader into a sympathy of attitude with the speaker's sense of the world:

another mode of analogy is to be found in the music of poetry.... It is like the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or of some other figure concealed, so that we cannot identify him, who speaks with a measured voice which is often disturbed by his feeling for what he says.... When we hear the music of one of the great narrative musicians, as it tells its tale, it is like finding our way through the dark not by the aid of any sense but by an instinct that makes it possible for us to move quickly when the music moves quickly, slowly when the music moves slowly. It is a speed that carries us on and through every winding, once more to the world outside of the music at its conclusion. It affects our sight of what we see and leaves it ambiguous, somewhat like one thing, somewhat like another. In the meantime the tale is being told and the music excites us and we identify it with the story and it becomes the story ... When it is over, we are aware that we have had an experience very much like the story just as if we had participated in what took place. It is exactly as if we had listened with complete sympathy to an emotional recital. The music was a communication of emotion. (*NA 125-126*)

Through this voice, then, we become participant in the 'genealogy' of creation, sharing the ecstasy of liberation and transformation that accompanies the disclosure of 'home' at the centre of experience (*NA 50*). Reading becomes an important paradigm for the act of creating and sharing a poetic 'home' in Stevens's poetry.⁴³ Invested in the words of the poem, the poet's voice makes available the powers that inform his insights into aspects of reality, and thereby enables him to enhance and extend his reader's perceptions of the world. The voice, however, cannot achieve this authority without a 'will to power' on the reader's part. Contrary to Eliot baiting the

⁴³. Altieri, *op.cit.*, pp.106-116.

reader's scepticism with apparent 'meaning' while allowing the music of the words to work surreptitiously on his unsuspecting mind, Stevens requires his reader's active participation: 'The poem must resist the intelligence/Almost successfully' (*CP* 350). 'Almost' is the key word here, complimenting the reader on his creative ingenuity that discovers and establishes possibilities of resemblances within the poem's obscure design.⁴⁴ The poet so arranges the words that the reader is directed, as he reads, to reflect on and to manipulate his own experience as he tries out possibilities until they cohere into the strange relations that the poet offers. Reading thus becomes a disclosure of the reader's own powers of desire, a deepening of his own powers to make resemblances and thereby intensify his feelings for the world. As he reads, it is as a 'figure' of desire that he comes alive, finding his *own* fulfillment as he partakes in the poet's constitutive speech of making and remaking resemblances of 'things as they are'. This is what the poem enacts as Chocorua claims the testimony of making visible and heard the common self:

Now I, Chocorua, speak of this shadow as
 A human thing. It is an eminence,
 But of nothing, trash of sleep that will disappear
 With the special things of night, little by little,
 In day's constellation, and yet remain, yet be,

Not father, but bare brother, megalfrere,
 Or by whatever boorish name a man
 Might call the common self, interior fons.
 And fond, the total man of glubbal glub,
 Political tramp with an heraldic air,

Cloud-casual, metaphysical metaphor,
 But resting on me, thinking in my snow,
 Physical if the eye is quick enough,

⁴⁴. Leggett's reading of Stevens in the light of Maaron's theory of obscurity will prefer to emphasize that the poem resists the intelligence successfully, *op.cit.*, p.125.

So that, where he was, there is an enkindling, where
He is, the air changes and grows fresh to breathe.

The air changes, creates and re-creates, like strength,
And to breathe is a fulfilling of desire,
A clearing, a detecting, a completing,
A largeness lived and not conceived, a space
That is an instant nature, brilliantly.

The play of syntax as it follows the contour of the voice here is impressive, especially in the second stanza where it is suspended, only to evolve through the participles into a conditional clause and into the following full-blooded indicatives where the oldest and most revered metaphor of birth, that of air with creation, quickens into life. The voice here creates 'a largeness lived and not conceived', a 'space' for the incarnation of the 'common self' whose variety of attitudes and tones enable the poet and his reader to meet and feel the momentary clearing and completing of desire.

This voice of course offers no programme for concerted actions, for political utopian vision nor an affirmation of transcendence. Yet note the self-mockery with which Stevens 'names' his major man. For what matters is not the 'boorish name' by which we describe the major man, but the act and means of naming that require constant efforts of renewing if we are to breathe life into words and memories salvaged from the dump. That each effort is always provisional is admitted by Chocorua himself who can only imagine the shadow as contradictions, repetitions, and even 'in tatters'. Stevens may look with nostalgic envy upon Santayana's life in a convent in Rome, yet he also continues to wonder if he himself has 'lived a skeleton's life/As a disbeliever in reality' (*OP* 117). Skeleton or aesthete, the poet is condemned to his 'fated eccentricity' (*CP* 443), mumbling his 'never-ending meditation' (*CP* 465) on the real.

Yet it may be argued, as Stevens does (*NA* 123), that this marginal existence is necessary were the poet to continue with his unending search for 'what will suffice'. In this connection, Stevens's late interest in modern physics as discussed in 'A Collect of Philosophy' is pertinent. In this essay Stevens's probing for poetic ideas in philosophy is part of his effort to show that poetry is central, if not equal to philosophy, in providing 'effective' affirmations of reality. He notes Jean Paulhan's remark on scientists' prevailing scepticism regarding scientific truths:

It seems to me that the old psychological theory of perception considered as a true hallucination is the very type of the call to poetry.... The first word of the philosophy of sciences, today, is that science has no value except its effectiveness and that nothing, absolutely nothing, constitutes an assurance that the external world resembles the idea that we form of it. Is that a poetic idea? Anti-poetic, rather, in that it is opposite to the confidence which the poet, by nature, reposes, and invites us to repose, in the world. Let us say that it needs poetry to rise above itself; hence that it is an invitation to much poetry. It is an indirect way of being poetic. (*OP* 275)

Paulhan is cited, along with Whitehead, S.M. Alexander and André George. Stevens follows Paulhan in drawing attention to the admission among modern physicists that Planck's concept of causality merely 'exists, on the human scale,... by virtue of macroscopic approximations', and that 'the true nature of corpuscular or quantic phenomena' may never be known (*OP* 276). Scientific theories, like poetic resemblances, are incessant 'indirect' efforts to describe and redescribe the mysteries of reality. As such, they parallel poetic resemblances that serve as fictions to satisfy the need to probe for the integrations of experience which, according to Stevens, the poet and the scientist, along with other philosophers, have in common (*OP* 276). Stevens indeed welcomes Paulhan's speculation that poetry may be more successful

in this endeavour (*OP* 276), due to its propensity for ‘fortuitous’ probings (*OP* 277) and ‘brilliant excess in accomplishment’ (*OP* 185) that allow the poet a greater degree of receptivity to disclosures of the real and their articulations in the play of words. According to Stevens, Planck becomes an embodiment of the scientist’s ambivalence regarding his own endeavour. For although Planck’s recognition of the anthropomorphism in his own theory of causality leads him to conclude that it is ‘neither true or false ... a working hypothesis’, it also underlines his insight into science as ‘the provisional and changing creation of the power of the imagination’ that functions boldly as man’s prophetic powers to foresee events (*OP* 280). In Planck’s ‘supreme hesitation’ Stevens detects ‘a nuance of the imagination’: ‘his willingness to believe beyond belief’ that marks his stature as a modern man and a modern poet. The scientist now joins the poet in his search for the ‘supreme fiction’ of the real:

This endlessly elaborating poem
 Displays the theory of poetry,
 As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
 Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
 Of poetry is the theory of life,

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

(*CP* 486)

Stevens’s choice of Planck as a modern poet is significant, all the more so for its unexpectedness and reticence: ‘it is unexpected to have to recognize even in Planck the presence of the poet’ (*OP* 280). The strained recognition here is indicative of the pressures of defending the values of poetry in the modern world of science and

technology. At the same time, that Stevens insists on seeing and describing Planck as a poet is also indicative of his refusal to appeal to the values and authority of science as do some of his contemporaries. As his choice of Planck over Pascal implies, it is not the desire for certainty or objectivity that attracts his contemporaries to science and later to the orthodoxies of belief and ideology. What matters is the defence of poetic creativity as the power that enables the poet to create and to assist his reader in creating what Stevens calls a 'native sphere' (*OP* 277). Limited as this claim is, its boldness must be stressed, for what poetry asks and seeks to fulfil is no less than to sanction and enhance the poet's and his reader's needs and efforts as the creative powers by which to attain 'the confidence in the world'.

A testimony of this effort is offered on 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself', with which Stevens chooses to conclude his *Collected Poems*. Note how the meditation is now so deep that it needs no identification of speaker nor of time and site. Here both the syntax and the repetitions of single words - 'scrawny', 'cry', 'March', and so on - allow the voice to focus on clarifying and intensifying what otherwise would remain a vague sound-effect of a fortuitous and commonplace bird's cry heard and remembered. As the voice returns self-consciously to deny its own penchant for repetitions, 'it was not from the vast ventriloquism/Of sleep's faded papier-mâché', it culminates in the triumphant transformation of the cry into a hymn that is both a recognition of the cry and an affirmation of itself:

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.

The poet here acknowledges precedence for his own hymn and thereby implicit denies himself any claim to transcendence. Likewise the cry itself is denied an ontological status for it is sublimated into a figure of the poet's desire for a celebration of the creative powers. The sacramental power of the ancestral images of light and sun is also modified while the connotative resonances of the images are gathered into an affirmation of a new beginning. The predicates create a new abstract space in which the outer and the inner, remembrance and desire, words and voice, the poet and his reader meet in a clearing and completion of desire which is 'like a new knowledge of reality'. This is the dimension of life envisioned as the 'supreme fiction' in which he lives, like Planck, in 'his willingness to believe beyond belief' (*OP* 280), and towards which Stevens will move.

Chapter IV: God and the Imagination are One

The poet's highest achievement, by Stevens's own emphasis, is the fulfillment of his function regarding matters of belief. 'In an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost' (NA 170-171). This, according to Stevens, is the 'role of utmost seriousness', for poetry must create the 'sanctions' for life to fulfil the desire for the spiritual solaces once provided by faith. As Stevens's never-ending meditations both in prose and poetry up to his purported conversion to Roman Catholicism before his death suggest, his search for 'what will suffice' is as precarious as it is bold, for it is sustained less by the need for the certainty and authority of truth once enjoyed by religious orthodoxy, than by the need for the uncertain inward grace that the imagination provides. In short, as Stevens himself says, the 'final belief/Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose' (CP 250).

