

# I.

## Wallace Stevens: Theory and Practice

### i. The Reality of the Imagination

Excessive attention to Wallace Stevens' theory can obscure what his poetry is about. His subject might best be described at the outset, for the sake of simplicity, in terms of the question posed in the early poem, "The American Sublime": "How does one stand/ To behold the sublime/ . . . how does one feel?" (CP, pp. 130-31). This is less an ideological question than it is one of stance or posture: with what tenable attitude may one confront the difficult circumstances of contemporary American secular life and avail oneself of the good possible in it? How, in short, does one get along? Writing poetry was for Stevens a way of getting along. He must be taken seriously when he says that he writes poetry because he needs to (OP, p. xxxvii). The act of composition was for him a way of discovering and crystallizing what he called in one of his last poems, "Local Objects," "the objects of insight, the integrations/ Of feeling . . ."

That were the moments of the classic, the beautiful.  
These were that serene he had always been approaching.  
(OP, p. 112)

These are discoveries not of the good, but simply of good things—"As when the sun comes rising, when the sea/ Clears deeply" (CP, p. 398), times "when the cock crows on the left and all/ Is well" (CP, p. 386)—whose revelation composes the poet in the composition of his poem.

This composure in face of what Stevens calls "the pressure of reality," this "serene" which is, at its extreme, a highly intense state of mind, stands as a kind of ideal experience which is central to Stevens' poetry. His theories, the heroes and fictions he hypothesizes, are tentative efforts to recapture and formularize it so that the experience may cease to be merely fortuitous. Through it he seeks to achieve a rapport with the conditions of contemporary life within the limits of what that life will allow him to believe, within what is credible. He does not merely evade or condemn what he considers the spiritual and imaginative impoverishment of contemporary reality, but takes it as given and makes of it what he can. Frank Kermode has aptly said of Stevens, in contrast with his "great contemporaries": "In an age of poetic myth-making Stevens is almost alone in his respect for those facts which seem 'in disconnexion, dead and spiritless.'"<sup>1</sup> It is in his willingness to accept the fact of contemporary life that Stevens, as Irving Howe has put it, has begun to move beyond the "crisis of belief" that troubled his contemporaries, to the question, "how shall we live with and perhaps beyond it?"<sup>2</sup>

The desire for faith does not issue for Stevens, as it does for some of his contemporaries, in an attempt to utilize or rehabilitate older belief. The orientation of his poetry is historical, but this awareness of history works toward freeing it from the past for a more acute perception of the present. Myth, once recognized as such, is regarded as at best a noble falsification of the present based on the assumptions of the past or, in other words, as quixotic. The "final belief" in a "fiction" proposed in "Asides on the Oboe" (CP, p. 250) is discovered by the end of the poem to be nothing less than a full recognition of our humanity, divorced from such falsification. Stevens' poetry expresses what might be called a nostalgia for perfection, or for an idea of perfection, which sometimes gives his thought a Platonic tone, but like his nostalgia for our religious myth, this is merely nostalgia. Stevens recognizes an innate obsolescence in myth as crystallized perception of reality, and addresses himself therefore to immediate perception of the changing present as the most likely way to

discover what we can or do in fact believe. (Although Stevens thought poetry could articulate the "credible," that which it is possible to believe, he did not claim that the function of poetry is the creation of systematic belief: "Poetry does not address itself to beliefs. Nor could it ever invent an ancient world full of figures that had been known and become endeared to its readers for centuries"—NA, p. 144.) Adequate adjustment to the present can only be achieved through ever fresh perception of it, and this is the effort of his poetry. It tries to find what is fresh and attractive in a reality that is frequently stale and dispiriting by way of coming to a satisfactory rapport with it.

In order to arrive at such a rapport it is necessary to satisfy the extra-rational but nonetheless real need for positive belief within the conditions of an indifferent and changing reality, as, for example, the desire to maintain a noble conception of human life. It is the constant irrational force of this desire that Stevens has in mind when he speaks of nobility as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA p. 36). But though the need for belief is not rational, it may be rationally understood, as Freudian psychology makes the irrational mechanics of desire available to the understanding and control of the reason. Thus, referring to Freud, Stevens suggests the possibility of a "science of illusions" (NA, p. 139). If one thinks of illusion as that created by the painter as he discovers the beauty of a landscape in his composition, or as that comprised in the poet's rhetorical formulations about reality, it is roughly equivalent to Stevens' idea of a "fiction" in which he resolves the problem of belief. A fiction is not an ideological formulation of belief but a statement of favorable rapport with reality sufficiently convincing that disbelief may be suspended. Stevens defines poetic truth as "an agreement with reality" believed, for a time, to be true (NA, p. 54). The "truth" of a fiction is poetic truth.

Because the fiction mediates between the requirements of desire and the conditions of reality, and because the relation between the two keeps changing, no statement of that rela-

tion is final. On the contrary, such statements do and must become constantly outmoded. It is like a game which, lacking any purpose but the playing of it, can only be played again and again. The urbane playfulness of Stevens' wit suggests his consciousness of this. His sense of humor is a way of expressing thought's perspective on its own limitations, its awareness that it must be ultimately outwitted by the extra-rational forces between which it mediates.

## ii. Change

Stevens' poetry deals in a series of antithetic terms, such as chaos and order, imagination and reality, stasis and change. The repeated recombination of the terms in each antithesis produces a continual restatement of the shifting relation between them:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend  
On one another, as a man depends  
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change. (CP, p. 392)

In considering such antithetic terms Stevens will adopt the point of view of one, then of the other, and then that of some nuance between the two. He was a poet who, in this sense, refused to make up his mind because he believed that change was the life of the mind: "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never" (CP, p. 247; compare "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," X-CP, p. 472). William York Tindall has written that Stevens usually brings conflicts to an end "by an agreement of opposites; for he had looked into Hegel."<sup>3</sup> I do not believe that Stevens was dialectical in this sense, for his syntheses are momentary, unstable, and, instead of advancing his argument, always break down again into the original antithetic terms. That is why the relation between such terms must be continually restated, and it accounts for that constant reformulation of a cluster of ideas that comprises so

much of Stevens' poetry. The first stanza of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" describes the procedure of the poem: a statement about the nature of reality followed by progressive qualification.

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,  
The vulgate of experience. Of this,  
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet— (CP, p. 465)

The rest of the poem consists of an exploration of the relations possible between the plain view of reality and its opposite, the imaginative view.

It is only another manifestation of this antithetic character that despite his acknowledgement of change, Stevens longed for peace, for stasis, for an unchanging ideal: "He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest// In a permanent realization" (CP, p. 425). Stevens' poetry gropes toward a final formulation that does not exist, one such as might be given by the tantalizing "impossible possible philosophers' man" who sums us up (CP, p. 250), and hence no single formulation can remain satisfactory. The "philosophers' man" is a fiction which must change as the exigencies which made it necessary change. One might reach beyond the quotidian to some finality, but, as Stevens put it in the early "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" (CP, p. 96), "time will not relent."

