

sounds produced strike a music from his spirit. By logical extension, then, the music is essentially the feeling it produces; since music is feeling, the desire he feels for the woman of whom he is thinking is a kind of music. There follows a projection of this feeling into the story of Susanna, the story serving as an extended simile for the feeling. (The poem is in this respect a compliment to the woman, referred to in the second and third stanzas, desire for whom provokes the reflective reverie that follows.) This projection becomes a speculation on the nature of desire and the bodily beauty that is its object. Susanna awakened a similar music, or "strain" (tune, tension: desire) in the elders. Since their lust is, in terms of the poem, a kind of music, it is appropriately described in musical terms (note especially the triple meaning of "The basses of their beings"—"bass" as musical term or instrument, as depth, and as evil.)

The poem then gives a description of the music of Susanna's feelings (II). The warmth of the water, its sensuous "touch," brings forth in her the "melody" of sensual day dreams or fantasies ("concealed imaginings"). The cooler air as she stands on the bank is echoed by her "spent emotions." She feels, "among the leaves," a gentle residue, or nostalgia ("dew") for her amorous attachments of the past ("old devotions"). As she walks away she still trembles ("quaver," a trill or tremolo in music) with the emotions she has just felt. Then the breath of the elders suddenly deadens ("muted") the feelings which the night had evoked in her, and their intrusion is put in terms of the brash, brassy interruption of the cymbal and horns.

The "attendant Byzantines" (III) serve as a choral expression of feeling about the elders' accusation. They are silly ("simpering"), frightened. Their "refrain" (or possibly Susanna's) is weeping, like a willow in windy rain.

The mind's response to beauty comes and goes (IV); it is spasmodic, changeable, giving only the vaguest suggestion of access to beauty as it exists in the flesh ("The fitful tracing of a portal"). But "in the flesh" beauty never dies. The apparent paradox is immediately qualified and then resolved in

three metaphors. Though the body itself dies, bodily beauty lives on in new embodiments. In the same way evenings die: the "green" of their "going" is descriptively apt, but also indicates that it is a "going" that is perpetually renewed, just as a wave flowing through the sea at the same time both passes and continues. Gardens die under the "cowl of winter" (winter covering the landscape, and also, a monk's cowl, winter itself like a monk now finished with its seasonal repentance), but they die to be reborn in the spring. Maidens die in marriage, to be replaced by other maidens who will, in their turn, die a similar death (compare the maidens in "Sunday Morning," V, CP, p. 69). The lust that Susanna's beauty aroused in the elders' minds was momentary and left only the prospect of their mortality (the "white" elders; "Death's ironic scraping"—in the *Apocrypha*, after falsely accusing Susanna, they are put to death). But Susanna's beauty has become immortal. Her beauty, her "music," is reborn in memory of her, and serves to consecrate that memory in praise.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (CP, p. 92)

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is written in that kind of free verse whose line is defined by a natural pause in the speaking voice and a break in the sense. It consists of a series of statements in no particular order, each of which involves the figure of a blackbird or blackbirds.¹⁷ But the difficulty of the poem is not diminished from section to section by the figure of the blackbird itself, for it does not have any constant meaning. In this respect the title is possibly a little misleading. "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP, p. 98) is in fact five ways of looking at a seascape, an exercise in impressionism, in which the sea, though changing, is a constant in the poem, the thing being described. The blackbird, on the contrary, acts in each section to bring out the meaning of the context in which it is involved. Its meaning depends on each context, just as the meaning of that context depends

on it. It does not have a constant signification but it has a constant function: to act as a focus that brings out qualities in what is put in relation with it. Beyond this, the poem is unified only by what the figure of the blackbird has suggested to the proliferating imagination.

The sections of the poem are not easy to understand, because the discrete descriptions and statements of which they consist are abstracted from any larger context. It is therefore difficult to tell what they refer to beyond themselves; they have, to generalize, an unusually limited amount of defined reference, and an unusually wide range of suggestive reference. The greatest danger in explicating them is perhaps that of rigid over-interpretation. Beyond repeating what a section says in what is often, here, unnecessary prose paraphrase, one can for the most part tell of it what kind of imaginative statement it is, in what way it appeals to the imagination. There may be no specific meaning beyond this, or, to put it another way, there may be an indefinite range of meanings suggested.

