"SO FAR BEYOND THE RHETORICIAN'S TOUCH": METONYMY IN SELECTED POEMS OF WALLACE STEVENS

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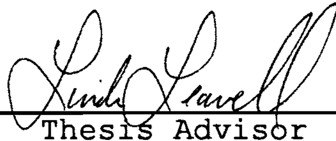

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CP Wallace Stevens. *Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage, 1955.

NA Wallace Stevens. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1951.

L *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1951.

OP Wallace Stevens. *Opus Posthumous*. Revised edition. Ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Vintage, 1990.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:

STEVENS, REALITY, AND RHETORIC

"Your trouble, Robert, is that you write
poems about -- *things*."
--Wallace Stevens to Robert Frost[1]

One of the major issues in Stevens criticism since its inception revolves around his use of the terms *reality* and *imagination*. What is reality and what is imagination and to what extent do they participate in art and life? These questions plague Stevens and appear again and again in his poetry, often accompanied by a distinctive use of figurative language. Stevens is aware of the duality he is working with in the terms *reality and imagination*, subtitling his collected essays *The Necessary Angel*: *Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. How Stevens defines and relates these terms and shapes his poetics around them is important in understanding Stevens and the complexity inherent in his poems.

A critical approach that examines Stevens' attempt to use linguistic and rhetorical play can answer these questions and clarify his technique. Central to Stevens'

poetics is figurative language which is based on this sense of play. Figurative tropes such as metaphor, simile, synecdoche, and, what I want to stress, metonymy, form a structural underpinning for Stevens' poems. Even as early as 1919, in the poem "Anecdote of the Jar," Stevens is in command of this structure and is able to use it to spell out his understanding of the relationship between reality and the imagination. Reading this deceptively simple poem as an example of metonymy challenges the usual metaphorical readings of the poem. Later, especially in his longer poems, Stevens expands on these ideas and a "theoretical" poem such as "A Primitive Like an Orb" explicitly confronts the relationship between language and reality and the imagination. The poem's conclusion can then serve to elicit parallel ideas from the earlier more imagistic poem. Before approaching the two poems, I will briefly survey the critical background of these two underlying issues in Stevens' poetry: the issue of reality and the imagination, and his use of figurative language, especially metaphor, simile, and metonymy. Then, I will show how these two issues are vitally related in an attempt to understand Stevens.

Notes Toward Defining Reality and the Imagination

Stevens repeatedly calls attention to "the thing itself" throughout his poetry (*CP* 534). He also uses the similar phrase, "things as they are" (*CP* 165). These phrases appear to refer to reality and give the sense that reality can be linked with the physical world, with the insistent mention of "things." However, Stevens explicitly defines reality in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" as "the life that is lived in the scene it composes and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it" (*NA* 25). He also writes in *The Necessary Angel* that "reality is not the thing but the aspect of the thing" (95). These definitions shift reality from the physical world to a perception of it. There is not a common base of reality, but only a phenomenological awareness of it. Elsewhere in his writings, Stevens offers other definitions for the term *reality*. In the *Adagia*, he states that "reality is the spirit's true center" (*OP* 201) and that "reality is the object seen in its greatest common sense" (*OP* 202). This suggests the privilege that Stevens gives to reality, whatever it is, whether it is subject or object, whether it can be touched or only perceived.

An even more curious aspect of Stevens' reality is that there is a sense of more than one reality, in Stevens'

words, "degrees of reality" (*NA* 7). Often in his poetry, the initial object is present, which is one reality, and then after the imagination works on the object, a new reality results--what Stevens refers to as one's "individual reality" (*NA* 94). He remarks that "a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own" (*NA* 79). This reality has as much validity for Stevens, but is in no way linked to the physical. At the same time, instead of creating a new manifestation of the thing by use of the imagination, Stevens also attempts to perceive a basic reality, what he calls the "first idea." In a seemingly Platonic viewpoint, the first idea becomes the primal source, untouched by the imagination or metaphor. This sense of reality also transcends the physical world, but in a non-imaginative way.