In Stevens' conception, history is a process in which no idea of reality is final, poetry is a progressive metamorphosis of reality, and reality itself is an entity whose chief characteristic is flux. Man

Lives in a fluid, not on solid rock.

The solid was an age, a period

With appropriate, largely English, furniture . . .

Policed by the hope of Christmas. (OP, p. 68)

Verrocchio's statue of Colleoni represents for Stevens the static ideal left behind by dynamic history. The idea of nobility it embodies is no longer appropriate to the changed conditions for nobility in a new historical situation. As a sym-

bol for belief it has failed to withstand the pressure of a new reality and has consequently become incredible: "It seems, nowadays, what it may very well not have seemed a few years ago, a little overpowering, a little magnificent" (NA, p. 9). Failing as a symbol of belief, the statue has become a magnificent artifact. Artifacts also are the statues in "Dance of the Macabre Mice" (CP, p. 123), in "Lions in Sweden" (CP, p. 124), and in the first two parts of "Owl's Clover," where the sculpted group of horses loses meaning in face of the bitter old woman: "The mass of stone collapsed to marble hulk" (OP, p. 44). The statue seemed "a thing from Schwarz's" (OP, p. 47)—the reference is most likely to F.A.O. Schwarz, the well known toy store—hence, a toy, a plaything, not to be taken seriously. So also, the "great statue of the General Du Puy" in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" belonged "Among our more vestigial states of mind" (CP, pp. 391–92).

But although no faith is absolute, particular beliefs are credible for particular epochs. Stevens writes out of a situation in which the beliefs that once ordered reality have become incredible; but the soul "still hankers after sovereign images" (CP, p. 124). Stevens is concerned with discovering belief that is credible in the American present. The style by which Claude Lorraine achieved serenity is obsolete (CP, p. 135), "Marx has ruined Nature" (CP, p. 134)—by replacing it as a source of salvation, for such as Wordsworth, with the means of production and distribution or, more simply, with history—and "The heaven of Europe is empty, like a Schloss/ Abandoned because of taxes" (OP, p. 53). "The epic of disbelief/ Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant" (CP, p. 122). It is the function of poetry to meet this situation: "It has to face the men of the time and to meet/ The women of the time" (CP, p. 240).

In a world whose fundamental condition is change, the only tenable kind of belief must involve an affirmation of change. There is no value in history beyond the content of the present as it comes and passes. In "Owl's Clover" this condition is figured in a "trash can" of beliefs where fragments of the statue are found:

There lies the head of the sculptor in which the thought  
Of lizards, in its eye, is more acute  
Than the thought that once was native to the skull;  
And there are the white-maned horses' heads . . .  
Parts of the immense detritus of a world  
That is completely waste, that moves from waste  
To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past  
Into a hopeful waste to come. (OP, p. 49)

"Nothing is final," chants the sun like Walt Whitman singing, "No man shall see the end" (CP, p. 150), and therefore, once more in the words of "Owl's Clover," "It is only enough/ To live incessantly in change" (OP, p. 50).

Stevens' theory comprises more of a mechanics, or psychology, of belief than an assertion of particular belief. His fundamental assumption is that belief is a psychological process through which it is possible to arrive at an affirmative relation to one's environment. Like other needs, the need for an affirmative relation to reality, the "passion for yes" (CP, p. 320), has a repetitive pattern of desire, fulfillment, and ennui in a cycle that generates its own perpetuation. No part of the pattern is absolutely bad because all the parts are essential to the continuity of the cycle. Thus in "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters," when the crow who is part of the sterility and temporary stasis of the winter landscape rises up, "One joins him there for company,/ But at a distance, in another tree" (CP, p. 294). The condition of the landscape is not a good to embrace but an evil to be tolerated as part of the ultimately benign cycle of change. This is "The last purity of the knowledge of good" to which the poem refers. Nor, correspondingly, is fulfillment itself absolutely good, as in "Banal Sojourn" (CP, p. 62), where the fulfillment of summer is described as having become a surfeit. This pattern is repeated in the cycle of the seasons as they affect the emotions, with winter representing barrenness, spring, desire, summer, fulfillment, and autumn, the decay of desire, a kind of asceticism.<sup>4</sup> The beginning of each emotional season is an experience of freshness and the end one of ennui and impatience for change

(the onset of winter is sometimes an exception, an occasion for gloom). The vital point is that nothing should impede the continuity of the process on which the stimulation of desire and its satisfaction depend.

Because of this affirmation of change, the traditional lament of transitoriness is transformed in Stevens' poetry to a hymn of praise. Change is not less destructive, but this destruction is desirable and the imagination must help to execute it:

The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,  
Who, to find what will suffice,  
Destroys romantic tenements  
Of rose and ice. (CP, p. 238)

The mind reduces belief to the wintery barrenness of disbelief. But what it destroys is belief that is inadequate, and in so doing purges the world of

. . . an old delusion, an old affair with the sun,  
An impossible aberration with the moon,  
A grossness of peace. (CP, p. 239)

A new resolution in the credible must follow one that is no longer satisfactory, as the satisfactions of one season are replaced by another season with satisfactions of its own:

The spring will have a health of its own, with none  
Of autumn's halloo in its hair. So that closely, then,

Health follows after health. Salvation there:  
There's no such thing as life; or if there is,  
It is faster than the weather, faster than  
Any character. It is more than any scene. (CP, p. 192)

There is no one relation to, or agreement with, reality that can be called "life," and the many possible relations succeed one another as they are appropriate. To live in the health of change, therefore, is to live always in a present of constant change. Time is

. . . apart from any past, apart  
From any future, the ever-living and being,  
The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire.  
(CP, p. 238)

The celebration of time, as in the literal march of time of "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," is directed to time as it represents an on-going break from history that frees the mind to live in an agreement with the present: "And you, my semblables, in gaffer-green,/ Know that the past is not part of the present" (CP, p. 291). This is the benevolence of time, that comes with its destructive power: "Freedom is like a man who kills himself/ Each night, an incessant butcher" (CP, p. 292). But despite time's purgative function in creating "An end of evil in a profounder logic" (CP, p. 291), its destructiveness remains:

Men came as the sun comes, early children  
And late wanderers creeping under the barb of night,  
Year, year and year, defeated at last and lost  
In an ignorance of sleep with nothing won. (CP, p. 291)

Within these terms of evil, the good finds its limits:

. . . The assassin discloses himself,  
The force that destroys us is disclosed, within  
This maximum, an adventure to be endured  
With the politest helplessness. (CP, p. 324)

### iii. Chaos and Order

The perception of chaos comes for Stevens when reality seems void of meaning and without emotional connection with the ego. It is suggested by the sea as in "The Comedian as the Letter C"; by the barrenness of winter as in the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" of "The Snow Man"; by the "large" (vastness, or infinitude) as in "the last

largeness" of "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician"; by darkness as in "Domination of Black"; by "the blank" as in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP, p. 397), or by "this blank cold" of "The Plain Sense of Things"; by the decay of autumn that reveals the bare essentials of the landscape, or by a decaying culture whose order no longer seems credible. Chaos is reality apprehended without the projections of the ego, so that we find ourselves in the position of "intelligent men/ At the centre of the unintelligible" (CP, p. 495),<sup>5</sup> and thus alienated from the reality of which we are part.

