

"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"  
(CP, p. 380)

"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is composed of thirty-one poems of seven three-verse stanzas in a loose approximation of iambic pentameter. It does not present a strictly consecutive line of argument but is organized in reflections pertaining to three topics, or "notes" (LWS, pp. 406-7, 538), and it has an epilogue. The introductory lines have no direct connection with the rest of the poem, except that their sentiments echo some of those in the body of the poem. Stevens makes it clear that they are not to Henry Church in LWS, p. 538. They seem to be addressed to the muse whom the poet cherishes more than the best knowledge to be found in books. The poet clings to his "single, certain" poetic truth, which is "uncertain" in that it is fortuitous, inspired rather than willed. The fitful quality of poetic truth is equal to the uncertain but vital ("living changingness") character of the encounter with the muse which, despite its changeability, brings us moments of composure ("in the central of our being"). Such moments, in which things are seen in the clarity ("vivid transparency") of imaginative truth, bring peace. It is such resolution, in an accord of the feelings and of subject with object, that is the kind of truth with which the poem is concerned (for example, in *It Must Be Abstract*, VII).

IT MUST BE ABSTRACT. The first section of *It Must Be Abstract* is in the didactic tone of a lesson to an "ephebe," a young man of ancient Greece undergoing his education at the hands of the state as his final initiation to citizenship. In the poem he represents the apprentice poet. The world is an invention because it is apprehended through our conceptions of it, our fictions, which are expressions of the "idea of the sun," or reality. Reality, the world, is the "idea of the sun" both because it is, in a sense, of the sun's conception, and because we can perceive it only through an idea. The ephebe is asked to perceive reality beyond our fictions of it. This reality is "inconceivable"; it exists beyond conception. Thus

to apprehend the idea of the sun, the ephebe must see it as "an ignorant man," as one who sees it without ideas about it, in order to realize it beyond conception. Reality is not invented, it is the conception of no mind, nor is the ephebe to suppose for it a creator, a "voluminous master" (stanza 3). When the sun is so seen in terms of its inconceivable idea, it is seen as part of a cosmos purged of anthropomorphic inventions, of "us and our images." The purgation of the principle of anthropomorphic invention kills one god as it kills them all (stanza 5). Phoebus, a personification of the sun, is an example: he has died with the vegetation in autumn, and the ephebe is instructed not to attempt to resurrect him ("Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest"—"purple" as the color of the setting sun and also as a shade of Stevens' color for imagination, blue.) Phoebus, as a personification of the sun, was an attempt to name the inconceivable, "something that never could be named." The "project" with regard to the sun is to perceive it beyond conception, beyond names for it, as it exists in itself (beyond names such as "gold flourisher," which we nevertheless need as metaphor to capture, for a moment, its reality). The "idea" of the sun, then, is its mere existence ("what it is to be"), and its "difficulty" is that it exists outside the conceptions of the mind.

In section II, "the first idea" is the idea of the sun, reality in itself beyond our conceptions of it.<sup>38</sup> It is the "quick" of this "invention" because it is what gives life to our fictions of reality. It is ennui with the cosmic scheme ("celestial ennui") as seen from a civilized, or humanly conceived point of view (that of "apartments") that sends us back to the idea of reality, the first idea. But since reality is beyond invention and inconceivable (see section I), when we approach it through our conceptions of it, we lose its "truth." As soon as perception becomes conception, the first idea inevitably becomes another metaphor ("hermit" in the sense of separation from the reality of life) which we ravish from the truth, and which is fatal to the truth. We live in the mind, which, as it contemplates reality, transforms it into metaphor in order to capture it and then, in its ennui of that metaphor,

desires to contemplate reality again—so that the first idea is also like a hermit in the sense of a mendicant “Who comes and goes” all day. Although there is an ennui of the world as invention of the mind, there is also an ennui of reality itself. The “monastic man,” the priest or philosopher, is an artist in that he develops a conception of man’s relation to reality (“Appoints man’s place”) which is imaginative, a metaphor (“in music”). His conception is of a particular time or state of mind, of, for example, today (“say, today”). But the priest and philosopher are also men who desire, and desire can never remain satisfied, because no fulfillment of it can remain adequate (“To have what is not”—what is no longer real and thus no longer fulfillment—“is its ancient cycle.”) Desire must be continuously responsive to the changes of reality. The example of a change of season is given. Desire observes the change of spring in weather and vegetation, and rids itself of old fulfillment (“what is not”) which was that “of another time.” One grows tired of the stale reality of winter, and seeks satisfaction in the on-coming reality of spring. Change is inherent both in reality and in ourselves; thus we grow tired both of reality itself, and of our metaphors for it.

Section III speaks of the moment in which the imaginative conception of reality, our metaphor of reality, is adequate. The poem gets beyond preconception (“refreshes life”), and gives us a sense of the existence of reality, allows us to “share” in reality. The sense that the poem gives of a reality that is “immaculate,” or pure of the projections of the ego, satisfies us as belief about reality. This is the “immaculate beginning” of a process in which the particular imaginative conception of reality, at first adequate, ceases to be so, and must make way for the desire (“unconscious will”) to perceive reality in its purity again (“an immaculate end”). It is a repetitive process (“We move between these points”) that goes from the “candor,” or purity (obsolete sense) of its beginning to the duplicate purity, or “plural” of its end.<sup>39</sup> Their purity is the result of our conceptions (“what we think”) which exhilarate our feelings, so that thought and feeling are at one

(“thought/ Beating in the heart”) through satisfaction of the desire to perceive reality afresh in a conception which enables us to do so. The poem, by means of describing reality without preconception, pure of the projections of the ego (“through candor”), brings an exhilaration, or “power,” that gives this fresh nature (“candid kind”) to everything. “We say,” of the fifth stanza, prefaces three examples of how the bare facts of reality may be captured and brought into relation by the imagination. Stevens writes that “the Arabian is the moon; the undecipherable vagueness of the moonlight is the unscrawled fores: the unformed handwriting” (LWS, p. 433). At night we conceive the moon as “an Arabian,” one learned, possibly, in astronomy or astrology, who, with his damned nonsense, disturbs one with vague, unformed portents read in the astrological arrangements (his “primitive astronomy” and his “stars” thrown on the floor) suggested by the moonlight (“the unscrawled fores”): we turn nonsense into portent. The meaningless chant of the wood-dove which is given in nonsense syllables had its meaning for us; and the coarsest appearances of the ocean may speak to us, although they say nothing (“howls hoo”). Thus life’s meaningless facts, “Life’s nonsense,” may be brought into unexpected, but significant, relation, “pierces us with strange relation.”

