

visible" because the hand that made the gesture, painted it in, is now removed. This gesture is the second hypothesis, B. If one could get at one's meaning without such "gestures" to represent it, as philosophy might, one could get at it as pure idea. This figure, incomplete as a work of art, half conception, half execution, fluctuates in the contention between seeing meaning in the object or in an idea of the object, between "idea as thing," or "thing as idea," in the dispute between philosophical realism and nominalism. The figure, only half executed, is still tangibly half the idea of the artist: this is the final hypothesis concerning the figure. It represents "the desire of/ The artist." However one does not place confidence in the obviously artificial but in the real, "what has no/ Concealed creator." One does not accept the world as the representation of an idea, but as the thing in itself, the "unpainted shore" rather than the artificially created sculpture. It is the thing itself rather than the idea of the thing that has reality. In a final stroke the poet, by naming the figure, makes of it such a real thing, a real woman in our ordinary world rather than an artificial entity, a mysterious gesture. He makes of the painting (and the poem) a completed work, by dismissing her, the demonstration being over, as one might dismiss a real model into the world of the nonphilosophical real.

### "Esthétique du Mal" (CP, p. 313)

"Esthétique du Mal" is written, for the most part, in loose blank verse whose chief irregularities are a high degree of anapestic substitution and the inclusion of extra unaccented syllables before the caesura and line end. It includes fifteen sections of more than twenty lines each, in some of which the pentameter is arranged in various stanza forms. It is Stevens' major attempt to discover a tenable attitude in face of the evils inherent in life without the consolations of supernatural belief.

The poem begins with a description of an attempt to achieve what is the poem's general intention; that is, as the

title implies, to come to terms with evil through the imagination. (Stevens says that he was thinking of esthetics in connection with the poem "as the equivalent of *apérçus* [*sic*], which seems to have been the original meaning," LWS, p. 469, so that the title might also be interpreted to mean a view of evil.) Thus the personage in Naples tries to make use of a treatise on the sublime (whether Longinus or not seems irrelevant) in order to describe the eruptions of Vesuvius as a metaphor for pain. But his description falsifies. The rhetoric he applies does not come out of his own experience, and his description of the volcano as an epitome of pain is a mere trick of fancy that does not adhere to reality. He can describe the sound because it is old and descriptive phrases for it have already been invented. Pain is real only as it is registered on the nerves, but his own nerves are attuned to the comforts amidst which he speculates: "It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human./ There were roses in the cool café." He is not willing to face the reality of pain: "His book/ Made sure of the most correct catastrophe." This is a falsification of rhetoric, the same esthetic veneer that glazes catastrophe in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" and makes of it an illusory good:

Let the Secretary for Porcelain observe  
That evil made magic, as in catastrophe,  
If neatly glazed, becomes the same as the fruit  
Of an emperor, the egg-plant of a prince.  
The good is evil's last invention. (CP, p. 253)

In fact, Vesuvius does not know our pain, and would be ignorant of the advent of our death ("the cocks that crow us up/ To die"). Pain is not to be confounded with the metaphor of Vesuvius, or any metaphor, but is an exclusively human experience. It is this fact that is difficult to face, and that the imagination must account for in "the sublime," in the lofty but credible agreement with reality that will enable us to come to terms with evil. This defines the subject of the poem.

In the second section the same problem is addressed more successfully. At first the sounds of night that surround the man on the balcony are too much things in the mind, too much merely the objects of perception that can achieve, but have not yet achieved the resolution of his despair. They are "syllables" in his meditation without reality of their own, just as the metaphor for pain was a trope that did not adhere to reality. But resolution cannot come in the mind alone; it can only come as the mind discovers new aspects of a reality free from the mind in which resolution can be achieved. The rising moon is a revelation of such an independent reality. It escapes his meditation and evades his mind.<sup>35</sup> The shadow of night "merely seemed to touch him" because it is actually distinct from him. In this revelation there is a new knowledge that comes from the reality outside himself, "in space," and that brings about the resolution of his despair. Pain is not concerned with ("is indifferent to") reality ("the sky"), despite the sensuous scent and color of the acacias; if it were, it might see ("regard") in reality the latter's independence from the ego, instead of hallucinating an anthropomorphic reality which seems dependent on the ego. Reality is free from the mind that registers pain, as Vesuvius is free from the projections of rhetoric. Thus, the mind can always find relief in a new relation to reality, the final among which would be, by extension, death. The final section of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" is apposite:

But would it be amen, in choirs, if once  
In total war we died and after death  
Returned, unable to die again, fated  
To endure thereafter every mortal wound,  
Beyond a second death, as evil's end?  
It is only that we are able to die, to escape  
The wounds. (CP, pp. 258-59)

But it is also true that if death can dissolve evil, so can less drastic changes in the relation to reality give relief:

If earth dissolves  
Its evil after death, it dissolves it while  
We live. (CP, p. 259)

It is only because reality is "wholly other," and therefore does not share human pain, and rejects it, that makes it possible for a new relation with reality to be formed in which pain is dissolved. Pain, in not heeding "This freedom, this supremacy"—the terms are repeated from the preceding stanza where they refer to what is outside the mind—of reality in its separation from the ego, persists in its illusion that reality is part of the mind, and so it fails to see how the independence of reality is its salvation. Here may be seen the importance of a sense of reality beyond the mind in Stevens' work. If in Wordsworth it is necessary to sustain a duality between mind and nature in order to perceive their unity in the divine, so in Stevens the same duality must be sustained for a salvation of a different kind.

Section III concerns the possibility of good, as well as evil, within the limits of a secular world. The poetry of the person referred to is like a good ("honey") in hell. (It is possible that the person referred to is Dante, the "firm stanzas" those of the *Inferno*, and that the form of the section is in loose imitation of its stanza form. Kermode, p. 104, makes a similar guess.) But there is no hell, and the modern problem of evil exists within secular limits, because the physical world does not give grounds for faith ("O terra infidel"). In a Nietzschean passage it is averred that the projection of an anthropomorphic god to account for the evil in reality has caused us to misunderstand reality's otherness (compare discussion of preceding section). This "too, too human god" prevents us from accepting the independence of reality from the mind which is our only salvation, and the result, in the face of evil, is self-pity. The section ends with the suggestion that it should be possible to be content with the common good of earth, and that "hell," or evil so changed as to be part of the conditions of life on that earth rather than the manifestation

of a supernatural force, "Could be borne." It should be possible to live, not on the supernatural garner of "hives in hell" but, since earth and hell are one and here, on the "golden combs" of earth.

Section IV begins with an illustration of the sentimentalist as general or abstract and imitative ("Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs d'après Nature"). This is opposed to the specific and creative, illustrated by two examples of imaginative activity: the first, by the musician, "B." (the archtypical musician—Bach, Beethoven, et cetera), and the second, by the "Spaniard of the rose" who does not merely see and imitate, but metamorphoses the rose, or rescues it from nature. (Of the latter, Samuel French Morse writes: "Knowing that he is Pedro Dot, the rose hybridizer of Barcelona, is of no importance poetically speaking," but on what authority the identification is made it not mentioned.)<sup>86</sup> We may therefore take the "genius of misfortune" to be imaginative, as opposed to sentimental. The Spaniard sees the rose as something specific and ever new—not, as the sentimentalist sees things, as something vague, and of a general class ("her several maids"). The "genius of misfortune" too is specific, not vague and general like the sentimentalist. He is that evil in the self who, like B. and the Spaniard, imagines specific things, desperate consecrations of the world in the self's image, crude gestures—projections that make everything the cause of misfortune (at fault). He represents our ability to imagine away or rationalize misfortune so as not to accept it. The genius of misfortune is the perverse genius of the mind in its ability to metamorphose nature (like the Spaniard) through the imagination, and in this error we waste our lives trying to find satisfaction in an imaginary reality, rather than in the physical "world" that is our true reality.