But this indifferent, unintelligible chaos of reality without the imagination, which is what Stevens calls "absolute fact," is also that solid world beyond rhetoric and the imagination in which the ego may uniquely find fulfillment of desire. Thus Stevens qualifies his description of absolute fact as "destitute of any imaginative aspect whatever," by adding: "Unhappily the more destitute it becomes the more it begins to be precious" (NA, p. 60). The indifferent reality beyond the ego is the data with which the imagination works, the rock, as "The Man with the Blue Guitar" puts it (CP, p. 179), "To which his imagination returned,/ From which it sped." Moreover, when one comes to accept this chaos as the only truth in the sense that it is the only order that exists, it may be brought into gratifying relation with the ego:

. . . having just  
Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,  
Which is enough. (CP, p. 204)

One may then enjoy a pleasurable relation with reality in which the ego demands from the chaos of reality nothing but what it can give, and chaos is therefore adequate to satisfy the desires of the ego. In this state one simply enjoys the sense of one's own existence in a physical reality, beyond any meaning of that existence imposed by the ego:

It was how the sun came shining into his room:  
To be without a description of to be. (CP, p. 205)

Thus, the formulations of "Connoisseur of Chaos" (CP, p. 215): "A violent order is disorder" because it is imposed on, and therefore falsifies, the chaos of reality; and "A great disorder is an order" because, although "The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind," although reality proves incomprehensible to the ego, yet beyond the comprehending mind, a sense in this disorder is felt:

. . . yet relation appears,  
A small relation expanding like the shade  
Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill.

In the terms of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP, p. 169), the chaos of the storm is brought to bear, is brought into significant relation with the ego. The ego imposes no order on reality, therefore "the structure/ Of things" is accepted "as the structure of ideas" (CP, p. 327). Reality is recognized as the unique source of the ego's content, thereby bridging "the dumbfounding abyss/ Between us and the object" (CP, p. 437) that alienates us from it, and allowing the ego to find fulfillment in reality.<sup>6</sup>

It is his poetry that gets Stevens from reality as chaos to reality as perceived in some kind of order by the ego. This may be seen in his use of images:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles. (CP, p. 94)

This, from "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," demonstrates the way an image may be used as a principle of order. The blackbird, seen as a point of reference, defines an intelligible area among many possible but undefined intelligible areas. Speaking of "resemblances," the name Stevens gives to the basis of metaphor, comparison, he says: "What the eye beholds may be the text of life. It is, nevertheless, a text that we do not write. The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance as the painter be-

gets in representation; that is to say, as the painter makes his world within a world" (NA, p. 76). The mind orders reality not by imposing ideas on it but by discovering significant relations within it, as the artist abstracts and composes the elements of reality in significant integrations that are works of art.

It can be seen from this description of chaos and order that, as he presents no particular belief, Stevens presents no particular order but a theory of order, just as one might teach a theory of painting without advocating one style over another. He affirms the chaos of reality and seeks through the imagination for ways to make it tolerable, and even a positive good. This affirmation of chaos may not, in theory, seem an effective means to order, but when one comes upon it in "Sunday Morning" the case is different: "We live in an old chaos of the sun" (CP, p. 70). So stated, chaos seems good and the world seems ennobled by its identification with chaos. This is not a "truth" assumed for its usefulness even though it is untrue. It is a way of thinking about something, a way of thinking about something that promotes a way of feeling about something. Again, the evocation of an unintelligible cosmos is not ordinarily sympathetic. This is "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician" (CP, p. 62):

It comes about that the drifting of these curtains  
Is full of long motions; as the ponderous  
Deflations of distance; or as clouds  
Inseparable from their afternoons;  
Or the changing of light, the dropping  
Of the silence, wide sleep and solitude  
Of night, in which all motion  
Is beyond us, as the firmament,  
Up-rising and down-falling, bares  
The last largeness, bold to see.

This says nothing true or untrue about the chaos of reality in terms of absolute fact, but merely presents a congenial way of thinking about it that we can believe. The statement of

the poem compels belief. What I am trying to show is how Stevens' theory issues in poetry, and that chaos is ordered for Stevens not in his systematic thought, but in compelling statements in given poems. It is statements of the order of "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician" of which one should think when Stevens speaks of believing in a fiction.

#### iv. Ego and Reality

The characteristic movement of Stevens' thought as it is engaged in poetry may be described by two points of reference, the first taken from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the second from "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (CP, p. 383)

I am a native in this world  
And think in it as a native thinks. (CP, p. 180)

Between these two points Stevens' thought flows as a current between a negative and a positive pole. It is the gap between them that the poem must bridge and that, in fact, creates the need for the poem. In Stevens' theory it is the idea that after the last negation an instinct for affirmation remains, that impels the movement from the first point to the second (see "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," CP, p. 247, and "Esthétique du Mal," VIII, CP, pp. 319-20). The movement begins with the ego's sense of disconnection from the absolute fact of reality which is felt as alien to the ego's concerns. As the ego approaches absolute fact it tends to reconcile that fact with its own needs through the imagination, which thus establishes a vital connection between the ego and reality. The absence of the imagination, or absolute fact, must itself be imagined (CP, p. 503), and in the process that fact is brought into meaningful relation with the ego. What seemed inert, insubstantial, and irrelevant will then seem vivid, sub-

stantial, and filled with interest. One will be as a native who draws strength from his environment, rather than an alien who is oppressed by it.

This vivid sense of reality is produced by the imagination and captured in some metaphor or description. At this phase Stevens' poetry tends to be in praise and amplification of the reality so imagined. But as the ego's idea of reality imposes itself in our apprehension of reality, it becomes a "violent order," a cliché that distorts reality and is a falsification of it. We then escape solipsism through a desire to return to absolute fact, to forsake our ideas about the thing for the thing itself, which at this point seems like "A new knowledge of reality" (CP, p. 534).

. . . so poisonous

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to  
The truth itself, the first idea becomes  
The hermit in a poet's metaphors,

Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.  
(CP, p. 381)

Thus, an imbalance in favor of the imagination is restored by a return to reality, and the see-saw career of our idea of reality starts all over again.