Although the concept of the imagination is another major element in Stevens and is ever-present, Stevens does not seem to pay as much specific attention to it as he does to the question of defining reality. Essentially, the imagination is the active force that perceives reality. The key for Stevens is that imagination alters the thing itself. Stevens views this alteration negatively which subsequently clouds his attitude towards the imagination.[2] In a critical angle that approaches a nihilistic point of view, J. Hillis

Miller defines Stevens' concept of "the imagination [as] the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world with which imagination carries on its endless intercourse" ("Poetry of Being" 145). In Stevens' view, the imaginative process of perception creates a new, adulterated reality. The nothingness that many critics describe as vital to Stevens is a full nothingness, not an empty one. Only at the central core is there an absence, but this absence defines the lack which then implies the desire for fulfillment. To Miller, Stevens' problem is to reconcile the two terms, *reality* and *imagination*. Miller states that this is impossible, but Stevens is determined to attempt it anyway. One way in which Stevens attempts this is to come to terms with the lack of a center.

What seems more important than a strict definition of these terms, then, is to define the relationship between reality and the imagination. Stevens states in *The Necessary Angel,* "the imagination and reality. . .are equal and inseparable" (24). But when Stevens writes that "the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (*NA* 6), he implies that reality is a more immediate force and, hence, more preferred. "Eventually," Stevens remarks in the *Adagia*, "an imaginary world is entirely

without interest" (*OP* 200). While the imagination is valuable for Stevens, reality is necessary.

The relationship between the two terms in Stevens' writings is clouded by his nearly contradictory statements. In the *Adagia* he states that "there is nothing in the world greater than reality. In this predicament we have to accept reality itself as the only genius" (*OP* 201). The way Stevens words this adagia as a "predicament" that has to--is almost forced to--be accepted suggests that it is an apparent concession, as if Stevens grudgingly gives credence to reality instead of the imagination. In opposition to this attitude, Stevens writes to Theodore Weiss that "certainly the things that I have written recently are intended to express an agreement with reality" (*L* 463). Stevens wrote this letter in 1944, fairly late in his career, so the "recently" may indicate a progression in the poetry. Stevens also makes the remark that "The imagination is one of the great human powers" (*OP* 138). Here, as in other places, Stevens gives preference to the imagination. Stevens' response to a questionnaire from the *Partisan Review* resolves part of the contradiction in his remarks on the use of reality and the imagination: "The material of the imagination is reality and reality can be nothing else

except the usable past" (*OP* 309). In the intertwining of the terms, Stevens is most satisfied.[3]

The crux of the problem lies in identifying on what level of abstraction Stevens is thinking at the time. At one point, he may be referring to the physical world as reality, about which he becomes disenchanted as he does with the altered result of imaginative perception. It is only with the basic reality of Stevens' "first idea," because it is elusive and because he cannot ever perceive it, that Stevens is satisfied. The endless desire to locate the first idea may in part satiate his questing poetics.

Approaching Stevens' poetry by way of reality and imagination is not, by any means, an original approach,[4] but is necessary since the terms are a crucial aspect of Stevens' work. Surveying the ground of Stevens commentary, J.S. Leonard and C.E. Wharton in their recent study of Stevens' idea of reality, *The Fluent Mundo*, neatly organize it into four categories: decreative, romantic, ontological, and phenomenological.[5] Leonard and Wharton create a critical narrative that begins with the debate by early critics whether Stevens is a humanist or aestheticist, continues with the questioning of the romantic impulse in Stevens' poetry, and focuses finally on the influence of "decreative" and deconstructive theories as they are applied

to Stevens.[6] Joseph C. Kronick, in his article "Metamorphic Stevens," states that the use of the terms reality and imagination practically forces critics to choose sides, without allowing another term to mediate. Critics writing on Stevens must confront his use of reality and imagination and their apparent paradoxical relationship. The history of Stevens criticism is replete with various ideas on the meaning and relation of the terms, and since these terms are so fully entrenched in the romantic vocabulary, the romantic/decreative debate as summarized by Leonard and Wharton is the most appropriate for this topic. The debate raised by critics calling themselves either Romantic or Post-structuralist is important since it involves ontological and epistemological questions which Stevens' *reality* and *imagination* also consider: for instance, What is real and in what sense? What should the artist concern her or himself with? What is the basis of living? The issues are of great concern to Stevens, and his poetry often expresses his deep need to reconcile them.