Section IV describes the difficulty of life within a reality whose existence is distinct from the ego. Reality was not the invention of man. The Garden of Eden was the primary example of conceiving reality in man’s image. Thus Adam is the father of Descartes—“a symbol of the reason,” according to Stevens (LWS, p. 433)—since through Adam reality was first conceived on the basis of the reality of the reasoning ego; and through Eve reality was likewise conceived anthropomorphically (“made air the mirror of herself”—Stevens, LWS, p. 444, comments, apropos Adam and Eve, that “it is not the individual alone that indulges himself in the pathetic fallacy. It is the race”). Their “heaven,” or Eden, was a reflection of themselves, “as in a glass,” that created “a second earth”; and though earth itself was productive (“green”) and therefore hospitable, they lived in an earth “varnished” by

their own conceptions. But reality was not a matter of the ego shaping the world in imitation of itself. Reality existed prior to man; there was an order, or "myth," of reality before man's conception of it, "before the myth began." It is this condition that generates the poem, the imaginative conception of reality. We are aliens in a place "not our own," and that is apart from the projections of the ego ("not ourselves") in which it is therefore difficult to live despite our imaginative representations of our life in it or, perhaps, our memorable days ("blazoned days"). It is the poem that bridges the gap between the ego and alien reality. We do not shape the clouds in imitation as in stanza three; rather, we mimic what the clouds teach and reality shapes the ego.<sup>40</sup> The air is not a mirror of the ego, as in the first part of the poem, but rather the air, as the environment, is a "bare board" which reflects nothing of the ego, a stage on which our lives occur as before a set scene ("coulisse") which is both bright and dark, happy and not, a theater tragic and comic without regard to the concerns of the ego. It is a scene accompanied by the music of its own unfathomable meaning ("abysmal instruments") which renders insignificant ("make sounds like pips") the grandiose meanings that we try to add to it.

Section V begins with descriptions of three beasts, each of which is adequate to its environment. The quality of the lion's roar is anger, represented by the color red, and his roar fills the desert with his anger in defying it to produce something that can stand up to him. "Glitter-goes" refers to the effect of the blare of the elephant which "Breaches the darkness"; in Ceylon, according to Stevens, "a tank is a reservoir . . . a basin which may have been an ancient bath or the excavation for an ancient building" (LWS, p. 434). The sound glides over the surfaces of pools which, disturbed, refract light. (Stevens reads "glitter-goes" as "vibrancies of light," "velvetest far-away" as "very remote distance"—LWS, p. 434.) The ephebe, in contrast with the beasts, must struggle to produce the conception that will make him master of his environment. Stevens reads "sigil and ward" to mean that

"the person referred to looks across the roofs like a part of them: that is to say, like a being of the roofs, a creature of the roofs, an image of them and a keeper of their secrets" (LWS, p. 434). In place of the aggressive confidence of the beasts, he faces his environment, towards which his position is one of participation, rather than enmity, and he is cowed by it. But he is the type of those who, in time, are able to master reality for man who is, in consequence, master of the beasts that are part of reality.

Stevens has described section VI as fluctuating between inaccessible, but immanent, fictive abstraction, and concrete, accessible reality (LWS, p. 434). The section begins by describing the abstract "giant of the weather" of its final stanza (who in VIII develops into "major man") before he has been imagined; since he is not to be seen he is not to be realized, and since he is not to be realized he is not to be loved or hated. He must be seen in the context of a concrete landscape, but the one described has the unreality of a painting, one by Hals, whose *forte* was not landscape. Major man will have no reality ("Not to/ Be spoken to") unless he is imagined in human interaction with the landscape, providing it, in turn, with a human context as, for example, a roof, the fields bearing produce under cultivation, the birds imagined as a musical instrument ("the virginal") constructed to play for the human ear, the background of the landscape filled in with flowers that seem gay, against a particularized ("Northern") sky. The giant must be made visible by being particularized, but not completely so, since he must remain an abstraction, even though personified ("The dark-blown ceinture loosened, not relinquished"). So imagined in concrete detail, the giant is satisfactorily real ("nothing to be desired") without an abstract name, and he, in turn, makes the landscape seem real, more human, to be loved or hated ("My house has changed a little in the sun"; compare "The Apostrophe to Vincentine," CP, p. 52). Thus the abstractions of the imagination transform reality, as magnolias in their season change a house: its bare form is falsified ("False flick, false form"), but it is a falsification like that of reality when it is imagined

so that it is brought into close relation, "close to kin." Reality must be visible or invisible, or both: it is both an abstract conception and a concrete presence which the abstraction helps us to perceive. We do not see the abstraction, but the concrete particulars that give it substance. Reality is composed of its concrete presence ("The weather") and the abstract personification through whom it is conceived ("the giant of the weather"), or better, it is the concrete details ("the mere weather, the mere air") that give life to the abstract idea, that make the picture come alive ("An abstraction blooded") as a man may be said to come alive through thought: reality exists in its concrete details, man's mind exists in the conceptual matter which he brings to that reality.

The speculation of section VII grows out of the preceding section. The mere sensuous relation to reality is good ("It feels good") without the "giant," the abstract personification of he who conceives reality.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the truth about reality depends on that sensuous relation with it, during, for example, "a walk around a lake," when one becomes composed as the body tires, and physical composure comes to be one with mental composure: one stops to "see hepatica" as one stops "to watch/ A definition growing certain," and one waits in that certainty, as one rests among the pines. Perhaps there are moments when one is at the center of an equilibrium composed of "incalculable balances," as when the parts of a mechanism fall into place and produce a music of enthusiastic devotion ("Schwärmerei") representing, possibly, a state similar to religious beatitude. It is an experience which is not willed, but "fortuitous" as is love at first sight. It is "personal," or subjective, in that it has to do with an accord of the feelings; it is "extreme" in that one awakens into a state of clairvoyance ("more than awaken") as if from sleep, in which the abstract thought of "The academies" seems benighted ("structures in a mist"). It is not merely that one is in equilibrium, but that the "incalculable balances" that comprise the equilibrium include both subject and object: "all/ Is well," when "the cock crows" (as it happens, on the left), both within and without. The mechanism is like that

of a Swiss clock which sets up its music within only upon the right moment without. This is a state, then, in which subjective and objective composure are parts of a continuum; each is an extension of the other, so that the distinction between ego and reality is reduced to a point at which intellectual abstractions such as "the first idea," intended to harmonize the relation between the two, become superfluous.