At the heart of this interchange between the ego and reality is the effect of the imagination in bringing the two into vital relation. I suspect that this is not merely a point of theory for Stevens but rather an intensely real experience upon which the theory was constructed. Faced with the depressing prospect of a reality that seems dull, plain, and irrelevant to the needs of the ego, the poet comes to feel that the world in which he lives is thin and insubstantial, so remote from his concerns that feeling he is part of it "is an exertion that declines" (OP, p. 96). When, through the imagination, the ego manages to reconcile reality with its own needs, the formerly insipid landscape is infused with the ego's emotion

and reality, since it now seems intensely relevant to the ego, suddenly seems more real.

It was everything being more real, himself  
At the center of reality, seeing it.  
It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself.  
(CP, p. 205)

Stevens expressed this experience several times in more theoretical terms, as the manner in which the exercise of the imagination gives us the sense of a vivid and substantial reality beyond the mind:

. . . if we say that the space [reality] is blank space, nowhere, without color, and that the objects, though solid, have no shadows and, though static, exert a mournful power, and, without elaborating this complete poverty, if suddenly we hear a different and familiar description of the place:

This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning, silent bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air;

if we have this experience, we know how poets help people to live their lives. (NA, p. 31)

Again, in a passage on the function of poetry, abstracted by Stevens from H. D. Lewis' article, "On Poetic Truth":<sup>7</sup>

. . . its function . . . is precisely this contact with reality as it impinges on us from the outside, the sense that we can touch and feel a solid reality which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our own minds. . . . a quickening of our awareness of the irrevocability by which a thing is what it is, has such [particular] power, and it is, I believe, the very soul of art. (OP, pp. 236-37)



## v. The Function of the Imagination

The imagination for Stevens is not a way of creating, but of knowing. The imagination creates nothing, in the sense that it presents us with nothing that is not already in the world to be perceived. He in one place defines it as "the sum of our faculties," and characterizes it by its "acute intelligence" (NA, p. 61). He goes on to compare the imagination with light. "Like light," he says, "it adds nothing, except itself." The imagination, in other words, brings out meaning, enables us to see more. It does not create but perceives acutely, and the object of its perception is reality. What it perceives in reality is the credible. The credible, of course, is that which can be believed, and may be distinguished from absolute fact. The credible must be based on absolute fact, but is perceived by the imagination and may be beyond the range of normal sensibility (NA, p. 60). The nature of poetic truth is not that it is true in the sense that absolute fact is true, but that it says something about reality we can believe—which, of course, is not to say it is untrue. It moves us from a state in which we cannot believe something about reality to one in which we can believe something about reality, and consequently puts us, to use Stevens' phrase, in "an agreement with reality" (NA, p. 54).

Stevens writes that "the poet must get rid of the hieratic in everything that concerns him and must move constantly in the direction of the credible" (NA, p. 58). When a poet gives to us something about reality that we can believe which before had been incredible, he adds, again in Stevens' phrase, to "our vital experience of life" (NA, p. 65). The poem expresses that vital experience precisely because, as I have pointed out, in it the ego has reconciled reality with its needs so that reality is infused with the concerns of the ego. "A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it" (NA, p. 65). The poet is able to add to our vital experience of life because of the heightened awareness of life

that results from the intensity of his thought and feeling. In his essay "Three Academic Pieces," Stevens gives an example in another connection which is applicable here as illustration of the process of the imagination:

It is as if a man who lived indoors should go outdoors on a day of sympathetic weather. His realization of the weather would exceed that of a man who lives outdoors. It might, in fact, be intense enough to convert the real world about him into an imagined world. In short, a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own. (NA, p. 79)

The poet, then, gives us a credible sense of reality which brings us into vital relation with it.

Since the poet's vision is an intensified one, his description of reality in the poem is correspondingly heightened. It is "A little different from reality:/ The difference that we make in what we see" (CP, p. 344). Here there is a pertinent analogy with Wordsworth, for whom the interaction of Nature and the imagination produced a new experience of reality resident in the poem. Stevens' idea is developed in "Description Without Place":

Description is revelation. It is not  
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,  
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,  
Intenser than any actual life could be. (CP, p. 344)

Description is revelation in that it is an imaginative perception of the thing described: it is neither the thing itself, nor a pretended reproduction of the thing. It is a new thing, not reality but a real artifice, so to speak, with its own reality that makes actual reality seem more intense than it ordinarily is. "The poem is the cry of its occasion,/ Part of the res itself

and not about it" (CP p. 473). The poem is not about the thing (the "res"), but is the articulation of one's experience of the thing, an experience in which the articulation—the writing of the poem—is itself an essential part. To this should be added Stevens' statement in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words": "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (NA, p. 32).

With this in mind, regard a poem like "The Death of a Soldier" (CP, p. 97). The poem discovers a persuasive way of regarding a random and meaningless death as important and dignified. It perceives something in the soldier's death, not something that was not there in the fact of death, but something not seen except when looked at in a particular way, the particular way the poem looks at it. This is the good of rhetoric, to provide the perception that comes through saying things in particular ways.

## vi. The Function of Rhetoric

The sense of reality is given in poetry through what Stevens calls "resemblance," or the similarities between things. The imagination creates resemblance in poetry through metaphor (NA, p. 72). Poetry, through resemblance, makes vivid the similarities between things and in so doing "enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (NA, p. 77). Therefore, "The proliferation of resemblances extends an object" (NA, p. 78). This is one theoretical source for Stevens' preoccupation, in poetic practice, with variations rather than progressive form, for it follows that saying a thing in another way is not merely repetition but also an extension of the original statement. In his essay "Two or Three Ideas," Stevens translates the first line of Baudelaire's "La Vie Antérieure," "J'ai longtemps habité sous de vastes portiques," in three different ways:

A long time I lived beneath tremendous porches.  
(OP, p. 203)

I lived, for long, under huge porticoes. (OP, p. 203)

A long time I passed beneath an entrance roof.  
(OP, p. 213)

One of the points he is trying to make in doing so is that our sense of reality changes and that this change is reflected in terms of style by the way we say things about it. "The most provocative of all realities is that reality of which we never lose sight but never see solely as it is. The revelation of that particular reality or of that particular category of realities is like a series of paintings of some natural object affected, as the appearance of any natural object is affected, by the passage of time, and the changes that ensue, not least in the painter" (OP, pp. 213-14).