On one side of the Romantic/post-structuralist debate, Harold Bloom, Joseph Riddel, James Carroll, and Northrop Frye perceive Stevens in the Romantic tradition: as either the last of the Romantic poets or as the culmination of a romantic tradition. While Stevens himself is skittish

about aligning himself with the name Romantic (as in 19th-century British poets), he would see himself as a culmination of a romantic tradition. He differentiates between a pejorative Romantic and a new romantic:

> But poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic. Without this new romantic, one gets nowhere; with it, the most casual things take on transcendence, and the poet rushes brightly, and so on. What one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure: eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic (*L* 277).

The romantic for Stevens is a constant re-seeing in order to attain an awareness of a truth. Critics such as Bloom, Carroll, and Riddel valorize the imagination as a means to a transcendent truth despite Stevens' own statements against the imagination. Bloom sees Stevens as the heir of not only the British line of Romantic writers, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth, but also the American line, characterized by Emerson. James Carroll applies the terminology of the Romantic sublime to Stevens' poetry, while Riddel focuses on the Romantic impulse of self-creation as an act of the mind.

Helen Vendler, whose *On Extended Wings* is an important study of Stevens' longer poems, also emphasizes the imaginative aspects of Stevens.[7]

On the other side of the debate, Roy Harvey Pearce and Helen Reguerio, among others, advocate Stevens' preference for reality, in Stevens' own terms, "the thing itself" (*CP* 534). In doing so, they argue against the value of the imagination, describing it as a corrupter of reality. Although not necessarily post-structuralists, these critics' views often espouse the same ideas of post-structuralist critics. In her study *The Limits of Imagination*, for example, Reguerio states that the quest for unity, which is the work of the imagination, always fails. Stevens' poetry, according to Reguerio, shows how the imagination is constantly undercutting its own validity. Although Pearce, in his study *The Continuity of American Poetry,* begins with the concept of *continuity*, implying a link with the Romantic precursors, he suggests that in his later poetry Stevens achieves a way of conceiving known reality directly through a Kantian synthesis of self and outside world.

In Stevens' own writing, the relationship between reality and imagination is contradictory at best, and any critic can easily be tempted into oversimplifying Stevens. Post-structuralist critics such as Paul Bové and J. Hillis

Miller offer interesting views on the oversimplification of Stevens. According to Bové:

> There is in Stevens' poetry a curious alternation of opposites which critics ascribe to his Romantic heritage. Like Pearce, they claim that Stevens' alternating sympathy in the reality-imagination conflicts is a dialectical movement which will lead to a synthesis. This is, of course, a convenient and comfortable way of justifying and thereby eliminating by resolution, the "simultaneous" existence of opposites in Stevens. (207)

Bové's statement is supported by Stevens' own suggestion of an interconnecting link between the two terms. For Bové, though, the synthesis produces nothing; there is no center. Hillis Miller suggests that between the two simultaneously true poles, there is great difference and movement (146), and Stevens must find a way to write poetry which will possess simultaneously both extremes, while not ending in compromise with some constructed middle term. This appears to be something of a paradox. How can Stevens be both and at the same time neither? The problem surfaces in Stevens' essays and adagia as they portray conflicting themes.

Figurative Language in Stevens

Critics who attempt to understand the paradoxical relationship of reality and the imagination in Stevens' poetry often look toward his use of language, particularly his use of figurative language. The musical quality of Stevens' poetry as well as the inherent play in his language often initially attracts readers to Stevens. Stevens is clearly able to use language to suggest his position. The use of metaphor seen as a linguistic reflection of unity is one possibility. Metaphor clearly defines subject and object differences. Northrop Frye in his early influential article "The Realistic Oriole," for example, theorizes Stevens' world as one of total metaphor (74). According to Frye, the center of mental activity as it perceives reality is the imagination and the view of art is nature realized as a unity (64-65). Frye notes an apparent contradiction in Stevens' definition of metaphor, which he sees pejoratively as it is linked with resemblance. It is only when metaphor is connected to unity as identification that Frye sees a workable term in Stevens. Both Frye and Joseph Riddel see the urge to unity as the key to Stevens' metaphor. Riddel compares Stevens to Whitman with their use of metaphoric, Adamic naming, which both unifies and identifies for Stevens and Whitman. The unifying movement provides an appealing

reconciliation of the disjunction between reality and imagination. The unifying nature of metaphor is the goal of the Romantics as they attempt to make the external world part of the internal self. The Romantic notion of the Self as it encompasses nature follows along metaphoric lines. Stevens' metaphor, according to Sheehan, goes just to the point of knowledge but recoils the moment complete identity is reached, echoing Stevens' maxim that poetry resists the intelligence almost successfully (60).