In section VIII it is asked whether we can make of reality an appropriate human abode, "compose a castle-fortress-home", even with the help of an architect known for his reconstructions of such noble monuments in Europe (Viollet-le-Duc), in which an ordinary American, "the MacCullough," may be placed as "major man." "The first idea," reality, can only be reached through the imagination, and therefore what is needed is a "major man," an abstraction through which reality can be imagined as suitable to ordinary man. The democratic ideal of man, "the MacCullough," may be as expedient as any other abstraction of man as "the pensive giant" who is "the thinker of the first idea." It is a matter of "major man" and an appropriate reality in which he may be realized: the giant and MacCullough; word and reasoning, clear theory (l. 7), a beginning ("incipit"), completed by a figure to speak the word and its meanings. So realized, "major man" is seen to be an ideal of a philosopher-poet, thinker and "Beau linguist." But "the MacCullough" is the real MacCullough, the ordinary man ("But the MacCullough is MacCullough"); it does not follow that he is identical with his idealization, that the ordinary man is "major man." However, he might become so by contemplating in reality ("reading in the sound") the idea of the giant ("the thinker of the first idea").<sup>42</sup> He might take habit, whether through experience or poetic practice ("wave or phrase"), or through the recognition of "a possibly more than human human, a composite human" (Stevens' gloss of "a leaner being, moving in on him"—LWS, p. 434). He would then, as philosopher-poet, grow in understanding, and speak flowingly ("As if the waves at last were never broken"), and with ease.

The first stanza of section IX says that poetry ("The ro-

mantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance"), is of the nature of "apotheosis," or beatitude, perhaps like that described in section VII, and is its manner of expression. It is distinct from reason's mechanical precision ("click-clack") and its instrumental, practical illuminations ("applied/ Enflashings"). Major man, the philosopher-poet, is not himself the product of apotheosis or poetry but of reason, study, and random speculation or "revery." He is the object of thoughts difficult to grasp, and his nature is sought through the night of study to be realized at a propitious dawn when the cocks are calling and, perhaps, when the dew falls ("the good of April falls tenderly"). He is described as an infant to be cared for, who is "swaddled," sung to, and who reposes on a breast; he is a "foundling," orphaned from a sick past, but is "bright" in hope, and causes strong emotion. The passage, then, describes the nativity of major man who comes like a saviour from the reason. As a product of the reason he is a hypothesis, and therefore exists as a possibility ("He is and may be"), an ideal abstraction of the philosopher-poet.<sup>43</sup> But since he is an ideal abstraction, one does not regard his physical attributes, name him, or describe him. Major man is, as it were, an enabling idea, vital to hold in the heart, but is not himself matter for concrete description (compare "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" XII, CP, p. 278). He makes the "apotheosis" of poetry possible—so that the muse is precious for his touch—but he is not of its nature. The muse sings "accurate songs" not of him, but for him, in order to approximate in poetry, from the material of reality, the first idea: the idea of reality. The idea of the philosopher-poet, not itself of the nature of apotheosis, is an intellectual construction meant to make possible the kind of secular apotheosis that occurs in section VII fortuitously, and without the direction of the intellect.

Section X states that the most important abstraction is the idea of man. Major man, a representative abstraction of man as he is, articulates the idea of man. He is an abstraction more productive as a principle than he is in any particular manifestation. He is no exception from the "commonal," but

part of it, and he is abundantly productive as the one who expounds the representative type of the commonal itself, that "inanimate, difficult visage."<sup>44</sup> The latter has to be made from the representative type that the leaders and thinkers among men conceive out of the attributes of the individuals who comprise the commonal, a figure of a needy man who seeks a reality that no longer exists ("what was, where it used to be") and must therefore be shown the one that does, in which he can find satisfaction. It is from him that one must devise the idea of man, "The final elegance," not by consoling or sanctifying him, but by describing him as he is, in an abstraction that will bring him into accord with the reality of which he is part. It will be for the ephebe, as major man, to derive from him the idea of man.

IT MUST CHANGE. In section I a scene is presented as if in an Italian painting. The seraph, partly gilded ("parcel-gilded" is a variation of "parcel-gilt," a word used to describe partially gilded plate), inhales an "appointed" odor because the scene is set, as that in a painting. He is an artifact left over from an old mythology. The doves are unreal ("phantoms") as if they were illustrations in old manuscripts. The seraph sees the flowers the girls wear as they have always been, as they had been in "the bandeaux" of their mothers, as they will be again in another generation of girls. The bees and the hyacinths of spring seem as if they have always been there, "as if they had never gone." But things change. The components of reality are not static as they are in a painting, but are inconstant and obedient to inconstant causes "In a universe of inconstancy." Therefore the blue of night passes away, and when it returns is subject to variation. The character of the seraph may change completely, "according to his thoughts." We feel a distaste for the scene described, because it has changed so little it causes ennui: it remains the same; it has no variety in its repetitions. The world changes, and we are in need of its change. A repetition of the description of the static scene ("The bees come booming/ As if—") is interrupted with the violence of reality. In reality it is not as if the bees had never gone. Reality is not "as if," is not a meta-

phor. The doves are not like illustrations, but are pigeons "clattering" inelegantly in the air. There is no delicate "appointed odor" that the seraph inhales "among violets," but the sensual smell of life, of the body, and of an undisguised sexual acid, not for esthetic appreciation, but intent on copulation. And the sound of the bee has the crudeness of reality, not the delicately painted subtleties of a picture.<sup>45</sup>

Section II further distinguishes change from repetition. Stevens writes of it: "We cannot ignore or obliterate death, yet we do not live in memory. Life is always new; it is always beginning" (*LWS*, p. 434). No power can make the bee immortal. The President may ordain, but the bee does not obey. Why should the bee seek a life, which, as part of the past, is nonsense in the present ("a lost blague"), find "a deep echo" of his former life in a "horn"—probably descriptive of a flower—and persist at it ("buzz") as if it were a memorial of a past that is inexhaustible ("bottomless trophy"), the present bee merely trying to imitate what he once was ("new hornsman after old")? The physical good of the present is the equivalent of metaphysical perfection. What need is there, then, of immortality? Why, in the midst of life, in spring, should there be any question of nostalgia for life that has passed, or of a life after death consisting of a dream of one's remembered life? Spring is not a sleep in which one dreams, but a season in which lovers act to accomplish their love. Spring is not a repetition, as is memory, but a new beginning of life.

