

*The
Wallace
Stevens
Journal*



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Cover by Kathy Jacobi – from "Sunday Morning"
"We live in an old choas of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night"

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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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The Metamorphic Stevens

JOSEPH KRONICK

Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analyzed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected... The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.

—from *Atheneum Fragments*¹

While the concept that the poem anticipates its readers' interpretations has not been universally accepted by critics, it has received particular attention from critics of Wallace Stevens. Like the Romantics, Stevens has provided the terminology that would control interpretations of his poetry. His incessant play with the concepts of reality and imagination has directed critics to read him as either a late Romantic, even as the last Romantic in the case of Harold Bloom, or, in works of J. Hillis Miller and other former phenomenologists, as a poet who "grows out of romanticism, but goes beyond it."²

The relation of Stevens' poetry to Romanticism is problematic, so much so in fact, that his poetry, as Joseph Riddel has claimed, is central to the question of (post)modernism. Riddel pointedly stated the problem in his essay "Interpreting Stevens": "The post-Romantic is defined in his difference from the Romantic, and the difference accentuates the same. Have our poets really made a radical departure into the modern? That is, are our central poets, to use Stevens' phrase, really postmodern?" The difficulty of answering these questions is exacerbated when Stevens is read as a dialectical poet. His use of the terms "imagination" and "reality" exerts pressure upon his critics to read him dialectically, for the two words, as Riddel says, have "provided the dominant terminology of the criticism about him, just as this language is central to the internal self-commentary of so much of his poetry."³ Stevens takes as his own the language of Romantic dialectics, but in doing so, he turns this language back upon itself into a critique of Romanticism's metaphysical assumptions. Yet this may place him even more firmly in the camp of Romanticism, as Stevens himself suggests in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer: "When people speak of the romantic, they do so in what the French commonly call a *pejorative* sense. But poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic."⁴

In light of this letter it is surprising that Stevens could not immediately understand Williams' anger over being called anti-poetic. Williams' inclusion of the mundane in his poetry extended the poetic to everything, thereby destroying the very concept of the poetic. While Stevens asks "Of what is this house composed if not of the sun," Williams could say:

The province of the poem is the world.
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
and when it sets darkness comes down
and the poem is dark.⁵

In such poems as "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens also looks upon the sun as something textualized; that is, the sun as metaphor stands in place of a nature that cannot be properly named; language's appropriation of nature is always a misappropriation, or a misnaming. This misnaming is what entangles Stevens in the problematic division of Romanticism and modernism. The breaking of old forms would be essential for the emergence of a new poetry, but as Stevens wrote of Marianne Moore, the breaking of forms defines the romantic:

it seems to me that Miss Moore is endeavoring to create a new romantic; that the way she breaks up older forms is merely an attempt to free herself for the pursuit of the thing in which she is interested; and that the thing in which she is interested in all the strange collocations of her work is that which is essential in poetry, always: the romantic (*L*, p. 279).

Like Friedrich Schlegel, Stevens says, "in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic." While he may not have been familiar with Schlegel, though he studied German at Harvard, his similar equation of all poetry with the romantic further entangles the skein of history according to which modernism both follows upon and breaks with Romanticism. And while an examination of this break, if it has occurred, lies outside the scope of this essay, Stevens' poetry proves to be a testing ground, not just for a theory of modernism or postmodernism, but for Romanticism and the metaphysics of subject/object dialectics and the Hegelian promise of *Aufhebung*. To read Stevens dialectically, however, one must ignore his frequent insistence that his poems are fragments, as the title "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" announces most dramatically. True, his continuous discussion of reality and imagination would seem to sanction a dialectical reading; however, this reading forces a telos upon his irretrievably fragmentary corpus. Even such an astute critic as J. Hillis Miller concludes in *Poets of Reality* that "At the heart of Stevens' poetry there is a precise vision of reality. According to this vision, ultimate being is not in some transcendental realm, above and beyond what men can see. It is within things as they are... in the flowering of time, in the presence of things in the moment, in the interior fons of men." Elsewhere Miller calls this "the identity of poetry and life, and the development of a poetry which will sustain this identity."⁶ Underlying Miller's interpretation is a faith in the capacity of language to reveal the presence of Being in the world. But the act of naming can only take place in the absence of nature: "It was difficult to sing in face/Of the object" (*CP* p. 376). Language is never commensurable to nature. The poet must look obliquely at the sun in order to name it; in other words, to name the sun is to cloak it in "a poet's metaphors" (*CP* p. 381), thereby obscuring it from view.

Dialectic promises resolution and the totalizing poem, but in Stevens there are only fragments: "Words are not forms of a single word./ In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts" (*CP*, p. 204). Unlike Eliot, Stevens welcomes this state of things, for it is precisely the absence of the "poem of the whole" (*CP* p. 442) that allows poetry to exist – the fragment is theory, which is to say, poetry itself: "This endlessly elaborating poem/Displays the theory of poetry,/As the life of poetry" (*CP* p. 486). For Stevens, the theory of poetry is the theory of metaphor; rather, theory and metaphor are implicated in the absence that lies at the center of poetry/reality:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say (*CP*, p. 176).

The crucial problem in any attempt to discuss Stevens' theories of poetry and metaphor turns upon the question of the self-reflective, or autotelic, poem. In this familiar canto from "The Man with the Blue Guitar," he suggests not that the poem is an autotelic figuration, but that poetry is some primordial subject to which the poem refers. Yet this primary thought or spiritual source remains unattainable; the poem is forever caught between issue and return, that is, in the absence named "reality." Issue and return repeat the double movement that both veils and unveils reality; they uncover the absence at the center while forever keeping that center at a distance by refilling the emptiness again and again. He asks,

But are these separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse (*CP*, p. 177).

In this "universal intercourse," give and take cannot be distinguished; both are caught in a play of language whereby the poem acquires significance from what is already a metaphorical nature. As he says in "The Pure Good of Theory": "It is never the thing but the version of the thing" (*CP*, p. 332). The poem can only give us a fiction of the natural world and never the thing-in-itself. Instead of the poem reflecting its subject, whether the subject be imagination or reality, in the manner of a speculum, the metaphors turn in upon themselves, not to enclose the poem, but to break it open, thus revealing the fiction of any representational system.⁷

There exists within Romantic philosophy and poetry a similar process whereby the apparent dialectic of mind and nature is undercut by the sign/referent problematic of language. The desire for union with nature and the resultant transcendence of mind depends upon the capacity of language to transfer the non-sensible into the sensible. This process of transference underlies Coleridge's theory of allegory and Hegel's definition of the symbol. In both theories there is a separation of form and content that reveals that the sign exists solely for the sake of a meaning to which it bears an entirely arbitrary relation. An examination of their respective theories indicates that metaphor, which operates on the basis of similarity, shifts to what Roman Jakobson calls its polar opposite, metonymy, or contiguity.⁸ The mind/nature dialectic in Romantic literature sees as the metonymic displacement of a sign/referent principle of opposition. By concealing a linguistic problem in a language of representation, the Romantics try to cover over what might be called a shattered speculum, for the poem mimics a representation of self and/or nature. The staging movement between the non-sensible and the sensible uncovers the gulf that lies between self and nature; metonymic representation is, therefore, the subject of Romantic poet's most characteristic poetry.

What remains implicit in the Romantics becomes explicit in Stevens. Stevens' poetry finds its subject matter in this language of representation; that is, his poetry neither continues in Romanticism nor outgrows it; rather, it adopts the key terms of Romanticism, imagination and reality, and proceeds to reveal the center from which meaning in language radiates as a representation for a fictive origin. Stevens must occupy the home of metaphor, to borrow one of his own metaphors, to reveal that it is always an improper home.

In "Three Academic Pieces" Stevens situates himself within the Romantic tradition by raising the Wordsworthian dictum to keep the eye on the object into the principle of poetry: "The accuracy of accurate letters is an accuracy with respect to the structure of reality... because reality is the central reference for poetry" (*NA*, p. 71). The key term in this essay is "resemblance," Stevens' adaptation of the metaphysical principle of identity and difference. Beginning with the declaration of the need for an "accurate theory of poetry," he proceeds to confuse metaphor with synecdoche. When he speaks of resemblance in nature, his examples are all illustrations of synecdoche:

Take, for example, a beach extending as far as the eye can reach, bordered, on the one hand, by trees and, on the other, by the sea. The sky is cloudless and the sun is red. In what sense do the objects in this scene resemble each other? There is enough green in the sea to relate it to the palms. There is enough of the sky reflected in the water to create a resemblance, in some sense, between them. The sand is yellow between the green and the blue (*NA*, p. 71).

Stevens derives resemblance from synecdoche: a part substitutes for the whole, and the proximity of sea, shore, and sky fuses "positional similarity with semantic contiguity."⁹ Resemblance "creates the relation just described. It binds together. It is the base of appearance" (*NA*, p. 72). Nature's unity exists by virtue of an obscuring of differences, hence the fiction of the organic

Romanticism. Unity in nature is a tautology: resemblance creates relation. This relation, as we shall see, is not an identity, for it bears the mark of difference within itself.

His definition of metaphor as "the creation of resemblance by the imagination" conforms to the standard definition of metaphor as the identification of two unlike objects. However, he rejects identity as "the vanishing-point of resemblance" (NA, p. 72). Identity would do away with metaphor since a metaphor always stands in place of that which it represents. Stevens' term "resemblance" bears some similarities to Hegel's symbol, which always presents some other meaning in addition to the proper one. But Hegel, following Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, celebrates the arbitrariness of the symbol as proof of man's intuitive intelligence. Stevens, on the other hand, does away with the transcendental subject by introducing chance into metaphor.

Having rejected identity as the principle of resemblance, he must also do away with imitation, saying "It is not fortuitous as a true metaphor is" (NA, p. 73). Metaphor must allow for the play of chance. Stevens' discussion of metaphor reveals his caution against accepting the idealist's desire for identity. Rejecting the abstraction necessary for identity, he introduces chance into metaphor, thereby removing it from the author's control. This, of course, is inimical to the post-Kantian idealism of Hegel and Coleridge. Stevens places further restrictions on the imagination: "There is a limit to its power to surpass resemblance and that limit is to be found in nature" (NA, p. 74). To go beyond resemblance would be to escape chance. By placing the limit within nature he denies the dialectical movement between mind and nature whereby nature faces away as mind ascends toward absolute spirit. "To surpass resemblance" would lead to identity, and Stevens avoids the suggestion that sight into nature leads to insight.

Identity implies the end of language: meaning would be self-evident, for to give expression to this meaning would be to defer it and mark its difference from the other. Resemblance, however, contains its own differential. Stevens defines resemblance as the property of language and rejects resemblance in nature as it "would constitute a poem within, or above, a poem." He says this "suggestion sounds euphuistic." With euphuism, where the subject matter disappears behind a highly contrived pattern of balance and antithesis, a harmony that does not exist in nature comes to exist in the sound patterns of language. "If the desire for resemblance is the desire to enjoy reality," Stevens writes, "it may be no less true that the desire to enjoy reality... is the desire for elegance. Euphuism had its origin in the desire for elegance and it was euphuism that was a reason in the sun for metaphor" (NA, p. 78).

