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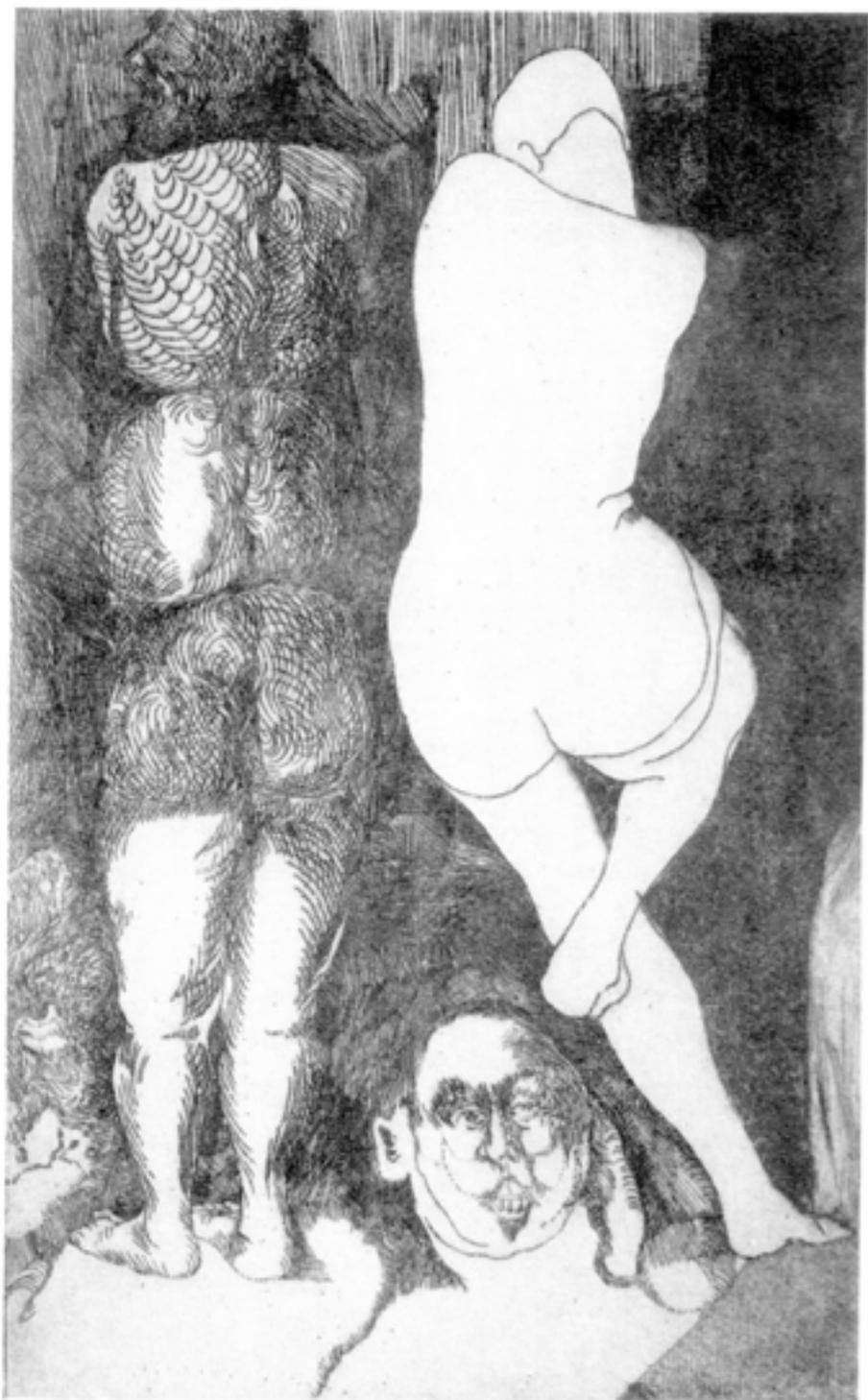
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Art as a Cry Against Extinction in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

JAMES S. LEONARD
and
CHRISTINE E. WHARTON

In "Of Modern Poetry" Stevens describes "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (CP 239).¹ Finding "what will suffice" seems a rather modest role for poetry to assume; yet it forms a substantial part of the very large claim Stevens makes for the function of the poet — "to help people to live their lives" (NA 29). This function is generally taken to consist principally in the creation of a "supreme fiction," a new myth to fill the void left by the "Too many waltzes [which] have ended" (CP 121); but it also includes as a perhaps more basic element the discovery of a sufficient response to the fear of annihilation. As such, the poem becomes the aesthetic embodiment of the "cry of the peacocks" in "Domination of Black" (CP 8-9) — a "cry against the twilight" of impending extinction.

"Domination of Black" is a poem of resemblances. In the colors of the fire are the colors of the peacocks' tails and of the fallen leaves, and the darkness of the hemlocks presses in like the encroaching blackness of the night, while the planets gather "Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind." The resemblances become a metaphor for the common fate of all that exists: the leaves, the peacocks, even the planets, all are destined for the blackness of oblivion, driven by the relentless wind which turns the leaves, wrenching them away from life. The repetition of "turning" and "turned" in the third stanza and the accompanying heavy emphasis at the beginning and end of each line create a circular movement as if the lines themselves were turning like leaves in the wind; and the rhythmical turning creates the effect of a relentless downward spiral reminiscent of the movement of the pigeons "Downward to darkness" at the end of "Sunday Morning" (CP 70). William Burney notices that the poem "expresses the inner-outer character of experience: there is a correspondence between colors in the room and those outside."² This correspondence breaks down the artificially imposed separation between the persona and the mutable world outside, bringing the shadow of mortality into the room with him. There is no protection against the blackness except to remember "the cry of the peacocks" and to join them in their cry. Stevens says of an aspect of art which he refers to as "nobility" that: "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36). This is the violence which is the dynamic force of the poem — the violence of the persona's cry against "the color of the heavy hemlocks."

In contrast to the ambiguous blackness of "Domination of Black" is the stark whiteness of unrelieved, unmythologized reality in "The Snow Man" (CP 9-10), but in this different setting the movement continues to be toward annihilation, experienced by:

...the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The mood has changed from one of foreboding to one of blackness, and the repetitive flux of colors has become a total lack of color. In such a setting even the "cry of the peacocks" has vanished and there is only:

...the sound of the wind
...the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place.

Again Stevens resorts to repetition of words and the use of heavy accents at the ends of lines to create an effect of circular movement, and again he employs the image of wind-driven leaves to evoke a sense of irresistible force. As Yoor Winters points out in his analysis of the poem's metrical structure, the accents are so disposed as to accelerate the movement of the second stanza; but when the wind is described in the third and fourth stanzas, the meter becomes slow and heavy.³ By this means, the inexorable sameness of the wind acts on the reader's perception in much the same way as the turning of the leaves, etc., in "Domination of Black." In the silence of this barren landscape, the imaginative construction of the poem itself constitutes the otherwise unutterable protest against mortality.

The problem of mortality is brought out still more explicitly in "The Death of a Soldier" (CP 97), as the soldier dies but "does not become a three-days personage" arising after three days like the crucified Christ. Instead, "Death is absolute and without memorial," like the burial in "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb" (CP 56), which:

Fortell[s] each night the one abyssal night,
When the host shall no more wander, nor the light
Of the steadfast lanterns creep across the dark[.]

The wind again is a central image in the poem, but in this case it serves as an analogue for human life, stilled at the death of the soldier, while "The clouds go, nevertheless, / In their direction." The indifference of the universe to the cessation of life is reiterated, this time manifested in the movement of the clouds undisturbed by the death of the soldier.

The shifting significance of images—for example, the wind—from poem to poem adds a dimension of elusiveness to the fear of annihilation. The wind at one time is identified with life itself while at other times it appears as the force driving the helpless individual before it toward his inevitable end. In the same way "the cry of the peacocks" in "Domination of Black" seems simultaneously

to be both an assertion of individual existence and an expression of inability to turn back the twilight and “the color of the heavy hemlocks.” Even in the starkness of “The Snow Man,” the crystallization of foreboding into fear is momentary and appears only as “the nothing that is,” a nothingness full of the sound of the wind through dead leaves. This elusiveness is perhaps best exemplified in the ending, or non-ending, of “Domination of Black.” The poem reaches its emotional “bottom line” not in the last line, but in the second from the last, with the simple heart-pulse of the declaration: “I felt afraid.” At this point, the speaker penetrates through the images spinning in his mind to express clearly and directly his feeling in the face of the darkness which confronts him. But the final line — “And I remembered the cry of the peacocks” — responding to this insight, circles back to repeat the last line of the second stanza and, thus, stirs the poem into its spinning motion once again.

The shifting significance creates more, however, than elusiveness. It is an essential feature of the paradoxical conjunction of vitality and mortality which characterizes human existence; it is Dylan Thomas’ “force that through the green fuse drives the flower.”⁴ This paradox is both stated and structurally evinced by the shifting meaning of the line, “The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream,” which ends each of the two stanzas of “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” (CP 64). R.P. Blackmur says of the line that it “implies in both stanzas that the only power worth heeding is the power of the moment, of what is passing, of the flux.”⁵ What gives the line poetic impact, however, is the *difference* in meaning between its two usages. In the first stanza the line is an affirmation of the exuberance of the moment: “Let be be finale of seem”; but in the second stanza it becomes a melancholy reminder of the inescapable movement of life toward death: “Let the lamp affix its beam. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.”

Stevens creates a similar effect in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (CP 92-95). However, the shift in this case is not one of simple contradistinction, as in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” but of movement among several variant meanings. The blackbird is seen in the poem as sentient being, as object, as observer, and as creator; but in two sections, VII and XI, it becomes a symbol for death. The dramatic impact of the two sections arises from nuance created by the shifting perspective. Like Thomas’ repeated linkage of youth and death, the more complex connection by Stevens of mortality with various phases of life helps to underscore the nearness and inevitability of death. Particularly effective in this regard is section VII, which asks why we imagine golden perfection and refuse the present beauty of sensuous reality, but shows also that the latter is the beauty of mortals — of blackbirds — and not a golden eternity:

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

The use of the blackbird as a symbol of death in the two sections casts a layer of connotation over the reference to blackbirds in the other eleven sections and helps to bind the diverse perception together into a unified view of life and death.

The exploration of connotative meaning through diverse and contrasting uses of the same *image* conforms with Stevens' belief that "To confront fact in its total bleakness is for any poet a completely baffling experience. Reality is not the thing but the aspect of the thing (NA 95)". In his essay, "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems," he says:

The aim of our lives should be to draw ourselves away as much as possible from the unsubstantial, fluctuating facts of the world about us and establish some communion with the objects which are apprehended by thought and not sense. (NA 95)

Art as a cry against extinction functions as an attempt to establish such a communion. In the face of life's movement toward the inscrutable blackness of death, the artist finds "what will suffice" in the form of a poetic protest against the common fate of all existence. Stevens does not resort to the extreme injunction of Thomas: "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light";⁶ but he does remember "the cry of the peacocks."

The absence of such a cry is lamented in "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock" (CP 66), in which the whiteness of the scene in "The Snow Man" is recalled: "The houses are haunted / By white night-gowns." The poem provides another example of shifting connotation of images, as the circular movement of "Domination of Black" and "The Snow Man" again appears but changes this time from the relentless downward spiral of falling leaves to the wished-for rings of color—relief from the oppressive monotony of the "white night-gowns." Stevens reinforces the ring imagery of the poem by again using repetition (of "or" and "rings") and metrical loading of heavy accents at the ends of lines to create a circular motion:

None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.