The poem, then, can be considered a series of examples of how the imagination works, and although some sections are also figurative statements about the working of the imagination, others are merely instances of it. In the latter case one must be content to accept the image or comparison presented, for to seek more would be to baffle oneself and defeat the intention of the poem. If the poem can be considered a series of instances of how the imagination works, the fact that the sections are insistently cryptic implies the assumption of a certain relation between the rational mind and the imagination which, as it happens, is stated in the last section of "Six Significant Landscapes":

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,

Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
Rationalists would wear sombreros. (CP, p. 75)

Rationalists confine themselves to one kind of perception. There is a more extensive kind of perception available through the imagination. It follows that, as in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," specific rational communication may be limited for the sake of imaginative statement, which may be rational but is also more than rational, and may, in Stevens' view, be non-rational (see below, pp. 76-77). One finds in this poem that there are degrees in kind of imaginative statement, from those which are figurative, but whose meaning may be specified, to those whose meaning is ultimately ambiguous, but which for that reason are highly suggestive.

Considering the poem as a series of instances of imaginative statement, I will discuss the sections in groups that correspond roughly to the ways they appeal to the imagination. This seems more convenient for purposes of discussion than adhering to a numerical order (which appears, in any case, to be arbitrary). Section I is a description in which the eye of the blackbird provides a focal point for a landscape which it composes, in the sense that a compositional center composes a landscape painting. The effect of the blackbird among the twenty snowy mountains is similar to that of the jar in "The Anecdote of the Jar":

It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild. (CP, p. 76)

The jar, the blackbird, serve as points that order what surrounds them. So, in Stevens' belief, may metaphor order reality in poetry. Speaking of "resemblances," the name he gives to the basis of metaphor, comparison, he says: "The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance as the painter begets in representation;

that is to say, as the painter makes his world within a world" (NA, p. 76). The mind orders reality by perceiving significant relations within it, as the artist abstracts and composes the elements of reality in significant integrations that are works of art. The blackbird serves the same purpose in IX:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

The blackbird, seen as a point of reference, defines an intelligible area among many possible but undefined intelligible areas.

In II the blackbird is used as the comparative term in a simile. Given that one blackbird is like another, the blackbirds sit in the tree like three equal possibilities. The blackbird in V is used in an ornamental and illustrative comparison. It adds nothing to the sense, which is that esthetic satisfaction may be found equally in statement and implication. The blackbird in III is used as a specific image that represents a general phenomenon, a *synecdoche* for autumn. The blackbird is one part of the entire process of autumn. But it is part of a pantomime in that autumn is a performance in which many elements, like the blackbird, mimic its general qualities, among which that of whirling is given here. In XII, the flight of the blackbird is juxtaposed with the movement of a river, as if there were some causal connection between the two kinds of motion: if "x" is happening, in other words, "y" also has to happen. Stevens comments sparingly on the section that its point is "the compulsion frequently back of the things that we do" (LWS, p. 340). But the imagery further suggests that both river and blackbird must be parts of a whole of which motion is an essential attribute. The blackbird must be flying if the river is moving, but a river is always moving. The blackbird is chosen from an almost unlimited range of natural objects that might have equally served as an image and term of comparison, and therefore implies them. Thus, the figure suggests a physical world that is constantly in flux.