Stevens' use of metaphor, however, poses yet another paradox. In her study of *Stevens and Simile*, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan points out that Stevens is faced with a problem: he desires to believe in metaphor, but at the same time knows that it is not true (30). The falsity of metaphor is an issue that many critics see as the crux of Stevens' problem with reality and imagination. Joseph Kronick suggests that Stevens settles for neither reality nor imagination since metaphor cannot be trusted as a link between reality and imagination, or between language and object ("Of Parents" 139). The split between the tenor and vehicle in metaphor, the impossibility of creating a real bridge, causes a splitting or fragmenting in metaphor itself, and, according to Brogan, the apparent unity between tenor and vehicle which is never actually present is reason

for Stevens' inconsistent and ambivalent attitude towards metaphor (183). Riddel, Reguerio, and Eugene Nassar all define metaphor as ultimately fake, false, or transitory. Reguerio notes that the rejection of metaphor is a rejection of totality, while Nassar aligns metaphor with imagination, as a means of ordering chaos, and shows how they are seen as both true and false (19). Charles Altieri directly states that metaphors lie and regards Stevens as successful because he progresses past the paradox of metaphor (30). What these critics then propose is that Stevens uses metaphor as a means of undercutting itself: to show itself as a false image of reality. In this view, Stevens sees "metaphor as degeneration," the phrase taken from Stevens' poem of the same name (*CP* 444).

The first section of Stevens' long poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," illustrates how he tends to distrust metaphor. Using the image of the sun, a favorite of Stevens, the speaker of the poem commands the *ephebe* to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye/And see it clearly in the idea of it" (*CP* 380). Clearly, Stevens believes the sun must not be seen with a metaphoric eye, for to see it metaphorically would be not to see it all, but rather to see something else substituted for it. However, the sun (as sensory object *par excellence*) can only be seen by metaphor.

If seen with the naked eye, the eye will be blinded by the sun's pure sensory nature.[8] The sun must be seen only in being; it cannot be named. Stevens continues, "Phoebus is dead" (*CP* 381). *Phoebus* as a name for the sensory sun is no longer valid. As classical Roman name, *Phoebus* is to see one impossible thing (the sun) as another impossible thing (the god Apollo).

Stevens further states, "But Phoebus was/A name for something that never could be named. . .The sun/Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be/In the difficulty of what it is to be" (*CP* 381). The tension in Stevens' mind is reflected in the insertion of a metaphorical name, the identifying epithet "gold flourisher." The name *gold flourisher*, more Old English kenning than classical myth, sounds as if it is quickly inserted into the poem. Even Stevens cannot completely divorce himself from this urge to place a name on the idea, although the ridiculousness of the title "gold flourisher" may be Stevens' attempt to undercut the name.

Often identified as a trope of substitution, metaphor assumes a sense of identification if the metaphor is successful: the supreme fiction can be identified via a metaphor of the sun. Stevens admits that reality is difficult: imaginative seeing only appears to make it

simple and, thus, metaphor is to be distrusted. All metaphor is false since it substitutes the original object for an object more simple to comprehend.

It is fairly evident that Stevens, if he does not reject metaphor, distrusts it. His use of metaphor, then, needs to be approached warily. Instead of metaphor, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan sees in Stevens' use of simile the possibility of a conciliation between unity (metaphor) and fragmentation. A possible solution to the problem of naming the unnameable is by asserting the identity as *as;* that is, recognition by similarity. According to Brogan, metaphor and fragmentation are the two poles of language--not opposites, but mutually dependent. She points out, however, that the relationship is not a Hegelian dialectic, from which a synthesis results, but a relationship in which Stevens can possess both poles through a tension created by simile (14). She proposes a solution to what Miller and Bové have suggested. Brogan states that Stevens is not concerned with language as either metaphor or fragmentation, but rather with language as it contains and reveals both directions. Simile, by its nature, suggests a unity as metaphor does, but undercuts it at the same time by the use of *like* or *as*. According to Brogan, simile is both unitive

and fragmentary, or at least holds both within a tension by its form.