And the ring imagery is extended by references to beaded ceintures, baboons (presumably ring-tailed), and periwinkles (with involuted shells). The rings, however, are not to be found among "The houses... haunted / By white night-gowns"; they must be constructed by the imagination of the persona. Thus, the colors are arranged in a progression which implies construction—the development of an imaginary edifice which is adequate to transcend the "white" of the "night-gowns." This is accomplished in two ways: first, there is a logical progression of colors between rings and gowns, the green rings of the purple

gowns becoming green gowns with yellow rings and the yellow rings becoming, in turn, yellow gowns with blue rings; and, second, the compound colors are broken apart into their primary components, the green night-gowns at the beginning of the color series becoming yellow with blue rings at the end and the purple of the beginning being left incomplete by the blue rings, only to be completed by "red weather" in the last line of the poem.

The absence of the peacocks' cry becomes an inability to utter *any* cry in "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" (CP 96): "I am too dumbly in my being pent." Again the wind is a principal image, but it has undergone an additional transformation to become the innocuous and uninteresting breath of ennui: "The wind attendant on the solstices / Blows on the shutters of the metropolises." As in "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock," the landscape is sterile, with no color of imagination. The wind "Stir[s] no poet in his sleep," just as the people of "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock" do not dream of baboons and periwinkles." The struggle against human fate has become so muted that summer and winter seem alike, and the persona wishes for a true experience of winter like that of "The Snow Man," which might arouse some cry from him – "The malady of the quotidian" – leaves no possibility for such experience.

A similar sense of sterility is central to "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP 76). The jar can be seen as art which fails to answer to the needs of human existence in the world. It provides order – but an order of somnolent, indifferent experience. The jar is "gray and bare," lacking the color and texture which give meaning to life. The colored rings of "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock" have been transmuted into the measured roundness of the jar, which [does] "not give of bird or bush"; and the sterility of the order produced by the jar is mirrored in the perfectly regular iambs varied only by a single syllable (line 3, in the entire poem. Creation in this case provides the illusion of control over the world and, by implication, over one's fate; but, in fact, it is an artificial creation of the indifferent environment of "The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad." That this is forcefully clear indicates that "Anecdote" succeeds where the jar of the poem fails.

The measured roundness of the jar as such is no more satisfactory than the chaotic spinning of leaves in "Domination of Black." Mere artifice distracts us from the problem of mortality but cannot cry out against it as the protagonist recommends in Section X of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP 170) to those who behold:

The approach of him whom none believes,

Whom all believe that all believe,

A pagan in a varnished car.

Calling to mind Nietzsche's declaration in *The Gay Science*: "How strange it is that this sole certainty and common element makes almost no impression on people [*fast gar Nichts über die Menschen vermag*],"⁷ Stevens thus expresses man's ambiguous, insensible apprehension of death. Death is a flickering reality, ungraspable, like the wind in "The Snow Man" and the shadows in

"Domination of Black." But the poem's imaginative force can momentarily fix mortality and counter with its cry – its constructive, cadenced human voice:

"Here am I, my adversary, that
Confront you, hoo-ing the slick trombones,

Yet with a petty misery
At heart, a petty misery,

Ever the prelude to your end,
The touch that topples men and rock."

Brown University
and University of Tennessee

NOTES

1. Stevens' works are cited in the text as follows: CP-*The Complete Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954), NA-*The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York, 1965).
2. William Burney, *Wallace Stevens* (Boston, 1963), p. 28.
3. Yvor Winters, *In Defence of Reason* (Denver, 1947), p. 127.
4. Dylan Thomas, *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, ed. Daniel Jones (New York, 1971), p. 77.
5. R.P. Blackmur, *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (Garden City, N.Y., 1957), p. 191.
6. Thomas, p. 208.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York, 1974), p. 225 [aph. 278].

We are pleased to announce

Dorothy Emerson has joined our staff in editorial capacity. Her full responsibility will begin with the next issue. Though she has worked on this issue, she has not seen enough of it to vouch for its "correctness". Dorothy Emerson, poet, is the wife of Frank Doggett.

Wallace Stevens' Romantic Landscape Notes on Meditation: "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters"

ALLAN CHAVKIN

Most scholars of Stevens' work neglect the puzzling "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" (1943), and the few critics who do briefly comment on it do not see the poem as a radical experiment in Stevens' assimilation of the English romantic landscape meditation, the genre out of which "Sunday Morning" (1915) and "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1943) also evolve.¹ "The poem of the mind in the act of finding What will suffice," as Stevens calls the romantic landscape meditation in "Of Modern Poetry," invariably culminates in the Wordsworthian "spot of time," that heightened moment of revelation in which the meditator conquers his sense of estrangement and comes to terms with an indifferent nature. In "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters," Stevens achieves a moment of heightened consciousness that is miniscule compared to those illuminary moments in "Sunday Morning" and "The Idea of Order at Key West." Moreover, the Keatsian sensuous physicality of the two earlier poems becomes severely diminished in the stark landscape of "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters." Significantly, the summer sun that shone so intensely in "Sunday Morning," the sun that set in the enchanting scene of "The Idea of Order at Key West," is absent in "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters"; there can never be a "boisterous devotion to the sun" here. "Bad is final in this light."

The sense of loss evoked in the poem refers to economic scarcity as the title, a southern colloquial expression, indicates – it is a barren time without food in the rural South. But the winter wasteland here is a metaphor for the spiritual desolation of the speaker too. Stevens' meditation seeks to convey the spiritual desolation, and in the act of describing it, redeem it.

At the beginning of the poem, the imagination struggles to humanize the stark winter landscape by describing the remaining broken cornstalks as though they were human bodies, but the metaphor is too contrived. "In this bleak air the broken stalks / Have arms without hands." As though desperately searching for the appropriate metaphor to convey the emptiness, the imagination immediately contradicts itself: "They have trunks / Without legs or, for that, without heads. / They have heads...." The attempt here at transformation is as unsuccessful as it is obvious. The imagination is clearly straining as it continues to elaborate upon its analogy: "Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth, // Like seeing fallen brightly away." As though admitting the inadequacy of his brilliant metaphors, the poet resorts to matter-of-fact description that set the scene at the beginning of the poem. "It is deep January. The sky is hard. / The stalks are firmly rooted in ice." This straightforward description (coupled with the sparse typography which conveys the feeling of emptiness) seems more effective than the ingenious metaphors. The choppy, fragmented effect here suggests that in this dismal scene the imagination cannot function properly. The landscape cannot be humanized, despite the mind's noble straining to do so.

Stevens continues his meditation and admits that, in this scene of alienation, poetry is not effective in redeeming the landscape. Poetry is merely a "syllable" and serves only to point to the desolation. "It is in this solitude, a syllable, / Out of these gawky flutterings, // Intones its single emptiness." As though trying to sing, the poet's voice becomes a shriek in the wind, stressing the abysmal emptiness of the scene, "The savagest hollow of winter-sound." In short, the voice of the imagination appears impotent. In this landscape one sees merely the "moving of a tongue" but hears no poetry.

Nevertheless, as the meditation seems about to degenerate into despair, it swerves course: "It is here, in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good." Stevens presents another variation of the theme of the inextricable contrarities of existence, a theme often articulated by Wordsworth and Keats—"Aye, in the very temple of Delight / Veiled Melancholy has her sov'reign shrine." There can be no knowledge of the good without knowledge of the bad.

The meditation's finale is enigmatic.² "The crow looks rusty as he rises up. / Bright is the malice in his eye... [Stevens' ellipses] // One joins him there for company, / But at a distance, in another tree." In the most miniscule of Stevens' "spots of time," the imagination, which has been unable to transform the landscape, can at least utilize the crow to gain a renovating insight in the final lines of the meditation—but Stevens refuses to present that insight, as the ellipsis indicating deleted material suggests, and he forces the reader to participate in the "open" ending of the work and to decide the final meaning toward which he is led. If the reader refuses to complete this meditation, then he is left with the inexplicable conclusion in which man "joins" a malicious crow. The demand here upon the reader is much greater even than that required at the conclusion of "The Idea of Order at Key West."

Stevens desires us to complete his meditation by seeing that the crow suggests what will suffice in this stark landscape; thus we are able to create a meaningful view of this grim situation and avoid the alternative of despair and nihilism. The crow can be seen as a victim of winter and as a symbol of the darker side of life ("this bad"). Though oppressed by the harsh season, he is a weather-beaten "rusty" bird who, in the same situation as the poet, prevails. He can endure the existential "nothingness" of the twentieth century wasteland. But the crow, too, eats corn and contributes to winter's brutalizing of man and thus seems malicious. The poet feels the need to "distance" himself from the crow, yet he admires this "tough bird" who survives in the dismal landscape; man, too, must learn to survive in this bleak environment.

Man must come to terms with the crow, for one must come to terms with the dark side (the destructive or predatory aspect) of existence, which, after all is real and not altogether bad. In a much more subtle way, Stevens' perception of the predatory crow as illustrative of a universal principle is similar to Keat's awareness in "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds": "but I saw / Too far into the sea, where every maw / The greater on the less feeds evermore.... Still do I that most fierce destruction see, — / The shark at savage prey, — the hawk at pounce, — / ...Away, ye horrid moods!" Unlike Keats in this poem, Stevens

sees the need to accept the crow and incorporate some of the crow's "fierce" vitality (his "bright malice") into his personality; unable to rely completely upon the imagination's powers or upon the summer environment of "Sunday Morning," he must come to terms with the darkest recesses of his being and become tougher in an inanimate cold world which seems to grow increasingly malevolent.

Southwest Texas State University

NOTES

1. Stevens' debt to the English romantics, especially to Wordsworth and Keats, has been noted. See George Bornstein, *Transformation of Romaniticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

2. The inscrutable ending has generated diverse interpretations. Adalaide Kirby Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 178, argues that the rusty crow rises "like a bad angel into the air," and the pain in this hell is "unbearable" because the countering force of the imagination is absent. William Burney, *Wallace Stevens* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 123, suggests that "the long but intense spark of life shown by an angel of death indicates that death... is as good as life—if one understands 'good' to mean a modern self-conscious version of the ancient heroic virtues." Merle Brown, *Wallace Stevens: The Poem as Act* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p. 28, insists that the detached poet finally gains the crow's knowledge that to moralize upon suffering for "one's own advantage is... the purest form of evil."

Stevens at the Front: "Lettres d'un Soldat"

GLEN MACLEOD

During the years of the First World War, Wallace Stevens was more closely involved with other writers and artists than ever before or after. An unusual example of his greater "openness" during this period is the series of poems entitled "Lettres d'un Soldat." The title and epigraphs for this series were drawn from a book of the same title by a French soldier and artist named Eugène Emmanuel Lemerrier.¹ The book collects Lemerrier's letters to his mother, from the time of his voluntary enlistment in the Army in August of 1914 until his final "disappearance" at the front on April 6, 1915. It records one "high-souled" young man's determined struggle, under the extreme mental and physical stress of trench warfare, to reconcile his artistic temperament with his patriotic duty.

This theme must have appealed deeply to Stevens, for nowhere else in his work does he rely so heavily on a literary source as he does in "Lettres." He took from Lemerrier the chronological structure of his series, and the inspiration for each individual poem. A closer look at the nature of this poetic "collaboration" may shed some light on Stevens' state of mind during this crucial stage of his development. Unless otherwise specified, the following discussion refers to the original version of "Lettres," which once numbered at least seventeen poems, for it is here that Stevens' original conception of the series is clearest. What remain of this manuscript has been published as an Appendix to A. Walton Litz's *Introspective Voyager*.²

The form of "Lettres" is unique in Stevens' canon. In choosing to "adapt" the book, Stevens tied himself to a chronology more rigid than any other ordering device in his *Harmonium* period, excepting perhaps the narrative mode of "The Comedian as the Letter C." Even more unusual is the structural role of individual poems in the series. Each poem in "Lettres" is not merely a variation on its particular epigraph, as most criticism of "Lettres" has seemed to assume. Rather, each poem is meant to suggest the contents of Lemerrier's letters over a period of time extending both forward and backward from the date of its epigraph. Stevens intended, it seems, to compose a poetic summary of the entire book. A few examples will show how he went about this project.