Stevens' discussion of metaphor, resemblance, and the sun places him within a discourse that stretches back to Aristotle. In his discussion of Aristotle in "White Mythology," Jacques Derrida says of metaphor:

The definition of metaphor has its place in the *Poetics*, a work which starts off as a study of *mimesis*. Now *memesis does not occur without theoretical awareness of resemblance or likeness, that is, of what will always be taken to be the condition of metaphor. Homoiosis not only constitutes truth (aletheia)—a notion which governs the whole series, but*

without it the production of metaphors is impossible: "To produce a good metaphor is to see a likeness" (*Poetics*, 1459a7-8). What makes a metaphor possible... is what makes truth possible.¹⁰

As Derrida continues to trace Aristotle's search for the non-metaphorical referent for all metaphors, he uncovers "the hidden syllogism of metaphor, the theoretical perception of resemblance" (p.39). Mimesis will only give pleasure if its resemblance is not an identity, a concept we have seen Stevens make explicit. In a footnote, Derrida adds, "In the elliptical syllogistic of *mimesis*, the pleasure of knowing is always compounded by the decisive absence of its object" (p. 40).

We may now return to Stevens and trace the path that leads him to the sun. When he says the euphuism "was a reason in the sun for metaphor," he reveals that the relation between metaphor and nature depends upon the natural object's absence. Euphuism, the most unnatural of languages, is the source for the most natural object – the sun. The desire to enjoy reality leads to a recognition that this enjoyment requires the absence of reality. Turning to Derrida once more, we find that even the sun is never fully present: "Since, as Aristotle tells us, we can no longer be sure of its sensible characteristics as properties, the sun is never properly present in discourse" (p. 53). Reality therefore becomes a metaphorical object of desire in Stevens. What we desire, says Stevens along with Freud, is desire. Possession of an object would eliminate desire by filling the void within which desire exists:

The point of vision and desire are the same.
It is to the hero of midnight that we pray
On a hill of stones to make beau mont thereof.

If it is misery that infuriates our love,
If the black of night stands glistening on beau mont,
Then, ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth,

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

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

Possess. It is desire, set deep in the eye,
Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene,
In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall,

Always in emptiness that would be filled,
In denial that cannot contain its blood,
A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof. (*CP*, pp. 466-67)

Rather than regret nature's absence, Stevens finds that it opens up language and allows for poetry's existence: "words of the world are the life of the world" (*CP*, p. 474).

Escape from language is impossible. "The difficulty of what it is to be" lies in the recognition of the double movement of language: words are never adequate to what they name, but naming must go on indefinitely. And when Stevens says in "Three Academic Pieces" that "the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one," he is saying that both are metaphors: "It is a world of words to the end of it" (*CP*, p. 345).

Stevens' refusal to commit himself to the priority of either imagination or reality would seem to place him in the tradition of Romantic mind/nature dialectics, but his concept of metaphor displaces the transcendental subject upon which this dialectic depends. That the desire for resemblance should define man suggests that the resemblance he seeks can never be found, as the object can only be desired as long as it is absent. Stevens' poetry becomes a veiling and unveiling of the absence of nature and the transcendental subject. The search for resemblance will conceal the absence of the subject as it reveals the absence of a pure nature untouched by language.

Louisiana State University

NOTES

1. Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1971), fragment 116.

2. J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), p. 1.

3. Joseph N. Riddel, "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking," *Boundary 2*, 1, no. 1 (1972), p. 80.

4. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 277. Hereafter cited as *L*. The following works of Stevens will also be cited in the text: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954): *CP*; *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951): *NA*.

5. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 99.

6. Miller, pp. 281, 276. This is no longer Miller's position. For his more recent statements on Stevens' poetry see "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," *The Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), pp. 5-31; 31 (1976), pp. 330-48; and "Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens," *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 274-85. In the latter, Miller explicitly rejects the possibility of discovering a final position in Stevens. However, his notion of "authentic voice" (p. 283) canonises certain texts as exemplary modes in which linguistic indeterminacy is thematized as the *mise en abyme*. The abyss, then, marks the return of the speculum in what remains a phenomenological method of reading.

7. For two recent statements on Stevens' insistence that any representational system is a fiction, that is, an interpretation, see Paul Bové, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980); and Joseph N. Riddel, "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the End of the Book," *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*.

8. Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language," *Fundamentals of Language*, 2nd ed. (1956; rev. The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 19-96.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

10. Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," tr. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History*, 6, no. 1 (1974), p. 37. Hereafter cited in text.

IMPROVISATION

When Wallace Stevens listened
to the world
the world listened back.
The boom in the jar gave way
to music: cacaphony returned
madrigals of improvisation.

When he sat at home
the world went back traveling
and brought back to him
its fickle weather:
a man climbing into the sea,
Mrs. Uruguay, on the ascent.

When Wallace Stevens spoke,
the needle pierced old theologies.
Gold chimes winked in the sun
and reality arranged itself
in the old soil.

What can be summoned from this life
to life?
Was it grief only, given the major man
to appropriate from the world?
And must there always be a reason
for the dark turning of wings?

Harriet Susskind

A Sense of the Place

SAMUEL FRENCH MORSE

"Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble."

from the "Adagia" – Wallace Stevens

Just twenty-five years ago, the editors of the undergraduate literary magazine at Trinity College were putting to bed a *festschrift* to celebrate, albeit a few months early, the seventy-fifth birthday of Wallace Stevens. It was a great occasion. Almost everyone who had been asked to join the festivities had accepted. Poems had come from ten poets, including Archibald MacLeish, Richard Wilbur, John Malcolm Brinnin, and Richard Eberhart. Alfred A. Knopf, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, and Conrad Aiken were some of those who had sent tributes. William Carlos Williams, Alfred Kreyborg, Louise Bogan, John L. Sweeney, Cudworth Flint, and ten others had sent appreciative essays written with an apt sense of the moment; and Arthur Berger had sent the first page of his orchestral score, "Ideas of Order." Stevens contributed "The Rock," which had not been previously published in America, and a brand-new poem, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," which became the tail-piece of the *Collected Poems*, published on October 1, the day before his birthday. Had we known that Stevens had confessed to liking "Rhine wine, blue grapes, [and] good cheese" as much as he liked "supreme fiction," there might also have been a proper picnic under the campus elms. At any rate, in a letter written a week or two after the *festschrift* appeared, Stevens commented to Babette Deutsche:

The *Trinity Review* is like a very rich chocolate cake. It would have been quite possible for me to sit down and devour the whole thing but I took a little of it here and there and then put it away. I don't suppose that you will believe that... but so help me God.

The Stevens issue of the *Trinity Review* has long been a collector's item; and now, 1979 marks another occasion for tributes. I only wish that Wallace Stevens had lived to celebrate his hundredth birthday, like his good friend of their *Harvard Advocate* days, Murray Seasongood, who continued to go to his office up to – and probably after – his own centenary last year. What Stevens might have had to say would have been worth hearing in the light of his remarks about his seventy-fifth. He told one friend:

...although I have not paid the slightest attention to birthdays heretofore, I do feel a certain amount of interest in this one because it at least marks the beginning of the last quarter. By the time I am 100 I won't know what a birthday is. Possibly I am more fortunate than most people because I have really nothing whatever wrong with me except that I

never made that million dollars that I started out to make. While this is a tremendous drawback, especially as the time for people to go to Florida rolls around, still there are compensations. Thus, I can sit at home and listen to WQXR. I have no plans that involve any change.

A few months earlier, recalling a refusal "to attend a celebration of the 80th birthday of Robert Frost," he had written to another friend:

Frost is greatly admired by many people. I do not know his work well enough to be either impressed or unimpressed. When I visited the rare book library at Harvard some years ago the first thing I saw was his bust. His work is full (or said to be full) of humanity. I suppose I shall never be eighty no matter how old I become.

After making allowance for the malice which was part of the "ferocious" egotism of poets, one can be certain that he must also have meant that he expected to continue at the office and to enjoy "mere being" — occupations which would have kept him in Hartford, where he could "sit still to discover the world," and where "An evening's thought" might continue to be "like a day of clear weather."

I

Hartford has seldom evoked great praises from the writers we identify with it, at least in the works for which we remember them. Still, Mark Twain found it "the best built and handsomest town" he had ever seen, as congenial a place to work in winter as Elmira was in summer. Sinclair Lewis, however, after less than two weeks' residence, thought Hartford had "no virtues except that one can live in a lordly manner on not very much money, and that though it's quiet for work, it's also three hours from NY."

The fort which the original Dutch settler established at the mouth of the river once called the Meandering Swine was, of course, more than three hours from New Amsterdam; and in any case, they seem to have left no noteworthy literary account of the spot. Thomas Hooker, who arrived a few years later, was no local colorist either, although he was said to have made the local freemen "very jealous of their liberties"; but the settlement did get its present name from the English birthplace of Hooker's companion, Samuel Stone. The Hartford Wits, a century and a half later, regarded the material world with greater tolerance; and imbued with rationalism, and committed to ideas of order identifiable with affluence, they were admirably representative of what we now think of as the conservative values appropriate to the insurance capital of the world. If they did not altogether neglect "landskap" in their writings, their temper was Augustan rather than romantic, and their literary pose was public, occasional, or satiric. David Humphreys did compose a "Sonnet... Addressed To My Friends At Yale College, On My Leaving Them To Join The Army," which could have provided Wordsworth with as good an example of what he tactfully called "prosaisms" in his *Preface*, as Gray's "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West": but New Haven was hardly Hartford — although it was Connecticut. Joel Barlow, in what may well have been his last poem, had his

blackbird and his winter; but his couplets comprised "Advice to a Raven in Russia," rather than a reflection of the redwing or a grackle by the Connecticut. In this context, it may also be worth noting that Noah Webster, to whose major work any reader of Wallace Stevens has been much beholden, was a Hartfordian. The "green belts" and parks of Frederick Law Olmstead and his son provided the poet with some of the views and vistas which he regarded as a "pure" and "valid purpose for poetry." With a host of Hartford Beechers, however, and the formidable Lydia Huntley Sigourney, a poet so much engaged by solitude and the "aspects of earth" he characterized as "the casual ones, as light and color, images," could have had little in common, including a sense of the place itself.

Stevens liked Hartford, although he did occasionally complain that "one shrivels up living in the same spot, following the same routine"; and as early as 1921, he defined "The malady of the quotidian" in "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad":

The time of the year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know.
I am too dumbly in my being pent.

The wind attendant on the solstices
Blows on the shutters of the metropolises,
Stirring no poet in his sleep, and tolls
The grand ideas of the villages.

On the other hand, being "so blessedly busy at the office," especially in the last years, kept him from "noticing the absence of a good many precious things"; in a letter dictated at the office, he told Barbara Church:

it has been raining ever since you sailed, and right now it is ready to start all over again, after an early morning thunder-shower. How fortunate I am, in such weather, to have the office where one lives in a sort of vacuum, containing nothing but the pastime of work. The great building is like a neutral zone, invulnerable to the weather. The leaves outdoors seen through the windows, belong to a perishable landscape, come from nowhere. My pen and inkwell and my blotter and memorandum pads are what count. Every now and then, a colored boy places fresh mail on my desk, like a planet passing at night and casting its light on objects, but with more meanings than any planet.

On the way to and from the office, and in the garden, the seasonal changes with their "effortless weather" made him attentive to those changes upon which making notes toward a supreme fiction often seemed to depend. Not that the poems were about the weather as such; but the weather is in them. Frequently they served to "demonstrate that just as objects in nature affect us, ... so... we affect objects in nature, by projecting our moods, emotions, etc..." which he told Harriet Monroe was "the point" of "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise." Nearly twenty years later, he said:

It is an old story that we derive our ideas of nobility, say, from noble objects of nature. But then, it is an equally old story that we derive them from ourselves. For convenience, and in view of the simplicity of the large mass of people. We give our good qualities to God, or to various gods, but they come from ourselves.