Brogan's approach is enlightening and holds much credence. Stevens is fond of simile and the figure can be found throughout his poetry. But at the same time, simile appears too easy, deferring the problem by placing it as *as*. Metonymy, as (re)formulated from the classical trope by Roman Jakobson in the 1950s, and subsequently re-read by Lacan and others, offers a greater possibility. Briefly, metonymy, by asserting a contiguous relationship, emphasizes the gap between the elements and the desire to fill that gap. Several studies have utilized metonymy in their reading of Stevens, but none have taken full advantage of the trope's possibilities. Harold Bloom in his influential study *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of our Climate* defines various *poetic crossings*, or moments of disjunction, in which tropes turn into other tropes. He parallels Stevens' poems with the Romantic crisis poems of Keats and Wordsworth. Bloom identifies three distinct crossings which correspond to poetic crises: the Crossing of Election moves from irony to synecdoche in order to answer the question, "Am I truly a poet?"; the Crossing of Solipsism asks "Can I love someone other than myself?" and moves from the metonymic to the hyperbolic; and ultimately, the Crossing of

Identification is a confrontation of one's mortality and takes place between metaphor and metalepsis (402-403). According to Bloom, tropic play is rhetorical power as persuasion, rhetorical persuasion as power. His system, however, suggests a hierarchic, privileged system as one trope progresses to another. Bloom sees metonymy evident in "Sunday Morning," but only as a step toward the metaphorical. For Bloom, there is development toward a privileged trope of discourse.

Margaret Dickie and Joseph C. Kronick have also suggested reading Stevens metonymically, and both see metonymy as a genealogical trope of reduction. Dickie in her book, *Lyric Contingencies: Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens,* distinguishes Stevens from the Romantics by his use of metonymic description, essentially identifying Stevens as a metonymic poet. With Stevens, according to Dickie, the external attributes are what make up the individual (111). Stevens externalizes the internal whereas the Romantic poets internalize the external. Dickie uses Stevens' poem "Theory" to illustrate this: "I am what is around me" (*CP* 45). The same is true with the poet. The poet is determined by the future audience. However the link between poet and future audience is a tenuous genealogical link dependent on the uncertainty of the contingent line between

source (poet) and heirs (readers). Temporality threatens to dissolve this link. Dickie's effort is partly feminist as she associates the genealogical trope with a catastrophe located at the center of the family, which shifts the scene of location from the father to the mother.

Kronick, in "Large White Man Reading: Stevens' Genealogy of the Giant," also discusses metonymy as a familial trope with relations to genealogy as it focuses on history and origins. Kronick suggests that Stevens operates in a Nietzschean godless world (93) in which the text no longer contains any essential meaning; now superficial appearance and artificial language are all that matter since truth no longer is a prerequisite for language (90-2). Genealogy as a familial trope is set in deserted places, not homes, and is evident not of a psychical struggle, but a displacing of the genetic link between figural and proper meaning. Reduction to the First Idea is not an approach to the thing itself, but a bridge between being and seeing that ties language to the phenomenal world. For Kronick, there is no poetry of the giant; it is only seen through lesser beings such as the ephebe. Kronick states that a metonymic reading of Stevens, focusing on the surface rather than the essence, would distinguish it greatly from both romantic readings and phenomenological ones (95). Unfortunately, he does not offer in what way this would be different.

In her feminist reading of "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Mary Nyquist briefly, but importantly, notes the presence of metonymy in the poem. Nyquist describes the effect Susanna has on the elders: through cause and effect, her nudity causes the elders' inner "bawdy strings" to react (317). Nyquist argues that Stevens confuses the subjective/objective nature of the poem and that the text plays with Susanna's music as both metonymy and metaphor. The question is whether the music belongs to Susanna or the reader, if it exists in her own memory or if the effect is caused by the music being located between these two alternatives in the reader's memory. There exists ambiguity, but, according to Nyquist, the text forces the poem to be read metonymically. By being metonymic, the text leaves an impression that Susanna has been violated and implicates the reader in the accusation of voyeurism charged against the elders. This reading clearly suggests the potential metonymy holds, especially as it relates to a confusion between subject and object. As Nyquist's reading shows, metonymy can affect the relation between poem and reader in a significant manner.