Poem V in the complete series ("Here I keep thinking of the Primitives...") relates obviously to its epigraph; both speak of field mice, and of a Japanese print. But the poem's subtitle, "Comme Dieu Dispenses De Graces," and its mention of "the Primitives," refer back to a letter of three days earlier (November 4). In a similar way, in poem VIII ("There is another mother whom I love...") Stevens seems to execute a "turn" on the epigraph, in which Lemerrier addresses his mother, by speaking of Nature as a Great Mother. But this turn is Lemerrier's own, for in a letter a few days later he writes: "Do you know that those touching traditions of the Divine Mother, so happily employed in our Christian religions, are the creations of the oldest symbolism?... the type of our Madonna is the great Demeter..."³ As both of these examples

show, Stevens deliberately alluded to passages of Lemercier's book which fell within the time-period described by the dates of his preceding and following epigraphs. His main object was clearly to suggest the overall development of the book, and of Lemercier's character, rather than simply to spotlight individual moments.

With this purpose in mind, the design of the series becomes clearer, and parts of it no longer seem quite so odd. Poem XII is a good example. It exists only as a fragment, included here with a translation of its epigraph:

I forgot to tell you that a day or two ago, during the storm, I saw the cranes coming homeward toward evening. A lull in the weather allowed me to hear their cry...⁴

In a theatre, full of tragedy,
The stage becomes an atmosphere
Of seeping rose — banal machine
In an appointed repertoire...

Both Samuel French Morse and A. Walton Litz remark on the "obliquity" of this poem.⁵ But read as part of the sequence, and as a partial summary of a section of Lemercier's book, rather than as a commentary on its epigraph alone, Stevens' conception becomes perfectly straightforward. The poem follows directly upon "Death of a Soldier," whose repeated phrase, "When the wind stops," becomes the "lull in the weather" which the poem describes. The poet's attention simply shifts from the actor to the setting. At the same time, Stevens is alluding to a letter of three days earlier:

...What I had kept about me of my own individuality was a certain visual perceptiveness that caused me to register the setting of things, a setting that dramatized itself 'artistically' as in any stage-management...⁶

Seen in this context, Stevens' poem is no longer problematical. It simply takes Lemercier's above reflection literally, reviving the dead metaphor in the common phrase, "theater of war"; the disturbingly "oblique" relation of poem to epigraph was probably unintended. It may well be this poem's triteness of conception, rather than its "obliquity," which resulted in its deletion from the series.

It seems to me that Stevens' very *lack* of obliqueness, or irony, is the defining characteristic of "Lettres." The overall relation of the series to its source is, as we have seen, uncharacteristically straightforward. The title is not at all oblique, as Stevens' titles more often are, and though individual poems sometimes bear an ironic relation to their particular epigraphs, the attitudes expressed are generally in perfect harmony with Lemercier's book. The flip tone of Poem IX, for example, ("Hi! the creator too is blind...") deliberately contrasts with its earnest epigraph, which stresses the need to "place trust in an impersonal Justice." Yet the ironic contrast, the sudden shift from consolation

to hopeless fatality, is quite characteristic of Lemer cier's letters of 1915. This very conflict is expressed in a brief letter a few days before the date of Poem IX:

...My consolations fail me in these days, on account of the weather.... I close with an ardent appeal to our love, and in the certainty of a justice higher than our own.... Yet is it even sure that moral effort bears any fruit?⁷

Stevens' humorous treatment emphasizes but does not change the quality of Lemer cier's emotional predicament.

"Lettres," then, follows Lemer cier's book both in its precise chronology and in its spirit. The real critical question remains: *why* did Stevens choose to undertake a poetic adaption of this little known book? In the first place, his choice alone indicates a desire to express himself on the subject of the War. The outbreak of hostilities in 1914 had an immediate impact on Stevens' circle of friends in New York City, several of whom traveled regularly to Paris,⁸ and catastrophe loomed far closer when the United States entered the war, in April of 1917. Though Stevens' letters of this period seldom betray his concern over the international situation, his very silence on the subject is striking, and lends to his few direct pronouncements the eloquence of restraint. As he wrote at the end of a letter during World War II: "I make no reference in this letter to the war. It goes without saying that our minds are full of it" (*L*, 356).

Two letters of 1918 do suggest the range of feelings the war inspired in him. The sight of troops rallying in Chattanooga roused him to unabashed patriotism: "Those that are here are splendid fellows. We cannot help doing well when we really start" (*L*, 207). Stevens generally permitted himself such unguarded enthusiasm only in the realm of aesthetics. And this uncharacteristic emotional outburst is matched, in another instance during the same month, by acute embarrassment and regret because of his failure to maintain proper self-control. He felt compelled to apologize to Harriet Monroe for his insensitive "gossip of death" while visiting her in Chicago, writing:

...The subject absorbs me, but that is no excuse: there are too many people in the world, vitally involved, to whom it is infinitely more than a thing to think of. One forgets this. I wish with all my heart that it had never occurred, even carelessly.

(*L*,206)

These two examples show Stevens imaginatively joining in the spirit of the war effort, but at the same time feeling strongly the inadequacy of merely "thinking of" it in comparison with the sacrifice of those who are "vitally involved." Such a sense of frustration over his own role in the war effort may have found temporary appeasement in the composition of "Lettres."

What appealed to Stevens in *Lettres* was not simply its timeliness, but more immediately the character of Lemer cier himself. Lemer cier was French, and so an attractive alter-ego for Stevens, who read *Lettres* in the original and wrote

for an audience who were also fluent in that language. On the question of his French epigraphs he wrote to Harriet Monroe: "I assume that most of your readers know French sufficiently not to need a translation" (L, 202). But Lemer cier was above all an artist, and it is in his fine sensibility and his passion for the arts, even at the front, that he most resembles Wallace Stevens.

Lemer cier's metier was painting, and evidence of his painter's eye is everywhere in his letters to his mother. In almost every letter he describes changes in the weather and landscape, and the reflections these inspire in him — a mode of imaginative activity most congenial to Stevens, who had just written the "Primordia" series.⁹ And the other arts were equally important to Lemer cier's life in the trenches. He continually writes about music, as in this passage of a letter three days before his death:

Think what it was for us when we were last in the front line, to have to spend whole days in the dug-out... There, in complete darkness, night was awaited for the chance to get out. But once my fellow non-commissioned officers and I began humming the nine symphonies of Beethoven. I cannot tell what thrill woke those notes within us. They seemed to kindle great lights in the cave. We forgot the Chinese torture of being unable to lie, or sit, or stand.¹⁰

This iteration of the consolatory powers of music surely struck a sympathetic chord in the music-lover Stevens, as would the larger theme of which this is only one instance: Lemer cier's deliberate and sustained search for consolation in a hostile world — in the love of his mother, in religion, in Nature, and (most importantly for Stevens) in art. But more remarkable in the above passage is Lemer cier's unstated assumption that any group of NCOs would know by heart all of Beethoven's symphonies. It seems strange from an American point of view, and would have seemed strange in 1915 as well; but the existence and value of such cultural sophistication even at the line of battle was taken for granted by the French, and by the British, too, as Paul Fussell has shown.¹¹ By documenting this phenomenon Lemer cier doubtless made the experience of war seem more accessible to Stevens. The world of war Lemer cier describes, in which finely cultivated souls are made to shine brighter and stronger through contact with the most terrible reality, is not too far removed from the world of *Harmonium*, whose two poles would later be defined by the imaginative fulfillment of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," and the final emptiness of "The Snow Man."

But it was Lemer cier's literary bent, more perhaps than his love of painting or music, which first suggested to Stevens the vital relation that might exist between the soldier and the poet, a theme he would return to with great effect during the early years of the Second World War. Lemer cier placed great value on writing. His letters are testaments to the lenitive power of the literary imagination. To write a letter to his mother was to *be with* her: "When I began to write on this sheet I was a little weary and troubled, but now that I am with you I become happy."¹² And to write poetry was a life-affirming act: "I have sent you a few verses. I don't know what they are worth, but they reconciled

me to life."¹³ He read with equal fervor, seeking consolation for his miserable condition in works of religion and philosophy ("Spinoza is a most valuable aid in the trenches"¹⁴), and it was this trait Stevens first emphasized in Poem I (later excised) of "Lettres": "...I quote the line and page,/ I quote the very phrase my masters used." As for his reading of poetry, Lemer cier wrote this to his mother:

...I am glad to see you like Verlaine... He has been my almost daily delight both here and when I was back in Paris; often the music of his *Paysages Tristes* comes back to me, exactly expressing the emotion of certain hours.¹⁵

Verlaine also "meant a good deal" to Wallace Stevens, who later recalled carrying his verses around with him, in his head, during his younger years, like Lemer cier: "There were many of his lines that I delighted to repeat" (*L*, 636). The seventh poem of "Lettres," "Lunar Paraphrase," might easily be read as Stevens' own "Paysage Triste." And it can hardly be coincidence that the epigraph to this poem is the sentence which immediately precedes the passage quoted above.

These temperamental affinities between Lemer cier and Stevens probably had the strongest influence on Stevens' decision to undertake a poetic adaption of *Lettres*. Yet Stevens' point of view does differ significantly from Lemer cier's at times, as is evident in Stevens' selection and emphasis, and despite the apparent faithfulness of "Lettres" to its source. The chief weakness of the series may be traced to Stevens' inability to sympathize sufficiently with his chosen subject.

Stevens acknowledged this weakness in "Lettres" when, in March of 1918, he and Harriet Monroe "went over them together and weeded out the bad ones" (*L*, 205). Their chief concern then seems simply to have been "to make a good beginning and a good end," as Stevens defined his object in revising a later series. Together they eliminated Poem I, with its conventional rhetoric, and cut at least six poems from seventeen (at least) to nine.¹⁶ They may have agreed to omit so many poems from the end of the original series merely in order to conclude with the powerful "Death of a Soldier." But the poems which survive from this excised group suggest another reason as well.

Lemer cier was a devout Christian, as Stevens was not, so that the periods of doubt and despair the French soldier experienced as he approached his final battle were overbalanced by his firm faith. His letters are moving precisely because they record his internal struggle and triumph. In a larger, historical sense they substantiate Paul Fussell's observation that "the Great War was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful 'history'... in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable."¹⁷ What survives of the poems which were to follow "Death of a Soldier," on the other hand, indicates that Stevens was either unwilling or unable to present convincingly the traditional consolations which comforted Lemer cier at the end. These two poems and a fragment do not invoke

"Courage... Wisdom and Love," as Lemercier does only hours before his death.¹⁸ Nor do they make reference to the Christian perspective. Perhaps some of the lost poems did so, as "Lunar Paraphrase" invoked the crucifixion. But if this is the case, their destruction probably indicates that Stevens found them either bad poetry or unacceptable doctrine when he "weeded out the bad ones." The surviving poems emphasize, instead, the *breaking down* of the very abstract values which sustained Lemercier. It is even possible that Stevens at one point intended to make this break-down the structuring theme of "Lettres." This possibility arises when we read the first and last poems together:

No introspective chaos... I accept:
War, too, although I do not understand.
And that, then, is my final aphorism.

I have been pupil under bishops' rods
And got my learning from the orthodox.
I mark the virtue of the common-place.

I take all things as stated – so and so
Of men and earth: I quote the line and page,
I quote the very phrase my masters used.

If I should fall, as soldier, I know well
The final pulse of blood from this good heart
Would taste, precisely, as they said it would.

Before battle the soldier is unquestioningly idealistic, having got his experiences primarily from books. He is naive enough to assert his inner strength in the form of a "final aphorism." But the poems which follow demonstrate that is hardly final, and that mere words are insufficient to comprehend the horror of war. By the end of "Lettres," his faith in traditional wisdom has been proven empty. Trying to come to terms with the massive carnage surrounding him, he considers two standard metaphors for death, and quickly dismisses them as false:

Death was a reaper with sickle and stone,
Or swipling flail, sun-black in the sun,
A laborer.