For Stevens, poetry is a way of saying things in which the way of saying yields the meaning and in which the way of saying is more important than, but indistinguishable from, the thing said. "The 'something said' is important, but it is important for the poem only in so far as the saying of that particular something in a special way is a revelation of reality" (OP, p. 237).<sup>8</sup> It is not only written language but also its sound that gives us, in poetry, a credible sense of reality: "words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds" (NA, p. 32). We seek in words a true expression of our thoughts and feelings which "makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them" (NA, p. 32). This kind of truth is that of true rhetoric: the appropriateness of a particular way of putting things is what persuades us of the truth of that way of putting things. True rhetoric, which is the poet's obligation, "cannot be arrived at by the reason alone," and is reached through what we usually call taste, or sensibility; hence Stevens speaks of the morality of the poet as "the morality of the right sensation" (NA, p. 58). When the right sound is discovered, it gives pleasure: when Stevens speaks of listening to the sound of words, he speaks of "loving them and feeling them" (NA, p. 32). The pleasure given by the right sound,

apart from this sensuousness of language, is that of the gratification that occurs when the imagination, through language, brings one into a favorable adjustment to reality. "The pleasure that the poet has there is a pleasure of agreement with the radiant and productive world in which he lives. It is an agreement that Mallarmé found in the sound of *Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*" (NA, p. 57). Thus Stevens can regard language as a god, a savior, in face of a bitter reality: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur,/ The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (CP, p. 322). For Stevens, "There is a sense in sounds beyond their meaning" (CP, p. 352), and that sense of sound beyond meaning is an essential of language as it is used in poetry.

## vii. Obscurity

Stevens does not hesitate to reduce or obscure the discursive meaning of the language he employs in order to get at that sense in sounds. That is why he writes, "The poem must resist the intelligence/ Almost successfully" (CP, p. 350).<sup>9</sup> Again, he writes: "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have" (OP, p. 177). This line of thought probably came to Stevens from the French Symbolist tradition, in which there is a conscious division between the creative and communicative functions of language,<sup>10</sup> and in which, therefore, the creative value of words depends on their suggestiveness rather than on their strict meaning, so that obscurity and lack of specificity become virtues. "[Poems] have imaginative or emotional meanings, not rational meanings. . . . They may communicate nothing at all to people who are open only to rational meanings. In short, things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions very often take on a form that is ambiguous or uncertain."<sup>11</sup> This would account for some of Stevens' obscurity as intentional, as I think is the case in the insistently cryptic "Thirteen Ways of Looking

at a Blackbird." Certainly it could account for his freedom in coinage and, further, in his employment of nonsense. "I have never been able to see why what is called Anglo-Saxon should have the right to higgie and haggle all over the page, contesting the right of other words. If a poem seems to require a hierophantic phrase, the phrase should pass" (OP, p. 205). Usually Stevens' nonsense, while it has no rational meaning of its own, does create a meaning in its context which it communicates, as in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," XXIX, where the sound of the phrase, "the mic-mac of mocking birds," in description of the lemons, helps to distinguish the character of "the land of the lemon trees" from that of the cloddish "land of the elm trees" (CP, p. 486).

Frequently, however, Stevens' obscurity is not due merely to the use of language for effects that exclude rational meaning. Despite Stevens' calculated use of obscurity, his poetry has been from the beginning largely one of thought and statement. "Sunday Morning" is a meditative poem and in it, and in such poems as "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," the initial and perhaps chief problem of explication lies in penetrating the rhetoric to determine the thought it contains. In the volumes following *Harmonium* the poetry, especially in the long poems, is increasingly discursive. It is evident both from his poetic practice and from his prose that Stevens came to hold the poetry of thought as an ideal:

Theoretically, the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry. . . . A poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems. That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good; and so in time and perhaps, in other politics, it may come to be. It is very easy to imagine a poetry of ideas in which the particulars of reality would be shadows among the poem's disclosures. (OP, p. 187)

In fact, there is a sometimes unresolved division between the discursive and imaginative functions of language that exists throughout Stevens' poetry. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" represents only one extreme of this division, at which it appears to be assumed that the communication of specific discursive meaning is incompatible with the esthetic effects of language. It is perhaps a sense of strain between the discursive and imaginative functions of language that motivates R. P. Blackmur's comment in his essay, "On Herbert Read and Wallace Stevens": "Does it not seem that he has always been trying to put down tremendous statements; to put down those statements heard in dreams? His esthetic, so to speak, was unaware of those statements, and was in fact rather against making statements, and so got in the way."<sup>12</sup> It is exactly this strain that makes itself felt when the referents of Stevens' language become uncertain, when his syntax fails, and his verse becomes unintelligible. Stevens uses obscurity in order to be suggestive, but he also uses it when the context requires that he be explicit. The blue and the white pigeons of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" are intelligible as contrasting states of mind and, though their meaning is indefinite, they suggest certain things about that contrast. But the "Blue buds or pitchy blooms" of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," XIII (CP, p. 172), seem to be specific kinds of intrusion into the blue of the imagination—a specific meaning for the phrase is implied, but is not communicated. The "three-four cornered fragrances/ From five-six cornered leaves" of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," VIII (CP, p. 470), is in the same way puzzling rather than suggestive. On a larger scale, explication of section VI of the first part of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP, p. 385) is problematic: a specific idea is indicated in the section but the statement fails to communicate it because the referent of the language is unspecified. One must guess at what is "not to be realized," what "must be visible or invisible." Sometimes uncertainty of meaning in Stevens' poems is caused by private reference, as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," XV (CP, p. 173), which Stevens has glossed as referring to a

popular song (LWS, p. 783). License for such private reference, however, comes out of his emphasis on the imaginative or creative aspect of language. If Stevens uses the phrase "dew-dapper clapper-traps" (CP, p. 182) to describe the lids of smokestacks (Poggioli, p. 183), it is because he likes the way it sounds regardless of its obscurity. Unintelligibility in Stevens' poetry occurs characteristically when the communication of specific discursive content is frustrated by the use of those effects of language beyond meaning which Stevens conceives to be most essentially poetic.

### viii. Genre

As a poetry of thought and statement, that of Stevens has been compared with English neoclassical poetry. Stevens' poetry is not didactic, however, in the sense of arguing or discursively demonstrating its doctrine. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar" there is no consecutive argument and, though there is a kind of finale, no conclusion; and this is largely true of the long poems in the following volumes. These are poems that consist of unsequential reflections on a central theme, in which the point of the poem is in the sum of the discrete reflections, in which conclusions are unimportant, in which, in fact, since there is no progressive argument, there can be no logical conclusion. If they may be said to have a structure, it is fundamentally the structure of the poet's mind as it is realized in the act of improvisation. Hence on one hand the loose, limitless variations-on-a-theme form, as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" or "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and on the other, the symmetrical but arbitrary forms, as in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," which serve as a frame within which to improvise. There is, for example, no formal reason why the three sections from *Opus Posthumous* (p. 72) called "Stanzas for 'The Man with the Blue Guitar,'" or even the poem, "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" (CP, p. 135), could not be inserted in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" without harm to the whole.