By Stevens's own admission, his attitude to religion was ambivalent.¹ Although he early lost his faith in the Presbyterian church in which he had been brought up, his journal entries and letters show that he continued to meditate on the

¹. The issue of belief in Stevens's poetry has been discussed by many critics. Adelaide K. Morris in *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) traces Stevens's revaluation of religious concepts and symbolism, and argues that Stevens's views on belief echo those of traditional religion, even though he tries to depart from them. Lucy Beckett's *Wallace Stevens* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1980) argues that Stevens follows the Arnoldian line, as mediated by Santayana. George Lensing in *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* prefers Emerson's influence. More recently David R. Jarraway proposes a 'deconstructive' Nietzschean model for Stevens's search for a supreme fiction of belief in *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief: Metaphysician in the Dark* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

question of belief and to long for the spiritual and imaginative comforts that belief provided. An early entry shows him fretting between scepticism and the need to believe:

I wish that groves still *were* sacred - or, at least, that something was: that there were still something free from doubt, that day unto day still uttered speech, and night unto night still showed wisdom. I grow tired of the want of faith - the instinct of faith.... It would be much *nicer* to have things definite - both human and divine. One wants to be decent and to know the reason why. (*L* 86)

The desire to have things definite and decent ensured his continued attendance to church services. Yet even this adherence to conventional piety, a practice which lasted until much later (*L* 348), was not unqualified. 'The church should be more than a moral institution', (*L* 140) he complained. Indeed, were it to retain its authority, its dogma and its visible signs must be made once more to satisfy both feeling and the imagination. A visit to St. John's Chapel after a reading of Christ's life which evoked in him 'a peculiar emotion' drew the following remark:

When you compare that poverty [of the church] with the wealth of symbols, of remembrances, that were created and revered in times past, you appreciate the change that has come over the church. The church must be more than a moral institution, if it is to have the influence that it should have. The space, the gloom, the quiet mystify and entrance the spirit. But that is not enough. - And one turns from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus - temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness - tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the noble depths of men familiar with Gethsamane, familiar with Jerusalem. - I do not wonder that the church is largely a relic. Its vitality depended on its association with Jerusalem, so to speak. (*L* 140)

Stevens of course was not alone in his desire for a 'vital' belief. Before him were Arnold and Pater, whose pursuit of aesthetic ideals as perfection of the spiritual

and imaginative life informed the aspirations of Stevens's generation. Although Stevens too professed a 'feeling of piety' and would sacrifice a great deal to be a Saint Augustine' (L 32) so as to pursue the unsullied pleasures of beauty and moral conscience, this saintly life was felt to be 'inhuman' and 'a form of narrowness', at odds with the demands of 'Chicagoan' modernity to which he must concede and yet which he also sought to evade. In Stevens's case, the pressures of reality must have been keenly felt, given the ethic of work which his religious heritage emphasized. Another early journal entry records an effort to accommodate facts without surrendering to the real:

..I believe, as unhesitatingly as I believe anything, in the efficacy and necessity of fact meeting fact - with a background of the ideal....

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

For belief to be 'vital', a new background of divinity must be envisaged so as to make Chicagoan facts acceptable.

Santayana and 'Comforts of the Sun'

Stevens's strained transcendentalism, here more a perspective by which to evade facts than to confront them, owes something to Emerson, and more pertinently to Santayana.² *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* redefines religion by extending

². George Lensing, *op.cit.*, pp.23-28, argues that Stevens's attempt to reconcile fact with ideal places him in the Emersonian tradition, and not in the line of Santayana's aesthetic idealism. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.14-14, 18-21, also prefers to see Stevens following Emerson's more tough-minded transcendentalism. Lucy Beckett, *op.cit.*, however, argues for Santayana's influence, as does Milton J. Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.211-212, who sees Santayana, along with Nietzsche, as one figure who assists Stevens in his

the naturalistic basis of Santayana's aesthetic idealism, already adumbrated in *The Sense of Beauty*, to the function of belief. Identical in essence, both poetry and religion are imaginative fictions and myths created out of sensations and experience to interpret and idealize reality and thereby satisfy spiritual needs. They differ only in so far as religion 'intervenes' in life to regulate behaviour.³ Their identity is achieved in the 'playful mood' (*IPR* 28) of the pagan myths and rituals of Greek religion. This anthropomorphic spirit reached its supreme expression in the story of Christ where it was intensified and enlarged so as to encompass the whole experience of humanity and elevate it to 'ideal adequacy' (*IPR* pp.v-vi). According to Santayana, the efficacy of Christianity lies precisely in its ability to satisfy both imaginative and spiritual needs for the ideal:

What overcame the world was what Saint Paul said he would always preach: Christ and him crucified. Therein was a new poetry, a new ideal, a new God. Therein was the transcript of the real experience of humanity, as men found it in their inmost souls and as they were dimly aware of it in universal history. The moving power was a fable - for who stopped to question whether its elements were historical, if only its meaning were profound and its inspiration contagious? This fable had points of attachment to real life in a visible brotherhood and in an extant worship, as well as in the religious past of a whole people. At the same time it carried the imagination into a new sphere; it sanctified the poverty and sorrow at which Paganism had shuddered; it awakened tender emotions, revealed more human objects of adoration, and furnished subtler instruments of grace. (*IPR* 86)

Santayana's views find echoes in Stevens's early speculation on the mysteries of the Christian dogma and the enduring power of the Church in which the enduring

search to define the hero. I hope to show that Stevens is as sceptical of Santayana's idealism as of Emerson's.

³. George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (ed.1900), pp.v-vi; hereafter abbreviated as *IPR* and further citations will be included in the text.

appeal of religion was perceived to reside in the marvellous. God was not a supreme being who demanded faith, although the thought of him 'makes the world sweeter, even if God be no more than the mystery of life' (L 140). He also found the New Testament 'thrilling', its contents 'a narration of the most incredible adventures that ever befell a human being.'⁴ Both the 'thrill' and the desire for comforting thoughts are to underline the strained anthropomorphism of 'Sunday Morning', Stevens's vision of life's mystery.

Stevens says that the poem is 'anybody's meditation' on 'religion and the meaning of life', and what he meditates on is the possibility of Santayana's proposition, for he explains that the poem 'is simply an expression of paganism, although, of course, I did not think that I was expressing paganism when I wrote it' (L 250).⁵ Certainly the poem's opening seems to endorse Santayana's ideas of the aesthetic basis of religion. As the poem progresses, the woman's enjoyment in sensuous pleasures and her religious longings become indistinguishable. Indeed, her reverie seems to be induced by these pleasures almost as if it too is a form of indulgence: 'The pungent oranges and bright, green wings/Seem things in some procession of the dead,/Winding across wide water, without sound,/Stilled *for* the

⁴. A letter dated May 11, 1909, cited in Lensing, *op.cit.*, p.60; and *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, p.224.

⁵. Milton J. Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.111-114, sees the poem's paganism as manifesting Pater's influence on Stevens's attempt to embrace the desire for beauty and the desire for death central to Pater's quest for intensity. Harold Bloom sees the poem as an early attempt by Stevens at Emersonian freedom with a smattering of Nietzschean will to power.

passing of her dreaming feet.’⁶ Both the ritual of pleasures and the religious reverie dissipate the austere observance of the ‘holy hush’ of Sunday Morning.

Yet Stevens goes further in dismissing the time-hallowed sacrifice. While Santayana is prepared to see the life of Christ as a supreme instance of the apotheosis of the imagination, Stevens reduces it to ‘silent shadows’ and ‘dreams’. The expulsion of the dead and their images, however, does not free the imagination from its nostalgia for divinity. Rather, it exposes the vagaries of the imagination just as it becomes imperative that ‘divinity must live within herself’ and that substitutive fictions and apposite rituals must be created. Indeed, the poem wonders how and how far the imagination can satisfy the need to believe:

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

The stanzas that follow ponder the implications of reimagining the sky in the image of ‘our blood’. Stevens turns to Keats, one of his “man” poets’, who once celebrated the exquisite pleasures of gratuitous delights. Unlike Keats, Stevens allows the woman no chimera of transcendence, but only the earth’s fertility; no intimation of life’s fullness in a momentary resolution of pain and pleasure, but remembrance and desire. Yet ‘endure’, thrice-repeated, here strongly resonates against the implications

⁶. The emphasis is mine. Jacqueline Brogan in *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1986), pp.148-149, draws attention to the use of ‘as’, ‘seem’, and ‘like’ that turns the woman’s religious vision into similes.

of transience, of loss and lack, that each of Stevens's proposed substitutes for paradise suggests. As such, it belies the trust in change and in the poetry of earth that Stevens here attempts. The tension between the desire for permanence and the gesturing toward change is central to Stevens's proposal that 'Death is the mother of beauty'. Death alone makes possible renewal, for the thought of death quickens desire while satisfaction is momentary, if at all. The willow will continue to shiver for maidens who remain unmoved, boys pile on plums and pears on discarded plates, and the maidens taste and stray 'impassioned', though not satiated, down the path of littering leaves.⁷

What kind of divinity may this mother of beauty engender and what manner of earth is he likely to inhabit? For Stevens's virile men, the sun is celebrated 'not as a god, but as a god might be' - a fiction that keeps alive desire - 'naked among them, like a savage source'. For them, the earth, now divested of the old mythologies, becomes what it has always been: an on-going process of flux, a recurrent conflict of opposing desires, or isolated moments of illusory unsponsored freedom. It is this inescapable transience and mortality that casts its shadow over the teeming vitality that the poem seeks to offer as a new poetry of the earth:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

⁷. Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, pp.99-111, notes that the willow is a metaphor for unrequited love and death. She also argues that the poem's word-play works as a way of ending old *topoi* rather than beginning new poems.

Try as he does, the landscape resists Stevens's appropriation. The sky darkens, the flocks of pigeons are 'casual', and their 'ambiguous undulations' downward into darkness portend the destiny that befalls any supreme fiction of the ideal: that it shares the same mortality and vagaries of desire as the labour of pain and blood of the people who make it.

