

And of all vigils musing the obscure,  
That apprehends the most which sees and names,  
As in your name, an image that is sure.

—To the One of Fictive Music

## Preface

After all that has been written about Stevens' poetry, its difficulty remains the chief problem. Explication of the kind performed for Eliot has been long overdue for Stevens. Most of the explications that exist, especially of the long poems after *Harmonium*, would be more aptly termed summaries that represent merely the beginnings of the kind of close reading that is necessary. Many of the most important early poems have never had satisfactory explication, and many of the apparently easier poems are still the subject of widely differing and contradictory interpretations. Commentators have been so fascinated by the explanation of Stevens' ideas that they have largely neglected the explanation of his poems, except for fragmentary readings designed to illustrate points which are as often as not incorrect or superfluous. Explication, especially that done by way of illustrating Stevens' theories, has tended to be sketchy, slipshod, and misleading or, often, plainly wrong. Critics, in order to illustrate a point, will use passages that are themselves in need of explanation; they will distort meaning by misleading quotation; in readings they will explain the obvious lines and skip the difficult ones.

Even the better readings that have appeared demonstrate considerable confusion as to how the poems may best be explicated. It is of dubious help to place a poem in a tradition of thought or to trace the influences that bear on it, before establishing what it says—and philosophy cannot serve as a gloss for Stevens' almost impenetrable phrases. Parallels in thought, and even in language, with systematic thinkers, though they may be suggestive, cannot determine meaning in the poem. Explicating a poem by relating it to one of Stevens' general themes, or by comparing it to another of his

poems, can be misleading, and may further obscure the text at hand. Stevens works through nuance, variation, and sudden reversal on a theme, requiring on the part of the reader an absolute attention to the specific text. A term such as "major man" may signify a complex abstraction in one poem while in another it merely means "the pick of young men" (*LWS*, p. 489). Similarly, Stevens' images cannot be frozen into static symbols: even the color blue, and the moon, which usually represent the imagination in his poems, do not do so invariably, or in exactly the same way.<sup>1</sup> Stevens' images must be understood ultimately in terms of the nuances of context; an image in one poem does not necessarily mean the same thing in another—it may mean the opposite. Finally, there is a kind of explication which, in refusing to read plainly the discursive content of Stevens' poems, has the effect of rendering easy poems difficult, and difficult poems unintelligible.

Doctrinaire objections to paraphrase notwithstanding, there is no getting around the discursive content of Stevens' poems, and attempts to do so only lead to further obscurity. When a Stevens poem is not discursive, when its meanings are indeterminate, there are ways of handling it that are appropriate (see, for example, my explication of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"); there is no reason, on that ground, for refusing explication of discursive meaning insofar as it can be explicated. Despite Stevens' insistence that poems have imaginative and emotional meanings, rather than rational meanings, as of course they do, no one who has looked at Stevens' explanatory notes to "The Man with the Blue Guitar" can doubt his cognizance that rational meanings can be extracted from a poem in order to help understand it. As to the limits of such glosses, Stevens made the following proviso: "You will understand that in converting a poem, written and thought out in the peculiar figurations of poetry, into plain English, one's explanations are bound to call for a certain amount of toleration" (*LWS*, p. 788).

As R. P. Blackmur long ago demonstrated, the obscurity of Stevens' poetry is different in kind from that of Eliot or Pound: "Mr. Stevens' difficulties to the normal reader pre-

sent themselves in the shape of seemingly impenetrable words or phrases which no wedge of knowledge brought from outside the body of Mr. Stevens' own poetry can help much to split."<sup>2</sup> The difficulty is with the phrasing itself, which is at a level of metaphor so sustained that it is hard to connect it with the subject of the poem. Stevens' arguments proceed in a sign language of metaphor often remote from the subject matter. What this kind of language unavoidably requires is plain, line by line paraphrase, and though there is, of course, need for further interpretation, it must presuppose such explication. Summary of the arguments is not sufficient, since the difficulty is not primarily in following the arguments but in the reference of the language itself. In explicating such poetry, one is either governed by the strictest detail of the poem, or one is free to give any interpretation at all.