Such poetry may be usefully distinguished from discursive or didactic poetry. In intent its end is not proof but conviction, or persuasion as in rhetoric except that it is as if Stevens were trying to persuade himself; its goal is not to demonstrate truth, but to effect resolution. It is aimed not at distinguishing the objective from the subjective, but at uniting the two (see my explication of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," VI). It does not attempt to assert fact, but rather seeks to adjust belief to fact, to bring about that "agreement with reality believed for a time to be true" (NA, p. 54), that Stevens conceives to be poetic truth. In other words its area of operation is not that of doctrine, but of psychology. That is why Stevens can write, "It is the belief and not the god that counts" (OP, p. 162), and again, "In the long run the truth does not matter" (OP, p. 180). For the dogmatist, for the philosopher, and for the didactic poet it is the truth that matters, and the adjustment to it is secondary. This is a poetry that adheres to a psychological mode of meditation whose end is resolution, as opposed to the discursive mode of the didactic whose end is demonstrated truth. It is therefore not surprising that Louis L. Martz finds that Stevens' poetry resembles formal Christian religious meditation.<sup>13</sup> But though he places Stevens in the meditative line of Donne, Herbert, and Hopkins, Stevens' resemblance to this line has nothing to do with form or tradition. On the contrary, the meditative character of Stevens' poetry is due to the untraditional ideological situation out of which he writes: he does not start with received truth which is to be justified as in, say, *Paradise Lost*, but from a position of no belief which constantly impels him to resolution in the repetitive search for the credible of which his poetry consists.

## ix. The Fiction

Stevens' clearest statement of the idea of a necessary fiction is in "Asides on the Oboe" (CP, p. 250):

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,  
Of final belief. So, say that final belief  
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

However, in "Men Made out of Words" he writes that "Life consists/ Of propositions about life" (CP, p. 355), then goes on to evoke the fear that our fictions, "the sexual myth,/ The human revery or poem of death," are merely fictions, dreams, and that consequently, "defeats and dreams are one." And, in "The Pure Good of Theory" he declares:

Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor  
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind

And the desire to believe in a metaphor.  
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of  
Belief, that what it believes in is not true. (CP, p. 332)

One must qualify the necessary fiction as a cardinal point in Stevens' thought with the idea that some such projection of the mind is not so much necessary as unavoidable. A major statement of this is in the Ozymandias fable of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "A fictive covering/ Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP, p. 396). Another is in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice  
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,  
Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,  
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,  
A glassy ocean lying at the door,

A great town hanging pendent in a shade,  
An enormous nation happy in a style,  
Everything as unreal as real can be. (CP, p. 468)

We never see merely what the eye takes in but compose as we see: "one looks at the sea/ As one improvises, on the

piano" (CP, p. 233). This, as stated in the poem "Variations on a Summer Day," accounts for such exercises in impressionism as "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." I do not wish to make Stevens consistent in a way in which he is not. With regard to the apprehension of reality, sometimes he says one thing and sometimes he says the opposite. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," for example, he also writes,

We keep coming back and coming back  
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns  
That fall upon it out of the wind. (CP, p. 471)

But in sum it comes to this: we can apprehend the substance of reality through our metaphors of it, but only for a moment; even as we make contact with the real we turn it into the imaginary, which quickly degenerates into cliché (see "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," first part, II and III, CP, pp. 381-82). Reality is the data of the ego, but that data is transformed by the ego in the version of reality captured by the poem or the fiction:

It is never the thing but the version of the thing:  
The fragrance of the woman not her self,  
Her self in her manner not the solid block. (CP, p. 332)

"To lose sensibility, to see what one sees," can be for Stevens a matter of spiritual destitution (CP, pp. 320-21). At the other extreme, to see one meaning only through a rigid system of thought is also spiritual poverty. The latter condition is personified in the figure of Konstantinov in "Esthétique du Mal." He is the "logical lunatic," "the lunatic of one idea/ In a world of ideas," whose extreme of logic is illogical (CP, pp. 324-25). Fictions must be credible in face of reality, and in fact the "pressure of reality" demands that we resist it with credible fictions (NA, pp. 22-23).

The fiction, so qualified, is a credible version of reality. It is neither reality itself nor 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. The fiction must be abstract because it must be selective in discovering those aspects of reality which meet the needs of the ego.<sup>14</sup> Thus a fiction is not belief in the ordinary sense but is a crystallized relation to reality which reveals reality as in some way gratifying to the ego—or, as the third subdivision title of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" tells us, it must give pleasure. Belief is a matter of "the more than rational distortion,/ The fiction that results from feeling" (CP, p. 406).

We do not depend on poetry or a theory of belief to bring us into this relation with reality, for we are moved naturally into such experiences by fortuitous events in the world around us:

. . . when the sun comes rising, when the sea  
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall  
  
Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.  
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.  
We reason about them with a later reason.  
(CP, pp. 398-99)

But "The casual is not/ Enough" (CP, p. 397), so Stevens systematizes, through his theory, the specifications for this relation in order to be able to encourage it into existence. The success of this process is described with exactitude in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," XVIII (CP, p. 174), as it occurs "After long strumming on certain nights." A "dream,"—a fiction which is not quite believable—when it becomes credible in face of reality, is no longer merely a fiction, a belief: "A dream no longer a dream, a thing./ Of things as they are." As a belief it is not held as an intellectual construction, but has a reality like that of the wind whose sensory presence is its only meaning ("wind-gloss"). Thus, the end of belief comes down to a gratifying, sensuous experience of reality, an agreement with life rather than an idea about it, "the mere joie de vivre" (LWS, p. 793).<sup>15</sup> Sometimes in Stevens, belief is put as a vital instinct, a sense

of reality we project onto absolute fact in the way that the vegetation of spring grows over reality's barren rock, as if in this respect we mimic the organic processes of nature because we are of its nature (see my explication of "Long and Sluggish Lines" and of "The Rock," I and II). Belief, then, is a sense of reality in which, as in death in "Flyer's Fall" (CP, p. 336), "We believe without belief, beyond belief."

x. "The center that he sought was  
a state of mind."

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," XXVIII, Stevens writes that, "If it should be true that reality exists/ In the mind," then the theory of poetry—the theory of how to create reality in the mind—would be the life of poetry. One might even, he goes on, extemporize "Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory/ Of poetry is the theory of life" (CP, pp. 485–86). Though we exist in reality we are bound by the mind, and thus it is not the nature of reality that matters so much as our sense of it, the sense of it that the imagination gives us. However, the favorable sense of reality that the imagination can produce, the "agreement with reality," is momentary:

For a moment final, in the way  
The thinking of art seems final when  
The thinking of god is smoky dew. (CP, p. 168)

These moments are for Stevens a radical experience<sup>16</sup> which, it would not be too much to say, all his theoretical poetry merely tries to recapture. In a world without other spiritual center, the occurrence of this experience provides a focus, or a "foyer," as it is put in "Local Objects" (OP, p. 111). It includes "The few things, the objects of insight, the integrations/ Of feeling,"

That were the moments of the classic, the beautiful.  
These were that serene he had always been approaching  
As toward an absolute foyer beyond romance. (OP, p. 112)

The intellectual content of the experience is no further defined, either in this poem or elsewhere, because it has no definite intellectual content. The experience is fortuitous, since one does not know what objective content to seek: it is comprised of "things that came of their own accord,/ Because he desired without knowing quite what" (OP, p. 112).