In the same explanation in which he notes the poem's paganism, Stevens comments on the ritualistic dance: 'Life is as fugitive as the dew upon the feet of men dancing in dew. Men do not either come from any direction or disappear in any direction. Life is as meaningless as dew' (*L* 250). As in 'Peter Quince at the Clavier', Stevens balks at the naturalism and the intimation of transcendence he tries to embrace. Much as he shares Santayana's desire that the 'unreal' of the imagination may provide a glimpse at 'purities beyond definitions' (*OP* 256), to rest content with the 'ideal adequacy' that poetry and religion must inspire and anticipate is for Stevens to identify poetry with 'the hieratic' and therefore to 'belittle' the imagination's freedom and its function of engaging and affirming troublesome facts (*NA* 138). In short, Stevens's 'necessary angel' must always be surrounded by paysans, for he is 'the angel of reality' (*CP* 496) whose 'central problem is always the problems of the normal' (*NA* 116).

The angel is particularly hard to find throughout the Thirties and Forties, and therefore it is all the more necessary. Assailed by the pressures of contemporaneity, Stevens asks if 'the instinct of joy' suffices as an idea of order to which we should turn for help instead of to God, or, more specifically, to the Left's Bulgar and to the New Humanists' 'reason, fatuous fire' (*OP* 93). Exploring the concepts of new romanticism, pure poetry and nobility, he defends and redefines the needs and power

of the imagination as creator of fresh forms of belief in the old world that has gone mad. Stevens himself stresses the necessity of the task:

If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else.... A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned an identity for that thing. (*L* 370)

As Stevens here indicates, at stake is the identity of belief. His growing concern in his poems and essays of this period is to evolve a credible symbol of belief out of the ongoing tension between the needs of the imagination and the changing pressures of the real. This 'figure of capable imagination' (*CP* 249) will help people live their lives by magnifying, not falsifying, them in their own eyes and by encouraging participation in 'an agreement with reality' that it creates. In brief, Stevens's concern is with the 'supreme fiction'.

A glimpse of this evolving noble rider is provided in 'Asides on the Oboe', a poem which Stevens says illustrates a possible identity of the object of belief (*L* 370). The poem begins with an ultimatum that 'final belief/Must be in a fiction' (*CP* 250). This final fiction, the poem makes clear, is not 'the obsolete fiction' of gods or heroes of the past. Rather, it is the 'impossible possible philosophers' man', an abstract idea of man that engages and responds to both thought and feeling. As 'a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,/Who in a million diamonds sums us up', his purity distinguishes the noble rider from the ignoble elements of reality and makes him the focus of shared aspiration and belief. The same imagery also suggests that he is both a medium and object of perception and fulfillment by means of and within which the needs of the imagination are given voice. Above all, as Stevens takes care to stress, what he reflects and reflects upon is the violence of reality that he transmutes:

One year, death and war prevented the jasmine scent
 And the jasmine islands were bloody martyrdoms.
 How was it then with the central man? Did we
 Find peace? We found the sum of men. We found,
 If we found the central evil, the central good.
 We buried the fallen without the jasmine crowns.
 There was nothing he did not suffer, no; nor we.

The jasmine scent of religious illusions is now dispelled, and with it the belief in the absolute truth of its fiction. What replaces it is the 'violence' of belief in the glass man's 'reflection' of reality. Note the repetition of 'as' by which Stevens takes care to stress both the momentariness and wilfulness of the act of creating and sustaining the illusion of belief:

It was not as if the jasmine ever returned.
 But we and the diamond globe at last were one.
 We have always been partly one. It was as we came
 To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard
 Him chanting for those buried in their blood,
 In the jasmine haunted forests, that we knew
 The glass man, without external reference.

Note in particular the ambiguity of the closing remark, implying both the illusory self-sufficiency and untruthfulness of this transience of peace. As Stevens elsewhere contends, 'The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly' (*OP* 189). Now that the age of the gods has passed, the age of fiction may yet begin.

Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and the Gaiety of Poetry

The idea that fiction may be the final choice of belief is by no means confined

to Stevens, and his attitude of scepticism and wilful belief in untruth suggests Nietzsche as his impossible possible philosopher.⁸ Although Stevens himself disclaims any direct connection between his ideas of fiction and the hero and Nietzsche's Superman, he is sufficiently intrigued by Henry Church's interest to pursue his own reading of some of Nietzsche's works, albeit without much enthusiasm. Stevens's attitude to Nietzsche is best described as cautious interest. He remarks mockingly that Nietzsche 'is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink', admitting however that 'if you don't like it, what is there to take its place' (*L* 432). To understand Stevens's attitude, and to see how Nietzsche helps Stevens to focus on the question of belief, it is necessary first to consider the contemporary view of Nietzsche, especially in the Thirties and Forties.⁹

The intellectual and political climate of these two decades did not favour interest in Nietzsche. As in the Twenties, the controversy surrounding Nietzsche centred around the ambiguous and notorious concepts of the Superman and the Will

⁸. Affinities between Stevens and Nietzsche have been noted by various critics. In Harold Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, Nietzsche is another Emersonian strong poet. Milton J. Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.247-265, examines Nietzsche's influence on Stevens's concept of the hero. Two other 'influences', beside Santayana, have been suggested for Stevens's idea of fiction. Frank Doggett, *Stevens's Poetry of Thought*, pp.98-110; and Frank Kermode, *The Sense Of an Ending*, pp.35-64, claim affinities between Stevens's idea and Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of 'As If'*. Milton J. Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.205-210, also examines the parallels between William James's will to belief and Stevens's, and concludes that James's theory is too pragmatic to be of interest to Stevens. A contrary view is proposed by Ihab Hassan, who argues that James, not Stevens's aesthetic fictionalism, is a necessary antidote to poststructuralist scepticism; see 'Imagination and Belief: Wallace Stevens and William James in Our Clime', *Wallace Stevens Journal* Vol. X no.1 (Spring 1986).

⁹. Patrick Bridgwater, *Nietzsche in Anglo-Saxony* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), pp.191-201, examines changing perceptions of Nietzsche in the Twenties and argues that Stevens is interested in Nietzsche's 'excess' of style. Milton J. Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.247-252, shows that Nietzsche went out of favour due to the anti-Nazi feeling in the Thirties and Forties.

to Power. Although Nietzsche's cult of the Superman had little to do with the American Bundist Movement, the image of the Bundists as 'thugs' and 'beer-drinking bullies' did little to promote Nietzsche's reputation.¹⁰ The espousal of Nietzsche by the Literary Left as a revolutionary gradually waned in the second half of the Thirties as the growing Nazi movement appropriated Nietzsche as its spiritual progenitor and as the threats of war increased. Even C.E. Joad's *vademecum*, *Guide to Philosophy* (1936), considered it safe to omit Nietzsche and include Marx, who was still at least respectable among the Left-wing intelligentsia. To many of his critics, Nietzsche's Will to Power was simply synonymous with German barbarism and militarism. Others saw it as Nietzsche's personal egomania and identified it as the basis of his attack on Christianity and democracy.

Granted the collective anti-Nietzschean vehemence, it is hardly surprising that Nietzschean enthusiasts were driven to apologetic defense. Their apology consisted of a careful modification of the politically controversial aspects of Nietzsche's doctrine of the Will to Power, and a self-conscious defense of his 'Europeanism'. Oscar Levy, for instance, defended Nietzsche's attack on Christianity as 'a consequence of intellectual honesty'.¹¹ Another critic presents Nietzsche through a selective collection of aphorisms as hating Germans, esteeming Jews and loving France.¹²

Of particular interest to Stevens's position is the modification of the excesses

¹⁰. Sander Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp.21, 39.

¹¹. Oscar Levy, 'Nietzsche and the Crisis: Reply', *Commonweal* 23 (March 13, 1932), pp.388-455.

¹². Benjamin de Casseres, *Germans, Jews and France* (1936), reviewed in *International Nietzsche Bibliography*, edited by Herbert W. Reichart and Karl Schlechta (1968), p.9.

of aesthetic individualism inspired by Nietzsche. Gone was the image of Nietzsche, fostered by Mencken, as a scourge of puritanism and materialism. His Dionysian exuberance and voluntarism, previously assimilated into American thought as a modern, more defiant version of Emersonian and Whitmanian vitalism, now moderated into a precursor of American pragmatism.¹³ Rare, too, was the view of Nietzsche as the last Romantic prophet, 'evangelist of a new alliance of earth and man'.¹⁴ In its place, Nietzsche now became 'a tonic', less a cure than a fortification against despair in his provision of a modern hero. One critic defiantly champions this view:

In an age of materialism and neurosis, Nietzsche, as warrior against emptiness and timidity, is an excellent tonic. He does not offer solace, but fortifies against despair and exalts to mountain heights. By affirming the utmost freedom of the individual he is also a tonic against the insecurity of modern man. Insecurity, bred of social and spiritual conditions, may spell danger for the future of man. It has done so in the past. Unable to stand the strain of insecurity, many may wish to get rid of their selves and sacrifice their individuality, on the altar of some political or transcendental idol.¹⁵

This image of Nietzsche as a modern hero becomes the central issue in Eric Bentley's study of the cult of hero-worship. Bentley's analysis is perhaps the only non-partisan and serious attempt to clarify and assess the impact of Nietzsche as a reflection of the disintegration of European civilization. He sees hero-worship in Freudian terms as a wish to escape from or transcend the vicissitudes of the self into

¹³. Charles M. Blackwell, 'The Tragic Philosophy', *Saturday Review of Literature*, Volume 2 number 39 (April 24, 1926), pp.733-742.

¹⁴. Thomas Mann, 'Nietzsche and Music', *Past Masters and Other Essays*, translated by H.T. Lowe Porter (1933), p.145.