The statue of section III is like Verrocchio's statue of Col-leoni, as Stevens uses it in one of his essays to demonstrate an expression of an ideal that is no longer appropriate. Stevens asks whether Verrocchio's statue is "no longer quite the appropriate thing outdoors," and answers: "It seems, nowadays, what it may very well not have seemed a few years ago, a little overpowering, a little magnificent" (*NA*, pp. 8-9). The statue of General Du Puy remains static, although the people who live near it pass away. The rigid posture of the horse suggests a general immobility, as if, at a final funeral of one of the residents, everything stopped, and the neighbor-

hood became static. Bourgeois professional men, preparing themselves with care for their Sunday visit to the museum, go to look at the statue, and find it "a bit absurd." His posture does not represent a middle class ideal that they can understand. Although the statue was once a credible representation of a man in the flesh ("his true flesh"), he does not look like any conception of man that the doctors and lawyers can recognize. As far as they are concerned he is a useless vestige of the past. Nothing had happened to the statue, because nothing about it had changed; for exactly that reason, it "was rubbish in the end." The ideal and its representation, for not changing with the change of reality, have become obsolete.

Section IV describes, in a series of examples, "the origin of change" as the intercourse of dependent opposites that produces a third thing. The language used indicates the passionate nature of such unions. The interaction of winter and spring produces the general birth and growth of the latter season, the "particulars" of the rapture of their embrace; the interaction of music and silence produces its effect in the listener; that of rain and sun produces the vegetation. The inherent interaction of a condition of solitude and its particular expression distinguish it from another condition of solitude, and the interaction of the string of a musical instrument with a crowd produces the expression of the latter. The interacting opposites become one. One must do likewise by participating in change through such interaction. Hence the reader, or the poet himself, or the ephebe (they do not exclude one another), is addressed in a variety of oppositions and unions through which he may participate in change.

The fable of section V follows the formulation of the preceding section, obeying the bidding of its last lines: a man becomes one with his environment, and is changed by it, "The partaker partakes of that which changes him." His memorial after death is the remains of his plantation, which was his planter's reality, his "zero green." (The "patter of the long sea-slushes" in l. 9 is a description of surf.) His ideal of heaven, which grew out of his life, was a planter's paradise on

"An island to the South." His nostalgia for his native land came to be expressed in plantation terms: that land was a melon, not so lush or vivid as plantation country, but which might possibly ripen from pink to red. A man not so affected nor so positively involved in his environment could not have done his work in it, nor left it so regretfully at death as he did. However, in the end, it was not his rather magnificent metaphors about his life that he clung to, but a discrete, still meaningful part of that life itself ("the banjo's twang"; see LWS, p. 435).

Stevens writes of section VI: "This is rather an old-fashioned poem of the onomatopoeia of a summer afternoon" (for Stevens' difficult and somewhat contradictory notes on the section, quoted in this reading, see LWS, pp. 435 and 438). He identifies "bethou" variously as the call of a catbird and of a sparrow. William Van O'Connor<sup>46</sup> has suggested that the section is a parody of Shelley, presumably of the lines, "Make me thy lyre . . . Be thou, spirit fierce,/ My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" from "Ode to the West Wind." However Stevens apparently considered "bethou" merely as a translation of the French "tutoyez-moi." The sparrow addresses the other birds, and, according to Stevens, mocks them; this is probably why he writes that the sparrow "probably was a catbird" (the latter is, of course, another name for the mockingbird). The sparrow, as he does with the "crackled blade" of grass, invites the other birds' familiar attention. In effect he is saying to them, "Stop your mindless, mechanical songs, and pay attention to me." The wren is "bloody" because "wrens are fighters." The bird sounds had been producing "a wild minstrelsy" (Stevens' reading of "idiot minstrelsy"). Their song was "inarticulate," in Stevens' words, "like clappers without bells"; he further writes of this latter phrase: "drops of rain falling made lines which were clappers without bells." There was so much meaningless music, so many birds singing without saying anything, that the meaningful "bethous" of the sparrow, by comparison, compose a significant articulation, a "heavenly gong." The repetitions of the other birds are, in contrast to the articulations of

the sparrow, "a single text" that has a static monotony like granite. Their composite song is like a variety of faces become one face, like fate caught in the immobility of a photograph, like the destiny of a glass-blower repetitively creating the same basic shape, like a priest ("episcopus," bishop, from the Latin) who participates in life, but without vitality ("bloodless"), like an eye without a lid which therefore cannot close to dream, not an imaginative expression ("dream") but a mechanical repetition. This composite song is of singers who sing without imaginative art ("of minstrels lacking minstrelsy"). The repetitious manner in which they sing of earth suggests a world in which the first leaf of spring appears and stays forever, as if that were the only episode in the "tale/ Of leaves"; and in which the sparrow, himself unchanging, sings the one permanent song of earth. The sparrow may be the *soi-disant* center of things ("Bethou him, you") but his voice, his claim, is one among many individual claims for attention, many "bethous" (for Stevens' "bethou" seems to represent the expression of the individual ego, "ké-ké," the "single text" of the collective voice which is inimical to the ego). The sparrow's song, which here seems the dominant one, nevertheless, like all the sounds in nature, is subject to change, and will come to an end.