It is possible that IV is merely an assertion that all things are one, but this interpretation seems inadequate, because it fails to account for the particularity of the examples involved. Something other seems implied by the use of the man and woman than could be if two randomly dissimilar objects had been chosen. The blackbird here is without significance in itself, but brings out meaning in that with which it is put in relation, just as, in Stevens' analogy, the imagination, like light, adds nothing, but illuminates (NA, p. 61). A man and a woman are one, perhaps in love, perhaps in that they are complementary opposites; the blackbird adds an unknown which denotes an element of mystery that they should be so. The figure of the blackbird is meaningless except as it is in the given context, like the "x" in an equation. The blackbird in VII has a similar function. Exclusively because it is placed in juxtaposition with golden birds, it comes to suggest the mundane, as contrasted with the exotic. But that the blackbird walks around the feet of the women adds a sense of mystery to them, "the strange unlike" that imagination brings in "To the One of Fictive Music" (CP, p. 88). Hence the passage reads, "why imagine the exotic, when the ordinary is exotic." The extravagance of the first verse of the section, "O thin men of Haddam," attempts to show this through rhetoric. Haddam is a town in Connecticut (Poggioli, pp. 184-85). In VIII the blackbird again works as an unknown which gives and gains significance in the particular context. The sense of the section is that there is something else involved in poetry besides the beauty of which language is capable. That something else is represented by the blackbird, but not specified by the context in which it is placed. The blackbird here has a suggestive value, especially in connection with the other sections of the poem: it suggests mundane reality, and it also suggests the imagination itself as it is used in this poem. It is not more specific than that, and does not need to be.

In X the blackbirds represent an image from reality striking enough to impress even those who evade reality in order to indulge the beauties of language alone. The "bawds of

euphony" are like the "pimps of pomp" in "Stanzas for 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle'" (OP, p. 19). The "fops of fancy" of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," X (CP, p. 16) are closely related. They all evade reality in poetry, rather than address it. The blackbirds would suddenly cause the bawds to "express themselves sharply: naturally, with pleasure, etc." (LWS, p. 340). In XI the blackbirds are juxtaposed with a "glass coach." Whatever the nature of the coach, its only specified quality seems to place it, as something artificial, in contrast with the blackbirds, which are natural. Thus, he who rides in the artificial equipage feels afraid of what he thinks is the intrusion of real birds into his fanciful scene. The implication would be that reality threatens fancy, which is an evasion of it.

In VI the blackbird serves to construct a word picture whose literal sense creates an effect without specifying a meaning. The mood, presumably created in the room by the barbaric glass in the long window, makes of the shadow in the window a mysterious phenomenon, something with an occult cause. The cause is the mundane blackbird. An ordinary object, because of the circumstances in which it appears, comes to have an extraordinary effect. This is as far as the sense can be pushed. In the final section the blackbird is again used to create a word picture which in this case has only a literal sense. It is not "about" anything else. There is only the picture to accept on its surface, as one accepts the surface of a painted canvas. There is no implication: it suggests nothing beyond itself, or it suggests what you want to make it suggest. It has the autonomy of a chance scene in reality, or of a piece of music, or of a painting, which catches and absorbs the attention, and composes the feelings in its own composition. It represents another use of the imagination in poetry, otherwise put in the "Adagia": "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have" (OP, p. 177).

In terms of this analysis, the poem may be considered in the light of the tradition that descends from Baudelaire and particularly Mallarmé, in which there is a conscious division between the creative and communicative functions of lan-

guage,¹⁸ and in which, therefore, the creative value of words depends on their suggestiveness, rather than on their strict sense, so that lack of specificity and the presence of obscurity become virtues. Stevens wrote in *The Explicator*:¹⁹

[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.

In this tradition, the poem, increasingly independent of definite subject matter, tends to be reduced to a purely esthetic effect, as in Mallarmé, or may, as in Valéry, turn in upon itself to find a subject matter in its own genesis and nature.²⁰ But Valéry does not, like Baudelaire and Mallarmé, try to arrive at an ideal or an absolute through the creative function of language; rather, he tries to order the world through the use of analogy (the faculty of combining images), and metaphor.²¹ Here there is a point of contact between this poem and the French Symbolist tradition, for in manner it is limited to the figurative aspect of language; it concerns itself with the uses of the imagination, and it does so by demonstrating how the poetic figure can order and illuminate reality by discovering significant relations within it.

This says something about the poem's obscurity. It is an insistent obscurity because it intends to appeal as exclusively as possible to the imaginative, as opposed to the reasoning faculty. The less specific the language of a poem is for the reason, presumably, the more suggestive power will it have for the imagination. "The poem," says Stevens, "must resist the intelligence/Almost successfully" (CP, p. 350). That is why it is less a matter of penetrating the meaning of the poem than of knowing how to read it. It must be explained not by being reduced to prose statement, but by being described as a poem. I take it as part of the intention of the poem to baffle prose statement in order to defy such a reduction.