Such a view “propose[d] for study the poet’s sense of the world as the source of poetry” in theory as well as practice — for practice, as the example of any poet of stature will show, precedes the formulation of theory, even though Stevens had long been aware that, as he said, “If I could create an actuality, it would be quite a different world in a good many ways from the world about us.” He had characterized Crispin, the hero of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” as “a profitless philosopher” because “Life was not for him a straight course; it was picking his way in a haphazard manner through a mass of irrelevancies. Under such circumstances, life would mean nothing to him, however pleasant it might be.” In contrast, “In ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ life [had] ceased to be a matter of chance,” by which Stevens meant that he had “introduce[d] his own order to the life about him,” like everyone else, “and that the idea of order in general [was] simply what Bishop Berkeley might have called a fortuitous concourse of personal orders,” but not “part of a general order.” He also thought that even the perceptive critics of *Ideas of Order* did not “see the kind of world in which [he was] living” in 1935. Nevertheless, if life never became for him quite the “straight course” he wanted it to be — as he admitted in the “Introduction” to *The Necessary Angel* — the “excited ambitions” he entertained for “the theory of poetry, as a subject for study,” and for “poetry itself, the naked poem, the imagination manifesting itself in its domination of words,” could be cultivated in Hartford.

That he cherished his privacy hardly requires justification. That he seemed to some of the local *literati* uncommunicative to the point of rudeness is true. Still, when I came to Trinity and put off writing to him, he took the trouble to write to me. “When I noticed in the newspaper last fall,” he said, “that you were coming to Hartford I thought that I should see something of you but I suppose that it is like living in Boston without ever getting to see Bunker Hill.” It had been easy to sense from earlier correspondence and an hour in the garden at Westerly Terrace that he preferred “to be interested in things of his own choice”; and his letter, as it proved, made it easier to see him thereafter.

It sometimes seems that he found it hard to overcome his natural reserve and diffidence except in letters; but he was not one “to feign an aura of mystery just to build a legend about his name.” He admitted to a dislike of “back-slapping”; and in an interview for publication, took a view of his refusal to help celebrate Robert Frost’s eightieth birthday quite different from the one already cited. He said:

I didn’t accept because the invitation said the banquet was being held for Mr. Frost’s “old friends.” I like Mr. Frost, as everyone else does, but by no stretch of the imagination could I call myself one of his old friends. If I had gone, his real “old friends” would have recognized that and resented my pose.

In the later years, Henry Church was probably the man whose friendship he cherished most. Church was, Stevens said, the man who had "so thoroughly lived the life [he himself] would have been glad to live" and was "so much more intricate a personality than any half dozen people... [he could] think of put together" that he feared to lose his friendship. Even so, it was almost impossible for him to ask the Churches to visit him and Mrs. Stevens in Hartford; and the one occasion on which they did come seems to have been almost a disaster. "I am not really a tyrant," Stevens later told Church; after all, it took me till after one o'clock the night you were with us to get things straightened out, so that I still think such things are impossible."

He had a genuine dislike of the "cheap publicity" and "dreadfully public glare" of "the literary life," even before he became a legend. When he was "beginning again" as a poet in the 1930s, he confessed to feeling that he was "A most inappropriate man / In a most unpropitious place," as he put it in "Sailing after Lunch," partly because he was finding it unexpectedly difficult to "get under way," partly because he felt out of touch and out of sympathy with the prevailing artistic climate. His "nerves" did not "shrink from loud sounds" or "strong colors," nor did he prefer "a drizzle in Venice to a hard rain in Hartford"; but "aesthetic self-consciousness," whether of the left or right, or of the kind manifested by some of the people who attended the premiere of *Four Saints in Three Acts* was unpalatable. He vented his spleen on the latter in a letter to Harriet Monroe:

There were... numerous asses of the first water in the audience. New York sent a train load of people of this sort to Hartford; people who walked round with cigarette holders a foot long, and so on. After all, if there is any place under the sun that needs debunking, it is the place where people of this sort come to and go to.

II

He was acutely aware not only of the "asses" and of salesmen in New York galleries "disguised as catalogues or as chairs," but also of "people who live only in the corporeal world, enjoying the wind and the weather and supplying standards of normality"; that is, the "they" who insist to the man with the blue guitar:

play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

Such a "they" would also include the people in a photograph recalled in a letter to Hi Simons, of "a lot of fat men and women in the woods, drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo," which "convince[d him] that there [was] a normal that [he] ought to try to achieve," however much opposed he was, to "think[ing] that we should insist that the poet is normal or, for that matter, that anybody is."

He always possessed a strong sense of his own identity. Even at the age of twenty, when he had just arrived in New York from Harvard and was wondering whether "literature [was] really a profession" and whether "you single it out, or must... let it decide in you for itself," he was "determined... not to *try* to suit anybody except [himself]." Nearly fifty years later, in his Bergen lecture at Yale, he was still concerned with the consequences of that choice, when he said:

A man's sense of the world is born with him and persists, and penetrates the ameliorations of education and experience of life. His species is as fixed as his genus. For each man, then, certain subjects are congenital. Now, the poet manifests his personality, first of all, by his choice of subject. Temperament is a more explicit word to use, since it emphasizes the manner of thinking and feeling. It is agreeable to think of the poet as a whole biological mechanism and not as a subordinate mechanism within that larger one. Temperament, too, has attracted a pejorative meaning....

His sense of the world was broad enough, to begin with, to accommodate views sometimes held to be mutually exclusive. If one makes allowances for the youthful tone and manner, a passage from his journal for 1900 suggests that breadth fairly accurately:

Sometimes [he wrote] I wish I wore no crown — that I trod on something thicker than air — that there were no robins, or peach dumplings or violets in my world — that I was the proprietor of a patent medicine store — or manufactured pants for the trade — and that my name was Asa Snuff. But alas! the tormenting harmonies sweep around my hat, my bosom swells with "agonies and exultations" — and I pose.

"Most people," however, remained "a great nuisance"; and he added, "my own disposition is not remarkably lenient in such things. Perhaps that is why my own likes are more often for things than for people: because of intolerance." At twenty-seven, he had discovered that "Old people are tremendous frauds," and that "The point is to be young — and to be a little in love, or very much — and to desire carnations and 'creations' — and to be glad when spring comes." His "idea of life" could include, in addition to "a fine evening, an orchestra... [and] a medium dinner," "a crowd *at a distance*," although in his bleakest mood, "people" reduced him to indignation:

One sees the most painful people, wherever one goes. Human qualities, on an average, are fearful subjects for contemplation. Deceit — how inevitable! Pride, lack of sophistication, ignorance, egoism — What dreadful things! Necessity, too!

It is not surprising, then, that poetry came to be "a form of retreat" and provided an opportunity to "let go" in which "the judgement of other people [was] neither here nor there," at least during the years in which he was writing for

"the grand poet" the "preliminary minutiae" which became *Harmonium*, published less than a month before his forty-fourth birthday. What still seems surprising, at least in retrospect, was his decision to get ahead in business. He himself said, "...when I really was a poet in the sense that I was all imagination, and so on, I deliberately gave up writing poetry because, much as I loved it, there were too many other things I wanted not to make an effort to have them." Florida continued to be a place to enjoy "mere being," even after he had begun to write again, at least until he made his formal "Farewell" in the poem he placed at the beginning of the 1936 edition of *Ideas of Order*; but Hartford and his "leafless North," its "wintry slime / Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds," and "the violent mind / that is their mind," proved more difficult to "imagine well" than he expected.

It was, again, his Bergen lecture that suggested the notion of his possible solution by drawing an analogy between what he called "our world" and "the poet's world," of which he said:

We could not speak of our world as something to be distinguished from the poet's sense of it unless we justified it and recognized it as having an existence apart from the projection of his personality, as land and sea, sky and cloud. He himself desires to make the distinction as part of the process of realizing himself. Once the distinction has been made, it becomes an instrument for the exploration of poetry. By means of it we can determine the relation of the poet to his subject. This would be simple if he wrote about his own world. We could compare it with ours. But what he writes about is his sense of the world.

Relation by analogy, it is obvious, had its privileges as well as its perils and problems. The asperity with which he frequently viewed "our world" sometimes came close to misanthropy, as in "The Mechanical Optimist":

A lady dying of diabetes
Listened to the radio,
Catching the lesser dithyrombs.
So heaven collects its bleating lambs.

Her useless bracelets fondly fluttered,
Paddling the melodic swirls,
The idea of god no longer sputtered
At the roots of her indifferent curls....

— a figure, incidently, whose hapless vulgarity seemed to imitate, somewhat unbecomingly, T.S. Eliot's style in portraiture. On the other hand, the local poet, frustrated in his own attempt "to bring a world quite round," was also the victim of a withering glance at a Hartford background Stevens more than once characterized as "unedifying":

The poet striding among the cigar stores,
Ryan's lunch, hatters, insurance, and medicines,
Denies that abstraction is a vice except
To the fatuous...

He devoted a whole volume to working out and clarifying the poet's sense of our world as a subject. *Parts of a World* has seemed to many readers a miscellany of "theoretical exercises" leading up to *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. On the other hand, it provides texts of unusual interest and pertinence in defining Stevens' sense of "our world" – not only Hartford and Connecticut, but also "our climate" and a foreshadowing, however faint, of the way "A mythology reflects its region," as he put it in one of the last poems he wrote.

Ideas of Order had provided intimations of the local scene, including some notes on municipal sculpture and public monuments by a former

hunter of those sovereigns of the soul
And savings banks, Fides, the sculptor's prize,
All eyes and size, and galled Justitia,
Trained to poise the tables of the law,
Patientia, forever soothing wounds,
And mighty Fortitudo, frantic bass –

As well as one company's guardian lions, if not the Hartford's caribou; a good deal of autumn and winter weather: "The skreak and skritter of evening gone / and grackles gone...", "wind and frost.. in mornings of angular ice / that passed beyond us through the narrow sky," and "the east wind blowing round one"; and some of those indeterminate days in New England, when

The sun is seeking something bright to shine on.
The trees are wooden, the grass is yellow and thin.
The ponds are not the surfaces it seeks.
It must create its colors out of itself.

In *Parts of a World* the observing eye was as often the eye of the painter as it was the eye of the walker. In "Of Hartford in a Purple Light,"

A moment ago, light masculine,
Working, with big hands, on the town,
Arranged its heroic attitudes.

But now as in an amour of women
Purple sets purple round. Look, Master,
See the river, the railroad, the cathedral...

Hi! Whisk it, poodle, flick the spray
Of the ocean, ever-freshening,
On the irised hunks, the stone bouquet.

Such an early morning view tempts one to propose this "illustration of the poetic as a sense" as Stevens' equivalent of "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," although "Master Soleil" as poodle suggests something more nearly akin to Dufy. "The Common Life," another such "illustration," caught the downtown skyline (as it used to be forty years ago in the '30s) from a perspective that recalls the drawings of Paul Klee:

That's the down-town frieze,
Principally the church steeple,
A black line beside a white line;
And the stack of the electric plant,
A black line drawn on white air.

In the first stanza of "The Poems of Our Climate," the light that creates the unity of the scene is, without having to be overly so designated, familiar to any New Englander:

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

when "one desires / So much more" than "A world of clear water, brilliant-edged / ...more than a world of white and snowy scents." For "The never-resting mind," "to be young... and to desire "carnations and creations" was no longer "the point," as it had been thirty years before; and

in this bitterness, delight
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

In "Connoisseur of Chaos," "the flowers of South Africa" are "bright / On the tables of Connecticut" and "it all" does go "on in an orderly way." In "Anything is Beautiful if You Say It Is," it is "I" the eye:

I love the metal grapes,
The rusty battered shapes
Of the pears and of the cheese

And the window's lemon light,
The very will of the nerves,
The crack across the pane,
The dirt along the sill.