The first stanza of section VII tells us that after a beautiful night ("a lustre of the moon") we need neither heaven, nor any hymn seducing us into love for the supernatural. It is an easy passion, and we are always ready, to love what is available within reality. Our love expands in response to the attraction of the lilacs. We smell the lilacs to satisfy no other desire than to smell them; it is an absolute satisfaction that has no meaning beyond itself. We encounter nothing but their odor, which is abundant as it is adequate to satisfy desire. The lover of the earth within us sighs his satisfaction with the midnight encounter, in which his bliss is accessible and can be won simply, secretly, and without need of hymns of praise or worship. Such "easy passion" is our birthright as natives of the earth. It is not of paradise, but of the present time and place, and may be found wherever we are: in the

afterlight of the sky on a spring evening, in the courage of the ignorant man whose bliss must be in faith in the truth of the book the scholar writes, and in the bliss of the scholar who seeks not a final and absolute truth, but changing degrees of certainty and insight that enlighten his lack of a final truth ("scholar's dark").

In section VIII Nanzia Nunzio represents reality. Her last name is Italian for nuncio, messenger, and she does come with a kind of message. Ozymandias represents a fiction which determines the conception of reality, "an inflexible/Order." As such he is an appropriate symbol since he does not change ("inflexible") and, like Shelley's figure, will decay with time, to be replaced by another order. On the contrary Nanzia Nunzio, the symbol of reality, who is on a "trip around the world" moves from place to place and changes her aspect, as she does here, by changing her garments in confronting an idea of reality. Reality changes according to our fiction of it. Nanzia Nunzio comes prepared as "the spouse" in order to unite with an idea of reality that will define her aspect. She strips herself of her present "fictive covering" so that she may assume a new one. She reveals herself as the essence of reality, not as reality clothed by an idea of it ("As I am, I am/ The spouse"), nor even as reality in its naked physical appearance ("Beyond the burning body that I bear"). She is reality unconceived by the mind ("stripped more nakedly/ Than nakedness"), and only as such is she prepared to unite with a new conception of reality. She asks to be clothed with a conception of the mind ("the spirit's diamond coronal") that will have the finality of an inflexible order, that she will know as the product of love, and that will render her precious, invest her with value. (Stevens has written that this section "is an illustration of illusion as value"—LWS, p. 431). Ozymandias answers that "the bride/ Is never naked": absolute reality is inconceivable. Reality is always seen in some fictive version of it, constructed by the feelings and the reason. As in section II of "It Must Be Abstract," the fiction of reality is cast off in order to return to its source in

reality itself, which, since it is inconceivable in an absolute state, can only be seen through another fiction of it.

Section IX asks whether the medium of the poem fluctuates between the nonsense ("gibberish") of poetic language and the nonsense of common speech, or whether it is both at once. Does it flit between two things or is it concentrated in one? Is there an inarticulate language, the gibberish of the vulgate, and a poetic language that is equally gibberish since it "chaffers," or idly talks the time away to no point? Or is the poem both the peculiar speech of the poet and the general speech of the vulgate? The question is not precisely put, or it is put evasively. The poet does not evade us in gibberish, "in a senseless element." Could the poet be evasive, who is the enthusiastic and dependent spokesman of the vulgate at our plainest limits? ("Bluntest barriers" is read by Stevens as "our limitations"—LWS, p. 435.) He articulates meaning for us, for the vulgate. He is the exponent of the vulgate by virtue of his peculiar form of speech, a speech that tries to reach meanings beyond speech itself ("only a little of the tongue"). He rather seeks the nonsense of the vulgate and tries to articulate it, to combine—as in the "imagination's Latin" of the last line—the learned language of the imagination with the vulgate, which is both the common language ("lingua franca," a jargon once used among different Mediterranean nationalities; also "franca" as free) and the most pleasant one ("jocundissima").

In section X, "a bench as catalepsy is a place of trance" according to Stevens (LWS, p. 435). Since the subject apprehends what he sees imaginatively ("full of artificial things"), the park in which he sits may be described as a "Theatre of Trope," of figurative language. He sits in an imaginative trance in the theater of figuration, and he sees one thing turn into another like a chain of similes. The lake is like a sheet of music, so that the objects on it must be interpreted by the imagination, as musical notes must be imagined as sound. It is like a sky or heaven ("upper air"), like a color which appears for a moment to change the next, in which the swans



are essences whose appearance changes from seraphs to saints, from one metaphor to another. The west wind is music, motion, force to which the changing swans move, and represents "a will to change"; the wind is nature's will to transform the blank sheet of the lake with multi-colored patterns.<sup>47</sup> The will to change is not to be denied ("necessitous"), and is inherent in the ever-changing present; it is a "presentation" in the *Thaetre of Trope* that consists of a world in which one thing changes easily into another as liquid turns into gas ("volatile world"), whose changing presence is constant, a world which exists in casual changes, like a "vagabond in metaphor," the transformations of whose eye compel our attention. But we cannot depend on merely casual change. The freshness of transformation is that of the world, which, since it is the world as we conceive it, is also the freshness of ourselves. We must facilitate the will to change through the transformations of the imagination. The will to change is a necessity through which—since the freshness of the world is that of ourselves—by apprehending the freshness of the world we apprehend ourselves refreshed as if traced in the world's mirror (the "rubblings of a glass in which we peer"). These refreshing ("gay and green") speculations are preliminary encounters with reality which should develop into passionate unions ("amours"). (The relation of the ego to reality is also cast in terms of erotic metaphor in IV, VII, and VIII of *It Must Change*.) Time, which brings about metamorphosis, will record them.

IT MUST GIVE PLEASURE. Section I reads that to sing hymns of joy at conventionalized times as part of the multitude, wearing symbols of its power, to feel thus the common heart that is the most splendid expression of the whole ("fundament," from the musical term, fundamental, the sounds of a whole musical body, as opposed to that of its parts), this is an easy musical exercise. St. Jerome, author of the Vulgate, and known for his scholarly revision of the text of the Psalter (compare Stevens, *LWS*, p. 435), founded the music that could be shared by the multitude. (In this description Ste-

vens may have had in mind a scene from an old stained glass window illuminated by the sun so that the strings of the instruments appear like blowing fire, and the colors of other instruments, having disappeared, make it seem that the golden fingers are picking on sky-colored emptiness). The multitude, by sharing in this music in "companies of voices," possibly in church, finds in sound its essential spiritual source ("bleakest ancestor"), and finds in light—perhaps that coming through the stained glass window—a music which falls in "more than sensual," or in spiritual, "mode" (tune or scale). But there is another kind of exercise, which is personal, and different from the common music of conventionalized spiritual joy. It is to catch our non-rational response to the substance of reality (the first idea), such as to the rising sun, the clearing sea, or the moon in a peaceful sky. These things are not transformed by the mind, the imagination, but they move us deeply as if they were. They do not originate in the mind, since we reason about them only after we perceive them, and they have had their effect on us.