Most recently, Daniel Schwarz reiterates the argument that both metaphor and metonymy are crucial to reading Stevens and that a valid reading depends on a dialogue

between the tropes (18). In his study *Narrative and Representation in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, however, Schwarz reads metonymy too simplistically as relating only to contiguous relations, and proceeds to belabor the metaphoric in Stevens. Schwarz's goal is to show how humanism (as representation) has been neglected for word-play in Stevens criticism, but as he remarks over and over, Stevens represents the physical through rhetoric and linguistic play. Schwarz suggests the desire present in Stevens and words his argument in terms of metaphor and metonymy. He notes that each metaphor lacks the correct nuance and that this inability to properly name propels a continuous search for yet another trope (22). With his argument, Schwarz implies the inability of metaphor to attain truthful identity.

These critics clearly show the validity of examining the metonymic in Stevens. Kronick comes to one of the same conclusions I have: that Stevens, through metonymy, is able to force a disjunction or recognize one already present between figural and proper meaning of language and that Stevens has a "desire to touch the muddy center" (Kronick, "Large White Man" 97). However, Kronick's approach through seeing metonymy as genealogy misses important elements that metonymy is able to distinguish. Dickie suffers the same

drawback, although her reading, like Schwarz's, is even more simplistic in applying metonymy. There is not a single concerted study of metonymy in Stevens, probably because Stevens appears metaphoric at first glance. It is true that the metaphoric and the metonymic mix in Stevens, but it is exactly this mixture that allows the metonymic to undercut the metaphoric, subverting the seeming priority it has. Stevens himself may not be aware of this subversion, although his writings show that he is uncertain of the privilege the metaphoric has received.

Stevens is an important poet, and while this is commonly understood and accepted, it is difficult to explain his importance or classify him in a neat category. An explanation may reside in his dealings with reality and imagination. These questions (of reality and imagination) are important in reading Stevens because they play such an integral part in his poetics. In addition to the immediate gratification Stevens' poems has for the reader through the sheer musicality of his verse, the philosophical debate underlying the poems is a clear mirror of the philosophical arguments nagging the modern period. The affinity of Stevens' poetry to practically every critical theory since the 1950s also suggests this appeal. Metonymy exposes the lack of a center. It describes reality by those objects surrounding the center. Because there is a center and

margin which can never correspond, there can never be a unified whole. Looking for the metonymic moments and also the moments of tension between the metonymic and the metaphoric can reveal the complexity in Stevens' poetry and can inform the questions he raises about reality and imagination. For Stevens, reality is something to be desired; in a sense, it is a desire for a unified whole. However, Stevens understands that it is a desire that cannot be fulfilled. Metaphor deludes with the prospect of unity and a fulfillment of desire. Metonymy, on the other hand, exists in the paradox between simultaneously acknowledging desire and acknowledging the futility of desire. Metonymic figures which appear in Stevens' poetry indicate his approach to the desire for reality in a non-metaphoric way. The next chapter will clarify the differences between metaphor and metonymy that I see as important in dealing with Stevens. The following two chapters will then focus on two of Stevens' poems, "A Primitive Like an Orb" and "Anecdote of the Jar" to specifically illustrate how metonymic figures work in Stevens' poems.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEMBLING REALITY: STEVENS AND METONYMY

Resemblance, Stevens remarks in the prose portion of "Three Academic Pieces," is the most "significant component" of reality because it creates a relation among things that binds them together (*NA* 73). Poetry satisfies the desire for resemblance and, by doing so, "touches the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (77). In the essay, Stevens discards both identity and imitation as false resemblance: in identity resemblance disappears, while imitation is artificial resemblance. Resemblance immediately calls forth the metaphoric reliance on similarity, which Stevens discusses:

> If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common. It makes it brilliant. When the similarity is between things of adequate dignity, the resemblance may be said to transfigure or to sublimate them. Take, for example, the resemblance between reality and any projections of it in belief or in metaphor. What

> is it that these two have in common? Is not the glory of the idea of any future state a relation between a present and a future glory? (*NA* 77)

Stevens goes so far as to call metaphor a symbol of all poetic tropes. Throughout the essay, Stevens refers to resemblances as metaphor and metaphor as the language of poetry. He notes the following description in terms of metaphor:

> The wig of a particular man reminds us of some other particular man and resembles him. A strand of a child's hair brings back the whole child and in that way resembles the child. There must be vast numbers of things within this category. Apparently objects of sentiment most easily prove the existence of this kind of resemblance: something in a locket, one's grandfather's high beaver hat, one's grandmother's hand-woven blanket. (*NA* 75)