¹⁵. George de Huszar, 'The Essence of Nietzsche', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 43, number 4 (October 1944), p.368.

a fiction of a heroic, albeit lonely, self. According to Bentley, Nietzsche's personal tragedy as a self-styled, dispossessed Dionysus is a 'typical example of a modern man in a modern dilemma: trapped between yearning for religion and emphasis on history, heroic vitalism and mysticism.'¹⁶ The appeal of heroism consists in its release of pent-up energies and in its inspiration of social cohesion which liberalism fails to provide. Yet this explosion, too, has its dangers, as Bentley warns in his conclusion:

The revival of hero-worshipping in the modern industrial epoch is but one symptom of the failure of plutocracy to satisfy the heart of man, and unless the rational and fruitful element in it can be assimilated by a more rational and fruitful philosophy than fascism, heroic vitalism will go down in history as no more than a portion of European nihilism, a mere segment of the great shadow which the machine age casts over the mind of artist.

In the context of this contemporary controversy, Stevens's ambivalence is hardly surprising. His poems and essays register Nietzschean themes and imagery, especially with regard to his meditation on the hero.¹⁷ Yet these remain largely evasive and avoid contemporary interpretations. One instance is perhaps his notion of poetic intoxication, as distinct from the view of Nietzsche as 'a tonic'. As used in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', it suggests a complex of will and scepticism regarding the hope to find what will suffice:

¹⁶. Eric Bentley, 'Modern Hero Worship: Notes on Carlyle, Nietzsche and Stefan George', *Sewanee Review* 52 (July 1944), pp.441-456.

¹⁷. See Milton Bates, *op.cit.*, Chapter 7. Other criticisms include James S. Leonard and Christine E. Wharton, *The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), that maps Nietzschean imagery in Stevens's affirmation of romantic humanism through the supreme fiction; Bobby Joe Leggett also maps the Dionysian-Apollinian imagery to claim 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' as a reassertion of lyric voice in 'Apollinian and Dionysian in "Peter Quince at the Clavier"', *Wallace Stevens Journal* Vol.14, no.1 (Spring 1990).

A few final solutions, like a duet
 With the undertaker: a voice in the clouds,

Another on earth, the one a voice
 Of ether, the other smelling of drink,

The voice of ether prevailing, the swell
 Of the undertaker's song in the snow

Apostrophizing wreaths, the voice
 In the clouds serene and final, next

The grunted breath serene and final,
 The imagined and the real,...

(CP 177)

Indeed, more important than affinities of ideas and imagery are perhaps these suggestive similarities in the play of thought and language - the tension between negation and affirmation, between need, resolve and scepticism, the play of parody and pun - that characterize Stevens's endless meditation on the imagined and the real, on the one hand; and, on the other, the play of antithesis and excess central to Nietzsche's tragic vision or the will to power. Stevens himself admits to liking the 'sharp edges and intensity of speech' (L 462) of Nietzsche's style that is a major strategy of Nietzsche's *gay science* - his revaluation of all values. A look at Nietzsche's concept of *gay science* may help to clarify Stevens's own attempt to define a credible substitute for belief.

Nietzsche's 'gay science', like Stevens's 'supreme fiction', is an attempt to define aesthetic illusion as a perspective by which to say yes to a world without God. First adumbrated in *The Birth of Tragedy*, this is achieved in the Greek tragic vision, created through the dialectic of the Dionysian conflicting vital energies of pain and pleasure, on the one hand; and, on the other, the Apollinian will to form and illusion.

By means of the illusion of tragedy, the Dionysian energy is intensified, yet its destructive conflict is resolved. The tragic vision is thus, for Nietzsche, the paradigm for the highest of all creative acts which, by giving form to the conflicting energies of life, becomes the supreme affirmation of life itself. As Zarathustra says:

Creation - that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's easement. But that the creator may exist, that itself requires suffering and much transformation.

Yes, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators!
Thus you are advocates and justifiers of all transitoriness.

For the creator himself to be the child new-born he must also be willing to be the mother and enduring the mother's pain.¹⁸

Nietzsche comes to baptize this dialectic of destruction and creation the 'Will to Power' which forms the basis of all creative activities, including intellectual and religious ideas. Like artistic creations, ideals of value and knowledge are displacements of experience into fiction, expressions of the Will to Power to overcome and affirm life.

Nietzsche's emphasis on the plurality and dynamism of the Will to Power as origin and condition of meaning leads him to attack traditional forms of knowledge and morality, especially Christianity. According to Nietzsche, Christianity errs in denying the dynamism and contradiction of the Will to Power. Its ideals of renunciation and transcendence seek redemption and alleviation of pain and suffering and thus imply exhaustion of the Will to Power. For Nietzsche, the dialectic of plurality and contradiction implicated in the 'gay science' makes it an important strategy of a critique of values by exposing the reductive 'Spirit of Gravity' (Z 201)

¹⁸. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 'On the Blissful Island', translated by R. J. Hollindale (Penguin Books), p.109; hereafter abbreviated as Z, and page references will be given for further citations which will be included in the text.

behind all dogmas of truth, good and evil. As he himself declares, only by the antithetical means of parody can the serious task of revaluation of all values and affirming life begin. 'Another ideal runs ahead of us, a strange, tempting, dangerous ideal,' he proclaims in the penultimate section of *The Gay Science*:

the ideal of a spirit who plays naively - that is, not deliberately but from overflowing power and abundance - with all that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine;... the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear *inhuman* - for example, when it confronts all earthly seriousness so far, all solemnity in gesture, word, tone, eye, morality, and task so far, as if it were their most incarnate and involuntary parody - and in spite of all of this, it is perhaps only with him that great seriousness really begins, that the real question mark is posed for the first time, that the destiny of the soul changes, the hand moves forward, the tragedy begins.¹⁹

'*Incipit tragoedia ... incipit parodia*, no doubt' (*GS* 2nd.Pref., 1). In both manner and message, the passage draws attention to parody as a method of criticism, which, by means of pun, irony, interrogation, provocation, and so on, subverts and resists all pretense to dogmas of knowledge and truth. It also suggests parody as a strategy of Nietzsche's own 'intellectual conscience' (*GS* I, 2): his effort to present his own views without claiming them as other than 'fiction'. As such, it suggests parody as Nietzsche's attempt to renew the dynamism of the Will to Power, and, above all, to claim the illusion of art, not as expression of truth or even of life, but as a wilful affirmation of life:

No, if we convalescents still need art, it is another kind of art - a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a pure flame, licks into untouched skies. Above all, an art for

¹⁹. *The Gay Science*, V, 382, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); hereafter abbreviated as *GS*, and further citations will be included in the text.

artists, for artists only! We know better afterward what above all is needed for this: cheerfulness, any cheerfulness, my friends - also as artists: let me prove it. There are a few things we now know too well, we knowing ones: oh, how we now learn to forget well, and to be good at *not knowing*, as artists! (*GS*, 2nd. Pref., 4)

Nietzsche's 'gay science' becomes Stevens's 'bright *scienza*' (*CP* 248): an imagined state of 'a gaiety that is being, not merely knowing,/The will to be and to be total in belief,/Provoking a laughter, an agreement, by surprise.' Similarly, Stevens wonders if wilful ignorance may be a condition by which to achieve the hoped-for affirmation of life: 'It may be that the ignorant man, alone,/Has any chance to mate his life with life' (*CP* 222). The fluid abstract style - both playful and involved - of the poems of the Forties registers the efforts of will, their nuances of desire and uncertainty in Stevens's meditations on this 'gaiety', often insinuating at the same time that any assertion or affirmation concluded remains a hypothesis, 'a thought to be rehearsed' (*CP* 247). In 'Landscape with Boat', for instance, the 'floribund ascetic', Stevens's 'anti-master-man' whose name suggests the Dionysian paradox of growth and death essential for a free spirit, practices Nietzschean mode of ascetic renunciation as his persistent questioning and negation transforms itself into willing and then into fulfillment:

He never supposed
 That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
 That the things that he rejected might be part
 And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue
 Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
 Upon the clouds, the ear so magnified
 By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
 Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine
 Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
 Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
 And that if nothing was the truth, then all
 Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.

Had he been better able to suppose:
 He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
 Above the Mediterranean, emerald
 Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
 Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
 A yellow wine and follow a steamer's track
 And say, 'The thing I hum appears to be
 The rhythm of this celestial pantomime.'

(CP 242-243)

Just as Nietzsche insists that 'to "give style" to one's character' (GS IV, 290) is an act of realization of the Will to Power, so Stevens says that the poet supplies 'the satisfactions of belief ... in his style' (OP 2). In particular, it may be argued that the Dionysian antagonism and paradox offers Stevens a possible style by which the 'violence' of the real may be accommodated and momentarily transformed by the 'violence' of the imagination into the nobility of poetry.²⁰ In 'Man and Bottle', the mind 'to find what will suffice,/Destroys romantic tenements/Of rose and ice/In the land of war' (CP 238-239); its task is indeed harder, for

It has to content reason concerning war,
 It has to persuade that war is part of itself,
 A manner of thinking, a mode
 Of destroying, as the mind destroys,

An aversion, as the world is averted
 From an old delusion, an old affair with the sun,
 An impossible aberration with the moon,
 A grossness of peace.

Of all the poems in *Parts of A World*, 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas' is Stevens's most sustained effort to explore the possibilities

²⁰. According to Milton Bates, *op.cit.*, p.198, Stevens might have implied a semi-ethical criterion of poetry in his choice of the term, in contrast to Eliot's rejection of poetry's moral function.

and implications of war as ‘a manner of thinking’ that may find in ‘the central evil, the central good’ (*CP* 251).²¹ The poem begins by considering the distinction between fiction and reality and their difficult relationship. Note how Stevens is ironic regarding both; the paper roses make brilliant sounds but are dust, while the blood-rose of the sun and rain lives in its smell yet is silent. Yet even this simple distinction is soon complicated, for even though the speaker asserts that ‘it is an artificial world’ inscribed with words, yet the rainy rose seems to escape it through belonging to the rainy naked world. The paradox is disturbing, for if pushed to the limits, it seems that neither knowledge nor immediacy is possible, as Stevens now wonders:

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

There is in ‘that last summer’ a wistful undertone of nostalgia, reminiscent of Eliot’s ‘there we have been’ as he recalls the moment of revelation in the rose garden of ‘Burnt Norton’. Yet the bitter irony in ‘lascivious poisons’ in the next line stops short of Eliot’s certainty. Stevens’s metaphor of scepticism and desire here may also be echoing Nietzsche’s own ‘poisons’ of the impulse of doubt and negation that need accompany any constitutive will of ‘scientific’ thinking (*GS* III, 113).²² Indeed, while

²¹. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.152, sees the poem as venturing ‘the crucial formula for American Romantic poetry’ in reclaiming the poetic self as maker of fiction. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.212-218, on the other hand, argues that the poem shows Stevens’s doubt in the efficacy of fiction to accommodate war.