And in "The Glass of Water," the poet addressed as "fat Jocundus, worrying / About what stands here... / ...in the centre of our lives, this time, this day," is reminded that

It is a state, this spring among the politicians
Playing cards. In a village of the indigenes,
One would have still to discover. Among the dogs
and dung,
One would continue to contend with one's ideas.

Being a poet had been easier when he had been "all imagination and so on" and "in a most excellent state of spontaneity," as he had said of the effect of "long summer spells of quiet" when he had sent off to Knoph the manuscript of *Harmonium*. Now the momentum of his mind seemed to be "all toward abstraction." What saved him from *mere* abstraction was the renewed confirmation in himself of a quality he valued in William Carlos Williams, who he had also – to Williams' displeasure – characterized as "anti-poetic" and "sentimental" as well as "romantic." The romantic in 1934, Stevens said:

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

Taken all together, the poems of *Parts of a World* provided an opportunity to work out in increasingly complex ways both "the opposition between things as they are and things imagined" and the "incessant conjunctions between" them, as well as a means of discovering a perspective from which one could feel, like "The Man on the Dump," the "purifying change" between one's disgust for "the things / That are on the dump (azaleas and so on) / And those that will be (azaleas and so on" when "One rejects / The trash." "It was," he said in a variation on "The Man on the Dump" to which he gave the title "The Latest Freed man":

It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.
It was being without description, being an ox.
It was the importance of the trees outdoors,
The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much
That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.
It was everything being more real, himself
At the centre of reality, seeing it.
It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,
Qui fait fi des jolies banales, the chairs.

It would become, indeed, "everything" seen first with "an ignorant eye," then with "a will to change," so that

The freshness of transformations is

The freshness of a world. It is our own,
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,

and what we see – "a kind / Of volatile world, too constant to be denied" – together "Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer...." till finally,

...the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure...."

and we hear the poet's name for his supreme fiction, "my green, my fluent mundo."

III

The poems that comprise *Parts of a World* occupied Stevens for about five years; it took him just four months to complete *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. He had not only recovered his poetic balance; he had become — outside of Hartford still, and for the most part in the milieu of the literary journals, a poet to be reckoned with. His reluctance to discuss his work on the ground that "explanations spoil things" gave way before the serious inquiries of Hi Simons, who intended a first full-length study of the poetry. His friendship with Henry Church began in 1939, when Church asked permission to print translations of poems from *Harmonium* for an American number of *Mesures*. Old friends with whom he had jaunted in Florida were in touch; and with some of them he found it easy to "let go," as he did to one who sent him persimmons from Georgia:

Wild persimmons make one feel like a hungry man in the woods. As I ate them, I thought of opossums and birds, and the antique Japanese prints in black and white, in which monkeys are eating persimmons in bare trees. There is nothing more desolate than a persimmon tree, with the old ripe fruit hanging on it. As you see, there is such a thing as being a spiritual epicure.

The landscapes of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* ranged from Hartford to a Ceylon imagined from postcards, books, and letters sent by his friend Leonard van Geyzel of Lunawila, and "a blue island in a sky-wide water" in a remembered South. Much of the weather was "by Franz Hals, // Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds, / Wetted by blue, colder for white," when "Gay is, gay was, the gay forsythia // And yellow, yellow thins the northern blue." For the poet, "A bench" — presumably in Elizabeth Park — "was his catalepsy, Theatre / Of /Trope," and

The water of
The lake was full of artificial things,

Like a page of music, like an upper air,
Like a momentary color, in which swans
Were seraphs, were saints, were changings essences.

In the poems that followed *Notes*, "the poet's world" continued to expand. For the first time, really, something like nostalgia for a world "in which the characters speak because they want / To speak... Free for a moment, from malice and sudden cry, / Complete in a completed scene, speaking / Their parts as in a youthful happiness," began to make itself felt. It was a world in which, as unexpected "favors" dropped from his growing interest in genealogy and family history, recollections of the world he had long ago "lost" when he left Reading began to alter the tone and therefore the substance of his work.

As a lonely young lawyer in New York still somewhat uncertain of his future, he had, "Every Spring... a month or two of semi-blackness," and found it easy to recall how "Some of us used to lie in the sun at Kissinger's Locks a whole summer long, going home only for meals and to sleep," and to "feel the warmth.. and remember the laziness of it." He told Elsie:

The Low-Germans... are very common at home. True-heartedness surely describes them. I love them, my dear.... I feel my kinship, my race. To study them is to realize one's own identity.

Reading was very much on his mind during the months before his marriage, partly because he knew that Elsie was reluctant to think of losing touch with *her* world, and because he wanted to prepare her for the great change that life in this city would involve; but it also gave him genuine pleasure to recall the world *he* had lost. He knew that Reading offered him no prospects of living the kind of life he wanted to live; and it seems likely that Elsie came to understand this, for among the passages she copied from his early letters before destroying them was one that simply confirmed his ambition — "I should like to make a music of my own, a literature of my own, and I should like to live my own life" — an ambition he continued to cherish almost to the end of his life.

The "whole" of which Reading was a part, like his grandfather's farm "and the people who lived in it," which he told Thornton Wilder he "look[ed] back to... the way American literature used to look back to English literature," remained buried for a long time. Except for a fleeting reminiscence of local idiom, almost the only allusion to that world came in the "scene" of "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise," which "represent[ed] a forest of heavy trees as the backdrop in eastern Pennsylvania," and which caused some comment as the backdrop for a discussion of poetry at four o'clock in the morning by three Chinese in "costumes of silk, red, blue, and green," who illustrated the significant points of their discourse with a melon and a red porcelain water bottle. That bit of perversity would seem to have been partly suggested by the Chinese pagoda at the summit of Mount Penn. Thirty years after, in "A Completely New Set of Objects," he recalled the annual festivals on the Schuylkill River, "down which paraded canoes and boats lighted at night with canded Chinese lanterns":

From a Schuylkill in mid-earth there came emerging
Flotillas, willed and wanted, bearing in them

Shadows of friends, of those he knew, each bringing
From the water in which he believed and out of desire

Things made by mid-terrestrial, mid-human
Makers without knowing or intending uses.

These figures verdant with time's buried verdure
Came paddling their canoes, a thousand thousand,

Carrying such shapes, of such alleviation,
That the beholder knew their subtle purpose,

Knew well the shapes were the exactest shaping
Of a vast people old in meditation...

Under Tinicum or small Cohansey,
The fathers of the makers may lie and weather.

Such recreations of the past came both opportunely and naturally, at a moment when, as he put it in "Debris of Life and Mind,"

There is so little that is close and warm.
It is as if we were never children.

Sit in the room. It is true in the moonlight
That it is as if we had never been young.

We ought not to be awake. It is from this
That a bright red woman will be rising

And, standing in violent golds, will brush her hair.
She will speak thoughtfully the words of a line.

She will think about them not quite able to sing.
Besides, when the sky is so blue, things sing themselves,

Even for her, already for her. She will listen
And feel that her color is a meditation,

The most gay and yet not so gay as it was.
Stay here. Speak of familiar things a while.

How much the sudden access of the past contributed to the "closeness" and "warmth" and "familiarity" of the later and last poems may be difficult to judge; but that it played a large part in deepening his tone to one "that confesses openly all the bitter secretions in the irremediable poverty of life," is not to be denied. "Credences of Summer," "The Auroras of Autumn," "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," "The Rock," and, I think, in its autumnally austere way, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" are works in which the poet's feelings toward his subject seems to have been so intense that "one is willing for [them] to be what [they are]" without cavil as to their "significance" or "importance." What is true of these longer poems is equally true of many of the shorter poems; they are "secretions of insight" that momentarily "compose the world," in which "the poet" does become "the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and also, between people as between themselves; but not" as Stevens added, "between people and some other world."

The end of the war in Europe meant the renewal of many things. Although his old bookseller, M. Vidal, had died in the fall of 1944, his daughter carried on the business and kept him in touch with his "imagined" and "imaginary" Paris, choosing paintings for his collection and sending him whatever books he wanted. The death of Hi Simons, in the spring of 1945, however, troubled him. The death of Henry Church in the spring of 1947, was a much keener loss; but he continued to correspond with Mrs. Church to the end of his life with great pleasure. His correspondence, indeed, increased; and he continued to write poems. He told Jose Rodriquez Feo that he "really read very much less of everything than most people. It is more interesting," he continued "to sit round and look out of the window." In a letter to Mrs. Church, a few months after her husband's death, he said:

You must not allow yourself to become [at Ville d'Avery – which was the Church's home in France, and for Stevens, as he added, wholly a fiction, but, because of Corot... a very special fiction] one more solitary person. The ordinary interest in a solitary life becomes accentuated in a place full of agreeable communications – I don't mean memories, but the insights and feelings that we have in the midst of difficulties in a spot that happens to be just the right spot for us. The true happiness to be found in such a spot is the sense that it restores and strengthens.

Hartford was, for the most part, "the right spot" for Stevens. The communications he received there, especially those that pleased him, even provided him with ways of dwelling with unforeseen and occasionally unwelcome requests, such as an invitation to contribute to the Ezra Pound issue of the *Quarterly Review of Literature*. In his refusal, he said:

A friend has just written to me from France speaking of

"My pink Persian cat...
in front of me, looking up just now with his
reproachful amber eyes. He does not like to be
molested even by thoughts or looks."

That's Pound.

On the other hand, much that was going on in painting and poetry seemed to him "very queer," and "lurid and rhetorical," "just so much frustration and evasion"; and, he added, what he said applied "even to politics." He needed, in the most literal sense of the word, a change, although he could make something even of his feeling of "aridity" and "monotony." He feared the "total freedom" of the post-war world because, he said, "the great critical and expository minds that our time so greatly needs do not seem to exist." So, long, then, as he could "compose" his feelings, he could cope. He wrote to Rodriquez Feo in the fall of 1948:

At the moment I feel completely illiterate, so to speak. I rather think that nature gets at me more thoroughly now than at any other time of the year. One grows used to the spring; and summer and winter become bores. But Otonno! How this oozing away hurts notwithstanding the pumpkins and the glaciale of frost and the onslaught of books and pictures and music and people. It is finished, Zarathustra says; and one goes to the Canoe Club and has a couple of Martinis and a pork chop and looks down the spaces of the river and participates in the disintegration, the decomposition, the rapt finale. Murder... and adieu; assassination... and farewell.

At the Canoe Club, he used to tell his guests, particularly those who belonged to the academy, one did not talk about poetry; one appreciated the photographs and pin-ups behind the bar. No one, of course, violated that prohibition more quickly than Stevens himself; and in the last years, he enjoyed the comments on his work by fellow vice-presidents and presidents who had not only read it but could talk sensibly about it.

That the "essential poem at the centre of things" postulated and projected with such expectancy in "A Primitive like an Orb" continued to elude him is true; but it remained a symbol of his self — or, as he said, "of one of [his] selves." "What We See Is What We Think" was not simply the title of a poem; it was an axiom. His description of an ideal reader of a fiction applied to the kind of maker he admired even more precisely: he was one

for whom the story and the other meaning should come together like two aspects that combine to produce a third or, if they do not combine, interact, so that one influences the other and produces an effect similar in kind to the prismatic formulations that occur about us in nature in the case of reflections and refractions.

A poem written with these "prismatic formations" in mind could also be characterized as "the poem of the idea within the poem of words," as an illustration of the proposition that "the world is what you make of it, or a demonstration of "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality."