These examples are poetic tropes. They are obviously not, however, all metaphors. The hair connected physically and organically to the child is a synecdoche. Even if it has been cut and is no longer connected to the child's head, its power of resemblance only resides in the past proximity with the child. The grandfather's high beaver hat and the

grandmother's hand-woven blanket are metonymic in that they are related only because they have been associated with the people they "resemble." A blanket would not mean anything unless it had been in close physical contact with (or created by, to use another way of identifying metonymy) the grandmother. Why does Stevens consistently call resemblances metaphor and what does he mean by the term *resemblance* when these other tropes are not based on resemblance, but rather are based on proximity and connection, be it organic or physical? The answer to the second question seems to rest with Stevens' conflation of figurative tropes, seeing all resemblance as metaphor. In this he is not alone; he follows the tradition of the nineteenth-century writers and critics in identifying all figurative language as metaphor and symbol. Part of the conflation rests with the seeming privilege given to metaphor and symbol. While they are not technically the same, the terms metaphor and symbol have come to be interchangeable, both assuming a truth value since symbol and metaphor act to accurately identify the other term. Identity is reflected in the symbol/metaphor, with all of reflection's metaphysical assumptions of truth.

Paul de Man has noted how metaphor has been historically privileged since Aristotle. De Man suggests

this hierarchic arrangement results from aligning analogy (metaphor) with necessity, and contiguity (metonymy) with chance (*Allegories of Reading* 14). The privilege of metaphor over metonymy (and all other tropes) resulted in an elevation of metaphor to what Jonathan Culler calls a "figure of figures" (189), encompassing all rhetorical figures. Metaphor was seen as all of rhetoric.

Both de Man and Culler note that this shift occurred during the nineteenth century as the rationalistic eighteenth century shifted to Romanticism. Culler suggests that this occurred because of an attempt to legitimize rhetoric. Metaphor was the one figure most notably seen as showing essential qualities of relationships (through its essential utilization of similarity) and as such, truth, especially as opposed to the chance occurrence of metonymy: metaphors are able to show reality in a different aspect (Culler 192). De Man discusses the relationship between symbol and allegory and states that the main Romantic question of the nineteenth century was not a dialectic between subject and object, but rather an intersubjective relation set in temporal terms in which an atemporal Other posits itself out of reach of the self. Allegory, which does not attempt unity (as symbol does), instead establishes a separation, or distance, in which allegory "prevents the

self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self" ("Rhetoric of Temporality" 207). In the same way, metaphor, like symbol, proposes a unity in which one term substitutes and replaces another. When the vehicle comes to represent the tenor, when the metaphor is privileged, the tenor is replaced. The signifier represents yet another signifier since the signified is the Other, or the Other of the Other as the signified is itself yet another signifier of another signifier, always apart. Metonymy, on the other hand, because it depends on proximity for its identification, must maintain a distance--a gap that cannot be crossed. The desire for unity, which marks the Romantic impulse, accounts for the seeming dominance of metaphor/symbol during this period. Jerome Bump, in an article on Stevens' and D.H. Lawrence's relation to science and nature, states that metaphor is the preferred tool in science as well as in poetry (50). It is just this assumption that has relegated metonymy to a secondary importance.[9]

Roman Jakobson, however, resituated metonymy and metaphor as the two fundamental terms of rhetoric, dividing the whole of rhetoric into these two polar terms.[10] Classically, metonymy has been defined as the transfer of the name of a thing to something associated by various

relations--cause and effect, container and contained, possessor and possessed (Bredin 45)--and has long been discussed as one of the major tropes. Metonymy has always been in the linguistic system from Quintillian to Peter Ramus to Roman Jakobson, even as each has reduced the number of tropes (Bredin 47). Jakobson, a linguist studying the communicative styles of aphasic patients, described two types of aphasic disorders, a contiguity disorder characterized by the ability to *select* words but the inability to *combine* them properly and a similarity disorder characterized by the reverse. Jakobson lists several variations on these characteristics, but in general each disorder is identified by the lack of a certain ability. He then assigns metaphor to the contiguity disorder and metonymy to the similarity disorder: "Metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to the contiguity disorder" ("Two Aspects" 254) Jakobson also established selection and combination as basic operations of language, aligning selection with metaphor and combination with metonymy.