Section V is based on the acceptance of the physical world implicitly recommended in the preceding section. In this section, as in "Sunday Morning," the discussion is more oriented toward the discovery of good than the rationalization of evil within secular limits. The general import of the two stanzas is clear: the only faith can be in the good of physical

reality, as opposed to the supernatural of archaic belief, the only good life a life in fraternity ("This brother") with the living and familiar. As in "Sunday Morning" the good of earth, of what is real and present, which is "within what we permit," in "in-bar," incorporates the good of paradise and its corollaries and our nostalgia, or "damasked memory," of paradise. The latter is now "ex-bar," or excluded from belief.

In section VI, the sun, which "dwells/ In a consummate prime," shares its perfection momentarily at the prime of day which then passes: thus he keeps seeking "A further consummation." He tries to transmute the month into his own state of perfection, and, as with the day, at the very point of success, fails. Day by day and month by month the years fail, and he rejects them year by year. The sun, then, is like a clown, in that it is perpetually frustrating itself in its desire for an impossible consummation, yet is not a clown because it is perpetually fulfilling itself in perfection. The "big bird" represents the mind as it is nourished by reality (the creation of the sun), and is as insatiable as the sun. Fed by the consummations of the sun, "its grossest appetite becomes less gross," but even "when corrected" the appetite for further consummations remains in "divinations of serene/ Indulgence out of all celestial sight," intimations of perfection the sun can never illuminate. The bird has risen "from an imperfection" like those of space, and is seeking perfection. He, like the sun, rejects momentary perfections and perpetually follows the sun, the "yellow grassman," for the promise of further perfection the sun will cast away in the future. The sense of the parable is that driven by imperfection, we constantly seek a promise of absolute perfection that cannot be fulfilled.

Section VII is one of Stevens' attempts to create "the mythology of modern death" (CP, p. 435) as he puts it in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," a poem devoted to that subject. The passage at hand may represent an attempt to cope with the violence of World War II (the entire poem was published in November, 1945). The "soldier" is an abstraction, an unknown "soldier of time" commemorating all those who have died in war. The only ease he finds in death is in-

difference to further, or "deeper" death, and, since he cannot die again, he is called "deathless." In death he nevertheless, with the companions he represents, moves on the wind with the general motion of the creation of which he was part, like Lucy in "A slumber did my spirit seal." Since he ceased to exist when he died, "No part of him was ever part of death." His mortal wound was part of life, not death, and, as part of life, "is good because life was." Since the wound was good as a part of life, it may be described as a rose that represents the goodness of life rather than the evil of death. The sense of the two final lines is that since death is mere non-existence, the felicities of life are the only commemoration for the dead, since they show that their mortality is good, because life is good.

Section VIII refers to the crisis of disbelief, and resolves it by recourse to the psychology of belief. "The death of Satan was a tragedy/ For the imagination" because it destroyed the current myth of evil and its imaginative corollaries ("blue phenomena"). Satan's death was the revenge of men whom he made the sons of evil as they were of good; they simply withdrew belief. Lines ten to fourteen, which assume a tone of pathos, may be read to mean that since the Christian mythology of the supernatural is no longer credible, there is no longer any afterlife (compare "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb," CP, p. 56). The sense of the sentence beginning, "What place . . .," is that since this mythology is no longer credible, to be in its afterlife is not enough to exist. The phantoms are ghosts of ghosts. However, the negation which reveals reality bare of myth leaves a vacuum of belief. We live by "improvisations and seasons of belief" (CP, p. 255), which are doomed to become incredible and be replaced by others:

. . . these philosophic assassins pull  
Revolvers and shoot each other. One remains.