Or death was a rider beating his horse,
Gesturing grandiose things in the air,
Seen by a muse....

Symbols of sentiment...

"So the meaning escapes," as Stevens put it in another poem of the same time, "Metaphors of a Magnifico," which also describes the failure of imaginative

conceptions to withstand the pressure of reality. Bitterly, the soldier seeks a substitute for the discredited "line" and "phrase" of his former masters:

take this new phrase,
Men of the line, take this new phrase
Of the truth of Death —

But he loses interest even in the attempt, concluding that the "truth of Death" precludes any verbal approximation:

Death, that will never be satisfied,
Digs up the earth when want returns...
You know the phrase.

Something of the bored aesthete lingers in that final line, and its inappropriateness to its context suggests what is wrong with "Lettres": the gesture is too pat, its evasion too easy to satisfy the demands of so exacting a subject. The poem, like the series as a whole, trails off into dull irresolution. Not only Lemercier's faith, but Stevens' imaginative energy seems to have faltered before the terrible reality of war.

Stevens' drastic editing of "Lettres" demonstrates his dissatisfaction with this poetic statement on the subject of war. But the subject itself continued to haunt him, and when he returned to it at the beginning of the Second World War, the experience of writing "Lettres" was clearly in his thoughts. In his prose essay of 1941, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens refers to the international upheaval of the 1910s as the very fountainhead of our contemporary consciousness:

...Reality then became violent and so remains. This much ought to be said to make it a little clearer that in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive. (NA 26-7)

As the First World War played an important part in Stevens' poetic development, so war itself became a central metaphor in his mature poetic world. He would begin to see the poet's relation to the world as a form of combat, fought in this arena of "spiritual violence." The epilogue to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" begins:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

"The idea of an endless war as an inevitable condition of modern life," Paul Fussell has written, "would seem to have become seriously available to the imagination around 1916."¹⁹ The First World War survives in our consciousness as the "spiritual violence" in which we live our lives. It survives in Stevens' poetry in the more aggressive posture of his imagination after the major transition of his career "from a poetry of perception to a poetry of the act of the mind."²⁰

From the vantage point of 1942, Stevens could see that part of the trouble with "Lettres" had been that he was trying to do two contradictory things at once:

The immense poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things. In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination... and constitutes a participating in the heroic.²¹

Stevens did not want to write war poetry, but "poetry of a work of the imagination." To do so in an atmosphere of "spiritual violence" meant that the poet must take an aggressive, combative stance toward the "pressure of reality." The new attitude he demanded of himself went against his natural inclinations. In 1918 he had apologized at length for his "gossip of death" during a time of war, because "there are many, vitally involved, for whom death is much more than something to think about." This recantation, however admirably motivated made the common assumption that mental activity is essentially passive, and can never be considered as "vital" as the physical involvement of the soldier. The later Stevens would assert, on the contrary, that poetic activity must be "violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (*NA*, 36). The problems Stevens first confronted in "Lettres" became, in their transformation, a permanent part of his poetic landscape.

In "Lettres" Stevens first explored the close relation which existed in his mind between the soldier and the poet. The series ultimately failed because he did not get the relationship "right." He tried to identify himself with Lemercier, but was unable to present convincingly the soldier's sustaining beliefs; and the nature of this project prevented him from substituting an alternative "supreme fiction," even if the idea had occurred to him at this early stage in his career. Years later, when he returned to this theme, he would no longer try to unite the soldier and the poet in a single person. In the epilogue to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the two roles are separate but complementary. Soldier and poet represent the two extremes of human endeavor, on the parallel fronts of imagination and reality:

...The two are one.
They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows, or that meet
In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.

Their points of contact are spiritual ("the meeting of their shadows") and specifically literary: the soldier writes letters (like Lemercier's) which may inspire the poet; and the poet writes poems which can sustain the soldier even at the front. The complementary acts of reading and writing are made to figure the proper relation between poet and soldier, as well as between imagination and reality. And "Notes..." itself becomes the battlefield on which the impossible meeting of these "parallels" is momentarily achieved.

The epilogue to "Notes" is also, in a sense, the epilogue to "Lettres." The soldier addressed is a Frenchman ("Monsieur") like Lemercier, and he depends on language in the same vital way. The soldier in "Lettres" sacrificed his life for the traditional values of his "masters":

I quote the line and page,
I quote the very phrase my masters used.

If I should fall, as soldier, I know well
The final pulse of blood from this good heart
Would taste, precisely, as they said it would.

This self-assurance ultimately failed in "Lettres." Words finally proved insufficient to sustain either the soldier or the series of poems. But the epilogue to "Notes" corrects this failure, filling the place of Lemercier's "masters" by means of the poet's "supreme fiction," and re-asserting the power of language to redeem even "the final pulse of blood":

...Monsieur and comrade,
The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.

The transition from "Lettres" to "Notes" is simple, but profound. And it is perhaps easiest to see by comparing the tone of resigned disillusionment, the un-compelling rhythms, and the vague meaning of the earlier ending:

Death, that will never be satisfied,
Digs up the earth when want returns...
You know the phrase.

With the confident strength of the epilogue to "Notes":

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.²²

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NOTES

1. *Lettres d'un Soldat* (Août 1914-Avril 1915). *Préface de Andre Chevillon* (Paris: Librairie Chapelot, 1916). All translations are taken from the translation by "V.M.," *Letters of a Soldier: 1914-1915, with an Introduction by A. Clutton-Brock and a Preface by Andre Chevillon* (London: Constable, 1917). The letters were published anonymously, but for the sake of clarity I shall refer to Lemercier by name, and to the protagonist of Stevens' poems as "the soldier."

2. A Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford, 1972). All the extant poems from "Lettres" are printed in Appendix B.4, pp. 309-316. I follow Litz's numbering of these poems.

3. December 21, 1914. The date of the letter, rather than the page number, is given so that the reader may easily consult any edition of this book.

4. March 17, 1915.

5. Samuel French Morse, "Lettres d'un Soldat," *Dartmouth College Library Bulletin*, 4 N.S. (December 1961), p. 49.

6. March 15, 1915.

7. January 9, 1915.

8. Stevens' friends Pitts Sanborn, Carl Van Vechten, and John Covert were all in Europe in August, 1914, and recorded their experiences of the mobilization and evacuation in the pages of *The Trend* (October and November, 1914, issues).

9. For a discussion of the relation between the "Primordia" series and "Lettres," see Litz, pp. 61-77.

10. April 3, 1915.

11. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford, 1975), Chapter V, "Oh What a Literary War," pp. 155-190.

12. November 10, 1914.

13. January 22, 1915.

14. December 9, 1914.

15. November 29, 1914.

16. "Death was a reaper..." is numbered XVII in the manuscripts. See Litz, p. 309. "Lunar Paraphrase," Poem VII, was also cut, possibly because its "pathos and pity" seemed out of place in the more restrained edited version.

17. Fussell, p. 21.

18. April 5, 1915.

19. Fussell, p. 74.

20. Joseph Riddell, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Politics of Wallace Stevens*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Univ. Press, 1965), p. 162.

21. *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, p. 206.

22. This reading of the epilogue to "Notes" dissents from the view of Helen Vendler who sees it as "something of an anti-climax." See her *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 205.

"A Mythology Reflects Its Region": Stevens and Thoreau

ERROL M. McGUIRE

In the late poem of 1955 which bears the above title, Wallace Stevens suggests that his age has come too late to be born into a state of mythic consciousness and that this fact has extraordinary, if no longer surprising, consequences. Modern man's capacity to transcend the constraints of his own culture—a product of his knowledge of himself as an historical creature—continually forces him to question the meaning of all received truths. Emerson, of course, was among the first Americans to enunciate this recognition, as it was the recognition itself which made his own career as a romantic so urgent. In his famous lines from "Experience": "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors.... Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast." For Stevens, such uncertainty is a serious and unhappy consequence of the relativity of experience, yet it has its happier, if precarious, counterpart. Even though the Enlightenment incurred severe psychic costs in its heirs, man has now at last become consciously aware of himself as a creator, a fact which the early Emerson had also announced in terming him "a becoming creator" or a "creator in the finite." He is no longer reduced merely to the role of an epistemological interrogator; the images which he chooses to embody reality will, if accurate, at least serve to amplify his own nature. The authentic poet, in fact, says Stevens, will generate a lively image which can expand both in time to recapture a fresh spiritual of his being ("freshened youth") and in space to encompass the wood and stone of the region which has decisively shaped his existence.

Here, the all-important relation in Stevens' thought between imagination and reality, or sense and consciousness, is almost too easily solved; the imagination manifested in this image does not gasp for breath within an overpowering world of cold, isolated objects, as in "The Course of a Particular," nor does it trip a light fantastic upon a pervious environment, as in "Earthy Anecdote" or "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." The metaphors of its activity are instead steady, organic, productive, and fertile in character. The hypothetical nature of the speaker's inquiry—"if we had—" thus itself manages to shift quickly into an affirmative, declarative statement regarding the sustaining energy of mythology even in an age apparently grown too old for it. The effective presence of mythic narrative is indirectly asserted in the very act of the poem's creation. Indeed, void of some deep abiding cultural tradition (even if now corrupted) on which to draw, the poetic imagination can only be disoriented or lifeless, the eviscerated product of an invert environment. If we take this tradition to be a necessary part of "reality," Stevens' own comment in a letter

asserts the interacting dynamics. "Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. Here is a fundamental principle about the imagination: it does not create except as it transforms."¹ Contrary to his common sense claim, therefore, Stevens' region does have its mythology, a "story" or series of stories which for him are spun out of the incredibly diverse confrontations between reality and the originative and unifying forces of the necessary angel.

In what follows I want to propose that Thoreau's contribution to the mythology of the New England region had a significant impact on at least three of Stevens' poems. We know, of course, that scholars have already isolated a number of explicit and implicit sources lying behind his verse; included among these are, most particularly, Wordsworth, Emerson, Keats, Browning, and other romantics.² One recent essay has gone so far as to assert that Stevens' poetry represents a modern version of Transcendentalism and is linked to the earlier period (especially to Thoreau) through its expressed love of the landscape, its view of inexorable change, its quest for religious ecstasy, and its occasional suggestion of unity between individual and the central mind.³ Yet no one has given serious, sustained attention to Thoreau. His name is virtually nonexistent in the secondary sources. On first reflection, this is not difficult to understand, for Stevens mentions Thoreau directly only two times in his collected letters and these references are both incidental to his own work.⁴ The weight of the internal evidence in the poems which I have in mind, however, may well indicate that the Concord poet should be inducted into that formative group noted above in Stevens' background.

In the first poem, Stevens develops a poetic rehearsal of the fate of transcendental reflection in Concord after its full flowering in the 1840's, some thirty to forty years before his birth. "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly" depicts Mr. Homburg visiting home there and finding himself irritated with "minor ideas" which spell the region's passage from early innocence to modern experience. He beholds the same undespised facts which Thoreau had hoped would one day flower into truths— here, for example, grass, trees, and clouds— but his declaration of confidence in the presence of an allied spirit overhead or underfoot is severely hedged and largely rhetorical. The images of his imagination flow over one another to touch what appears to be eternal reality and to join with it momentarily; yet no god reveals himself of the sort which Thoreau called the "old settler and original proprietor" in "Solitude" in *Walden*. No recognizable answering Spirit now occupies either the territory within or without the soul and the search for divinity in Nature conducted so vigorously by the earlier citizen of Concord has received a tortured, twisted reply.⁵ The "something" which may be beyond us appears to Mr. Homburg either as a lower order "slightly detestable *operandum*" or as some more aethereal realm, one, however, which is finally "too big, / A thing not planned for imagery or belief."

Thoreau, too, it may be recalled, spoke intermittently of Nature as a "personality so vast and universal that we have never seen one of her features."⁶ But the mystery for him is a divine one, full of assurances of a Presence "far more deeply interfused." For Mr. Homburg, it is essentially unresponsive.