This is the same problem of content for a native and contemporary ideal that Stevens raised in the early poem, "The American Sublime": "What wine does one drink?/ What bread does one eat?" (CP, p. 131). The answer is that there is no sacrament because there is no deity, that the ideal has no definite content, and that the "ultimate good" is a certain subjective experience whose only reality is psychological. "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (CP, p. 524) describes the "ultimate good" as the world imaginatively perceived so that one loses consciousness of the self and becomes aware of an order which is in fact that of the imagination ("that which arranged the rendezvous"). The "miraculous" power of the imagination creates a condition that seems to be one of secular beatitude that occurs "Here, now." Finally the imagination is identified with God, without, however, asserting the reality of God. On the contrary, the reality of the experience is entirely psychological, since the power that caused it, the imagination, operates only "Within its vital boundary, in the mind." The "ultimate good" here, the spiritual focus, may be described in the words of the opening line of "Artificial Populations" (OP, p. 112): "The center that he sought was a state of mind,/ Nothing more." This is not an experience that depends on an accession of knowledge, or on an intuition of some known principle, such as diety, assumed to exist beyond the mind. The poem rather describes a state of mind in which the world is experienced in a certain desirable way: "nothing has been changed except what

is/ Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all" (OP, p. 117).

Stevens raised another question in "The American Sublime" when he asked with regard to the sublime: "But how does one feel?" (CP, p. 131). The question is pertinent since the ideal he pursues is a certain experience, and comes down to a way he sometimes feels. "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" describes not a rational but an emotional experience: one has a sense of "a warmth,/ A light, a power," and one "feels" an obscure order (CP, p. 524). The language here suggests that in this condition a sensuous experience of reality is paramount. So also in "As You Leave the Room" (OP, p. 116), the modification of the ego which is accompanied by an exaltation of mood, "an elevation," is the result of an intensely sensuous experience of reality in which the latter seems "something I could touch, touch every way."

The most thorough description of this central experience, which is in the first part of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP p. 386), begins by dispensing with that poem's abstract apparatus in favor of purely sensuous description: "It feels good as it is without the giant,/ A thinker of the first idea." Perhaps, the poem continues, a true experience of reality depends not on such abstractions but 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. At such times one is in an equilibrium, a state of "incalculable balances," that includes both the mind and one's surroundings. This is exactly that resolution through an "agreement with reality" that Stevens' poetry aims to create. It is a radical combination of mood and circumstance that is "Extreme, fortuitous, personal." It involves the beauty of random events in reality, which, in the words of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man" (CP, p. 222), "Occur as they occur": "Could you have said the bluejay suddenly/ Would swoop to earth?" But above all it requires an intense sensuous awareness of reality that is beyond the range of systematic thought. Hence the conclusion of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man":

It may be that the ignorant man, alone,  
Has any chance to mate his life with life  
That is the sensual, pearly spouse.

At the same time one has a sense of lucidity, even of clairvoyance, because one grasps the "truth;" one perceives reality in its sensuous integrity, and is completely satisfied with it. Compared to this, the truth of intellectual abstraction seems hazy and remote. So we are told at the end of the description of the experience in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,  
As on an elevation, and behold  
The academies like structures in a mist.

What is fundamental in these moments of relation is an acute awareness of existence itself, the palm, in "Of Merc Being," "Beyond the last thought," in which the golden bird sings and which is the end that we desire only for itself: it is this and "not the reason/ That makes us happy or unhappy" (OP, pp. 117-18).<sup>17</sup> This is the sense of existence for which the ghosts yearn in "Large Red Man Reading":

They were those that would have wept to step barefoot  
into reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in  
the frost  
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves  
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was  
ugly

And laughed . . . (CP, pp. 423-24)

At the same time there occurs an agreement between the ego and reality in which the separation between the two disappears and they seem one harmonious entity: "The reader became the book," and "The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind" (CP, p. 358).<sup>18</sup> The reconciliation of the



ego with reality produces a vivid and harmonious sense of existence.

Ultimately, one is brought to reality, and consequently brought to life, by one's feeling for reality; in such feeling lies the poem's power to revivify. The poet in "Large Red Man Reading" brings the ghosts to life because he "spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked" (CP, p. 424). The possibility of such an experience of revivification, in which "being would be being himself again,/ Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self" (CP, p. 255), is described in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," IV. Section V of that poem considers the possibility of an abstract idea that might make such experience generally available, but VI rejects systematic thought, and the poem finally places faith in imaginative expressions based on feeling, "the heart's residuum," for a positive relation with reality despite its inherent evil.

Since this experience of ideal relation with reality is by nature fugitive, there can be no formulation of it that one can repeat to summon it up; nothing avails but improvisation. And when improvisation fails, when the ego cannot bridge the gap between it and a too alien reality, there is an antithetical experience, a negative counterpart of the ideal one. It occurs when the relation to reality becomes too great a burden, so that "being part is an exertion that declines" (OP, p. 96). When this happens, the ego may attain composure by withdrawing from reality into itself, just as it may in opposite circumstances attain composure through heightened experience of reality. Thus in "Solitaire under the Oaks" (OP, p. 111), one escapes from reality to "pure principles" and is, consequently, "completely released." The point of the experience described in the poem is release, and though it is achieved through contemplation of principle, the principle is unimportant so long as it is instrumental in bringing about this release. What is desired is a state of mind, a psychological equilibrium without any particular intellectual content, in which one is relieved of the pressures of reality. Whereas the positive counterpart moved toward greater experience of real-

ity, this state of mind seems to move toward exclusion of any experience of it: one exists in an "oblivion," thinking "without consciousness" about arbitrary principle, so that "Neither the cards nor the trees nor the air/ Persist as facts." Instead of a heightened sense of existence, one finds here precisely its opposite: it is

As if none of us had ever been here before  
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,  
This invisible activity, this sense. (OP, p. 113)

It is true, of course, that these are all late poems, and may represent a composed withdrawal from life in preparation for death, but one finds among the same group far more poems about the opposite experience, such as "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" and "As You Leave the Room" (OP, p. 116), the latter of which seems quite plainly a poem whose occasion is the end of life. This negative experience is epitomized in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," XX (CP, p. 480):

. . . the pure sphere escapes the impure  
Because the thinker himself escapes. And yet  
To have evaded clouds and men leaves him  
A naked being with a naked will  
And everything to make. He may evade  
Even his own will and in his nakedness  
Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere.