²². See ‘The poison of which weaker natures perish strengthens the strong - nor do they call it poison’ (*GS* I, 19).

to desire to be part of the rainy rose is to live under the 'unbearable tyranny' of rain, and to live with the monster-maker of the sun of the imagination is to live with nothing better than 'paper things' and 'paper days', for Stevens as for Nietzsche, there is only one choice: to 'recognize untruth as a condition of life' or that 'the false and true are one'.²³

Section II sees Stevens elevating the statement into, as it were, a 'creed'. Here Stevens centres on the problem of evil. As in 'Esthétique du Mal', evil is no moral ideal, but pain and suffering, and the warring impulses of the creative will and doubt that 'made magic, as in catastrophe'. It is this concept that Stevens puts to the Secretary for Porcelain to note. The parody here is directed at Keats, who counsels faith in the truth of his fiction of the Grecian Urn. Yet even Stevens here seems to find his own claim hard to accept. Just as the world is harder to turn into metaphors than a tea-cup is, so the reality of ten thousand deaths cannot be easily 'glazed' or equated with 'a single well-tempered apricot, or, say,/An egg-plant of good air.' The playfulness turns sour, indeed ferocious, in the second half of the section as if Stevens now turns to persuade himself, 'my beards', to seek solace in his own metaphor.

Yet why so ferocious? Is it perhaps because of his own lingering nostalgia for Keatsian fiction of transcendence that he himself tries to exorcise and yet which somehow returns in his own well-tempered apricot? Plato, reddened flower, and bird, too, call up the shadow of the Uncle, who tries to keep alive his memories of love and beauty, while his body tires. At stake here is the difficulty of affirming the self, with all its vicissitudes, as maker of belief on which so much depends. The tension of scepticism and need underpins the parable in Section III where Stevens turns to the

²³. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, I, 4.

leanest and hungriest of cats: the believers of the old god. Their sustenance gone, in the new world all men must now be priests. Yet what is it they preach? A substitutive unified and unifying 'dark-blue king' who will unify the hearts and minds of men like the old god? A central man? Or simply that no substitute is necessary? Stevens's reaction to his own speculation is at once hesitant and desperate. The first two possibilities prompt an ambivalent exclamation: 'If they could!'. The third is even less attractive: 'The multitudes of men/That kill the single man, starvation's head,/One man, *their* bread and *their* remembered wine?'.²⁴ Yet note that the speculation also secretes an answer:

The lean cats of the arches of the churches
Bask in the sun in which they feel transparent,
As if designed by X, the per-noble master.
They have a sense of their design and savor
The sunlight. They bear lightly the little beyond
Themselves, the slightly unjust drawing that is
Their genius: the exquisite errors of time.

Here, it seems, is Stevens's revaluation of all values, for the lean cats return to serve under a different god, now divested even of the glazing of Stevens's fruit of evil. The play on 'per-noble' can either mean suggest 'thoroughly' as in 'perforate', or 'bad' and 'destruction' as in 'pervert' or 'perfidious', making X a very noble master or a very evil master; in brief a Nietzschean master of fiction by whose design - destiny and slightly unjust drawing - the lean cats lie basking as if in the sun.²⁵ Will this new sun withstand reality even at its bleakest? Stevens now turns to another lean nostalgia: the

²⁴. my emphasis.

²⁵. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.153, sees X as a Eliot as mistaken believer who, like the woman of 'Sunday Morning' gives his own bounty to the dead.

Emersonian transparency of 'The Snow Man'. This time, Stevens puts himself back in the landscape as the acknowledged maker of the 'difference' on which being depends. As Zarathustra suggests, the ideal of transparency, of identity, is the most exquisite error of time by being the most subtle of deceptions: 'Appearance lies most beautifully among the most unlike; for the smallest gap is the most difficult to bridge' (Z 234). Yet the landscape has changed, denying Stevens this most exquisite illusion, and thereby making a new one all the more urgent. More sceptical and more needful than the speaker in 'The Snow Man', Stevens now attempts to transfigure the withered scene:

He felt curious

Whether the water was black and lashed about
 Or whether the ice still covered the lake. There was still
 Snow under the trees and on the northern rocks,
 The dead rocks not the green rocks, the live rocks. If,
 When he looked, the water ran up the air and grew white
 Against the edge of the ice, the abstraction would
 Be broken and winter would be broken and done,
 And being would be broken and done,
 And being would be being himself again,
 Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self,
 Black water breaking into reality.

'If' identifies being as an act of imagining, or in this case of reimagining, and not of insight. Note too the emphatic repetition of breaking as a mode of renewal, and the pervasive common undertone of precariousness, solitude and defiance that accompany Stevens's affirmation of the self as master and maker of its own belief.

So what is this belief that Stevens now proposes? The rest of the poem tries to define its form and origin, and explore its possible implications. 'The law of chaos', according ^{to} Stevens, 'is the law of ideas,/Of improvisations and seasons of belief.' It is necessarily subjective, pluralistic, fictive, always subject to assassins' doubt and

redefinition. Although these qualities make belief only ‘a singular romance’, yet they also keep alive ‘this warmth in the blood-world for the pure idea’, just as they keep their believer on the way to life not to death. As Stevens later tells Papini, ‘the way through the world/Is more difficult than the way beyond it’ (*CP* 446), for it requires the will’s supreme effort to affirm pain and suffering not only as the inevitable condition of life, but as the creative origin and force of belief. Stevens returns to ponder this difficult prospect in the final section:

We live in a camp ... Stanzas of final peace
 Lie in the heart’s residuum ... Amen.
 But would it be amen, in choirs, if once
 In total war we died and after death
 Returned, unable to die again, fated
 To endure thereafter every mortal wound,
 Beyond a second earth, as evil’s end?

It is only that we are able to die, to escape
 The wounds. Yet to lie buried in evil earth,
 If evil never ends, is to return
 To evil after death, unable to die
 Again and fated to endure beyond
 Any mortal end. The chants of final peace
 Lie in the heart’s residuum.

How can

We chant if we live in evil and afterward
 Lie harshly buried there?

The meditation here is more tentative, more anguished than in ‘Asides on the Oboe’, for the earth in which we lie buried is also ‘evil’. Under these conditions, how may and can the final chants be sung in which final peace may be found? Note that, unlike the confident assertion of ‘Asides in the Oboe’, Stevens’s proposed answer is preceded by ‘if’:

If earth dissolves

Its evil after death, it dissolves it while
 We live. Thence come the final chants, the chants
 Of the brooder seeking the acutest end
 Of speech: to pierce the heart's residuum
 And there to find music for a single line,
 Equal to memory, one line in which
 The vital music formulates the words.

The conjunction here carries both the weight of hypothesis and will, for the paradox is resolved even as it is contemplated.²⁶ If evil is dissolved while we live, then the heart's residuum can be pierced and the final chants can be sung. This is Stevens's meditation on the Eternal Recurrence, the will's most difficult effort to confer value on chaos. The final two lines predict how the heart may be pierced and what the final chants may sing:

Behold the men in helmets borne on steel,
 Discoloured, how they are going to defeat.

The prospect here is as bleak and bold as it is for Nietzsche's 'abysmal thought' (*Z* 232), as Zarathustra will say:

... Behold, you are the teacher of the Eternal Recurrence, that is now your destiny!

That you have to be the first to teach this doctrine - how should this great destiny not also be your greatest danger and sickness! (*Z* 237)

Soon after Stevens's grim vision, he insists in 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' that this is the difficulty that each noble rider must need experience as he seeks to fashion 'the acutest end of speech' for himself. The 'chant' will soon be sorely needed as Stevens prepares for the growing reality of war.

²⁶. It is interesting to recall Eliot's convoluted meditation that opens 'Burnt Norton' where the hypothesis leads on to a surrender to the mystery of revelation.

The Impossible Possible Poet's 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'

Stevens's preoccupation with the spiritual function of poetry and the form of belief received a new impetus when Henry Church approached him for suggestions concerning his ideas of setting up a new literary magazine in America to replace *Mesures*, then endangered by the war in France, and a foundation to award scholarships for promising artists and writers. While Stevens cautioned his friend over the financial and legal issues, he was enthusiastic over the prospect of establishing the significance of poetry that such a project might afford. As his ambitious proposals make clear, the question of the relationship between poetry and belief was central:

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.

(L 378)

The suggestion carefully balances between claiming the spiritual significance of poetry and distancing it from religion. Equally important was the incumbent of the Chair, who would need to be 'a man of a dynamic mind and, ... something of a scholar and very much of an original force'. Stevens was less restrained when he came to his choice of illustrations of essential poets. Neither Santayana nor Eliot would suffice, even though both men possessed the required qualities, for the former was too religious and too philosophical, while the latter too much of 'a negative force'. God and the imagination might indeed be one, yet the poet would never cry out for his

return.

Henry Church's project never materialized, while Stevens's meditation led indirectly to 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction'. Stevens claims in the poem's dedication to his friend that 'Notes' is 'the extremest book of the wisest man close to me, hidden in me day and night'. Within this intimate book, love and peace are again possible. Out of what has Stevens's wisdom grown and who is this wisest man?

Paradoxically, it seems, out of ignorance. 'Begin ephebe, ... You must become an ignorant man again/And see the sun again with an ignorant eye,' says Stevens's wisest man, who sounds as if he was Nietzsche parodying the original Beginning. The ephebe is of course not only an aspiring poet, but also an aspiring citizen, preparing for his full citizenship through military training. He is therefore, we may say, a Nietzschean searcher and maker of belief, which he must do in a world without God. Hence, to begin again, the ephebe must follow strict injunctions. He must not see God, but only the first idea that is neither conceivable nor to be conceived. He must become not-knowing, must deny his anthropocentric urges to suppose the mind the source and end of meaning, or to compose a master or a name for that mind. The negatives resound to forbid the ephebe from returning to the old fictions of the sun, to instil disobedience as a discipline crucial for a new conception of the first idea that will also be a new fiction of being: 'to be/In the difficulty of what it is to be'.