The mass of meaning becomes composed again.  
(CP, p. 256)

This scene never stops being played, because it is sustained by a psychological need to affirm: "After the final no there comes a yes" (CP, p. 247). Thus the tragedy begins again "in the imagination's new beginning" of belief, and will be played through again to the destruction of that belief, "because under every no/ Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken."

Section IX repeats the description of the loss of the imagination in the first section of "The Comedian as the Letter C," but in terms that parallel the same experience described by Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, Books Twelve and Thirteen. The "panic" is due to the destruction of belief, as described in the preceding section, resulting in a period when all imaginative conceptions of reality—the moon as "round effendi," "the phosphored sleep," and so on—have become incredible: "The moon is no longer these nor anything." He who has lost imaginative perception of reality, or "the folly of the moon," is impoverished as Crispin was impoverished in the sea. The experience is referred to as the loss of sensibility, and its dynamics are the same as in Wordsworth: "to see what one sees." In Stevens, as in Wordsworth, perception with the physical eye or the senses alone signifies loss of sensibility, because imaginative perception is creative, metamorphosing the object of perception (see *The Prelude*, Book Twelve, ll. 121–31). The eye sees, but the mind begets in metaphor, or resemblance (NA, p. 76). Thus the sight has "its own miraculous thrift." To limit oneself, on the contrary, to one interpretation of what is seen when reality is fraught with possible interpretations, "a paradise of meaning," is to impose an order on it that does not exist. Such a "violent order is disorder" (CP, p. 215). This would be to divest reality of its imaginative aspect, or its "fountains." Though the present suffers a crisis of disbelief that is chanted by the "indifferent crickets" (or mediocre critics), what we require is an imaginative conception that like the halcyon will charm the wildness or chaos of reality as yet unreclaimed by the imagination; that will beat back ("buffet") this wildness with its manifestations ("shapes"), blow the halcyon against the

haggardie. An example follows that resembles the experience of Wordsworth on Snowdon (*The Prelude*, Book Fourteen) that crowns the recovery of his sensibility. Its diction in part ("a loud, large water") echoes Wordsworth, perhaps intentionally, taking him thereby to represent the type of the experience. The fountain of the imagination bubbles up to drown out "the indifferent crickets" with the graces ("favors," also meaning gifts) of truth presented in a favorable light through the rhetoric of poetry ("sonorously exhibited"). The "primitive ecstasy" is that of the affirmation of reality therein implied.

The student of nostalgias in section X is one who has examined the various forms of longing for a congenial conception of reality. Among them he rejects what is perhaps the esthetic, perhaps merely the elegant and delicate ("mauve *maman*"), as opposed to the gross maternal, others that were fantastic, and still others that he profoundly, perhaps subconsciously, yearned for, "things submerged with their englutted sounds,/ That were never wholly still" (below, ll. 12-17). His soul ("anima") wanted reality in its gross substance, at its most primitive and least controlled by the mind (reality as an "animal" that is "unsubjugated"), so that reality, his "home," is a return to his source in nature ("a return to birth"). Nature is a mother, and, since he is part of nature, she is within him, fiercely goading him to recognize the truth of her reality. Understanding reality as the source of life made him proof against the impersonal pain she inflicted, because he understood that the pain was not the result of her malice, but of her gross, but fertile, innocence. Thus, "That he might suffer or that/ He might die was the innocence of living." This idea, however, is only "the last nostalgia" for a human explanation of a reality that is in fact inexplicable: "that he/ Should understand" reality seems to explain pain or evil that is otherwise incomprehensible. To assert this idea, though false, disentangled him from many possible sophistries by way of explanation of reality.