If, in a sense, his poetry has been based most often on what he called "theory" and "propositions about life," at least from 1930 on, he could as an old poet "sit in a park and listen to the locusts;... sit in a park and hear church bells," and wonder whether this would be "two pasts or one present and one

past." He could go to Elizabeth Park, which "is almost all there is in Hartford," which he liked "especially on Sundays when people go there," and see that "The very fat woman who exercises her dog had a new dress on yesterday. The tennis courts were full. A little boy ran after squirrels and called them: Cats." He could "pretend that everything in nature is artificial and that everything artificial is natural, as, for example, that the roses in Elizabeth Park are placed there daily by some lover of mankind and that Paris is an eruption of nature." He could watch some nuns painting waterlilies, or consider "The Plain Sense of Things":

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge.
Required, as a necessity requires.

It would not be "every day" that "the world arrange[d] itself in a poem." And it did not matter that his work remained "indefinite," that it had "not got anywhere," philosophically. "What we all need to find," he said in the spring of 1955, "is to find that in which we can be easily fecund."

He had, in fact, come to terms with himself, with his own life and, therefore, from his perspective, with the world. Having accomplished that reconciliation, he found it possible and pleasant, in Hartford, Connecticut, to "feel like a native," as he said in the piece written for the Voice of America in the spring of 1955. It was easy, too, to be himself; he could appreciate not only the place but the spirit of the place, the sense that "we live in the tradition which is the true mythology of the region and we breathe in with every breath the joy of having ourselves been created by what has been endured and

mastered in the past." He had made "The transition from make believe for one's self to make believe for others," which was, with a qualification altogether characteristic, "the beginning, or the end, of poetry in the individual."

It is hard to choose, now, a way of concluding. His sense of the place was more than the sum of its parts. There is, however, "A Clear Day and No Memories," in which we — for he includes us, too — can share his solitude: and in which, as so often in the last poems, by the merest allusion, the life he had lived in the mind and most unforgettably in the imagination, is momentarily evoked, as in the very mention of what is not thought, — as here it may be the beloved in her "blue-shadowed silk" for whom Peter Quince improvised so many years before at the clavier:

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,
Today the mind is not part of the weather.

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.

Three Travelers Watch A Sunrise

ROBLEY EVANS

Wallace Stevens' play, "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise," first published in *Poetry* (July 1916), presents an example of the poet's developing sense of the power of the imagination and its relationship to the "detestable operandum" during the period of writing *Harmonium*. Stevens' flirtation with oriental motifs, his use of color symbolism, and his deeply imagistic structure make the one-act play interesting because of the potential undramatic character of such material. Stevens' models must have been in noh drama: Fenellosa's re-working of "Nishikigi" had appeared in *Poetry* in 1914; in Maeterlink's symbolist dramas; and in more important works like Strindberg's "Ghost Sonata" of 1907, where the surreal effect is created by realistic *mise en scene* heavily laced with symbolic props and poetic repetition. "Three Travelers" is consequently difficult to dramatize in a conventional manner since its major theme—the conflict between the "real" world and the realm of pure poetry—must be expressed symbolically, a "staged" poem. A recent production for the Stevens Centennial celebration at Connecticut College (October 10-11, 1979) suggests that the play can be produced if its essentially symbolic structure—its imagistic correspondences—is emphasized.

Stevens does everything he can to reduce action to mental event. Three Chinese appear, attended by two Negro servants, and set up a ceremonial camp in "a forest of heavy trees on a hilltop in eastern Pennsylvania," a familiar-enough locale rendered strange by their visit. They change into Chinese costume with the servants' help, and seated on the ground, describe the nature of art and its relationship to "the invasion of humanity." One speaks for the value of this invasion, "suffering and pity" being the only way to teach the "court" love and wisdom. Another describes human experience as "scenes" painted on a porcelain jar, evocative because painted. The third Chinese speaks against any invasion of the "windless pavilions" from without, that is, he speaks for an entirely imaginative vision as opposed to a realistic one. The first Chinese then sings a bittersweet song of "Mistress and Maid" which marks a transition in the play, moving the discussion toward the world of sexual love as a subject for art. A "true" story about the elopement of a neighbor's daughter with a man follows, and suddenly the three travelers are aware of a man hanging dead from a tree behind them. The ballad has merged the ceremonial scene à la Yeats' "Lapis Lazuli" with another and cruder reality. The dead man's lover is discovered hiding in the bushes. After her brief, matter-of-fact account, she and two of the Chinese leave the third alone on the stage as *raisonneur* to remind us that "Sunrise is multiplied, / Like the earth on which it shines, / By the eyes that open on it...." and the play ends.

A director must determine how to emphasize the correspondences, verbal and visual, which give "Three Travelers" its rich complexity of interior reference; and secondly, what weight to place on the connection of the play's first part with its brutal conclusion. Does the imagery, the ballad sung, the weight of the story, suggest continuity? Or is the final scene a violent juxtaposition making an overemphatic commentary on the "windless pavilions"?

Stevens has been careful to provide poetic continuity for the three Chinese with concrete objects, bright colors, and verbal references to them, as well as with allusions to the light which will dawn at the play's end. Objects "gesture" toward what is absent, in other words, their multiplicity of reference suggesting the multiplicity of revelation to come. The play takes place at night ("about four o'clock of a morning in August") and in the Connecticut College production a blue light in the small lobby used for the production indicated night-time and the play's dream-like quality. This "night side" of the imagination has its specific counterpart in the blue costume of the Third Chinese who explains the function of the imagination throughout the play. Such an equivalency is also established in the pointillist images that "light" the night. The servants carried real lanterns and lit a real candle which is later referred to as the "sun" in the symbol-making dialogue. A red porcelain water bottle is placed on the stage as Stevens' concentrating image, and it, too, provides light in its self-referential way: "It is like the seclusion of sunrise/ Before it shines on any house." Although these points of light are symbolic, reflecting one another and foreshadowing the dawn, they should be concrete props, not gestured. A real melon to quench the First Chinese' thirst is called for, a real musical instrument (a playable lute or guitar), a real porcelain jar, heavily-textured baskets: the colorful and the tactile should convey each object's specialness and beauty like the oranges and green cockatoo of the contemporaneous "Sunday Morning." Each object has a life of its own; the candle, for instance, "shines, perhaps, for the beauty of shining." Stevens is working out his concept of death as the mother of beauty, and such details point toward the poignant momentariness of things. The dramatic parallel here is Strindberg's "Ghost Sonata" where the solidly present *mise en scene* contributes to the surreal effect of events. This effect was furthered in the Connecticut College production by a fully prop-like "dead" man, paper-stuffed clothing hanging from a highly artificial tree (an abstract metal sculpture fortuitously available from the Studio Art department) with black stage boxes as visibly artificial "bushes" in which the lover hides until her "entrance." This must be an imaginary garden with real toads in it.

The presentation of the three Chinese should be formal and contrived; the servants should arrange the stage objects with ceremonial precision to place the action "here and now" not "out there." This careful identification of the immediate presence of things and events is indicated in Stevens' directions for the Chinese, who appear first wearing business suits, and are then dressed on the stage in kimonos of red, green, and blue, transformed into mythical figures before the audience. In the Connecticut College production, masks were used for the actors rather than makeup, to suggest strangeness and contrivance. The colors of the three figures, of course, form a pattern with the pointillist lighting and with Stevens' color coding at the verbal level. The Second Chinese speaks most often about the candle, the red jar. The Third Chinese, in blue, describes the imagination's variableness and the integrity of the windless pavilions. The actors' gestures and speeches should be formal, ceremonial, but not parodistic. At important points in the dialogue, the three Chinese whispered certain lines in unison, to add an eerie quality and to suggest mysterious origins for their wisdom. Maeterlink provides models for the lost or wandering group which is self-enclosed, speaking only to itself, in such plays as "The Blind," and "The Intruder." Stevens calls for "Negroes" as servants. A more interesting approach

is to treat these visible stagehands as *mo*, prop men on the Chinese stage who dress in black to be “invisible” but available. In the Connecticut College production, the actors were dressed in monks’ robes with cowls, their faces covered so that they blended with the night, ominously. They do not speak, but go on and off into the world beyond the stage.

The Connecticut production emphasized the separation between the ceremonial and imagined world of the travelers and the “real” world of the lovers at the play’s end. A recently described typescript in the Yale Library collection of Stevens material seems to enforce this distinction. Originally, Stevens had suggested stage business in which the dead man and his lover are revealed to the audience before the Chinese appear. Still unseen by them, such a picture would have suggested an ironic frame for the “windless pavilions” from the beginning.¹ However Stevens’ final revisions require that the pair be hidden from both audience and Chinese until the conclusion, though a “dark object” (the hanged man) is to be hinted at initially. In other words, Stevens sought to achieve surprise and impersonality, to minimize empathetic response. The hanged man should be an obvious dummy. Anna, the lover, was acted without mask or makeup, in a black slip. She is the “servant maid” in the annunciatory ballad sung by the First Chinese; she is the “Anna” of whom he tells a humorous lover’s tale of elopement: and at this point, the poetry comes “alive.” But Stevens flattens the effect of Anna’s actual appearance on stage to suggest that “suffering humanity” invades but does not persuade. In flat, brief lines, Anna tells her story. Once told, “She turns her back to the body, shuddering, and does not look at it again,” and departs supported by the First and Second Chinese.

Possibly a production of the play might argue that the tragedy has been “called into being” by the poetry of the previous scenes. But to do so would put more emphasis upon human sources for art – romantic sources – than the symbolist in Stevens would wish. The poet does not urge ironic condemnation of the three Chinese’ vision: no one comments on the tragedy as a tragedy. The dead man “wanted nothing,” and his motive for suicide is unexplained. Instead, as the sun rises with its red glow, human passions are absorbed in the larger aesthetic vision of imaginative multiplicity. The blue-clad Third Chinese concludes by noting the human event as relative and subjective, an imagined reality:

Red is not only
The color of blood,
Or (*indicating the body*)
Of a man’s eyes,
Or (*pointedly*)
Of a girl’s.
And as the red of the sun
Is one thing to me
And one thing to another,
So it is the green of one tree (*indicating*)
And the green of another,
Without which it would all be black.²

This final speech should be presented matter-of-factly, without fervor. The vision is interior, after all; life is in what we perceive. The Third Chinese leaves the stage, and though the stage directions call for the sound of birds, "a voice, urging a horse," the crack of a whip, these should not be emphasized. As Stevens was to write later in his career, "the imaginative world is the only real world, after all."³ One of the *mo* stands silently among the abandoned props looking at the audience as the sun rises and the play vanishes.

NOTES

1. Louis L. Martz, "Manuscripts of Wallace Stevens," *The Yale University Library Gazette*, 54 (1979), 51-67.
2. *Poetry*, VIII (1916), 178. All quotations are from this version of the play. "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise" was also published in *Opus Posthumus* (New York, 1957).
3. The reference is to "To the One of Fictive Music," in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), 252.