The thinker may escape the real world ("the impure") for a consciousness pure of reality. But the evasion of any idea of reality creates the need for another to take its place ("everything to make"), unless the thinker manages to exclude all content from his consciousness (which may therefore be described as "his nakedness") and remains in a hypnotic state that, perhaps, resembles the extinction of consciousness in mystic nirvana or, perhaps, merely the point of inanition in

revery. But one cannot sustain this state of mind any more than one can sustain its counterpart. There is a "will," a given in human nature that amounts to a necessity, in himself and others, that he must evade in order to enter this state and that he cannot evade for long, that drives the thinker's consciousness back into contact with reality once more. So the succeeding section (XXI) begins:

But he may not. He may not evade his will,  
Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade  
The will of necessity, the will of wills.

When either of these fugitive experiences is consummated, then, one moves toward its opposite. Here, undoubtedly, is a source of the characteristic polar fluctuation of Stevens' thought in its repetitive approach to and withdrawal from reality.

### xi. The Importance of Stevens' Art

One of the sayings in the group of comments called the "Adagia" runs as follows: "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (OP, p. 158). The remark is apposite to Stevens' poetry. He did not write poetry that had to do with people in social relation. There is little in his poetry of narrative, little that is personal, little that is occasional, nothing that is dramatic. In an age before, as he put it, Marx ruined nature, he might have been a nature poet of the magnitude of Wordsworth. He wrote about his response to place, to objects, to landscape, and he wrote about ideas, and his ideas come down to the importance of an intense responsiveness not to personality, nor indeed to ideas, but to sensuous, physical reality. The essential self is, for him, the body,

The old animal,  
The senses and feeling, the very sound  
And sight, . . . (CP, pp. 46-47)

In Stevens' vision, that which is beyond the self is a fluid, constantly changing present in which nothing endures and nothing has any end beyond itself:

It is a theatre floating through the clouds,  
Itself a cloud, although of misted rock  
And mountains running like water, wave on wave,

Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed  
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way  
A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change. (CP, p. 416)

In such a reality the effort of the intellect to discover absolute value seems absurd, and reality itself seems to lose its substance and solidity. Stevens appealed to the senses to give him, through poetry, a feeling of the substantiality of that reality beyond the mind as something pleasurable vivid, fresh, and various rather than same, insipid, and without value.

We do not have to be told of the significance of art. "It is art," said Henry James, "which makes life, makes interest, makes importance . . . and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process." (NA, p. 169)

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1961), p. 92. In this regard, one thinks of William Carlos Williams along with Stevens.

<sup>2</sup> "Another Way of Looking at the Blackbird," *The New Republic* (Nov. 4, 1957), 17 and 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Wallace Stevens*, (Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 11 [University of Minnesota, 1961]), p. 29. J. Hillis Miller denies this, as I do, but develops the point differently: "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," in Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, eds. *The Act of the Mind* (Baltimore, 1965), p. 146. (This article contains the essence of the longer version published in Miller's *Poets of Reality*.)

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Stevens' seasonal cycle, see Kenmode, pp. 34-37.

<sup>5</sup> Section IX of this poem, however, reaches in the opposite direction, toward order.

<sup>6</sup> See Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole," *Hudson Review*, X (Fall 1957), 363, who comments that Stevens' poetry tries to annihilate "the sense of contrast or great gulf fixed between subject and object, consciousness and existence." N. P. Stallknecht, "Absence in Reality," *Kenyon Review*, XXI (Fall 1959), 545, notes that Stevens celebrates the unity of mind and nature as in the Romantic tradition.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophy*, *The Journal of the British Institute of Philosophy*, XXI (July 1946), 147-66. Essentially the same statement is found in NA, p. 96. See Joseph N. Riddel, "The Authorship of Wallace Stevens' 'On Poetic Truth,'" *MLN*, LXXVI (Feb. 1961), 126-29.

<sup>8</sup> Abstracted by Stevens from H. D. Lewis' "On Poetic Truth." See n. 7. The passage is exactly apposite to Stevens.

<sup>9</sup> "Man Carrying Thing." The same thought with slight variation is found in the "Adagia" (OP, p. 171).

<sup>10</sup> See Yvor Winters, "The Hedonist's Progress," *In Defense of Reason* (Denver, no date), pp. 453-54, for a discussion of the history of this distinction in connection with Stevens.

<sup>11</sup> Stevens in *Explicator*, VII (Nov. 1948), Item 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (Garden City and New York, 1957), p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> "Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation," *Yale Review*, XLVII (Summer 1958), 517-36.

<sup>14</sup> In terms of his theory Stevens uses abstraction to mean "a quality of being taken out, abstracted in the root sense" (Martz, "The World as Meditation," p. 531); "artificial in its proper sense, something constructed rather than generalized" (Frye, p. 365). An abstraction in this sense is an artificial construction of elements selected from reality.

<sup>15</sup> Stevens uses the phrase in relation to section XX. See my analysis of that section.

<sup>16</sup> The attempt to define this experience was suggested by J. V. Cunningham, who took note of it in "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens" (formerly published in *Poetry*, LXXV [Dec. 1949], 149-65), *Tradition and Poetic Structure* (Denver, 1960), pp. 122-23.

<sup>17</sup> See Miller, pp. 157-61, for a discussion of Stevens' perception of being.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of the dynamic relation between these two terms of the experience, see above, section iv.

## II. Readings\*

### "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" (CP, p. 5)

The nude is an emblematic figure of spring. There is a comparison between spring, in the first part of the poem, and a similar figure representing summer, in the latter part. Thus spring is "paltry," especially early spring, spring at the start of her voyage, as compared with the fullness of summer described later on. She, early spring, is without pomp—she is not imagined, like Botticelli's Venus, with a shell, but rather embarks on "the first-found weed"; nor is she imposing like an archaic deity, but silent, insubstantial. She, as we with the sparsity of spring, is discontent with her own paltriness: she desires the pomp of "purple stuff" (cloth), and is impatient with the staleness of winter ("salty harbors" as opposed to the excitement of the high sea—"bellowing," and "high interiors" with its suggestion of being enclosed by the sea and by high waves). The goddess of spring, she dominates everything ("touches the clouds") as she runs her seasonal course. But this is still meager compared to the fullness of summer, the nude of "a later day," who is "goldener," a center of pomp. The season is the servant of fate, and summer in particular is a servant who follows spring inexorably, tidying up its "scurry" ("scurry" in *Collected Poems* is a misprint) and comparatively wilder, lighter motion, making it "spick."

\* The readings follow the order of *Collected Poems* and *Opus Posthumous*