On the contrary, the argument resumes, in section XI, it is not possible to account for evil by any such facile hypoth-

esis. "Life is a bitter aspic"; life with its evil is hard to swallow. "We are not/ At the centre of a diamond"; rather, life is flawed by imperfection. The paratroopers fall to drag the ground ("mow the lawn") in sudden and random death, and the vessel's "waves/ Of people" meet the same fate, despite the knell of faith tolling in the steeple. This indifference of fate is compounded by all the inconsequential dead, the "poor, dishonest people." The only belief available against the poverty of reality beyond and without the imagination, and against the evil which is the condition of life, is the metamorphosis possible through the imagination as it is expressed in language. The imagination discovers in reality a "paradise" of possible meanings, the "jocular procreations" (CP, p. 183) which are the joy of life, and which allow us to come into an agreement with reality. Hence, "Natives of poverty, children of malheur,/ The gaiety of language is our seigneur," our god, or lord. The "man of bitter appetite," that is, the man who has a taste for the "bitter aspic" of life with all its imperfections, despises the confections of the fancy which evade reality, which are like the contrived scenes of a movie in which the paratroopers "Select adieux" and the ship, if it sinks, does so picturesquely. He also rejects a landscape which is dominated by the symbolic steeple of an incredible belief, and the idea of an afterlife which would disinter the "poor, dishonest people" from whom the violets grow: "the violets' exhumo." Instead, the harsh realities ("exacerbations") of these things are cherished, or caressed, for the sense of reality they give, for they are the means of distinguishing the ego from reality, and so enable the ego to form a credible conception of itself in relation to reality. The harsh realities press the sensitive tongue ("epicure") so that their taste is distinguished from the taster, reality from the perceiving ego, in a process in which it is not satisfaction of hunger that is desired, but the hunger for these harsh realities itself. The "bitter appetite" of the beginning of the stanza is itself the thing above all to be desired, in face of the bitter realities.

Section XII is an effort to rationalize pain out of existence

through the understanding, which, however, shows its limits. His two categories are the self and the social world. Initially, he hypothesizes that he would be alone in each category. In the first he is isolated within his mind; in the second his mind is isolated among those of others. In the second, however, he is accompanied by his knowledge of others, and in the first by his knowledge of himself. In which case, would his knowledge be more capable of meeting the situation when the will demands that his thinking be to the point ("true")—which will best accommodate him to face pain? It can be neither, since in each case his knowledge amounts to the same thing. His knowledge, which includes knowledge of pain, destroys the categories, unless he escapes the knowledge. In so doing he would be alone as he thought he was when he contrived the categories. This creates a third category without knowledge, in which he is passive. In this state, whatever is registered on the nerves would be accepted as the truth of reality, including pain, which, if not accepted, betrays one, "is false." Since pain is accepted, it no longer exists as pain. The third world, then, seems to be a passive state of sensuous perception in which the thinking self is eclipsed, in which pain would not be known as pain, such a condition as might be induced by liquor, drugs, or mysticism. But this is merely a construction of the intelligence, an ideal: what lover of reality has such a world? What woman could be so perfectly gratifying? In the imperfect world there is no way of escaping pain.

As section VIII concerned the perpetual tragedy of belief, so section XIII addresses the perpetual tragedy of life itself. Ideas of justice, as "the son's life for the father's," are secondary within the universal tragedy of inevitable death which is beyond justice. This is,

. . . the unalterable necessity  
Of being this unalterable animal.  
This force of nature in action is the major  
Tragedy. . . .

Inevitable death is "The happiest enemy" because it defines the clear limits, the "destiny unperplexed," within which the good may be discovered. The limits are those which death allows life, which evil allows good. Within this absolute condition there are degrees of evil: "Evil in evil is/ Comparative." Thus a man may contemplate a good in reality and call it the ultimate, since it is the maximum, good. This version of reality is the "assassin's scene," since it does not evade death, but discovers the maximum good in death's dominion. The dominion is life itself, whose destruction can only be endured "With the politest helplessness."