The Craft of Contradiction: Poetic Arrangement in *Ideas of Order*

Steven T. Knight

I*deas of Order* follows *Harmonium* in Stevens' canon after an interval of more than a decade. Several critics—perhaps most notably Michel Benamou—have remarked extensively on the radical reorientation of the poet's aesthetic stance after his years of silence. Benamou, in fact, extolls the "masculine" nature of the imagery in *Ideas of Order*, in contrast to the "feminine" qualities of *Harmonium*¹. Certainly Stevens clarifies immediately that for him, the 1930's will not be like the previous decade. In "Farewell to Florida," the volume's opening poem, the narrator declares that "the past is dead," the comfortable past of the 1920's and *Harmonium*. As his ship departs the tropics for the colder North, we may detect a simultaneous exhilaration and resignation at the prospect of this brave new aesthetic world:

My North is leafless and lies in a wintry slime
Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds.
(*CP*, 118)

More telling than any "philosophical" shift on the poet's part, however, is the new emphasis in *Ideas of Order* on the arrangement of poems in the volume. Stevens' earlier exuberance and tireless experimentation had given *Harmonium* what one reader has termed a "kaleidoscopic"² quality, a sense that the poet's forays into different segments of his imaginative territory were presented in a random (perhaps even haphazard) fashion. The clearest evidence Stevens gives his readers in *Ideas of Order* that he has found a greater self-discipline for his poetic craft is this: that the placement of a poem—like the placement of a line in a Cubist painting—now truly matters to the volume, that the poems are not mere fragments but integrated parts of an aesthetic unit.

It is in *Ideas of Order* that Stevens begins shaping one of the dominant qualities of his later work, what I have chosen to call "the meditative technique." Already experimented with in such individual *Harmonium* poems as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," this technique involves imaginative play upon a particular object or thought from a variety of perspectives. In *Ideas of Order* Stevens uses this technique as a constructive principle of the poetic sequence; each poem in a sequence either strengthens or ironically undercuts the perspective of the preceding or following poem. We should keep in mind J. Hillis Miller's comment that there is no orderly progression to Stevens' thought, "only an alternation between contradictory possibilities."³ It is in Stevens' refinement of the meditative technique that we discover an increasingly sophisticated ability to consider these possibilities. For this discussion I will examine a nine-poem sequence beginning with "Sailing After Lunch" (*CP*, 120-21) and ending with "The Idea of Order at Key West" (*CP*, 128-30)⁴ as a particularly striking example of Stevens' arranging skill.

"Sailing After Lunch" is, like "Farewell to Florida" and the later "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" (127-28), a farewell poem, and like its predecessor it also uses the sailboat figure. but what "Sailing After Lunch" says goodbye to is not a geographical region or comfortable climate; instead it dramatizes the stultifying effect of an outmoded romanticism, which must be expunged before a new intercourse of the self with the world can assert itself. The poem's opening line, "It is the word *pejorative* that hurts," shows that the poet's frustration with the world is simultaneously a frustration with language itself. The rigid iambs and anapests of these lines emphasize his linguistic entrapment:

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

This, we read in the next line, "is least what one ever sees"; that is, it is a way of speaking about the world that is no longer true to our own observations. But in the final two stanzas a more vibrant form of romanticism takes over,⁵ a new way of seeing the world which, significantly, begins with what we say:

It is only the way one feels, to say
 Where my spirit is I am,
 To say the light wind worries the sail,
 To say the water is swift today,....
 (C P 120-121)

The repetition of the phrase "to say" initiates the boat's motion, so exhilarating after its earlier immobility. Finding a new way of talking about the world—here a newer, invigorated romanticism—is tantamount to energizing that physical world, a world of heavy sails and musty blue water, with a new lightness and motion.

The following poem, "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" (121-22), dramatizes a similar moment in the relationship between the imagination and the world, when one imaginative order has died and the next has not yet asserted itself. Its first four stanzas are an extended lamentation for the death of the old order (in both social affairs and aesthetics), and give strong support to A. Walton Litz's assertion that the tone of *Ideas of Order* is predominantly elegiac.⁶ Even the ambiguous Hoon from *Harmonium's* "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (65), "who found all form and order in solitude," has watched his forms vanish.

The fifth stanza, with its "sudden mobs of men" and bald assertion that "there is order in neither sea nor sun," returns the poem to the major concern of *Ideas*: the painful search for a sufficient fiction in a world that seems increasingly resistant to any ordering. Yet despite the fact that too many "waltzes" (i.e. imaginative orders) have now ended, there may still be hope in the inchoate shouts of the mob:

...the shapes
 For which the voices cry, these, too, may be
 Modes of desire, modes of revealing desire. (C P 122)

There is cautious optimism here, an optimism qualified by the tentative "may be" of the second line. The poem ends with the rather vague hope that "some harmonious skeptic" will discover a new "skeptical music" to give order to the world. Like the "music" at the end of "Sailing After Lunch," it too will give motion to the world and will be "full of shadows," Stevens' familiar image for imaginative depth.

The "Dance of the Macabre Mice" (123) plays a ludicrous but effective parody on the waltzes from the preceding poem. Though one critic has called this "the most blatantly political poem" in *Ideas of Order*,⁷ any interpretation of the poem's statue as a political trope only must be judged too restrictive. The "Monsieur" on horseback that the mice dance so gaily upon is symbolic of any imaginative order: in its susceptibility to the swarming mice, it shows the vulnerability to defamation of all established modes of discourse. The language of the inscription is, significantly "like zithers and tambourines combined"; its meaning may be laughed at as readily as any "music," whether old or new. In brief, the voice of the mice (heard throughout the poem) gives immediacy to the "sudden mobs of men" described by the more detached narrator of "Sad Strains." The mice dramatize the yearnings of a hungry, deprived self for a genuine way of ordering reality, combined with an anarchistic feeling that present forms must be destroyed. , ed.

"Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial" (123-24) presents an idea of order that contrasts strikingly with the anxiety and despair of the previous poems. After the desperate scene of mice "in the dead of winter," there is a return here to a warmer, more human voice, suggesting an alternative order in the physical pleasures of "summer, the drunken mother." The world of pure reason, of ideas cut off from enjoyment of one's physical world, is treated harshly:

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

(C P 124)

In this wintry context, "bluest reason" (using blue, Stevens' image for the imagination) connotes an imagination isolated from meaningful contact with its surrounding world. Thus, "Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial" suggests the somewhat paradoxical notion that order is sometimes discovered best in the temporary disorder of the physical world. To use the concluding words of the sequence's next poem, "Lions in Sweden" (124-25), "the vegetation still abounds with forms." Escape from "bluest reason" is possible if one is willing to turn to the creative possibilities of the world around us.

The five-poem sequence beginning with "Sailing After Lunch" and ending with "Lions in Sweden" is therefore an excellent example of Stevens' evolving "meditative technique." The first poem's emphasis on the revivification of language as the key to renewing contact with the physical world is treated more intensely in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" and "Dance of the Macabre Mice," where the imagination's struggle for a believable fiction becomes tinged with anxiety. "Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial" and "Lions in Sweden" express a desire to shift away from a rigid subject-oriented ethos; both are mild exhortations to turn from abstract ideas to the lush abundance of our spiritual world.

This alternation between opposing ideas of order becomes even more pronounced in the volume's next four poems. "How to Live. What to Do" (125-26) is a prime example of the "poetry of pure sight" that Benamou celebrates in the Stevens aesthetic of the 1930's.⁸ The rock upon which the poet makes his meditation is, as the first stanza says, "impure," while the world is "unpurged." Once the imperfections of the world have been accepted, the poem implies, then man can begin evolving a heroic fiction of the commonplace. It is a fiction that will unite self and the physical world not by the traditional ecstasies of "chorister" and "priest," but by a simple acceptance of (to borrow words from *Harmonium's* Snow Man) nothing that is not there and the nothing that is:

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

(C P126)

Litz is correct in seeing the experience of deprivation at the heart of *Ideas of Order*,⁹ but poems like "How to Live. What to Do" show that this deprivation is only a prelude to the heroic sounds that will issue forth when one has accepted the world's hardness. As Stevens writes in "Evening Without Angels" (136-38), another idea of order, "Bare night is best. Bare earth is best." the cold wind's sound can be a music as energizing and ordering as any of the old waltzes that have ended; it is our responsibility to open ourselves as fully as possible to the world's "music."

Following this celebration of the world as a self-sufficient fiction, "Some Friends from Pascagoula" (126-7) seems to be a wry, almost comic counterpoint to its predecessor. Its emphasis upon the powers of language shows a return to a concern for the self as fiction-creator:

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

(C P126)

The poem abounds with other verbs of linguistic description—"Tell me," "Say," and "Speak" all figure prominently. Significantly, this poem's narrator is not, like the narrator of "How to Live. What to Do", a direct observer of the imaginative moment. His experiences must come to him second-hand from "Cotton" and "black Sly," the creators of a new noble imagery. But like the frustrated sailor of "Sailing After Lunch," this poet finds that the self and world can be linked imaginatively only when "dazzling" new ways to describe it are found.

"Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" (127-28), in contrast, avoids the stress on language in "Some Friends" and the heroic identification of self with world in "How to Live. What to Do" In their places, it calls for acquiescence to the "sheer physicality of existence"¹⁰ that permeates many of the volume's poems.

The lightly bouncing iambs and anapests of the first stanza underscore this submission to life's rhythms:

That would be waving and that would be crying,
Crying and shouting and meaning farewell,
Farewell in the eyes and farewell at the centre,
Just to stand still without moving a hand.

(C P127)

The repetition of "farewell" emphasizes that this poem is, like so many other Stevens poems of the 1930's, about the necessity of saying goodbye to old ways of thinking about one's place in the world. "In a world without heaven to follow," i.e., a world cleaned of the old imaginative conception of God, even the words of farewell should be superfluous, for "just to be there and just to behold" would in themselves be sufficient justification for living. In brief, "Waving Adieu" counsels that mere existence itself constitutes a sufficient fiction, apart from any words used to describe it. As the poet concludes,

Ever-jubliant,
What is there here but weather, what spirit
Have I except it comes from the sun?

(C P128)

It is the "sun" of reality, the poet suggests, that controls the "spirit" of our self, and it is sufficient for us to obey what this sun dictates.

Clearly Stevens is experimenting with different relationships in these poems between the phenomenal world and individual consciousness, which incessantly seeks constituting and linking order for those phenomena "outside" itself. Though our friends from Pascagoula may feel that the world's objects are only as real as our words can make them, others take a totally different view of the matter: in a world in which physical existence is all we can ever hope for, why bother with words at all? Words are, after all, only an interference between one's self and the world's fundamentally physical qualities.¹¹

"The Idea of Order at Key West" (128-30) gives us yet another solution to the opposition of Subject and Object. Joseph Riddel is convinced that this poem recreates the essential drama of *Harmonium*, "in the choric exchanges of animated sea and the lady's song: the one an inviolable reality, the other a separate distinct self"¹² The point is made early in the poem that the lady and the sea are separate entities:

The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.

(C P128)

The shapes of language and physical reality (the latter imaged here by the sea) will never be equivalent, for hers is a human voice, the voice of "the maker's rage to order." Song and sea will forever remain separate orders that can only be brought together momentarily by artificers of the imagination:

...when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

(C P129)

The sea's "self," we must remember, is discerned by the poem's narrator, the listener to the song by the seashore. It is also significant that as the lady's song ends, the narrator is able to go back toward the town and see new relationships in his surrounding world: the lights in the fishing boats now seem to master the night, portion out the sea, "arranging" and "deepening" all around him. What we as readers (and the poem's narrator) are left with is "an impressionist marriage of subject and object"¹³ that bridges an otherwise insurmountable duality.

As one critic has pointed out, Stevens proves in "The Idea of Order at Key West" that his personal aesthetic has progressed greatly from the rather solipsistic Hoon of *Harmonium*.¹⁴ Unlike Hoon, the narrator of "The Idea of Order" is willing to acknowledge that he (and more specifically, his words) can never actually *be* that ever-difficult phenomenal world. The best an imaginative man can hope for is a new "song," a new *logos*, one that will offer a new way of appropriating creatively inchoate phenomena always eluding a language, always other than language.