While this later element "does not do for us," its very formless transparency gives the narrator a clue that thinking may be like the motion of the wind, a breathing with the living changes incessantly discovered in reality. As the momentum for this series builds, the afternoon's color itself becomes the actual equivalent of Emerson's transparent eyeball, "a source, / Too wide, too irised, to be more than calm," rather than merely the soul's opposite or "print," as in "The American Scholar." Yet for all that, it remains "Obscurest parent, obscurest patriarch," and Stevens again shifts back to the primacy of what "We think," determined to initiate a movement of mind superceding actuality's untransforming sun.

At this point, a line occurs which seems to be one of several remarkable echoes of significant passages in *Walden*. "We think as wind skitters on a pond in a field / Or we put mantles on our words" to shield them from the chill of imagination's late wintry, windy buffetings. In Thoreau's classic, the transcending narrator in "The Ponds" perceives that "A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. On land only the grass and trees wave, but the water itself is rippled by the wind. . . . We shall, perhaps, look down thus on the surface of air at length, and mark where a still subtler spirit sweeps over it." For this speaker, the natural elements themselves both contain and presage the spiritual presence which fulfills the upward aspiring course of all created life. The spirit is incarnated in the wind, while at the same time it lies more perfectly in the purely celestial environs above, causing the very air itself to ripple like the water's surface.

The secure passage from one state of being to another is, however, no longer conceivable to Mr. Homburg. A dominant uncertainty about the concrete specifiable relations between human perception and the wider natural world allows but small comfort to him or to the audience of the poem.⁷ He cannot rejoice, as could Thoreau, that the "universe is wider than our views of it," nor can he imagine celebrating the requirement, voiced in "Spring," "that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable." The world's body has succumbed to the dehumanized scientific inquiry which Thoreau had so consistently condemned⁸ and is now understood to be governed in gloom by "blunt laws" which "make an affectation of mind." The routinizing and reductive trends in science and culture which Thoreau had feared would undermine "the central fact" have succeeded in doing precisely that. Entirely displaced are those "older naturalists" mentioned in "Friday" of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* who divine the "real laws," the empirical truths which mount rapidly to the ethereal. Contrary to Whitehead, neither loveliness nor power seems fully appropriate for depicting Nature in her modern aspect. Thus, the "new scholar" in Stevens' poem has replaced the "older one," while the microscopic examination of a "glass aswarm with things going as far as they can" has ambiguously succeeded to the position once held by the Transcendentalist microcosm, in which all the world and its higher truths could be discovered in condensed form by redeemed consciousness. There is little question, of course, that the early Thoreau sought to emulate the prescribed

pattern for the "American scholar," an observation that Henry James confirmed by remarking that he "took upon himself to be, in the concrete, the sort of person that Emerson's 'scholar' was in the abstract."⁹ Can any figure, then, other than Thoreau serve so well as Stevens' implicit model for the older scholar of Concord? None, I think. Nor can any more dramatic earlier counterpart for a mere laboratory slide "aswarm with things" be found in Concord than Walden Pond. The surface of the Pond, we are told, is supremely sensitive to the slightest disturbances – skaters, water-bugs, fish, and oars. And in the light and beauty which they produce, all these movements intimate the presence of a divine agency which takes there a local habitation and a name. At Walden, nothing is "caught in glass" for the microscope, nor is the spirit's action trivialized to a "mannerism." By majestic contrast, its surface takes the measure of man and is a kind of lens for the all-seeing eye of God. "In such a day, in September or October," says the narrator, "Walden is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer. Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water."

A second instance of an apparent link between these writers occurs in the final canto (XXXIII) of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Here I would argue that the evidence for a conscious literary connection between Stevens and a section of Thoreau's work is even stronger. Helen Vendler, as well as others, has described this poem as being exceptional among the longer ones for its concentrated form and action; everything is pared down to the essential confrontation between imagination and the primafacie "out there." All is played upon a "reductive guitar," as she puts it nicely at one point.¹⁰ A part of this reduced scale involves the annihilation of the gods, for there is no apparent third dimension in the poem except perhaps the unpredictable metamorphic character of the shifting contexts of the various cantos. We hear almost nothing here, as in "The Idea of Order at Key West," of "the spirit that we sought," but only of

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

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

(XXI)

Throughout the work, Stevens depicts the multitude of permutations in the struggle of acquisition and relinquishment between the guitar and things as they are. The audience of the guitar player, of course, would have him strum "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (I); nevertheless, he knows very well that steady transactions with the celestial departments of the universe have been cancelled until further notice.

I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.

(II)

If the poet is not saying with Nietzsche that “we have *Art* in order not to perish of the Truth,”¹¹ in some places his pronouncements are even more radical. The modern “poem of the act of the mind” can no longer merely repeat “what / Was in the script,” before “the theatre was changed / To something else.” Now the poem must provide its own sufficient truth (“Of Modern Poetry”).

The earth, for us, is flat and bare.
There are no shadows. Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
Even in the chattering of your guitar.

(V)

The universal intercourse between poem and world, a passive condition with “all / Confusion solved” (XXII, XXIII), is entirely hypothetical, a provisional reality resting on the perilous “as if.” The final canto shares this narrowed vision of experience with the earlier ones, but Vendler is correct in stressing that this section in addition reveals Stevens’ “yearning to escape the two-dimensional world he has adamantly presented.”¹²

The images in this part drive the poet and his generation to recognize that the era of sacramental Sunday has passed, leaving only “Monday’s dirty light.” Where once men had dreamed of a beyond, their visions are now laid to rest, incarcerated in a “final block” of sterile, endlessly undistinctive time. The eschatological bread of mythic promise in Christian tradition has become mere “actual stone” in a perverse reversal of the temptation stories in Matthew and Luke.¹³ Thus, bread intractably remains only bread and stone stone in the conventional, desacralized world. No promise remains of an eternal return beyond time’s dessicating effects. Yet the poem insists on parting from its audience with perhaps the most uplifting, declarative phrase in its entire repertoire.

We shall forget by day, except

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

Interestingly enough, on the same day, “Monday,” in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau develops an observation which appears to be a very plausible source for Stevens’ concluding metaphors. Much

of the material in this chapter deals with the respective values of Eastern and Western modes of existence and in particular with contemplative versus active styles of thought. Earlier in the book, Thoreau had compared the auroral sweetness and vigor of dawn with the noontide hour and its languor and intense glare. Here, however, a much more positive assessment of the brilliant passivity of Indian reflection dominates his dreamy midday thoughts during the lunch break with his brother on the banks of the Merrimack. Monday, then, is very far from being a realm of "dirty light" for Thoreau, since in this archetypical week every day participates symbolically in a perfect temporal order, an aesthetically derived order of new creation in seven days. Apropos of this, the narrator remarks in "Thursday," "The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity which includes all time." Finally, as the two men settle in for the night at their camp, Thoreau records the following passage, presenting a variation on one of his most characteristic interests.

The wilderness is near as well as dear to every man. Even the oldest villages are indebted to the border of wild wood which surrounds them, more than to the gardens of men. There is something indescribably inspiring and beautiful in the aspect of the forest skirting and occasionally jutting into the midst of new towns, which, like the sand-heaps of fresh fox-burrows, have sprung up in their midst. The very uprightness of the pines and maples asserts the ancient rectitude and vigor of nature. Our lives need the relief of such a background, where the pine flourishes and the jay still screams.

The repetition in Canto XXXIII of pine and jay is striking. It is true, of course, that the pine appears with some frequency elsewhere in Stevens,¹⁴ and that both terms may have been selected to serve as images for his standard division between green and blue, nature and imagination, or percept and concept. Yet it is notable that the flourishing pine and the screaming jay provide a respite from and a tonic for the growing frustration of the nineteenth-century romantic in practically the same fashion that their imagined counterparts offer a suggestion of retreat from the chronic reduction of human possibility in the poet's modern world. While this new pine and jay are largely the offspring of the elastic poetic imagination – "like the reason in a storm" (VIII), Nature itself in this context is no longer entirely a monster, a wind in dead leaves, "The demon that cannot be himself" (XXVII). The temporary sway of pine and jay does not block out the fear that

The earth is not earth but a stone,
Not the mother that held men as the fell.
(XVI)

Yet it is finally nothing other than the bursting health and vigor of the natural world so revered by Thoreau that finally provides the metaphors for the moments of imaginative conquest.¹⁵ This is Stevens' mighty attempt to replace

"rotted names" (XXXII) with a language which had already proved its capacity for life, an attempt which duplicates Emerson's prophetic call in *Nature* for a speech which could "pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things."

With such concerns in mind, the Transcendentalist had also earlier placed heavy stress upon the efficacy of the inspired moment and was generally less concerned with the continuity of historical passage than his more orthodox Unitarian brethren.¹⁶ We find Stevens making a corollary emphasis in the final couplet where he recognizes that the escape from sheer corporeality occurs solely in selected "moments." It was a function of his poetry in fact to locate that "moment final" mentioned earlier in Canto VI and to expand the sublime moment of soaring imagination to include first the hour and finally the year, as in "It Must Give Pleasure" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The pine and the jay in Thoreau's wilderness are, therefore, the precise images suited to mediate a continuing, if altered, possibility of transcending instants of clarity and calming nurture, visions of balance and wholeness.

A final example of a poem which may bear the marks of a direct Thoreauvian influence on Stevens is "Credences of Summer." This work is engendered by the notion that credence should be given to summer, that the mind can lay by its trouble for the season, and that honey can be hived in trees and a colorful festival held. Over against the sentiment of the late fall season captured in "The Plain Sense of Things" that "A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition/ In a repetitiousness of men and flies," this poem attempts to safeguard the ontological and aesthetic integrity of the phenomenal world from all danger. In its early cantos, at any rate, "Credences" seeks and finds the precarious and temporary union of man with himself, his environment, and his immediate age; by the poem's midpoint, however, the earlier warm light has begun to shade into darker tones and one senses that Stevens' loving cry to Jerusalem must finally suffer the absence of any certain reply. In the last canto, the "inhuman author" who meditates late at night "does not hear his characters talk." The colorful and luxurious circumstances of "the fat, the roseate characters" in this section are free only "for a moment, from malice and sudden cry." In contrast to Kermode and Riddel, therefore, Vendler argues persuasively that "Credences" contains the "uneasiness" which finally issues inexorably in the serpentine moods of "The Auroras of Autumn," where the hopes of summer must ultimately go up in flames. At the very best, it is ironically qualified in "Auroras" by what Harold Bloom terms "the ambiguous figuration of the Northern Lights."¹⁷

It has been reasonably proposed that Stevens composed this piece as a reminiscence of a hike over Mount Penn, a mountain whose tower overlooked "Oley, too rich for enigmas."¹⁸ I would supplement this and Vendler's references to Wordsworth's *Excursion* with the suggestion that Stevens seems to have also had Thoreau very much in mind when he composed these verses and that the poem can be creatively read as a studied qualification of the unbridled enthusiasms of *Walden*, especially the narrator's final conclusion that "there is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning-star." Over against Thoreau's piece, as we have already noted, the end of summer in the poem's conclusion

brings not only sadness, but what seems to be a slow withdrawal of credence. (In keeping with Stevens' own title, perhaps it would be even better to speak here of the appearance of one, particularly gloomy, credence among other "Credences," rather than simply a withdrawal.) In the opening phrases of the poem, summer is regarded positively as "the last day of a certain year/ Beyond which there is nothing left of time" (I). These lines suggest both the time of consummating fruition, the end of a complete productive cycle, as well as the occasion in which ordinary history is surmounted in a mythic ritual which suspends all temporal motion. Mircea Eliade's distinction between myth and history comes immediately to mind, where the mythic identity of ends and beginnings *in illo tempore* overcomes the desperation of mere linear passage through time. Similarly in "Sounds," Thoreau's persona maintains that in his time-transcending periods at Walden, his days "were not days of the week," but rather that he lived like the Puri Indians, who had only a single word for yesterday, today, and tomorrow. One of his intentions in the work is precisely to provide access to an eternal realm or dimension of experience beyond the reach of time's degenerative influences.¹⁹ So, too, on summer days the speaker by the Pond sometimes dwells in or approaches a state of reverie, recalling periods of "dreaming awake" during his youth, just as the mind in the later poem "lays by its troubles."