There is yet another act of disobedience that the ephebe must follow and which the master himself instructs by way of illustration: 'The sun must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be/In the difficulty of what it is to be'. The sheer impulsiveness of naming and its rhetorical flourish suggest that the tension of renaming and unnamings, and the kind of name, is more related to the effort of being than the master has

hitherto divulged.²⁷ Indeed, the master's own disobedience prepares for Canto II and III where he describes the 'ancient cycle' of ennui and desire that lies behind the poet's motive for the first idea:

It is the celestial ennui of apartments
That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
Of this invention; and yet so poisonous

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

Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.
May there be an ennui of the first idea?
What else, prodigious scholar, should there be?

It appears that the distaste at what Stevens calls the imaginative 'poverty' of modern life - its tawdriness and lack of 'instinct for faith' and joy - is what prompts the desire for the 'ravishments' of the metaphors of the first idea. Yet once achieved, these metaphors too lose potency and must themselves be thrown away. Only this cycle, the master insists, keeps desire alive in its elusiveness like 'the hermit in a poet's metaphors/Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.' Thus, the monastic man is an artist, for he denies himself the satisfaction of metaphors' claim to truth and being, and yet paradoxically thereby keeps desire potent and therefore its renewal of

²⁷. The point is raised and differently answered. Eleanor Cook suggests 'nonsense' as the aim of Stevens's deceptions of religious terms for the use of poetic power of naming; see 'The Deceptions of Wallace Stevens', *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Volume 4, No.3/4 (1980), 46-57. Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.176, sees the question as a reduction in preparation for the later triumphant declaration of the poet as a maker of tropes. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.255-270. argues that the deception is in search of abstraction as the International style by which the poet can rise above politics while remaining part of reality. Milton J. Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.214-233, agrees on the poem's contemporary context, though prefers to see Stevens's abstraction as implying the poet as a common man.

metaphors. This mode of severe asceticism is what the master celebrates in Canto III as the joyful pursuit of the first idea, always moving from ‘that ever-early candor to its late plural’. The ‘strong exhilaration’ of this ‘candid’ power is all too evident in the strange Arabian astronomer who throws stars around the floor, and unweaves their secrecies down to a free play of words and sounds. ‘Life’s nonsense’, the master observes of his own illustration, ‘pierces us with strange relation’.

Stevens’s Arabian is of course no Coleridgean Kubla Khan, and words like ‘grossest’ and ‘falls’ imply the limits of his will to metaphor and of the power of metaphor. Canto IV admits to these limits, and in so doing Stevens saves himself from the danger of mistaking his anthropomorphism for reality, or remaining content with a single fiction, or for that matter old ones, of that which cannot be represented. If the first idea was and is never our own, then the continual effort to remake the supreme fiction is the only way of transforming the muddy centre into the place where we can live and be ourselves. The epehebe is reminded of this hard lesson of asceticism in Canto V where he, like Nietzsche’s free spirit, must learn to live with solitude and harness the violence from within (‘you writhe and press/A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,/Yet voluble dumb violence’) so as to prepare for the task of contending against the violence from without.

The task is no ordinary heroism, as the comic imagery of the last tercet of the canto suggests. In so far as it is unending, the supreme fiction may remain always more a potential than a realization; yet it will also always have to be willed, made and remade. ‘I have no idea of the form a supreme fiction would take,’ Stevens admits later, ‘The Notes start out with the idea that it would not take any form, that it would be abstract’ (*L* 430). Similarly, Zarathustra says that ‘so that I might still speak in

parables, and hobble and stutter like poets: and truly, I am ashamed that I still have to be a poet' (Z 215). The remaining cantos of 'It Must Be Abstract' address the task of defining the supreme fiction of that which cannot be formed. There is a lot of 'stuttering' in the severe negations of Canto VI, and yet the effort of defining seems to pay off as the idea of the weather gradually takes shape. Note that the master takes care to insist that the idea must be . . . abstract, always provisional, for only as such can it . . . remain alive:

My house has changed a little in the sun.
The fragrance of the magnolias come close,
False flicks, false form, but falseness to the kin.

It must be visible or invisible,
Invisible or visible or both:
A seeing and unseeing in the eye.

The weather and the giant of the weather,
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.

To say that the weather is an abstraction is of course to reinstate the inventing mind as a necessary source of the first idea.²⁸ Here again the danger the ephebe must guard against is to mistake this mind as the unerring source or to compose a master for the mind. The task here is to evolve the major man as a major abstraction, more elusive and yet more necessary, which will act as a credible idea of man. It is certainly not the 'giant thinker' whose absence does not seem to be missed, nor is it the maker of gratuitous 'Swiss perfection' during which the 'familiar music of the machine/Sets

²⁸. Helen Vendler notes the return of the human, but reduces its significance to 'an illustration' of the relation between the giant and the weather; see *On Extended Wings*, p.192. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, p.258, prefers to see the giant as a provisional mediator. Milton Bates, *op.cit.*, p.217, on the contrary, argues that no mediation is necessary for Stevens's medium man who can enjoy the world without the giant.

up its Schwärmerei'. Stevens himself says to one real-life ephebe, 'The long and short of it is that we have to fix abstract objectives and then to conceal the abstract figures in actual appearance. A hero won't do, but we like him much better when he doesn't look it and, of course, it is only when he doesn't look it that we can believe in him' (*L* 489). As we have seen, Stevens turns to Focillon, whose ideas that the MacCullough must be born out of the artist's intense labour of renewing of forms whose imaginative transformation of the world into a human environment closely parallels Nietzsche's. Between Focillon's emphasis on the cultural function of art and Nietzsche's insistence on the labour of the will to power, Stevens evolves the figure of major man who is both human and yet more than human, a shared 'commonal' figure who walks the streets of everyday reality and who is also born of the labour of desire. Note how the poem both resists and persists in the urge to name this figure that must not be named and yet must be even when the figure finally emerges:

It is he. The man
 In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,

 It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
 The final elegance, not to console
 Nor to sanctify, but plainly to propound.

The negatives return, lest the ephebe hypostatize the tramp-like figure - Stevens's concession to contemporaneity - into yet another Phoebus. Note, too, the paradox in the master's instruction that calls upon the ephebe to confect and propound plainly the final elegance of this inelegant tramp. No one image of the major man, however elegant, is adequate, or for that matter, final, for 'the hot of him is purest in the heart' (*CP* 388). The paradox will form the burden of the master's next lesson on how to

renew the image of the major man.²⁹

'It Must Change' begins directly with a re-examination of 'chronologies' of being: fictions of the first idea that come to be taken as truths. Their authority rests on the faith in the power of the imagination and of language to give form to being, to embody and preserve it and thereby satisfy the desire for 'the ravishments of truth' against the 'ravishments' of time. The 'parcel-gilded' seraph is one appointed guardian of this truth, presiding over the scene in which generations of girls, bees and flowers succeed one another. For the master, such repetition provokes distaste rather than pleasure. Likewise with the President of the Immortals in Canto II who denies that death can be the mother of beauty, yet who cannot order the bee to drone green phrases of its lost youth. So, too, is the statue of General Depuis, a noble rider of the past, but only a 'strongly-heightened effigy' to the present generation of lawyers and doctors in their promenades. Because nothing has changed or happened, time has ravished the general, who 'was rubbish in the end'.

Were the major man to assume a definite shape of final elegance, he might follow the General's destiny. It is to prevent this ending that the master proposes an alternative mode of representation according to which being is to be conceived and defined as a dialectic of opposites, in brief, as change:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day and night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.

²⁹. The paradox is a fine point for critical debate. Milton Bates, *op.cit.*, p.218, argues that Stevens is too wary of images of major man and prefers the imagination itself. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.261-262, takes a dissenting view that the qualified espousal of the contemporary, or the credible, is crucial to making poetry itself a credible engagement of reality.

Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

‘Copulars’, here the operative word, puns on ‘copula’ - to be - and ‘copulate’, and suggests the function of language to be that of creation. Whether the master is here following Zarathustra’s desire to redeem ‘it was’ by means of *amor fati*, Stevens himself was speculating on the possibility that God might be found in the predicate.³⁰ Together, it appears that Stevens here may be proposing his own ‘genealogical’ method of representing being that originates in the contrarities of the will to power, and one which finds expression, as in the cry of the impossible, possible philosopher’s cold glass man of ‘Asides on the Oboe’, in the music that speaks for a crowd of voices issuing from a little string.

Something of this method seems to operate from Cantos V to VII where Stevens reworks three visions of the pastoral. In the first, it is Crispin and the guitarist, his two early fictive selves and their *amours* with the earth, that are recalled. With his dream of the wild green pineapple island to the South unfulfilled, and his native land of red melon left behind, the planter sustained the labours of life with the labours of the blue plantation island performed with the aid of the banjo’s piercing twang. Yet, although the convoluted negatives in the concluding comment pays emphatic tribute to the necessity of the saving power of illusion, that the narrative is set in the past tense seems to insist too that the banjo’s music must end and did with the planter’s death and his plantation’s decline.³¹ So it is with the Shelleyan music of ‘Bethou’ in

³⁰. See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ‘Of Redemption’, p.161; and Stevens’s letter dated August 8, 1942; L 415.

³¹. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, pp.194-195, argues that the parable intimates Stevens’s reappropriation of the Romantic visionary tradition. Milton J. Bates, *op.cit.*, p.222,

Canto VI that Stevens himself tries to revive and apply earlier to the street riots in 'Mozart 1935', and the Whitmanian cyclicity of death and beauty that the fragrance of the last lilacs evokes in Canto VII. The 'easy passion and ever-ready love' for the earth that conceals and knows nothing for which the lover yearns is now to be found in the book written for the ignorant man by the scholar in the dark less attentive to the certainty of love than to its fluctuations, less to his perception than to its degrees of change.