It is clear that in *Ideas of Order* Stevens dedicates his craft to exploring how consciousness involves itself in, or is at times caught up by, that world constantly surrounding it and determining its perceptions. The volume's overriding theme is that imagination lies at the beginning and not the end of reality—but it is important to remember, Stevens seems to suggest, that the way this imagination inserts itself into the world is constantly shifting.¹⁵ The simple acceptance of the cold wind's "heroic sound" that energizes the meditator of "How to Live. What to Do" is not sufficient for the questing "maker" of "The Idea of Order at Key West," while the macabre mice prove that no imaginative order is immune to ridicule. The best we can hope for is to meditate on contrary possibilities, and it is here that what I have called "the meditative technique" comes into play. Though I have focused on only two sequences of poems, it should be clear that this "alternation between contradictory possibilities" (to use Miller's words again) exists throughout the volume. The consignment of angelic order to the past in "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" (135-36), for instance, is elaborated upon in the following "Evening Without Angels" (136-38), while the next poem, "The Brave Man" (138), mocks the "men of sun" that preceded it. Or one could point to the elegiac tone of "Anglais Mort à Florence" (148-49) that contrasts with the lilting, sing-song rhythms of "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" (149-50). *Ideas of Order* is above all a collection of contrasts—though perhaps not as striking as those in *Harmonium*, they exist nevertheless—and we should recognize in these contrasts alternating conceptions of the Subject-Object "universal intercourse" soon to be faced by the Blue Guitarist.

NOTES

1. Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 50-51.
2. Willaim W. Bevis, "The Arrangement of *Harmonium*," in *Critics on Wallace Steves*, ed. Peter L. McNamara (Coral Gables, Fla: University of Miami Press, 1972), p. 72.
3. J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens," in *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 259.
4. All page numbers in parentheses will hereafter refer to *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954).
5. A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1972), p. 190.
6. Litz, pp. 167-68.
7. Litz, p. 190.
8. Benamou, pp. 50-51.
9. Litz, pp. 181-82.
10. Litz, p. 181.
11. Miller, p. 225 makes comments similar to this.
12. Joseph Riddel, *the Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), pp. 118-19.
13. Ibid.
14. Louis L. Martz, *The Poem of the Mind* (New York: Oxford Unversity Press, 1966), p 206.
15. Miller, p. 231 also points out that for Stevens, just as reality is constantly moving and metamorphosing, so is the mind.

Wallace Stevens's "Page from a Tale": An Exploration of the Poem and Its Sources

E. I. SHOENBERG

William Butler Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" runs like water up a wick into the minds of those who meet it, and when the minds are those of other poets it runs out again into their poems. Often the borrowing is deliberate, and often, as in Ezra Pound's "The Lake Isle," the original poem is the butt of satire. In one poem though—Wallace Stevens's "Page from a Tale"—phrases of the original Innesfree poem and of an equally romantic poem by Heinrich Heine represent Poetry itself. Stevens's poem is about the poet's preference for imagined reality over imagined romanticism, and the borrowed phrases appear in only the first part of "Page from a Tale," but their effect lingers even after the poem has, like the poetic development of Stevens himself, moved from one kind of imagining to the other.

Before considering "Page from a Tale," it is helpful to look at "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and at No. 31 of Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*.

There is nothing in Yeats's poem to indicate the age of the poet, but we know it to be a youthful work. There is nothing in it to disparage his impractical plan to live alone on an island in a rough cottage sustained by beans and honey. The young poet's longing for a refuge where peace comes dropping slow and where he may stand on something more comfortable than the pavements gray is outdone only by his innocent candor in revealing the dream. The honest sentimentality of the poem—there is not a suggestion of the cold eye Yeats later cast on life, on death—offers up the poem, a juicy morsel, to the ironist and the sophisticate. The traditional measures and old-fashioned poetic diction sauce it temptingly for the parodist. But the wish it expresses, the wish to get away from "all this" and live alone in peace, echoes as clearly in other youthful hearts' cores as the lapping waves of Innisfree was an echo, in turn, of the gentle rippling of Walden Pond underscores the universality of its theme.

The poem by Heine, if restricted to the phrases borrowed from "Page from a Tale," is about the loveliness of a warm spring day among the flowers of a field—an easy correlate of Innisfree's bean rows and beehives. But for the reader familiar with the whole poem or with the series, *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, of which it is No. 31, the mood is extended to romantic melancholy or even to gothic horror, for the poet declares he would rather be lying in the grave in the arms of his dead sweetheart:

*Die Welt ist so schön und der Himmel so blau,
Und die Lüfte, die wehen so lind und so lau,
Und die Blumen winken auf blühender au
Und funkeln und glitzern im Morgentau,
Und die Menschen jubeln, wohin ich schau—
Und doch mocht ich im Grabe liegen
Und mich an ein totes Liebchen schmiegen.*

(The world is so fair and the sky so blue,
And the breezes, they sign so gentle and mild,
And the flowers nod in the blossoming field
And sparkle and glitter with morning dew,
And the people are joyful wherever I look –
And yet I'd rather lie in the grave
And embrace a dead love.)

Whether the whole poem should be welcomed into Stevens's poem on the basis of its having got a metrical foot in the door, or not, is open to discussion, but if the whole of Heine's poem is to be admitted, so must the whole of Yeats's.

Actually, each of the poems contrasts a peaceful, cheerful scene with a scene of depression and gloom. Each poet would rather be somewhere other than where he is, but they yearn for opposite havens; Yeats would leave the gray city for the lovely lake isle of Innisfree, while Heine would turn his back on the whole lovely earth and its happy people for the morbid coziness described in the last two lines of his poem.

Stevens uses only the pleasant part of each poem, but is pertinent that in one case the quoted words and phrases represent reality and in the other a dream.

Both Yeats's poem and Heine's fall with Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" among the many poems useful to those who would claim all poetry ultimately to be about death and any fantasy of trouble-free existence to be the expression of a death wish.

Like the two poems which contributed haunting phrases to it, Stevens's poem is about imagination's contributions to reality; it is about the life of the mind, and it is only a fragment of a "tale."

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A boy, Hans, has built a driftwood fire on a frozen shore. Beside the fire he watches through the night anticipating morning. His fire and his vigil are for the crew of an icebound ship, the fire's light presumably serving as a point of orientation for the crew. Captive in his responsibility, Hans dreams, fragments of remembered poetry bearing his spirit away while his body huddles freezing in the physical reality of the arctic or subarctic shore.

At length he turns his imagination from the unreality of poetry to the various possible weather conditions to be announced by the rising sun – and what kind of men the crew will be. Whatever the weather, the crew of the *Balayne* will walk ashore, anxiously alert for any tide-caused breaking up of the ice. From here, supposedly, the tale could go on, but the "page" ends.

"Page from a Tale" is the second poem of *The Auroras of Autumn* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950). The book is an extension of the earlier collection, *Transport to Summer* (Knopf, 1947). The poem is six ten-line stanzas long, and seems itself to be an extension – and extension of the first, longer poem, "The Auroras of Autumn" of the later book. In "The Auroras of Autumn" an old man, a patriarch, reads to a gathering of relatives at his home; the second poem may be a page from his reading, in fact, and the third poem, "Large Red Man Reading," which has more to say about the listeners than about the man reading to them, may be a continuation of the first poem as well.

The placement of "Page from a Tale," directly after the longer (240 lines in ten sections of eight three-line stanzas each) tone-setting first poem, suggests its function in the collection: it illustrates themes established in the opening poem. Its title, indicating the poem's fragmentary or inconclusive nature, as well as its comparative brevity, further suggests this relation to the parent poem; and "Page from a Tale" takes its opening image, the drift-fire on the shore, from the closing image of "The Auroras of Autumn" – "a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick."

The mock fragment contains several either/or opportunities both for Hans and for the reader. It cries out to be interpreted symbolically, and the possible interpretations, although not infinite, are certainly multiple.

The setting of "Page from a Tale" is an ice-locked seacoast where the stars seem a foot across and the Aurora borealis is expected at any minute. This and the boy's name, Hans, continue the Scandinavian motifs introduced in "The Auroras of Autumn." The time, if autumnal, is *late* autumn, when a ship might misjudge time and the weather and find itself icebound. It is not so deep into winter, however, that Hans should not be expected to wait out the increasingly longer northern night. As early as October, as far south as Denmark, the darkness would last eighteen or nineteen hours – but we have no way of telling how much our rationcination matches Stevens's on this point.

The sets of alternate possibilities in which the poem abounds begin with the first sentence. This sentence, all but the last line of stanza one, contains an extra comma (at the end of the seventh line). By dropping the comma and treating the fragments of quoted poetry as simultaneous with but outside the sentence – putting them in parenthesis, so to speak – we are able to chart the sentence and to clarify the "difference / Between loud water and loud wind." Hans has become aware of the difference while German words from Heine's poem and fragments of Yeats's poem mingle in his mind. Here are lines 1-9 "simplified":

In the brightness of that winter day	
The sea was frozen solid and Hans heard,	
By his drift-fire, on the shore, the difference	
Between – loud water	and – loud wind
– that which has no accurate syllables	– that which cries <i>so</i> <i>blue</i> and cries again <i>so lind und so lau</i>
– <i>sound without</i> <i>meaning</i>	– <i>speech as it ascends</i> <i>and falls.</i>

In this stripped-down sentence the items on the left, "loud water" and its appositives, "that which has not accurate syllables" and "Sound without meaning," are alternatives to "loud wind" and its successive appositives, "That which cries (in words)" and "speech as it (is sent out and received, or as it is spoken and heard or written and read)." The first suggest sublingual, primitive but powerful forces, the formless elemental surging of the sea and of that within Hans (within man) which is so elemental it must go without a name, though not without recognition. The second, loud wind, is a thing of language and the

ideas that ride on language. It is, for Hans, romantic, ideal, and unlikely to materialize – all connoted by Heine's *so blau, so lind und so lau*, and by the snatches of Yeats's "Innisfree" which was not even likely to materialize for Yeats, although at one period of his youth he seems to have believed (almost) that it might.

While poetry enchants Hans's mind, reality lies before him, a real ship really in trouble. It isn't even a romantic sailing vessel. It is a steamer.

In the second stanza Hans continues in his reverie while the first stars of the night appear in the sky and the wind continues to blow. The stars are the stars of poetry, as the triple rhyme in the last lines of the stanza implies. This rhyme, in an otherwise unrhymed poem, can have no other significance and, lest we overlook it or think it accidental, the rhyme is triple.

The stanza contains another pointer toward poetry, but a subtler one. In the fourth line there is a pretty example of poetically contrived diction, a kind of synaesthetic epizeuxis, in a pair of crossed verbs: "The wind blaxed as they (the stars) sang."

The stars, "couriers of (the ship's) death," are not the sweetly romantic stars of the summer's night soft in yon azure deep. They are the fierce though still romantic stars of the North. They look back at Hans with savage faces because they are Viking stars. At the beginning of the next stanza they are supreme; not even the driftwood fire competes with them, and Hans continues to dream of the bee-loud glade glade in a state of frozen or suspended animation.

The spell is broken, though, and Hans turns from his dreams to reality in the middle of line four of the third stanza: "*In the bee-loud glade. Lights on the steamer moved.*" From this point on there is not further reference to either the German or the Irish poem. Hans's concern is for the Balayna and what the morning will mean for her crew. They will be anxious to read the weather from the morning sun, he knows, the sun, the clouds, and the ice will all seem animate and threatening to the crew of the ship. Most threatening of all is the ice, beneath which the sea tries to speak, though its sound is distorted in a break of memory" – like an actor stepping out of character.