It is perhaps pertinent to say that my choice of poems for full explication is not an attempt to promote a Stevens canon. A poem such as "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," though among Stevens' best poems, is not in need of the kind of reading I am concerned with here. On the other hand, "The Rock," which I do not consider to be one of Stevens' best poems, has been chosen for full explication both because it has become important in critical discussion, and because it is difficult. I have given close readings of most of Stevens' major and best-known poems beyond a certain level of difficulty, and I have tried to establish an approach to the rest. Further readings did not seem sufficiently profitable, even without considering limitations of space.

"The Guide to Stevens Collected Poetry" provides an entrée to a larger body of poetry than could be, and, for that matter, need be, paraphrased. It will be the most effective if used after reading the introductory essay and becoming familiar with the paraphrased poetry. In combination with the rest of the book, it should be adequate in giving cues to the subjects of the poems, and in indicating their frame of reference within Stevens' thought and poetic practice. The Guide either makes brief comments on the poems, or refers the reader to a section or sections of the book that discusses rele-

vant thematic material. Together with the paraphrases, it covers the complete *Collected Poems*, and all the poetry in *Opus Posthumous* that is of importance.

I would like to express my gratitude to J. V. Cunningham and Irving Howe for their help on an earlier version of my manuscript while I was at Brandeis University and, in particular, my indebtedness to the former for his many detailed suggestions and corrections, both in my essay on Stevens' theory and practice, and in explication of individual poems. Thanks are due to Bell Gale Chevigny for a helpful reading of parts of this manuscript, and to Professor Oscar Cargill, to John Hammond of New York University Press, and to Robert King, formerly of the Press, for their help. I would also like to express my gratitude for a Fulbright Fellowship that provided for a year of study in connection with the original manuscript. Acknowledgement is due to Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. for permission to quote from the following works by Wallace Stevens: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (copyright 1954, by Wallace Stevens); *The Necessary Angel* (copyright 1951, by Wallace Stevens); *Opus Posthumous* (copyright 1957, by Elsie Stevens and Holly Stevens); *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, edited by Holly Stevens (copyright 1966, by Holly Stevens). I would also like to acknowledge the permission of Holly Stevens to quote from Wallace Stevens' commentary in *Mattino Domenicale ed Altre Poesie*, edited by Renato Poggioli and published by Giulio Einaudi.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "The Comedian as the Letter C," V, 15, and my explication of "Esthétique du Mal," II. For an attempt to work out a key to Stevens' use of colors, see George McFadden, "Probing for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens," *Modern Philology*, LVIII (Feb., 1961), 186-93.

<sup>2</sup> "Examples of Wallace Stevens," *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (Garden City, New York, 1957), p. 202.

## A Stevens Chronology\*

- 1879 Born at 323 North Fifth Street, Reading, Pennsylvania, October 2, to Garrett B. Stevens, lawyer, and the former Margaretha Catherine Zeller. He was the second of three brothers; he had two sisters, one of whom died shortly after the end of World War I, while serving with the Red Cross in France. His father occasionally published poetry and prose in the local papers.
- 1896 In high school he won the *Reading Eagle* Prize for essay, and the Alumni Medal for Oration.
- 1897 Graduated with merit from Reading Boys High School. He had worked for the *Reading Times* in the summers. Enrolled at Harvard as a special student (not a degree candidate).
- 1899 One of Stevens' undergraduate poems at Harvard elicited a sonnet in reply by Santayana ("Cathedrals by the Sea"), who was then teaching there, and whom Stevens knew.
- 1900 Graduated from a special three year course in English at Harvard. President of the *Harvard Advocate* from March, 1900, to the end of the college year. Between 1898 and 1900, many contributions, both prose and verse, to the *Advocate* and to the *Harvard Monthly*. After graduation he worked on the editorial staff of the *New York Tribune*, and on the periodical, *The World's Work*.
- 1901 Entered New York Law School.
- 1904 Admitted to the bar in New York. Began legal practice.
- 1909 Married September 21, 1909, to Elsie Viola Kachel (who
- \* Much of the material in this chronology was taken from LWS or, when possible, was checked against that volume.