Section XIV revolves the formulations of section IX, but more as they concern the restriction of the imagination than the loss of it. (The quote is from Victor Serge, who was a Marxist and anti-Stalinist historian and novelist. Konstantinov was a former member of the Russian secret police, a meeting with whom Serge recounted in his memoirs.)<sup>37</sup> The committed emotions of Konstantinov require a consistent intellectual structure to justify them, regardless of the truth of that structure. His cause therefore creates a logic of lunacy. Konstantinov's lunacy consists in his obsession with one idea "In a world of ideas." Reality here, as in section IX, is considered rife with possible metamorphoses, a "paradise of meaning." Stevens' point of view is always historical and relativistic: "One wants to be able to walk/ By the lake at Geneva and consider logic," that is, the history of logic, "the logicians in their graves," and their systems buried with them. One would "promenade amid the grandeurs of the mind" as through a museum. Nevertheless, despite the element of reason represented by the lake, one would be aware of the chaos of reality (compare "The Doctor of Geneva," CP, p. 24), and thus be apprehensive of meeting the logically unreasonable Konstantinov. One would feel the same "blank uneasiness" before the lake of reason, in the museum of logic, that Victor Serge felt before the logical lunacy of Konstantinov. A restriction of the mind to reason and logic then, is itself logical lunacy. Konstantinov would pay no heed

to the lake of reason or the history of logic, since, obsessed with one idea, "His extreme of logic would be illogical." He therefore represents the element of unreason breaking through the imposed order of reason, and serves as a double demonstration of the defeat of reason. Reality is not reasonable; reason only makes tentative formulations about it which, when they become rigid and restrictive, round the circle to that extreme which is unreason.

Section XV, as the poem's finale, resumes its major theme of the feasibility of the good life, despite attendant evil, in the physical world. "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world" because there is no other. It is despair of fulfillment within the physical world that creates the supernatural ideal:

Sad men made angels of the sun, and of  
The moon they made their own attendant ghosts,  
Which led them back to angels, after death. (CP, p. 137)

On the contrary, the good of earth is that it is perfectly suited to human desire,

. . . as, desire for day  
Accomplished in the immensely flashing East,  
Desire for rest, in that descending sea  
Of dark, which in its very darkening  
Is rest and silence spreading into sleep. (CP, p. 137)

The ghostly consummations of the dead are pathetically contrasted with the "rotund emotions" of the living. Like the shades of the Classical underworld, or like the ghosts of "Large Red Man Reading," they "would have wept to step barefoot into reality" (CP, p. 423). The consummation of reality dissipates the impulse to abstract thought of the "metaphysicals," who "Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat." The "metaphysicals"—or those given to the kind of abstract reasoning that leads to the idea of a supernatural

paradise, as opposed to the "non-physical people" who are in paradise and can feel little or nothing—are so satisfied by the physical world and the "rotund emotions" therein that they know nothing of paradise. This, then, is the affirmation of a belief in a good life within the conditions of a "physical world," "the thesis scrivened in delight." But its discovery did not lie with the physical eye and ear; it was rather the imagination working on the data of the sense and dealing with "all the ill it sees," and "all the evil sound," that brought the mind into accord with the conditions of life in a "physical world." The imaginative metamorphoses through which the accord is brought about, the various versions of the self and the sensuous world, may therefore be described as "metaphysical changes." They are the imagination's revelations of reality and are all the metaphysic necessary "in living as and where we live."

### "Man Carrying Thing" (CP, p. 350)

The psychological process illustrated here seems to concern the poet's composition of the poem rather than the reader's apprehension of it, but could conceivably concern both. The poem must not make itself immediately available to the intelligence. Rather, one apprehends the general outline of it first; that of a brown ("brune") figure, for example, whose details and significance ("Identity") we cannot make out. What he carries remains mysterious even to our most urgently needy ("necessitous") attempts to perceive it. These uncertain details are "secondary"—the certain whole being primary—they are the first hints of meaning that must be given time to accumulate, like the first flakes of a snow storm. Such meaning is opposed to meaning that is immediately obvious; the "horror" is a horror of the easily obvious. We must struggle with our thoughts till dawn to arrive at meaning that is difficult to grasp clearly, and which is therefore worth making obvious.