Stanzas four and five of "Page from a Tale," as mentioned above, offer alternative eventualities for the sun's rising on Hans's frozen coastline and on the ice-bound Balayne – beginning with the sardonic possibility that it might not rise at all: "The sun might rise and it might not...." If it rises like a red wafer pated on the sky – if five or six lines of Stevens' poetry may be shrunk to one phrase of Stephen Crane's prose – strangely near and spookily portentous, there are again alternatives: "It might and it might not in that Gothic blue speed home its portents to their ends" – that is, it might and it might not bring weather conditions which will crush the ship in the ice.

OR (stanza five) the sun might rise normally, its rays spreading like the spokes of a wheel, the sun and its rays reflected on the water and ice and its bright path on the sea visually connecting sun, reflected sun, and the fire on the shore. OR (Lines 7-10) the sun might "come bearing, out of chaos, kin" – the northern lights in unpredictable patterns and eerie shiftings and flickerings suggestive of unnatural and supernatural forces and beings, as if Norse gods and goblins were "Lashing at images in the atmosphere, / Ringed round and barred, with eyes held in their hands." (Odin, god of among other things

poetry, sacrificed one of his eyes for wisdom; elsewhere in Scandanavian mythology the three Norns, who are Norse Fates, have, like certain trios of trolls, a single eye among them and can be controlled by anyone wily and brave enough to steal the eye.) These kin of the sun will be “capable of incapably evil thought.” There follow a few “incapably evil” thoughts: “slight gestures that could rend the palpable ice, / Or melt Arcutrus to ingots dropping drops, / Or spill night out in brilliant vanishings. / Whirlpools of darkness in whirlwinds of light....” By this time Hans is again fantasizing, but now in terms of the near and real.

Over “the miff-maff-muff of water” (sound without meaning, perhaps, but poetically accurate syllables nonetheless) and the pronounceable sounds of the wind (Hans’s poem fragments?) “the glassily-sparkling particles of the mind—” —but this statement nearly at the end of the last stanza is, like the poem itself, fragmentary, and Hans drops it in mid-sentence. The crew of the *Balyana* will soon be coming ashore, not by the light of the stars (imagination, poetry) but by the practical twentieth-century beams of their flashlights—holding *their* eyes in their hands. Their flashlights are modern, practical, and the men will be aware of a very real possibility — that they could be destroyed by the primitive force of the tide under the ice.

In “Page from a Tale” Stevens refutes the kind of poetic fantasy that offers a retreat from harsh reality, but he does not deny the validity of this youthful impulse. First having abandoned Hans to the dream retreat of romantic poetry, he calls the boy back to contemplation of impending reality. “Page...” tells Stevens’s readers, as do many of his other later poems, that imagined reality is as exciting as, and more important than, imagined impossibility — that Reality is, after all, the Supreme Fiction.

The Wake of the *Balayna*: An Afterword

Working with “Page from a Tale,” I realized I had started with a somewhat unscholarly assumption: that the poem is itself an example of what it advocates, imagination based on reality. For months I tracked the *Balayna*, and I am now convinced that my intuition was sound, that Stevens took a few facts and created from them a possible reality. Here are the facts from which I have imagined the reality of the origin of “Page from a Tale.”

About once in forty years the salt water of the North Sea freezes, locking Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark to Norway and Sweden. Scandanavians call these Ice Winters. “Page from a Tale” is set somewhere in the affect area, as we surmise from the boy’s name, Hans, from his thinking in German as well English poetry, from the references to the northern lights and from the word “Gothic” in the poem, and finally from the name of the steamer, *Balayna*.

The ship’s name suggests that it is a whaler. The Middle English word for Baleen, whalebone, is *balyn* from the Middle French *balain* and the Old English *balaine*. The etymology hints that the ship is not Scandanavian in its registry, for the Norse-Danish term for baleen is *fiskeben* or *hvalbarde*.

The winter of 1944-45 was an Ice Winter, and, average intervals not withstanding, so was 1946-47. In view of the publishing dates of *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) and the preceding volume, *Transport to Summer* (1947), it seems likely that Stevens wrote “Page from a Tale” early in the period between

the two dates, or even while *Transport to Summer* was in the printer's hands. Newspapers then would have been carrying accounts of shipping troubles in the North Sea, and Stevens, a vice president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Corporation would have been interested.

Whether or not there was a boy, Hans, who built a driftwood fire near an icebound steamer that fall, there was a giant sterner *Balayna*—or rather *Balaena*—in the news at the time. There were, in fact, three ships named *Balaena* afloat in 1947-48. One was built in Seattle for an American West Coast fishing company. One was a yacht built in New London, Connecticut, and owned by a New Yorker. I have eliminated both of these because they were not in the news, although Stevens could have known the yachtsman and simply borrowed the name of the yacht. However, the last of the three ships is, it seems clear, the giant steamer of the poem. In October, 1947, she would have been docked at or approaching Bergen, Norway.

The librarian of S.U.N.Y. Maritime College ascertained for me through Lloyd's Registry of Shipping, that the *Balaena* was built in Belfast by Harland & Wolff, Ltd., in 1946, for a British corporation, Hector Whaling, Ltd. The ship's bow was reinforced, the better to cope with pack ice. Her first voyage was experimental in several respects.

Post-war Britain was looking for ways of expanding its food supply and its economy and hoped to convince its people that whale meat was palatable. The *Balaena* was equipped with radar, an early postwar use of that war-inspired device, and it carried a helicopter, both radar and helicopter to be used in spotting both ice and whales. The steamer was a factory ship, processing whales and storing whale products; she was the focal point of a fleet of smaller vessels. An important aspect of the *Balaena's* activities was research in meteorology, ornithology, and whale physiology and biochemistry.

Ironically, the radar and the helicopter, backed up by the exploding harpoon, were so successful for the *Balaena* and for other whaling vessels that whales quickly became an endangered species and the British whaling industry quickly became extinct.

The annual route of the *Balaena*, beginning in 1946-47, took the ship from Liverpool to Bergen, where the Norwegian captain and most of the crew came aboard, and from Bergen to the West Indies for fuel, then to Cape Town, South Africa, for the bulk of other supplies, and thence to the whale fields of the Antarctic. In the spring she returned to Cape Town, then home to Liverpool and Bergen.

The *Balaena's* chemist and medical officer, Dr. Christopher Ash, wrote a book about the ship's first voyages—*Whaler's Eye* (New York and London: The Macmillan Company, 1962).

The New York Times of December 27, 1946, carried a short article about the *Balaena's* special equipment and the purpose of her first voyage. On April 22, 1947, *The Times* reported *Balaena's* return to Cape Town with a record catch. Both stories were syndicated by Reuters.

In December, the time of the first news article, the *Balaena* would have been already in the Antarctic, for her annual voyage began in October. That the ice winter of 1946-47 offered difficulties at Bergen is entirely likely. I have talked with several Scandinavians who remember that terrible winter and with an

American, Ericson Nelson, who was “there—on the sea” with an American ship carrying military personnel and refugees. His ship was delayed, held out of its North German port by ice. “Nothing was moving,” he told me.

(In one of scholarship’s coincidences, I had contacted Mr. Nelson not because I thought he would know about the ice winter, but because he was the editor of a German language newspaper, the *Buffalo* (N.Y.) *Volksfreund*, and I had failed in six libraries and three universities to identify “*so blau, so blau, so lind und so lau.*” Mr. Nelson wasn’t able to help me with that except to tell me that both *lind* and *lau* are more Austrian than German. Gary Czerwiec, a student at Buffalo State College, found No. 31 of *Lyrisches Intermezzo* in an assignment for his German class.)

Whether the *Balaena* was among the ships like Mr. Nelson’s trapped in October 1947 in the freezing North Sea or not, she *was* damaged by pack ice in 1950, according to Christopher Ash. That was the year of publication for “Page from a Tale,” making it unlikely that Stevens learned of that episode and wrote the second poem of *The Auroras of Autumn* in time for its inclusion in the book, even if the book was published late in the year.

It occurred to me that the insurance coverage of the elaborately equipped whaler and her cargo would have been a very complex and expensive consideration, and that Wallace Stevens’ company, the Harford of Hartford, could have been involved. The ship’s owners, Hector Whaling, Ltd., did not answer my letter; they must no longer exist. Christopher Ash, too, does not answer; he, too, may no longer exist. I have been unable to learn from the Hartford’s offices in this country whether they were involved in the *Balaena*’s extraordinary insurance coverage. Both in New York and London, Lloyd’s told me the information I sought was unretrievable; but in London they did say that the amount would have been too large for a single insurer and that coverage, especially of the cargo, would have been underwritten by many secondary insurers and it is quite possible that one of these was Hartford.

At any rate, when imposition of international whaling quotas brought an end to British whaling, the *Balaena* was sold to a Japanese company and renamed *Kyokuyo Maru III*. Christopher Ash wrote in *Whaler’s Eye* of visiting his old ship under her new name. He found research begun aboard the *Balaena* being carried forward by Japanese scientists, again as an adjunct of whaling and the processing of whales.

Whether or not *Kyokuyo Maru III* is still actively whaling I do not know, but as *Balayna* in “Page from a Tale” she lies forever icebound in the the North Sea under stars a foot across.

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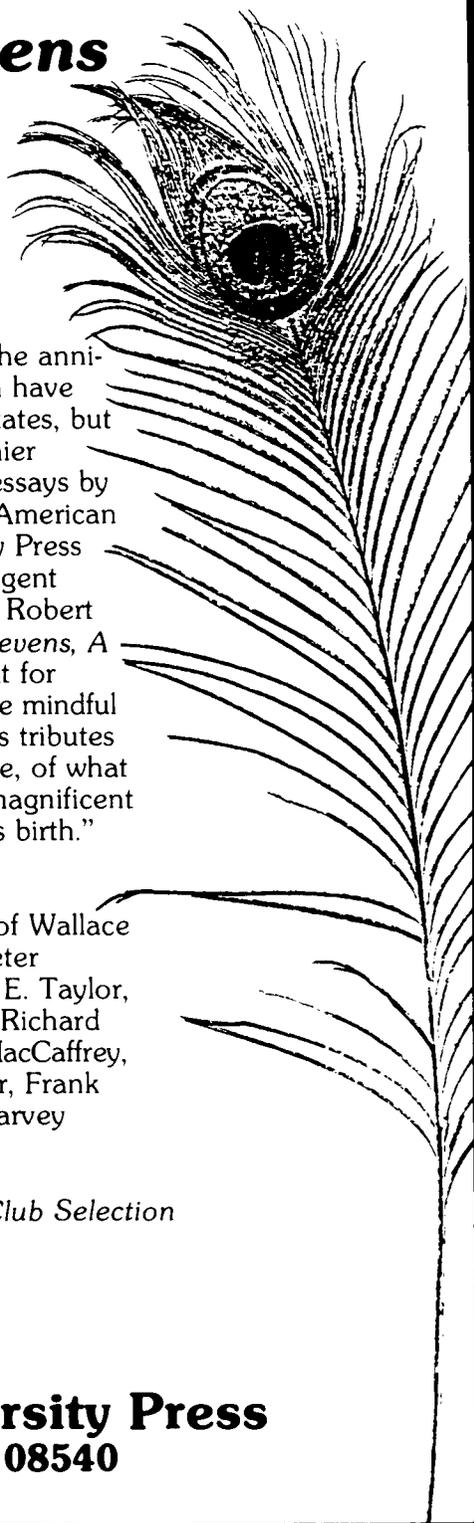
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