In the second canto, there is a hortatory call for a kind of holocaust of vision by which the "essential barrenness" of reality might be revealed, "the centre that I seek." And in this poem at least, the emphasis is upon the qualifying platonic adjective "essential," rather than on Stevens' more typical, stark "barrenness." "Burn everything not part of it to ash," cries the refining voice of the bard. Over against this stands Thoreau's earlier call for a modern celebration of the fiery purificatory rite of the "busk" in "Economy," while his own stern hortatory invitation to front reality face to face remains unequalled in the American language.

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake.... Be it life or death, we crave only reality.²⁰

Set aside the inevitable, deadening cognitive analysis of summer's rich immediacy, the later poet demands with corresponding sympathy. "Let's see the very thing and nothing else."

No less arresting, I believe, are specific analogues between *Walden* and Cantos III and IV. The third almost lovingly depicts "the natural tower of all the world,"

A point of survey squatting like a throne,
Axis of everything, green's apogee.

No symbol of green's apogee in the nineteenth century will serve better than Walden Pond. From this point Thoreau was able to survey not only Concord but the entire world, and to do so in both a physical and a metaphysical fashion, whether this involved establishing the exact boundaries of a local field or estimating the spiritual condition of man and his relations. His house at the Pond also constituted on the imaginative plane an *axis mundi* ("Axis of everything"), and Edenic location ("green's green apogee"), in a part of the universe which was, according to Thoreau, "forever new and unprofaned." Perhaps even more provocative than these parallels in "Where I Lived" is the repetition in Stevens' lines of the exact verb found in Thoreau's description of his ceremonial occupation of this housing site: "Such was the part of creation where I had squatted." Indeed, with this special use of the word in mind, where the gross connotations of squat are absorbed into a meaning which stresses the freely given, magnificent nature of the territorial bequest to the squatter, the participle in "Credences" effectively captures the throne's dependent relationship upon its extraordinary point of survey, "the final mountain."

The fourth canto introduces the reader to the exercise of reaching reality's own limits, limits where serenity is so overpowering that the need for rational or clairvoyant interpretation vanishes like a morning fog. An eschaton of "last choirs, last sounds" now reigns in Oley which delivers up a perfectly "Pure rhetoric of a language without words." One does not have to know Thoreau well to remember the part which sublimest music plays in acquainting man with the "celestial empires." Beyond this, he urges in the opening sentence in "Sounds" that we must cut through ordinary language and that "we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard." Thoreau, of course, is not speaking out of what at this juncture of the poem amounts almost to a millennial mood, but he is describing a high species of communion which only those with properly spiritually conditioned ears may hear. In addition, one may recall from the "Conclusion" his remarks upon the indefiniteness and volatility of those words "which express our faith and piety," as well as his moving comments on the consummate eloquence of Silence in "Friday" of *A Week*. In this last section, he bears special witness to his debt to the mystical traditions of both East and West in which verbal discourse inevitably gives way to nonverbal illumination. "I hear the unspeakable," he records in his Journal after a winter evening's walk.²¹

Further points of contact between these works would include the poem's interest in the one day which "enriches a year" and Thoreau's reverence for the sacred character of the awe-full claim which each day lays upon the individual and his talent. "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts," proclaims the narrator in a familiar passage of "Where I Lived." The poem also makes much use of mountain imagery and certainly no one in New England ever associated visionary possibility and vivid life as consistently with mountain climbing as Thoreau.²² The voice in Canto VI which identifies the rock of truth with a mountain surely calls attention to the Concord saunterer's description of his experience atop Mt. Ktaadn, and perhaps even Mt. Greylock. The chance of any sort of reference to the "mountain luminous" passage in his

Greylock encounter with the sublimity of the heavenly lights is, or course, probably remote. More plausible, though, is an association between the ascent of Maine's highest peak in *The Maine Woods* and these later lines:

It is a mountain half way green and then,
The other immeasurable half, such rock
As placid air becomes. But it is not

A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage.

Much more enticing than the potential credibility of these two references outside *Walden*, however, is the correlation between the cock and the bean pole in Canto IX and the similar prominence of the crowing cock and the bean field within that work. These relationships, which I will elaborate below, are also more convincing than Vendler's attempt to see the figures in this section as only the products of a corrupting metamorphosis at work on earlier forms in the poem, with the tower becoming a bean pole, the mountain a weedy garden, and the old man clothed in "ruddy ancientness" shrinking to a cock robin.²³ This moment in the poem portends the imminent loss of summer's temporary acquisitions—the festival colors, the natural tower, and the marriage hymns which for a time had appeared to be so eternal. Now, in the aftermath of trumpet cries, a "cock bright" is invited by the narrator to fly in low and land on a bean pole. What the bird surveys is a garden abandoned in decay, with its gardener absent and "salacious weeds" grown up to replace the last year's crop. One might say that the "complex of emotions" which "falls apart" in this scene is equivalent to the death of romantic and Transcendental hope in the dismembering presense of modern historicism and relativism. The garden which Thoreau labored in with such Herculean effort and, in the midst of hoeing his metaphors, with such excellent results is the "same" garden which Stevens' bird enters—except that it is now no longer tended. The earlier poet's "long war" with weeds, the "lusty crest-waving Hector," is concluded and the battlefield deserted to its natural occupants. Husbandry has waned as "a sacred art" and the presence of any divine "principal cultivator" from that earlier, brighter era is sufficiently doubtful for a new adventurer to sacrifice further effort.

In addition, the cock whose crow Thoreau's narrator seeks to imitate in order to wake his neighbors up and bring them to their spiritual senses has here been transformed into a bird whose sound literally "is not part of the listener's own sense." In this phrase, the natural and the human have suffered a woeful division, with the nonpersonal pulses of Nature and the disorienting din of human history coming to stand at opposite sides of a great chasm. Poe's "Infernal Twoness" is as much the signature of this age as he had feared it to be during his own day. More relevant even than this creature from other sections of the book, however, may be the little bird which actually appears in "The Bean-Field." The "brown-thrasher—or red mavis" which sings so rambunctiously above Thoreau while he is planting seems a fitting match for the bird who is asked in Stevens' poem to return to sit on the pole and to wait fruitlessly for warmth with "brown breast redden[ed]." Something like Frost's oven

bird, his quandary is "what to make of a diminished thing." The cold autumn of existence in Stevens' own late season of modernity has permanently displaced the Transcendentalist gardener and his little world of organic plenitude. Thus, the fleeting momentary stay against confusion in the credence given in summer's full flush at harvest has given way to fragile, haunting echoes of halcyon days now lost. The persistent presence of the bird from early season to late, however, indicates that the imagination continues to provide sufficient resources to repossess—even if only ironically—the greener spirit of a local past.

These similarities and identities between words, phrases, and ideas in Thoreau and Stevens seem to provide solid ground for asserting the existence of an internal relationship between certain of their writings. Given Thoreau's local prominence as a New England man of letters, there can be no doubt that Stevens read his more significant works with the same care he demonstrated for other figures in the tradition. What I have attempted to do is select only those passages in Stevens where a strain of influence from the Concord poet appears to play a decisive role in the poetic drama. Even if the evidence for direct dependence is not conclusive in any single case, the convergence of language and vision noted in my observations provides additional warrants for what Roy Harvey Pearce has called the continuity of American Poetry. A mythology reflects its region.

NOTES

1. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), pp. 363-364.
2. For a brief additional comment, cf. Helen Hennessy Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 9-10. Harold Bloom's observations on Emerson appear in "The Central Man: Emerson, Whitman, Wallace Stevens," *Massachusetts Review*, VII (Winter, 1966), 23-42, and are extended in his recent *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, 1977). Note also Richard Eberhart, "Emerson and Wallace Stevens," *Literary Review*, VII (Autumn, 1963), 51-71.
3. Nina Baym, "The Transcendentalism of Wallace Stevens," in Edwin Gittleman, ed., *The Minor and Later Transcendentalists* (Hartford, 1969), pp. 67-71.
4. *Letters*, pp. 463, 437; note also 133.
5. On September 7, 1851, Thoreau only makes explicit what is indirectly suggested in many other places. "To watch for, describe, all the divine features which I detect in Nature. My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature." *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, eds., Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (New York, 1906), II, 472.
6. "Walking," *Thoreau: The Major Essays*, ed. Jeffrey L. Duncan (New York, 1972), p. 222.
7. In his mid-twenties, Stevens made this comment in his Journal: "I can't make head or tail of Life. Love is a fine thing, Art is a fine thing, Nature is a fine thing; but the average human mind and spirit are confusing beyond measure.... To laugh at a Roman awe-stricken in a sacred grove is to laugh at something to-day. I wish that groves still were sacred—or, at least, that something was: that there was 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. Self-consciousness convinces me of something, but whether it be something Past, Present or Future I do not know." *Letters*, p. 86.
8. Besides the relevant passages in "Higher Laws" and "The Pond in Winter" in *Walden* and in "Friday" of *A Week*, note also his typical comments in the Journal, III, 155-156; VI, 237; and XII, 371-372.
9. *Partial Portraits* (New York, 1888), p. 24.
10. Vendler, p. 124.
11. Quoted in Erich Heller, *The Artist's Journey into the Interior and Other Essays* (New York, 1968), p. 194.
12. Vendler, p. 123.
13. Note the interesting alternative reading of these lines in William York Tindall, *Wallace Stevens* (Minneapolis, 1961), p. 29.
14. For example, see "In the Carolinas," and "Credences of Summer," Canto II.

15. In Thoreau's special brand of theology, "it is the marriage of the soul with Nature that makes the intellect fruitful, that gives birth to imagination." *Journal*, II, 413. As James McIntosh has shown in considerable detail, however, this attitude was characteristic of only one of his three rather different relationships with the natural world. Or, rather, we might say that the metaphor of marriage, interpreted with full breadth, encompasses all three relationships – involvement, detachment, and distanced, appreciative attention. James McIntosh, *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist. His Shifting Stance Toward Nature* (Ithaca and London, 1973).

16. The book which deals with this aspect of Transcendentalism most adequately is Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism. Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca and London, 1973). Note also M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), pp. 423f., for Stevens' stress upon "moments of awakening."

17. Bloom, "The Central Man," p. 38.

18. Michael Lafferty, "Wallace Stevens," *Historical Review of Berks County* XXIV (Fall, 1959), 108.

19. For Thoreau, sin itself is understood to be "in proportion to the time which has come behind us and displaced eternity, – that degree to which our elements are mixed with the elements of the world." *Journal*, I, 300.

20. This passage, it should be noted, is a very different notion of philosophical confidence than the Transcendentalist or romantic enthusiasm for perfection which Melville derided as the "all" feeling. Melville to Hawthorne, June 1 (?), 1851, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, eds. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven, 1960), pp. 126-131.

21. *Journal*, IV, 471-472.

22. Note for example this observation of March 21, 1853: "Our experience does not wear upon us. It is seen to be fabulous or symbolical, and the future is worth expecting. Encouraged, I set out once more to climb the mountain of the earth, for my steps are symbolical steps, and in all my walking I have not reached the top of the earth yet." *Journal*, V, 35. A little noted passage is his late recollection of the ascent of Ktaadn (X, 142). See further McIntosh, pp. 202f.