Stevens says of the "blue woman" of section II that she "was probably the weather of a Sunday morning early last April when I wrote this" (*LWS*, p. 444). One projects into this embodiment of the day the feeling that she does not desire that the argentine ("the Cotton Thistle") or clouds be other than what they appear, nor that the blossoms should rest as objects of beauty, rather than participate in a sexual process of fertilization, nor that the fragrant heat of summer night be part of her fantasies ("abortive dreams"). It was enough for her to know, through her memory of other years, that the argentine is a manifestation of spring, the clouds have their own reality, that the blossoms are fertilized and decay ("Waste") without reposing in the virginal beauty of puberty, and that when the heat of summer grows fragrant it does not become part of her dreams, but is the night. These things have always been so, and thus in memory acquire a permanence which gives their present manifestation clarity and intensity (see *LWS*, p. 444). They seem real without the

intrusion of the mind, as the whites and pinks of the dogwood are real, and intruded upon by the mind only insofar as the eye perceives them.<sup>48</sup>

The first five stanzas of section III describe a weather-worn statue, the face of a god (Stevens, *LWS*, p. 438), a single lasting image in an unchanging reality ("A lasting visage in a lasting bush"), but this is an image of a god that no longer completely claims one's faith (Stevens, *LWS*, p. 438). Although it endures, it has outlived itself, as it were. The feeling has gone out of the frown on its brow, it is weathered, though it has not changed, it cannot escape the crown representing its dominion, and its renown wastes itself on its ear, which is overcome with tedium. The red-within-red lines of its features fade but do not disappear. The tedium of one worn out idea of deity "might have been," but, as one myth goes, another god, Orpheus, came and brought the pleasure of music, the pleasure we find in imaginative conceptions. In place of the unfeeling image, this pleasure brings the love of the children, in place of the image's unchanging monotony, the freshness of early flowers and their variety. As one commentator observes, the god destroyed the possibility of endless repetition when, in bringing music from hell, he discovered the beauty inherent in death and change.<sup>49</sup>

The first line of section IV echoes the last line of I. Feeling precedes reason. Prior to reason, we make of what we perceive through the senses "a place dependent on ourselves," a place that we adopt as ours because we love it. The myth of the "marriage in Catawba" (a river or region in South Carolina) illustrates this. First the captain, or hero, and the maiden representative of Catawba fell in love, but refused to marry. Then they agreed to take one another only without ceremony (the sipping of the wine), without rites ("secret cymbals round"), and not in their persons, but as signs of relation with a humanly sympathetic reality ("To stop the whirlwind, balk the elements"). The captain marries the maiden for Catawba (hence her name, Bawda, procuress for Catawba), and the maiden loves the captain as the sun that makes Catawba fertile. The marriage is one of love, and their

love is for the place where they marry, which is "neither heaven nor hell," but reality made into "a place dependent on ourselves" because of our love for it, because of the love affair between the ego and reality that the captain and the maiden ("love's characters") represent.

Section V begins with a sumptuous meal that is appropriate since the section is about how to live happily within the limits of reality. The name of the Canon Aspirin identifies him as one who would purge life of pain, rather than the soul of sin. As a Canon he is concerned with the spirit, but as one who enjoys a meal he is concerned with normal, material good. After the meal he praises his sister because she lives sensibly and therefore happily. Stevens says of the Canon: "The sophisticated man: the Canon Aspirin, (the man who has explored all the projections of the mind, his own particularly) comes back, without having acquired a sufficing fiction—to, say, his sister and her children" (*LWS*, p. 445). This sensible sister clothes her children appropriately to their expectations. She paints them with the colors of the imagination, but only within the terms of what is possible. She does not pretend that they are as objectively precious as they are to her, and therefore hides what they mean to her under simple names. She loves them the more for seeing their reality "by rejecting dreams"; she hears and sees them as they are, and as they are her love for them exceeds the bluntest expression of it. The Canon begins to imagine a fugue of praise to his sensible sister. But she herself asks for her children none of the "excitements of silence," among which would be a fugue of praise, but the clear reality of sleep.

Section VI continues with the Canon Aspirin. His "praise of the rejection of dreams" in connection with his sister, "gives him, in the long run, a sense of nothingness, of nakedness, of the finality and limitation of fact; and lying on his bed, he returns once more to night's pale illuminations" (*LWS*, p. 445). When he comes to sleep, and things as they normally are, sensible things, have passed from his mind in a state preceding sleep ("had yawned themselves away"), he is left with a sense of the inadequacy of sensible, factual things

("The nothingness was a nakedness"). Beyond this state, fact can only exist as an element of the imagination, incorporated into fantasy. Thereupon, he incorporates what he knows ("learning") in an imaginative re-creation of the night that exists beneath his eye and in the reality ("mountain") of his ear, which is of the matter of his mind, rather than of reality. He imagines himself as winged and moving among the paths of the farthest stars. He descends to the children's bed and, with the force of his feeling for them ("with huge pathetic force," the force of human pathos), tries to incorporate them into his fantasy in another flight of imagination; thus, in contrast with his sensible sister, he attempts, through thought, to escape the inadequacy of the factual, the normal, even in human relations (compare *LWS*, p. 445: "If he is to elude human pathos, and fact, he must go straight to the utmost crown of night: find his way through the imagination or perhaps to the imagination"). Here he arrives at the point beyond which thought can no longer be pushed, beyond which, therefore, imagination is of no avail. Having come to an end of thought, he had to decide whether to return to fact. But he had to choose, not between thought and fact, but whether to include both in his concern for the children. He chooses to include both, because thought is based on the fact of reality, and our view of that fact is affected by our thought. The two are interwoven ("complicate") and gather into one harmonious whole.