It is from the scholar's book which Stevens tells the story of the odd encounter between Nanzia Nunzio and Ozymandias in the next canto. Like Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, Nanzia Nunzio is a seeker after final elegance; her words, 'As I am, I am', like her nudity, define her long-prepared self-abnegation in expectation of the word that, when spoken, will marry her to the 'inflexible order' of truth and being. Yet the Shelleyan Ozymandias proves himself master of another kind of inflexible order, for he contradicts her request for 'the final filament' and matches the emphatic predicates of her address with one of his own, 'the bride/is never naked./A fictive covering/Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.' Out of the coupling of opposites the 'particulars of rapture' come, thus says Stevens; or so it seems.

What fictive covering is this odd marriage of opposites likely to weave, which is to say what form or what speech is the major man likely to assume or speak? Not much, it appears; for the covering will never be finished; besides, it may even be nonsense. Unlike Logos, the major man speaks 'only a little of the tongue'. Like Zarathustra, who still has to 'hobble and stutter like a poet' (Z 215), the major man is a 'dependent orator', restrained by the 'bluntest barriers' of language on which he

gives a dissenting view.

depends for his very being. Striving to forge plainly the final elegance of his own fiction of the commonplaces, the poet must seek to renew the potential of the common language. This he does by combining the imagination's Latin, its 'gibberish', with the 'lingua franca et jocundissima', the 'gibberish' of the common language. The result is the 'peculiar speech' of which the following canto is an instance:

A bench was his catalepsis, Theatre
Of Trope. He sat in the park. The water of
The lake was full of artificial things...

'Catalepsy' is a trance, even a disease which causes a seizure.³² Thus it is a manifestation of the Dionysian pain and ecstasy, or Stevens's 'will to change' responsible for transforming the park into a 'theatre of trope'. The freshness of transformation makes the world, at least for a moment, 'our own' and 'ourselves', for we now look no longer into the muddy centre but 'rubblings of a glass in which we peer'. The vestiges of Saint Paul's dark glass still remain that remind us of the fallen state of our being and our language, yet the major man is also there as 'a vagabond in metaphor' whose eye catches our own.³³ Stevens seems to have found a way of forging proposals of love out of these shadowy duplicates of our reflections and our language; and, imperfect as they must remain, 'time will write them down'.³⁴

Reflection - both the act of thinking and the act of figuration -indeed seems to

³². Many critics have made this point; see Cook, *Wallace Stevens: Word-play and Word-war*, p.245, for instance.

³³. Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, pp.245-246, makes a similar point.

³⁴. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.200, sees 'down' as beckoning a grim direction which Stevens must follow just as the Canon must be clipped in his Romantic flight so as to change into a necessary angel of reality.

be the concern of 'It Must Give Pleasure'. The canto begins with Stevens dismissing Saint Jerome's exultation of the Divine vision for another more uncertain:

But the difficult 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.

Note the careful phrasing of Stevens's definition. Pleasure comes not from immediate, gratuitous perception, but from the difficult effort of a 'later reason': of reflecting upon and transforming experience into the subtlety of thought and resemblances. The mind must focus on 'the image of what we see' and ponder on its own 'motive for metaphor' (*CP* 288). This is the 'difficullest rigor' that requires foregoing the indulgence in well-rehearsed metaphors known to the Saint, and which Stevens undertakes in Canto II. Already an image of memory or more specifically a figure of thought, the blue woman, 'linked and lacquered', insists that memories of the earth alone are enough and that voluptuous dreams should not be added. The effort seems to pay off, for

The blue woman looked and from her window named

The corals of the dogwood, cold and clear,
Cold, coldly delineating, being real,
Clear and, except for the eye, without intrusion.

It is as if by insisting on the pastness of things past that the mind can regain its clarity of sight, rediscover and revitalize its own resources for the necessary effort

of 'later reason'. Not to do so is to be enslaved to the broken visage of permanence from which 'the eye could not escape'. It is perhaps a measure of Stevens's own ambivalence that he should so feel compelled to mount a ferocious parody of God's images and miracles, and to summon up a Nietzschean dead shepherd to stage a drinking bout.³⁵ For, as we go on to the oddest marriage ceremony in Canto IV, at stake here is no less the need to forge out a new, more rigorous and vital supreme fiction within and by means of which the earth might again be 'ours':

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.

A lot indeed 'depends' on ourselves, for the word 'dependent' recalls both the earlier and bleaker 'dependency of old and night ... inescapable' of 'Sunday Morning', and the antithetical play of words of 'cold copulars'. There is no forced resolution here, only emphatic injunctions against consummation either of the marriage wine or of love, against mistaking the ravishments of fiction for the inflexible order of truth. There is no Pauline caution here either, only the marriage hymn that celebrates the fruitful tension of reflection and language as the captain and his bride come together as 'love's characters ... face to face'.

It is for Canon Aspirin to discover and evolve this strange marriage as an order of belief. Its strange asceticism is as remote from his conspicuous consumption as from his sister's austere acceptance of reality. Yet the Canon is no mere sensualist, for he reflects on and hums his fugue of praise in approval of the 'sensible ecstasy' of her choice. He is indeed a man of thought who, as Stevens tells us, has 'explored all the

³⁵. For biblical allusions in Canto III, see Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, p.251.

projections of the mind, particularly his own' (*L* 445), and has, through the labour of his mind, discovered the limits both of facts and thoughts. Above all, he has chosen the difficult choice of 'the complicate, the amassing harmony' of fact and thought.³⁶ More difficult is of course to find a new form for this harmony. This can only be done certainly not by the arbitrary choice of mimesis or contrivance by reason, but rather by the labour of discovery with all its attendant risks of uncertainty:

But to impose is not
 To discover. To discover an order as of
 A season, to discover summer and know it,

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

 It is possible, possible, possible. It must
 Be possible. It must be that in time
 The real will from the crude compoundings come,

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

 The fiction of an absolute - Angel,
 Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
 The luminous melody of proper sound.

The poem strains as the Canon partly resists the urge towards imposition and partly wills his desire into being. Conceived under the labour of 'later reason', the new angel seems more like 'a beast disgorged'. What hymn is appropriate to this strange

³⁶. The Canon and his sister have provoked much critical interest. Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, pp. 204-205, sees him as a high Romantic fallen angel who knows the cure to the headaches of reality, and her as his muse, and whom Stevens must surpass. Milton Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.226-230, sees her as a more diminished version of the blue woman as a clairvoyant of reality, and him as an angel of reality who will proclaim the medium man. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, pp.266-268, sees the Canon as a sensualist, whose error must be exposed and rejected for the truth of his sister's way.

conception?

After such a strenuous exercise, the relentless, anguished questioning in Canto VIII comes as no surprise. The canto is the Canon's version of Nietzsche's 'abysmal thought' (Z 232) of the Eternal Recurrence, asking if he could accept his own crude angel as the supreme fiction. For to accept the self as creator of such a fiction is also to accept the self's poverty, to accept that the solacing majesty of need's golden self is not 'expressible bliss'. Yet by the same token, if this is the self that imagines the angel, then the only majesty there ^{is} _^ is one that lives within and mirrors the self. As with Stevens's other ascetic exercises, the convoluted questioning resolves into a provisional 'yes': 'I have not but I am and as I am I am'. The statement implies the fiction of being as the self's 'escapades of death' - Cinderella's escapist fictions by which to escape the poverty of life and of the self. It also implies the need for a fiction of belief, and above all, the self's ability and necessity to fulfil that need out of its own resources. The affirmation cuts both ways.

With this hard-won affirmation, the poem moves into the last two cantos where the Canon claims more confidently that 'I can/Do all that angels can'. From his perspective as creator of angels, he can at least hope, not to transcend the repetitions of life, but to enjoy them and also to see them as artistic creations: 'These things at least comprise/An occupation, an exercise, a work,/A thing final in itself and, therefore, good'. Similarly, if he can now see the angel at least as an aesthetic projection, and not as a beast disgorged, then he may also hope to bestow upon the tramp in 'It·Must Be Abstract' the honorific title as master of repetition.

The final canto sees the Canon improvising his own love song of the earth, his *paramour*. He begins by renaming himself, 'Civil, madam, I am'. 'Civil' carries a

powerful connotation in Stevens, suggesting ‘the imagination as a power within’ that endows its possessor with ‘such insights into reality as will make it to be ... a poet in the very center of consciousness’ and which make possible ‘that ultimate good sense which we term civilization’ (*NA* 115-116).³⁷ The name also echoes back to the ephebe, who has now, it appears, graduated and is now writing his first poem for his fat girl, his muse of the earth, in which he will seek to rename her and her earth:

Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires

That I name you flatly, waste no words,
Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,

Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
You remain the more than the natural figure. You
Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational

Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
That’s it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

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

The ephebe has learned his lesson well, it seems, for he here warns his muse that this

fluent mundo is but a fiction never to ^{be} realized though always keenly felt.
^

‘Notes’ concludes with a reminder of the ephebe’s other mission as a soldier,

³⁷. Eleanor Cook, *op.cit.*, pp.262-3, makes this point. Longenbach, *op.cit.*, p.269, extends the meaning to suggest that the hero, that is the poet, is now a communal figure, not an individualistic one like the Canon or the MacCullough.

as if to stress that the discipline of asceticism is always necessary, not only for the immediate threat of the War, but for the other, equally important war 'between the mind/And sky, between thought and day and night'. Note that, though Stevens acknowledges the never-ending interdependence of poetry and war, he takes care to stress that the soldier's task ends while the poet's continues. In so doing, Stevens is, like Nietzsche, stressing the imagination as the power that does not simply resist the pressures of reality. Rather, its function is greater, for it seeks to enrich and affirm reality by means of the creation of values that will necessarily be fictive. As Stevens contends, Pascal may call the imagination 'a delusive faculty' (*NA* 135), yet he too turns to it for the very last act of his life. Indeed, Stevens, like Nietzsche, will claim boldly that we never turn away from the imagination at all; for, in so far as the imagination is the power that helps make sense of reality, its fictions have permeated reality and become a 'vital' part of reality. For Stevens, as he stresses in the conclusion of 'Imagination as Value' and elsewhere, this 'vital' reality is the imagination's greatest achievement and what it must always strive to realize in order to help people live their lives:

... when we speak of perceiving the normal we have in mind the instinctive integration which are the reason for living. Of what value is anything to the solitary and those that live in misery and terror, except the imagination?