23. Vendler, p. 240.

COMMUNICATIONS

AN ORDINARY ESSAY

I

Every so often one stumbles on a sentence that suggests a new reality, that intimates a previously unrecognized mode of Being; in non-Heideggerian terms, we sense another sense of life. It was there all the time, of course, but something in the sentence opens up a way to this new apprehension of reality. Among the commonplaces of Stevens' *Adagia* I stumbled on such a sentence:

Weather is a sense of nature. Poetry is a sense.¹

How are we to take this saying of Stevens? The word *sense* relates weather and nature. In what sense? Can we talk about *sense* when it is *sense* itself we are after? Yes, if we are willing to don round sombreros and be circular in our thinking rather than attempt to ground our deductions in a myth of square propositions of rationality. This is the modern predicament: lacking absolute grounds – God being the chief one we now lack – we are thrown back “in windings round” upon ourselves. Thus Heidegger asks the question of the meaning of Being by investigating the being, man (*Dasein*), that has as its *issue* its own being. In other words, an essential way of *being* human is to ask what Being is. In this curiously circular process, we are grounded in our own questioning: what *is* is-ing?

Our question is: in what sense is weather a sense of nature. Only when we have made this transparent can we go on to ask in what sense poetry is a sense. Several lines of thought suggest themselves: (1) *Sense* as meaning. A word has several senses; weather is a meaning or expression of nature. (2) We could assume a personification here. Weather is to nature as, say, sight is to man. At first glance this seems strange, but perhaps not. (3) *Sense* could mean a “sense of where you are.” Basketball players have this sense, as do pianists who perform in the dark. Weather is a sense of being in nature. (4) We could shift the point of view from weather to the reader of the sentence and say weather is *our* sense of nature. We do not “sense” the abstraction nature except as it is expressed in some sort of phenomenon. Weather concretizes nature.

This last sense of *sense* strikes me as immediately accessible, and hence in danger of becoming a dead sense. It is reductive; it reduces nature to weather, and reductionism is a sin we would rather leave to Descartes, Marx, and Freud. The sense of a new reality in Stevens' saying comes, I believe, from the interfusion of *sense* as a bodily sense and the sense of *sense* as “where one is.” If we think of sense in a non-Cartesian way, I think we will have something. Normally as good Cartesian dualists we understand the sense of sight as a kind of transference capacity by which information from “out there” is presented to our “real” self, our mind (or spirit), in “here.” Sight functions to provide the subject (us) with objects. Heidegger, for one, feels this model does not express our actual mode of being in the world – it is a reductionist epistemology based on a mechanistic concept of knowledge and Being. Heidegger would suggest we are already and always *in* a world. As beings, we exist in a mode of being along-side of other things. We do not see a form and then interpret it as “tree.” We see a tree – or something else, we perceive as a tree. The point is that we always already, immediately, perceive something: *as Dasein*, we *are* in a world. There is no time lag in which a self “in” our bodies is told about something out “there.”

What has all this to do with weather as a sense of nature? It bridges the Cartesian gap, the reductionist gap, between nature and weather. Weather is a way of being in the

world for nature. Weather is a how nature *is* – for us. We live in a continuous coming and going of weather, but seldom does it reveal itself to us in its clarity, because it is *always* there. It stays, and is stayed in its continuous departure and arrival. And weather is one of the ways in which we exist, have a being – we are always in a weather, just as Heidegger explains how we are never without a mood (we find ourselves “thrown” in one mood or another). A “sense of the weather” is a sense of “where we are”: a Being-among-things-moving-with-things. The apprehension of weather is a way of being – in nature. Poetry, then, is a way of being – in.... Stevens gives us nothing here. “Poetry is a sense.” Period. Poetry is a way of being. Poetry *is* Being.

II

Wallace Stevens was not as interested in poems as he was in poetry. Poetry is what may, or may not, dwell in the poem. In this regard, he reveals himself as a true romantic – Coleridge and Shelley make similar distinctions. In some realm or other, poetry “exists,” apart from and even independent of the poem. In speaking of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” to Hi Simons, he touches on this idea:

I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction. A man as familiar with my things as you are will be justified in thinking that I mean poetry. I don’t want to say that I don’t mean poetry; I don’t know what I mean. The next thing for me to do will be to try to be a little more precise about this enigma. I hold off from even attempting that because, as soon as I start to rationalize, I lose the poetry of the idea.²

As soon as he pinpoints “poetry” as the meaning of the supreme fiction, it slips away from him – not conceptually, but existentially. Conceptions are not interesting to Stevens unless they are perceptions. He ravages modern science and philosophy, sending letters to Jean Wahl and Paul Weiss soliciting nominations for “inherently poetic” ideas, such as the infinitude of the cosmos.³ “Poetry,” Stevens says in the *Adagia* “has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential” (*Opus Posthumous*, p. 164). All this sounds strikingly like Eliot’s characterization of Donne’s sensibility as “felt-thought.” But that will not do here, precisely, for Stevens. The necessary angel is the angel of reality, and however much he may praise mind and imagination, reality – ultimately – is privileged: it is what we “get at” with mind and imagination. “Felt-thought,” though, privileges the latter element: the physical sensation of *thought*. Another term is necessary. If we turn it around, perhaps we could characterize Stevens’ sensibility as “reflective-sensation.” Poems, sometimes, allow “reflective-sensation” to reveal poetry.

III

Part of the austerity of the later poems arises from a sense of things departed. Over and over Stevens’ poems reach toward that which is no longer there, towards absence:

Silence is a shape that has passed (*CP*, p. 506).

March... Someone has walked across the snow (*CP*, p. 511).

Wood-smoke rises through trees, is caught in an upper flow
Of air and whirled away (*CP*, p. 522).

The proud and the strong
Have departed (*CP*, p. 504).
The wind has blown the silence of summer away (*CP*, p. 487).
The house is empty. But here is where she sat (*CP*, p. 427).
Like tales that were told the day before yesterday (*CP*, p. 505).
It was after the neurosis of winter (*CP*, p. 482).
After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things (*CP*, p. 502).

And perhaps the ultimate departure:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air (*CP*, p. 525).

Stevens questions departures. The perception of what is not attracts him because of its peculiar power for inducing states-of-mind: reflective-sensation, sense. The reality of an object in a space/time locus is undeniable, and yet the ability of the imagination to arch across the "distance" of time presents an alternate reality as real as the "fact" of the thing in such and such a place at such and such a time. The "fact" is a fact of the mind, and exists only there, in a realm of ideas, not in space and time – a modern mythology which we are only beginning to understand as a myth. We look at a space, and in imagination, the thing is both there and not there, and the strange relationship of the two produces a peculiar state-of-mind, a sense.

Stevens has built several of his poems entirely around this sense of departure. In "A Clear Day and No Memories" (*OP*, p. 113), the paradox of departure is perfectly embodied in the necessity of presenting what is not there in order to negate its presence:

No soldiers in the scenery,
No thoughts of people now dead,
As they were fifty years ago,
Young and living in a live air,
Young and walking in the sunshine,
Bending in blue dresses to touch something.

The more the poet defines what is not there, the more vividly the absent people stand in our minds. They begin abstractly as "people now dead," but each line particularizes the abstraction – "young and living," then "young and walking," not just in "air" but in "sunshine." The final line evokes, on the tactful edge of sentiment, some half-understood story – something touched by girls "bending in blue dresses." From this exquisite line, which pulls with all the imagistic "realizing" power of language, we are jerked back into the absence:

Today the mind is not part of the weather.

The second half of the poem recognizes the failure of the first half: instead of negating the perceiver's perception of what is gone, the perceiver himself is negated, leaving neither perceiver nor perceived, but merely the sense of perception, which is sense itself:

Today the air is clear of everything.
It has no knowledge except of nothingness
And it flows over us without meanings,
As if none of us had ever been here before
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
This invisible activity, this sense.

The poetic "trick" here is the transference of perception to the air itself by a subtle personification: "It has no knowledge." Strictly speaking, this is of course true. Air has no knowledge. But Stevens makes this poetry work by first giving the air the potentiality for knowledge by personification, and then denying its potentiality in the same phrase – "no knowledge." "Except of" – Aha! the air does have knowledge after all, but it is of "nothingness." Knowledge of nothing is merely the possibility of knowledge. We are left with this potentially alone, for the speaker is effaced, partially by the collective "us," somewhat more by the simile "As if none of us had ever been here before / And are not now," and finally completely effaced in the last noun phrases of the poem. There is no perceiver of perception here, but just perception – an "invisible activity," that is, an activity with no visible actor, merely "this sense."

Stevens' "sense" spans subject and object, perceiver and perceived. In this spanning we are aware of nothingness – that which *is* not. Nothingness is itself something, and, moreover, depends on the absence of something. In these paradoxes, a clearing is opened for the appearance of Being. It comes to us with its sense, the empty sense, which shows Being most clearly because it is transparent, a clearing out of imagination and reality which leaves only the ground itself: Being/Sense.

IV

Wallace Stevens did not know Heidegger in any way that can be construed as influence, yet the mutual illumination of the two is striking. Heidegger sought to re-ask the question of the meaning of Being. Immediately he is plunged into impossibilities. The problem is not simply that to ask what *is* Being is to question one's own question; the difficulty is the fact that Being itself is not a being – it does not have the character of an entity. Our language, though, forces us into talking about Being as if it were an entity, a thing. One way to thwart this power of language is to approach the speaking of Being with paradox and contradiction. One such central paradox in Heidegger is the simultaneous disclosure and concealment of Being, as the sky, at once, discloses God, and conceals him. What opens Being to our perceptions also closes off our perception of Being. We move toward the clearing in which Being appears, but we cannot stand there in the center of the clearing. We are always on the edge. And yet this is truth – in the sense of *aletheia*, which in the original Greek indicates a disclosure or appearance. The concept of truth as the correspondence of a statement to "reality" reduces truth to a function of propositions. No. The truth is what *is*, what appears, but whatever appears, also conceals itself. Being and nothingness depend on each other, perhaps we are each other. We cannot take Stevens too simple-mindedly. When "something" departs – summer, a woman, the wind – what remains is not *just* a memory in the imagination of the perceiver. But because Being is that which is "closest" to us – as *Dasein*, as human beings – nor are we to make Stevens more complex than he is. When something departs, what remains *is* a memory.

Before I studied Zen, mountains were only mountains. After I studied Zen, mountains were only... mountains.

V

Ignore the poem, for a moment, and listen to me. I was twenty years old in a Munich apartment six stories up. The flowers stood in the window sunlight out of reach on the other side of the room. The clear air and light were as still as the Frau Professor's talk. I remember the sense of it as if it were in another world. Now,

Say that it is a crude effect, black reds,
Pink yellows, orange whites, too much as they are
To be anything else in the sunlight of the room,

Too much as they are to be changed by metaphore,
Too actual, things that in being real
Make any imaginings of them lesser things.

And yet this effect is a consequence of the way
We feel and, therefore, is not real, except
In our sense of it, our sense of the fertilest red,

Of yellow as first color and of white,
In which the sense lies still, as a man lies,
Enormous, in a completing of his truth.

Our sense of these things changes and they change,
Not as in metaphor, but in our sense
Of them. So sense exceeds all metaphor.

It exceeds the heavy changes of the light.
It is like a flow of meanings with no speech
And of as many meanings as of men.

We are two that use these roses as we are,
In seeing them. This is what makes them seem
So far beyond the rhetorician's touch.⁴

This poem is mostly talk in the structure of a loose syllogism: Say... And yet... So.... The syllogism depends on us having seen flowers in a certain light. So Stevens says to me, "We are two that use these roses as we are/ In seeing them." I understand him—whether I do or not. This is the absolute mysticism of the thing; it depends absolutely on the imagination; it is a sense.

VI

The observer of departures is always on the edge of what he perceives—the departure is "over there." He looks in from where he is. We may stand in the center of a world, as in the center of a city, but it is always a theoretical world, a theoretical city. Our perception is always of an arc in one direction, an horizon of perhaps 120 degrees. We *are* on the edge. Even if we turn around, we do not live in the center, but amid "patches and pitches."