The subject of section VII<sup>50</sup> thinks of orders and imposes them on reality, as if he had the intelligence of animals in fable rather than real intelligence, and used it, as in a fable, to intrude a moral, an imposition of the intelligence. On the basis of his imposed orders he builds capitols, as parts of a constructed reality and signifying, perhaps, corresponding social orders which, however, exceed in their artificiality the qualities of wax. In their sonorous corridors he commemorates in statues, since this is what fame requires ("fame as it is"), men known for their reasonableness, but who are again denigratingly compared to animals intelligent in fables. But the imposition of an order of the mind is different from the

discovery of order that really exists, such as the order of summer or of winter. It is possible, without reason ("not to have reasoned at all"), to discover such an order, to find an inclusive or source idea ("major") of the weather where there was no conception of the weather at all ("Out of nothing"). It must be that out of the crude compositions of reality will come some clear idea of it, which will seem at first something forced out of reality, improbable as a likeness of it, which will be nurtured only by the desperation of our need for it. To so find the real would be to cast off every fiction except that one which comprises a conception of absolute reality. The angel of a fiction of heaven should therefore be silent to listen to music accurate with regard to reality. This latter fiction may or may not be a "supreme fiction," but note that there is a difference between an absolute fiction and a "fiction of an absolute." The wording is tricky, but it would appear from context that Stevens is searching for an idea of reality rather than an absolute idea. The "absolute" is reality, the "fiction" our idea of it.<sup>51</sup>

Section VIII hypothesizes an angel to demonstrate an argument. If one can imagine an angel who gazes at the chaos of creation ("the violent abyss") and makes of it glorious music ("pluck abysmal glory"), flies through what the evening, an ordinary time of day, reveals, and needs nothing but the chaos of the abyss ("deep space") without the "gold centre" of god or the "golden destiny" of heaven, if he is satisfied merely in the equilibrium of his motion without further destiny or purpose, is it not true that one imagines this in the angel as a projection of one's own experience? Is not his satisfaction a fictive version of our own? If one has felt the satisfaction projected in the angel for an hour filled with a bliss which, as part of human, not supernatural experience, can be articulated and understood through such creations as the angel, in which one is happy without need of the supernatural ("need's golden hand"), and is satisfied without its consolations, then there is potentially a lifetime in which the only greatness and glory ("majesty") are not those of god but reflections of the self,

in which one does not have god or heaven but, being satisfied as one is, does not need them. The heavens and their population have no reality but that of our own experience, are only the reflections of ourselves through which we try to escape the condition of death, wish fulfillments that can never be real fulfillment, as Cinderella could never fulfill herself under her roof by dreaming of the Prince's castle.

The subject of section IX grows out of the preceding section. The poet encourages the wren and the other birds in the section because he is in sympathy with them. The wren is described as "too weedy"; "weedy" applies to animals lacking in vigour, here in comparison with the poet. The poet can do "all that angels can" since the angels are fictive projections of himself. He can enjoy the ethereal pleasures of angels and, in addition, the earthy ones of men who, hidden in celestial light, can in the imagination enjoy angels, as gods once in the imagination could enjoy men. The bird is a "forced" bugler because he sings by instinct, not option, and he is encouraged to stop short in his preludes, because the good of his song lies in the mere repetition of the few notes in it. The poet is in sympathy with the birds' songs and their mating calls because their repetitions represent occupations which are ends in themselves, and are therefore good in themselves. The existence of which they are part is composed of such repetitions that are circular processes, participation in which is final and without further end, so that the mere repetition of the process is a final good. The processes are ends in themselves, as opposed to the ultimate ends of religious belief. They are final goods in the way wine at a picnic is a final good, to be enjoyed for itself. We enjoy such processes which have no relation to a fixed center, a *summum bonum*, but which are relative to a series of discrete, final goods; thus we observe with sympathetic pleasure the similar motion of the leaf's eccentric spin. Perhaps, then, it is not the exemplar of men's ideals ("man-hero," one such as major man), but whoever, like the birds, can direct his life most completely to the repetition of self-rewarding processes, that is the exceptional creature, the pattern to imitate. In

contrast to "It Must Change," VI, where the mechanical repetitions of the birds suggests only a "granite monotony," repetition here suggests to the poet the type of rewarding activity in a secular world.

The "fat girl" of section X is a personification of the earth (Stevens, LWS, p. 426), hence the epithets of the first line. The poet asks why he can find her only in "difference," or in what is never the same, see her in a moving shape, not fixed, as something in change, not in final form. She is well known, yet at the same time deviates ("an aberration") from what she is. In her (earth's) direct presence ("undemeath/ A tree"), the feelings she evokes of love and of her evasiveness require that she be named, held to a single identity. (Concerning the words "but underneath/ A tree," Stevens notes a double meaning: "a. on reflection [a man stretched out at his ease, underneath a tree, thinking;] b. a great tree is a symbol of fixity, permanence, completion, the opposite of 'a moving contour'"—LWS, p. 444). But to define her is to characterize her, and to characterize her is to transform her through the imagination. She becomes again an elusive unreality ("soft-footed phantom"), the emotional ("irrational") distortion of herself, however one cherishes her reality. For the ego, that is her only reality: a "more than rational distortion" that creates a fictive conception of her dictated by one's feelings about her. The idea can be put in abstract thought, the province of the Sorbonne, since it is an irrational process whose laws may be rationally defined. It is therefore predictable that when touched by emotion in a propitious scene, with this knowledge in mind, one will conceive a fiction of her so that she may be called by a name that describes her; and though the description is of a fertile and changing ("fluent") world, in the description her constant movement will be captured, fixed and clear as if in crystal. She will have been given an identity through "The fiction that results from feeling."

