

in order to remain present, it must destroy itself. The dead of the Dutch grave yard, whose "glory" when they were alive was that of "heaven in the wilderness" of Pennsylvania, are now insensate witnesses to the fact that the present brings a new ideal, "a new glory of new men."

One may not even die peacefully in the knowledge of having perfected an ideal that will endure; on the contrary, one is tormented by the idea that those living in a new present will "Avoid our stale perfections," using what is left of ours for their own ends, seeking their own perfections. For the stars of the present are not relevant to the dead imaginary beings ("chimeres"), but to the living present "of those alive." The living who people the present ("Under the arches, over the arches" of the sky), on the edge of future death ("autumnal horizon"), march through segments of a chaos which, since it is reality itself, is "more than an order"—toward an ideal that will be an expression of their particular generation, "a generation's centre." The fact that the dead can so subtly bear witness to the effects of time in sustaining a living present shows both that time was not wasted on the dead, and that the differences that time has wrought were not made too difficult for them to track down.

### "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" (CP, p. 293)

As the title indicates, the poem presents a barren landscape. The sun is not only absent but seems as if it belonged to another realm all together. The scene is frozen, dead; "Bad" seems final because the scene is static, frozen, as if it will never change. Appropriately, therefore, the remnants of dead vegetation suggest images of impotence, incapability: "arms without hands," "trunks// Without legs," "without heads," heads whose tongues are incapable of expressing their anguish. As the stalks suggest the failure of speech, the snow suggests the failure of sight (in language that calls up the pertinent feeling of Nashe's "Brightness falls from the air").

Even the dead leaves "hop," as though lame or crippled. The sky, hard as if frozen, the stalks rooted in ice, emphasize the fixity of the scene. One single sound, composed of the stupid ("gawky"), inconsequential sounds in the landscape—the "savagest hollow" of the wind as it sweeps across the scene—expresses its monolithic barrenness. It is in a "bad" so extreme that we can know the "good" at its most absolute, stripped of all inessentials ("last purity"): that all things are destroyed, as in the cyclic death of the seasons in the present scene, that even the "bad" of this season will be destroyed by that cyclic change. In tone with the rest of the scene, the crow seems accustomed to stasis, he "looks rusty as he rises up." But the "malice in his eye" seems vivid, alive. He seems to represent the necessary destructive principle that motivates seasonal change, and therefore, in sympathy, "One joins him," but only "at a distance," out of caution and distaste.

### "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" (CP, p. 295)

This is one of Stevens' funnier poems. The poet describes himself in process of painting a figure with words, as though on canvas, to illustrate his idea. Thus the figure is both a functional "mechanism," and an "apparition," something that has suddenly materialized. It is a hypothesis: "Projection A." The figure is without context ("floats in air"), on a canvas, "at the level of/ The eye," without name, and without meaning except for the sensuous one expressed by "the curving of her hip." She is so freshly imagined that the paint is still wet, indicating her total innocence ("Eyes dripping blue"). If one placed above her head an old crown artfully painted into the picture ("practic," in an obsolete usage, means artful, a usage here suggested by the archaicized spelling), suspended as if in three dimensions by the artist, that suspension, apparently indicating a magical or miraculous phenomenon, would represent on the part of the artist a "gesture," an expression of meaning regarding the figure, "in-

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.