The center, though, is where we want to be:

It would be enough
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,

Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy.⁵

The physical center, though, is a type of the spiritual or intellectual center. Intellectually we do not have even "patches and pitches," but "writhings" and "windings round." The intellect's major tool, the question, directs the mind into a path devoid of all sense of centering in an openness. The directional nature of questions excludes a sense of "everywhere in space at once." It is the nature of questioning that "is in point" in this poem:

It is an intellect
Of windings round and dodges to and fro,

Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present
Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole

Of communication.

Instinctively we may seek to avoid this trauma, and the lecturer is there to help us do so. One can avoid the writings of questions by losing oneself in easy answers, specious revelations, puerile stances of "right." The snake oil of the lecturer builds the illusion of composure and clarity – gives us a World of Beauty – in a world of writhings:

This day writhes with what? The lecturer
On This Beautiful World Of Ours composes himself
And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe,

And red, and right. The particular question – here
The particular answer to the particular question
Is not in point – the question is in point.

If the day writhes, it is not with revelations.

The lecturer has all the answers – the world is his rose to explicate. The question raised by the lecturer's very process makes the day writhe for the hearer, but what can he do:

One goes on asking questions. That, then, is one
Of the categories. So said, this placid space

Is changed. It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
There must be no questions.

Questions torment and pale the blue of the sky, but the lecturer's answers are a question in themselves. The only way out is the ending of questions altogether. Such a stillness is the stillness of sense. Sense understands without questions, and without raising questions. It is complete. It is in the middle. In this "enormous sense" one may "merely

enjoy." Departures and arrivals are one.

Poetry is a sense – of center. It is the closest we get to the center. Poetry may take the place of a mountain – an old image of centering – in Vermont; it gives an "outlook" from which one can sense the "unexplained completion." From the mountain, one can see the sea:

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of the mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had need,
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.⁶

VII

Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) is the greatest German poet. Heidegger has ensured that, at least for those for whom Heidegger is the greatest German philosopher. Hölderlin's poetry is the poetry of the prophet who knows that the gods have departed. But we have not learned yet to read Hölderlin. We are still learning. Hölderlin sings in a troubled time. He establishes that which remains, and he names that which is holy, and lets the common man, as far as it is possible, stand in the presence of the holy. The gods depart, though, that something else may arrive. We cannot see the life of the god that is to follow, but it will be poetry, and it will be of the mind, and it will need a reader:

...the establishments
Of wind and light and cloud
Await an arrival,

A reader of the text,
A reader without a body,
Who reads quietly.⁷

Nor have we learned to read Stevens:

...Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.

VIII

In "Vacancy in the Park" (*CP*, p. 511) Stevens meets that which is not there. The speaker of the poem comes across a trace in the snow:

March... Someone has walked across the snow,
Someone looking for he knows not what.

The act of interpretation is based on working back from effect to possible cause. This apparently logical procedure disguises the audacity of the man's imagination, who feels he sees into the very mind of the wanderer and knows that he does not know what he is looking for. But the speaker is not finally interested in this man, but in his own perception, his own sense of the strangeness of departed things.

Three similes follow:

It is like a boat that has pulled away
From a shore at night and disappeared.

It is like a guitar left on a table
By a woman, who has forgotten it.

It is like the feeling of a man
Come back to see a certain house.

The similes are progressive if we look at them from the point of view of the perceiver. The first simile is dependent on the perceiver "spanning" the act of departure by his own existence—he knows the boat as there, and as gone. He is outside of, or on the edge, of the departure. In the second, the man also spans the act of departure, but spans also the mind of the woman who leaves the guitar. He knows she has forgotten it, which is more than the woman herself knows. In the third simile, the man is completely absorbed in the "actor" in the simile. The departure has become a returning, which is a return to see that which has departed—the life once lived in a "certain" house. The speaker knows the "feeling" of this mind. What is there to distinguish between the speaker and the man in the simile? Nothing. The speaker becomes the man, *is* the man, and I do not think it is out of the question to assume the "someone" who walked across the snow is the speaker himself who now looks at his own steps in the snow—he alone knows he does not know what he is looking for. This is the one thing we all know, perhaps the only thing.

The poem ends with an imagistic stanza:

The four winds blow through the rustic arbor,
Under its mattresses of vines.

The arbor gives us an enduring frame of reference, and asks the reader to see himself spanning the time of departures in the reference to the "four winds." The matted vines overhead are described in terms of mattresses, implying a visual density, but also a kind of restlessness or sleepiness. The area defined by the arbor and its vines becomes a "place," but this place is shown up for what it is—pure vacancy, nothing—but the movement of all possible winds through it. In a way, this area becomes identified with the mind of the speaker, which spans the the departures as the arbor spans the departures of the wind. The sense of emptiness of this poem is the perception of departures,

not the least of which is the departure of the speaker from himself as the wanderer. The wanderer/speaker is ultimately the "vacancy" in the park, awaiting the revelation of himself.

IX

There is a comfort in the absence of "physical" reality:

In the oblivion of cards
One exists among pure principles.

Neither the cards nor the trees nor the air
Persist as facts. This is an escape

To principium, to meditation.
One knows at last what to think about

And thinks about it without consciousness,
Under the oak trees, completely released.⁸

The self is lost as it is taken up into the realm of pure relationships and principles. The cards turn up, one by one, and without thought or conception the black seven falls on the red eight. Perception acts without a perceiver. Pure principle. The mind is oblivious to the card as card, and even the trees fail to "persist" as facts, though "persist" implies a process of the sense of physical reality moving in and out of perception. While it is "out" one can finally think without thinking, know "without consciousness." This is enlightenment, release.

The ultimate departure of self leaves only sense. But the fiction of reality must return, if only to allow the poet to write the poem. Of necessity this poem is cast into the habitual present tense — "one exists," "one knows at last," "one thinks." This is the realm of suspended realities. This is the absolute mysticism of the idea — "under the oak trees." It depends absolutely on oak trees, the cards, and the air. It is a sense.

X

The oxymoron "angel of reality" in "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" (*CP*, pp. 496-97) embodies yet another paradox by which Stevens attempts to render the sense of Being. Nothing convinces us quite like Stevens' own comments that the poem and poetry are two different things:

The point of the poem is that there must be in the world about us things that so lace us quite as fully as any heavenly visitation could. I have already suggested that one way of handling the thing would be to evade any definite representation but to depict the figure the moment after it had vanished leaving behind it tokens of its effulgence, but that is only my way of thinking of it." (*Letters*, p. 661).

His commentary is on the poem; it has a point. There is no "point" to use of "yet" as the junction of these two stanzas:

I am one of you and being one of you
Is being and knowing what I am and know:

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

Any one who claims he can pinpoint the exact sense of “yet” here is deluded. The poetry depends on the flickering of the meaning between stanzas, between “I am one of you” and “Yet I am an angel.” The dropping of the “the” before “earth” is analogous. The poetry is in the gesture made by that absence. “Yet I am the necessary angel of the earth” is not poetry, and not just because the rhythm is wrong, though that is part of it. “Of earth” implies more than the ground we stand on, as “Of the earth” would; “of earth” implies the ground of our being, where we stand under the heavens as mortals and look towards the absent/present divinities in the sky. And this is the sense of “again.” The sense of Being is an intimation we know already. Even the first time we see the angel of reality, it is “again.”

The angel stands in the door, but only for a moment:

I am the angel of reality,
Seen for a moment standing in the door.

Doors are curious things. Inner and outer meet there. They are passages between definition of space. But when is one *in* a door? One is never in a door: one is either moving out or in, or to create a static fiction, half-way out or half-way in. The door is like the present moment, which continually collapses to nothing as the future presses in upon it and the past deflates it. The angel in the door is what is there, now. But his arrival and departure is simultaneous. Look again, you may catch a sense of him before he turns his shoulder, and is gone.

XI

The three families of meanings of the word *sense*, condensed from a number of pages in the OED:

1. The faculty of perception.
 - A. Physical – as in the sense of sight.
 - B. Mental – as in common sense.
2. The actual perception.
 - A. Physical – as in feeling cold.
 - B. Mental – as in a “sense of numbers.”
3. Meaning, signification.

Sense is how and what we feel – “mentally” and “physically.” Damn Descartes! *We are* sense. The word spans imagination and reality. The original Greek goes back to our word for sensation, physical perception. The monkey in the tree, and why we dream of falling as the greatest danger. And we wait for what shall befall us.

XII

Reading the *Adagia* is like climbing a mountain in Vermont:

We live in a constellation
Of patches and of pitches,
Not in a single world,
In things said well in music,
On the piano, and in speech,
As in a page of poetry –
Thinkers without final thoughts

In an always incipient cosmos,
The way, when we climb a mountain,
Vermont throws itself together.¹⁰

"Incipient cosmos" means a world that is always arriving – and hence departing. Poetry lives in this process, in the act of perception which "throws together" the parts of a world. The *Adagia* are pieces of a poem it is our privilege to practice poetry upon (I do not know if you have ever startled a pheasant from cover, not with a gun, but just walking. The burst of sound draws the eye out straight after the whirring bird. It is a departure that transfixes one. But by transfix, what do we mean? Is it not drawing out of the self into the world? When we return to the fiction of our bodies, we can only explain how it has continued to exist by telling ourselves it was "transfixed" while we followed the pheasant into the bush, along side it, till it disappeared):

A poem is a pheasant.
Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush.

This is our choice: dissect pheasants (or display them stuffed in sterile classrooms), or stand in the presence of the poetry as it disappears into our everyday lives, intimating the holy which is to come. Stand still,

...Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.

You were not born yet when the trees were crystal
Nor are you now, in this wakefulness inside a sleep.¹⁰

XIII

It was necessary and
It was almost enough.

The clean air, somehow, held
The eccentric branches still
Like crystal, or carved jade,
As in a museum in which one lives,
Where departures
Are the departures of sense.

It was almost like being
To stand in the blue, incipient weather
Among trees, and Wallace Stevens.

Douglas E. Airmet
University of Iowa

NOTES

1. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 161.
2. Wallace Stevens, *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 435.
3. See "A Collect of Philosophy" in *Opus Posthumous*, pp. 183-201.
4. "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight," *Collected Poems*, pp. 430-31.
5. "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract," *Collected Poems*, pp. 429-430.
6. "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," *Collected Poems*, p. 512.
7. "One of the Inhabitants of the West," *Collected Poems*, p. 503.
8. "Solitaire Under the Oaks," *Opus Posthumous*, p. 111.
9. "July Mountain," *Opus Posthumous*, pp. 114-15.
10. "Long and Sluggish Lines," *Collected Poems*, p. 522.

Notes and Comments

The current issue of *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (Vol. 74, No. 3, 1980), contains a bibliographical note by Marin Felsky of the University of Toronto called "Wallace Stevens' Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: a Textual Crux" in which he shows that the text of a line "It Must Be Abstract" as it appears in *The Collected Poems* and *The Palm at the End of the Mind* varies from the way it appears in earlier texts and in the manuscript.

The American Council of Learned Societies has announced two research fellowships for recent recipients of the Ph.D. having to do with Stevens: Milton Bates, Assistant Professor of English at Williams College, received one for a literary biography of Wallace Stevens; and Natalie Harris, Assistant Professor of English at Colby College, received the other for a study of the literary criticism of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams.

Some recent Stevens prices of interest:

a. *Ideas of Order* (Alcectic Press, 1935) — one of 135, copies, signed — \$1,500.00 — Minkoff Rare Books, Catalog 67.

b. *Esthetique du Mal* (Cummington Press, 1945 — one of 40 copies, signed by Stevens and by Wightman Williams, the illustrator — described by the dealer thus: "Pages 5 & 6 badly stained from a newspaper clipping; boards and endpapers lightly damp-stained and buckled, causing the author's signature and copy number to run (but not Stevens' signature), edges of boards lightly rubbed" — \$1,750.00 — William and Victoria Dailey Books, Catalog 16.

c. *Two or Three Ideas* (college English Association, 1951) — \$200.00 — Ray Walton Books — Catalog 4.

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