The epilogue points to the relevance of the series of poems by asserting the general need for the fictions the poet creates. Thus it is addressed to the soldier who, in war, might be

imagined to represent an extreme test of the beliefs, or fiction, with which the poet is concerned, and in comparison with whom the importance of the poet may be established. There is also a war between the mind and reality in which the poet is engaged, by reason of which he is always at work in reality ("in the sun") and, in his meditations, puts together his imaginative concepts ("Patches the moon together in his room") cast in poetry. The poet's war depends on that of the soldier's, since war brings about changes in the reality to which the poet must address himself. The two are one in that they are part of the same battle to master reality. They meet as parallels, if only in their effects in reality, as the sun shines on parallel lines so that their shadows intersect; or they meet in the written word as the soldier applies it in his own situation. Though the soldier's war ends, and he returns either in triumph or dead ("To walk another room"), the poet's war is constant. The poet provides the soldier with belief he can hold by, through the poems he writes, which bring about conviction ("Inevitably modulating") that is more than rational ("in the blood"). The hero conceived by the poet becomes, if the conception is convincing, the hero in reality. The faith conveyed by the poet, if it is conveyed accurately, and is appropriate ("proper words"), is the spiritual sustenance by which the soldier lives and dies.

### Summary

Although "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" does not develop a strictly consecutive argument, it will be useful to summarize its reflections under the section headings to which, sometimes only loosely, they pertain, as well as to define the more important terms and the relations among them.

*It Must Be Abstract.* The idea of the sun is the inconceivable existence of reality itself (I), synonymous with the first idea (II). The poem gives us a momentary sense of reality itself, of the first idea (III). The giant is an abstract personification through which the first idea is conceived (VI, VIII). Hence, he is described as "the thinker of the first

idea" (VII, VIII). He conceives reality in human terms so that it is relevant to the ego, giving us our particular idea of reality (VI). Major man is a giant who conceives reality, the first idea, but a giant who is of a particular time and place, and has a character appropriate to them. His present avatar is MacCullough, an ordinary man (VIII). He is also the exponent of the idea of man which is part of the reality of a particular time and place (X). As he who both conceives the idea of reality and expounds the idea of man, he is not only the ideal philosopher, but also the master of fictive creation, and so is in addition the abstract ideal of the poet, the idea of the poet that makes poetry possible (IX). The idea of man is the abstract representative of common man as he is, whose character is articulated by major man (X). The idea of man is the major abstraction since it represents the commonal itself from which major man is derived (X), and in terms of which he must conceive the first idea (VIII).

Reality itself exists beyond our conceptions of it (I). This reality beyond the mind may be realized only fleetingly, both because our perception of it quickly becomes stale and inadequate metaphor, and because that reality itself changes. Change is inherent both in reality and in ourselves (II). The poem, at the moment it is adequate as a description of reality, gives us a sense of reality beyond abstraction. It gives us, in other words, an idea of reality (III). The poem is the link between a reality indifferent to the ego, and reality as the ego desires it to be (IV). The poet is thus the type of those who enable us to master reality (V). Reality must be conceived through an abstract personification which allows us to perceive it in human context, thus reconciled with the demands of the ego (VI). The ideal state of harmony between the ego and reality does away with the need for abstract thought, so that the abstractions pertaining to the "supreme fiction" may be taken as merely instrumental to this ideal state (VII). The representative of the ordinary man is capable of becoming the major man who conceives the first idea appropriate to his time and place (VIII). Major man is an intellectual abstraction, the idea of the philosopher-poet that

makes possible the apotheosis of which poetry is the idiom (IX). Major man articulates the idea of man, which is a representative abstraction of common man, in such a way as to relate the common man to the reality of his particular environment (X).

*It Must Change.* Reality is in a state of change beyond any decorum the mind would impose on it, and the feelings require this change (I). Life in change provides good sufficient to render the repetitions of memory and of immortality superfluous (II). An ideal must change with the change of reality, or it becomes obsolete (III). The origin of change is in a passionate union of opposites that produces a third thing (IV). A man is changed by the life he leads, if he embraces it with strong feeling (V). No single expression of reality remains adequate, so that the singer of reality must use his imagination to change his song (VI). The particulars of reality are adequate to satisfy desire; there is no absolute truth to satisfy desire, but only changing degrees of certainty with regard to our relation to the particulars of reality (VII). Reality is always seen through some idea of it which is final for a time, but which changes (VIII). The poem is an articulation of the common speech produced by a combination of the language of the imagination with that of the vulgate (IX). Change in our conceptions of things is a necessity that freshens the world and we who conceive it (X).

*It Must Give Pleasure.* The pleasure that is referred to is not conventionalized spiritual joy, but that of perceiving the good of reality in its irrational substance, the first idea (I). We must take pleasure in reality as it is, not as we might wish it to be (II). Through the imagination we see reality not in one, unchanging, monotonous image, but in pleasure and variety (III). Our relation to reality is determined through love of it, and is not fixed as if by contract (IV). Our love for reality should operate through the imagination only within the limits of reality (V). Reality and the imagination are mutually inclusive, and the latter goes beyond fact to express our feelings about reality (VI). The order of reality must be found in reality itself, and must not be im-

posed on it (VII). Satisfaction may be found in the process of life without final ends of supernatural belief, which latter comprise wishes impossible to fulfill (VIII). Enjoyment can be found in the ends in themselves of earthly activities, and fulfillment may best be found in such discrete, final goods (IX). The fiction of reality which describes it is dictated by one's feelings about reality (X). Epilogue: The poet through his fictions provides the faith by which the soldier lives and dies.

A fiction, in this poem, is an idea of reality, a version of the first idea (compare "It Must Give Pleasure," VII and X). It has the function of disclosing the substance of reality in such a way that the feelings of the ego are brought into accord with it. It is neither wholly reality itself, nor merely a projection of the ego, but an abstract construction of the relation between the two, in which the feelings of the ego are adjusted to the fact of reality, in a state like that of the "incalculable balances" of "It Must Be Abstract," VII. Since both terms of the relation change, the fiction must also change; since the relation is one in which the feelings of the ego are to be satisfied, the fiction must give pleasure. The poem does not give a particular fiction but the specifications of a "supreme fiction" which a final idea of reality would have to include.

### "Large Red Man Reading" (CP, p. 423)

The personage of the title is "large" in that he is a mythic figure, "red" because he is vividly alive compared to the pale ghosts who listen to him. The ghosts, disappointed in a heaven that has turned out to be merely a "wilderness of stars" (compare "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb," CP, p. 56), have returned to earth to hear the red man, the mythic figure of the poet, read from "the great blue tabulae," blue as the color of the imagination in Stevens, which contain "the poem of life." The poem of life is of the most commonplace things, and the ghosts, correspondingly,