

ing sea—all these strokes of fine detail (“Flickings from finikin to fine finikin”), and the general effort to recreate them in art at whatever time and in whatever form, “from busts of Constantine/ To photographs of the late president,” are approaches (“edgings and inchings”) to the “final form” in which reality is successfully described through the formulation of art, which thus obliquely or immediately conceives reality. This tentative effort to conceive reality is like the evening manifesting itself through the colors of the extreme end of the spectrum only, like a philosopher trying to express himself through improvisations on the piano, or like a woman writing and destroying an approximation that does not quite capture her thought. It does not matter whether reality has any concrete substance or whether it is insubstantial. The important thing is to capture and express in the final form of art one’s sense of that reality which is significant only as it is perceived by the mind.

“Angel Surrounded by Paysans” (CP, p. 496)

This poem apparently grew out of Stevens’ contemplation of a painting he had bought, a still life by the French painter, Tal Coat, to which Stevens had given the name, “Angel Surrounded by Peasants.” The “Angel” in the painting, according to Stevens, is a Venetian glass bowl, the “peasants,” the terrines, bottles, and glasses that surround it (LWS, p. 650). Stevens writes that “the point of the poem is that there must be in the world about us things that solace us quite as fully as any heavenly visitation could” (LWS, p. 661).

The poem has the dramatic form of a biblical episode. One of the peasants has opened the door in welcome to an apparent visitor, but no visitor has presented himself. Then the angel appears for a moment and speaks. But in this case it is not one of heaven’s angels, but the “angel of reality,” who has none of the heavenly angel’s accessories, the pale

wing, the apparel of gold, the trite halo. The stars do not follow him as attendants, but are part of that reality which he represents and knows. The angel is one of the peasants, in that he is of reality rather than of heaven, and this existence as part of the reality shared in common with the peasants is all that he is and knows. Yet, though he is no more and knows no more than the peasants, he is nevertheless “the necessary angel of earth.” Man needs him, as a figuration of the imagination, through which one may see “the earth,” reality, afresh once more, beyond the rigidified “set” of images, or mold, in which man himself has imprisoned it. Through him, in poetry, one may distinguish the tragic in man’s relation to the earth, catching the fluidity of existence in fluid articulations, the words themselves part of the fluidity of existence (“watery words awash”), so that the meanings articulated are themselves composed of the fleeting suggestions of meanings which is the nature of the reality they interpret. The angel, as part of reality, is himself merely a suggestion of meaning (“only half of a figure of a sort”), only half perceived, or perceived only fleetingly, a projection of the mind, one who appears suddenly and elusively like a ghost, so nearly invisible that at the slightest change he disappears, “too quickly,” because with him disappears the illumination of reality that he brings.

“The Plain Sense of Things” (CP, p. 502)

“The Plain Sense of Things” is sufficiently unambiguous until the fourth stanza, where the crucial statement in the poem occurs: “Yet the absence of the imagination had/ Itself to be imagined.” What is the “necessity,” mentioned in the last line of the poem, that must be involved in this statement if it is to be read as more than a trivial verbal paradox? “After the leaves have fallen,” the poem begins—that is, in autumn or in an autumnal mood (possibly provoked by advancing age)—the bare constant of reality, the “plain sense of things,” is evident. (The bare earth or rock