... to be able to see the portal of literature, that is to say, the portal of the imagination, as a scene of normal beauty is, of itself, a feat of the imagination. It is the vista a man sees, seated in the public garden of his native town, near by some effigy of a figure celebrated in the normal world, as he considers that the chief problems of any artist, as of any man, are the problems of the normal and that he needs, in order to solve them, everything that the imagination has to give. (*NA* 154-156)

The Old Philosopher in Rome

The epilogue of 'Notes' returns the poet to the streets, to the earthly city and its beleaguered citizens, and it does so with the emphasis that the soldier's and the poet's wars will meet, if only uncertainly, 'in a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay'. In so doing, it is as if Stevens is signalling his own distance from his old master, Santayana, who has taught him much on the necessary values of the imagination, and who might have been in his mind during the writing of 'Notes'. It is as much an index of Stevens's enduring respect for his master, as of his own independence, that he evokes Santayana as 'figure of capable imagination' (*CP* 249) in 'Imagination as Value' in which he carefully attempts to define his own position on the question of poetry and belief:

There can be lives ... which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them. To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters. We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his old age, he dwells at the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher. (*NA* 147-148)

As always, Stevens's syntax here cuts both ways, suggesting that Santayana's presence adds human dignity to the austerity of the convent as much as the latter's sanctified atmosphere imparts saintly solace to the old philosopher's final days. To put it in Stevens's own metaphor, Santayana has succeeded in creating his own 'fluent mundo' within which he lives. The evocation gains added poignancy in 'To the Old Philosopher in Rome', for the poet, himself now in his old age, meditates on his own

master's impending death. Here, as in 'Notes', the two parallels meet:

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
 Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
 Of men growing small in the distances of space,
 Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
 Unintelligible absolution and an end -

The threshold Rome, and that more merciful Rome
 Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
 It is as if in a human dignity
 Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
 Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

The vista here is one that opens on to the earthly Rome. Yet note that Rome is envisioned in a diminishing perspective,³⁸ and the reason for this is soon given:

How easily the blown banners change to wings ...
 Things dark on the horizons of perception,
 Become accompaniments of fortune, but
 Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
 Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach
 The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
 Of the unknown. The newsboy's muttering
 Becomes another murmuring; the smell
 Of medicine, a fragrance not to be spoiled ...

This is the perspective of a Nietzschean poet, seeking to confer on the inevitable approach of death the courage and dignity of 'the heroic effort to live/Expressed as victory' (*CP* 446). The rewards of this austere effort culminate in an intense act of transfiguration:

³⁸. The point is made by Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*,p.361. Santayana would have wished for a widening vista: 'With a world so full of stuff before him, I can hardly conceive what morbid instinct can tempt a man to look elsewhere for wider vistas, unless it be unwillingness to endure the sadness and the discipline of truth' (*Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p.21).

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
 The candle as it evades the sight, these are
 The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,
 A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
 And these beneath the shadow of a shape

In a confusion of bed and books, a portent
 On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
 A light on the candle tearing against the wick
 To join a hovering excellence, to escape
 From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

The difference between Stevens's reticent and subtle evasion and Eliot's beatific vision of 'Little Gidding' could not be more marked. The poem moves from repeating the definite article to repeating the indefinite article as if first to emphasize the concrete particulars of reality, then to seek, by means of abstraction, to transform them into 'accompaniments of fortune'. 'Fortune' carries with it the meanings of 'wealth' and 'destiny', both being the task and rewards of the imaginative effort. Stevens himself speculates that 'it is not too extravagant to think of resemblances and of the repetitions of resemblances as a source of the ideal' (NA 80). It is this 'ideal' that the poem now secretes:

So that we feel, in this illumined large,
 The veritable small, so that each of us
 Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
 In yours, master and commiserable man.
 Intent on your particulars of nether-do ...

Through the intensity of Santayana's meditation, or rather Stevens's creative imagining, the poem creates the transformation, which Stevens likens to the ecstasy of apotheosis, through which the poet as the virile youth and his reader can

momentarily suspend their disbelief (*NA* 49-51). The poem balances delicately between Santayana's claim to the universality of the imagination, and Nietzsche's insistence on the need and necessity for 'each of us' to improvise and renew fictions of belief for and by himself. The subtle poise is all the more poignant for Santayana is now evoked, not as a universal but an isolated 'figure of capable imagination', striving through the 'intricate evasions of as' (*CP* 486) to affirm poverty as sole origin and means towards a 'human end':

Your dozing in the depths of wakefulness,
 In the warmth of your bed, at the edge of your chair, alive
 Yet living in two worlds, impenitent
 As to one, and, as to one, most penitent,
 Impatient for the grandeur that you need

In so much misery; and yet finding it
 Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
 Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,
 As in the last drop of the deepest blood,
 As it falls from the heart and lies there to be seen,

Even as the blood of an empire, it might be,
 For a citizen of heaven though still of Rome.
 It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most.
 It is older than the oldest speech of Rome.
 This is the tragic accent of the scene.

This is also the Dionysian tragic cry of pain that gives birth to the Apollonian illusion of belief. It is this cry that Stevens now hears, drifting through the poem as the sounds of the city's life and the reverberations of the repetitive ringing of the bells, poignantly reminding Stevens both of the poverty of life and the immense need to affirm that life as it is, as the poem now moves towards:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
 With every visible thing enlarged and yet
 No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,

The immense theatre, the pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

Here, in this bold and moving climactic figure of Santayana poised upon the last threshold of life, as Stevens himself was soon to do, lies a potent and fluent affirmation of the limits and aspirations of Stevens's never-ending search for a supreme fiction of being.³⁹ 'Form and frame' mark out the limits and the fulfillment of the mind's search for being, its endless questioning of larger structures to erect its edifice of belief, found within the life of the creative mind. So late in his career, this supreme achievement and the exaltation it brings is the 'reality of decreation' which Stevens describes as the condition of modern reality: 'in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything' (*NA* 175).

³⁹. Joan Richardson, *Stevens: The Later Years*, pp.426-27, gives the details of the controversy surrounding Stevens's 'conversion' which she infelicitously refers to as a 'final prank'. Milton Bates, *op.cit.*, pp.296-297 n 30), reports his conversation with Father Arthur P. Hanley, chaplain of Saint Francis Hospital where Stevens died, according to whom, 'the archbishop of the Archdiocese of Hartford requested that Stevens's baptism not be recorded or made public lest people think that Saint Francis Hospital actively sought to convert non-Catholic patients'.

Conclusion

‘It is not what I am, but what I aspired to be that comforts me. It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not the strength to realize.’ These words were spoken on the reception of the National Book Award which Stevens won for the second time after the publication of *The Collected Poems*. He died five months later at the age of seventy-five. The occasion was the last recognition of the life-long efforts of a poet who, like Canon Aspirin, never forgot that he lived in the world of Darwin and not of Plato, and yet who remained committed to poetry as a vital activity that, through the incessant travails of the imagination and the resources of language, sought to affirm that world.

As we have seen, for Stevens, the gaiety of poetry was the prime motive and reward of his efforts to evolve a mode of poetry as acts of creativity whose force and validity depends on their provision and renewal of forms of value capable of resisting and engaging the pressures of reality. He came to identify the imagination as the power whose cultural and spiritual function was to ‘help the people live their lives’. That the paradox in Stevens’s aspiration precludes it from being mere narcissistic indulgence or dream of transcendence or utopia should by now be clear. Stevens was too aware of the limits of the imagination and of language, too cognizant of the necessary tension between the imagination and reality that enabled the imagination to renew its creative vigour and create forms of nobility acceptable to contemporary reality.

The pressures of engaging successive cultural and political crises during the

Thirties and Forties indeed proved to be most productive, for they challenged Stevens into defining his concept of modern poetry and into experimenting with its forms of realization. His reading of some of contemporary thinkers and his incorporation, often in a radically modified manner, of their ideas into his evolving theories of poetry has been traced. Through Valéry, Stevens transformed his early *fin de siècle* aestheticism into the intensified play of abstraction and language of 'pure poetry'. This in turn was refined and extended, through the 'scientism' developed from Mauron, Focillon and Nietzsche, into a concept of the cultural and spiritual claims of the supreme fiction according to which poetry functions as a transpersonal mode of self-empowerment and imaginative affirmation of reality. The polemical force of some of the terms cannot be ignored. What emerged was Stevens's insistence that, given the coercive and conflicting forces of contemporary crises, the imagination became all the more important as an agency of value whose creative power must be intensified so as to enhance its engagement with reality and to avoid the dangers and limits of ideological conformity.

Poetry of this kind has its own dangers: it tends to be exclusive, self-reflexive, repetitious and obscure. Stevens himself is well aware of these risks, although he sees them as conditions of reading that secrete their own reward. 'The poem must resist the intelligence/Almost successfully' (*L* 350), he observes. This is not to say that Stevens agrees with the play of repetitions and referrals advanced by deconstruction, for 'almost' - the operative word here - suggests that the intelligence's dream of the clarity of meaning may be fulfilled. His 'gaiety of language' is of a different order. Like his contemporaries, Stevens knows the limits of words - its 'stiff and stubborn man-locked set' (*CP* 496) of clichés - that reduce the poet's desire for freshness of

insight to repetition. Yet he does not share their distrust, for, through the mediation of his necessary angel, the 'tragic drone' of reality does 'rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,/Like watery words awash; like meaning said/By repetitions of half-meanings' (*CP* 496). Indeed, to recognize the obscurity of Stevens's poetry as an index of value is to recognize his efforts of locating nobility in the powers of the mind and of words to create forms of value rather than in the finished product. It is also to recognize the secret compliment Stevens is paying to his readers' intelligence, and the seriousness of Stevens's commitment to the task of poetry: that of helping the people to live their lives by assisting them in the difficult and necessary effort of discovering their creative powers within themselves and realizing their fictions of nobility.

This then is part of the supreme humility with which Stevens spoke of his poetic endeavour as a modern poet. The great poem of the earth can indeed never be written, nor should it. If this affirms the poverty of the imagination, then it is to recognize its 'notes' as an achievement that is good, human and that suffices.

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