Classical figures of rhetoric, then, such as synecdoche, antonomasia, simile, and metalepsis, are dropped completely or subsumed under metaphor or metonymy just as Culler and de Man suggest happened earlier in the nineteenth

century. Jakobson, for example, assigns simile to metaphor and synecdoche to metonymy, causing the two terms, metaphor and metonymy, to become overdetermined in their meaning. I agree with Jakobson's subsuming of synecdoche under metonymy to a certain extent. I would argue that synecdoche as defined as part for the whole relies on a contiguous link, the difference being that synecdoche's link is organic while the metonymic link is either, as de Man suggests, pure chance or, as others suggest, socially ingrained. There is also a difference between metaphor and synecdoche in that the two elements in a synecdoche coexist whereas in metaphor they tend to be mutually exclusive. Metaphor is an imaginative trope; it is only the similarity that defines the relationship and the tenor need not be present (for example, my steed waits in the driveway when the steed stands in for an automobile) whereas in synecdoche, as in metonymy, both elements must be physically present for the relation to be perceived--with synecdoche, organically present (for example, hand for worker/person). The organic link of synecdoche implies the same proximic gap of metonymy. If the two elements are seen to be independent, there must be a point of division. The hand must end at a certain point for it to be an independent object.

Extending his study of aphasia to literature, Jakobson assigned lyric poetry and Romanticism to metaphor and epic

poetry and the realistic novel to metonymy (78). Later, David Lodge popularized this scheme, insisting that literary history could be described as a pendulum swinging back and forth between metaphoric and metonymic styles (*Working* 12).[11] Jakobson's and Lodge's discussions lead to a polar system in which one term, in this case metaphor, has been privileged as a result of cultural assimilation (Jakobson, *Language* 76).

Leon Surette, Jill Matus, and Hugh Bredin critique this bipolar system. Surette suggests that Jakobson's logic, characteristic of the Prague School and Saussurian structuralists, always falls onto a distinct but asymmetric polar system which is open to later critique (558). Matus also argues against the antagonistic view of the early structuralists and suggests that removing the terms of opposition would greatly increase the field for discussion (313). She also counters de Man's idea that metonymy has been neglected because it is the trope of chance. According to Matus, metonymy depends on perceptions which are not automatic or random; rather they are consciously made. Perceptions of both similarity and contiguity are a product of "choice and creation" (310). Bredin critiques Jakobson on two major points. First, in collapsing all speech into two fundamental poles (selection and combination), Jakobson

oversimplifies; he becomes too reductive and overdetermined. The idea of contiguity is misleading and "extensionally bloated" (Bredin 93), covering everything that is not similarity. Second, the two operations are not, as Jakobson argues, independent; according to Bredin, selection and combination occur together. This common-sensical view has been accepted by most critics, including de Man, Jonathan Culler, and Fredric Jameson.[12]

Jakobson admitted in 1957 that the two tropes are intertwined and "any metonymy is slightly metaphoric and any metaphor has a metonymic tint" (*Language in Literature* 85). There still, however, remains a decided emphasis on the metaphoric in both Jakobson and linguistic studies. As Jonathan Culler points out, there are conferences and special journal issues on metaphor, but never on metonymy or synecdoche (*Pursuit of Signs* 188).

Returning to the question of resemblance in Stevens, I would argue that resemblance is a metonymic relation, not a metaphoric one. The distinction lies in the gulf between language and reality. This underlying opposition underscores much critical thought and the metaphor/metonymy distinction brings it to the forefront. Stevens appears to be aware of this problem. He begins his essay "Three Academic Pieces," "The accuracy of accurate letters is an

accuracy with respect to the structure of reality" (*NA* 71). According to David Galef, he is announcing his intentions to discuss the word and the object (589). Stevens' statement implies that reality as truth precedes language. Before *letters* can be truth, they must be truthful to reality. One use of language is to connect in some way with reality. That it can never do this (always the gap between the figural and the proper) causes problems and the precedence of language emerges.

Metonymy as a linguistic phenomenon begins with naming; like all tropes, it is the transfer of the name of one thing to another. A direct link between word and object, between signified and signifier has been debunked by thinkers from Saussure to Derrida. This relationship, however, becomes most significant in understanding Stevens' reality and imagination. Metonymic naming, to distinguish it from other types of naming, occurs between two contiguous elements in a contained system. If a metonymy is to exist (linguistically since it is a verbal or written construct only), then the two or more terms it treats must physically exist simultaneously, in contiguous relation, like the beaver hat and the grandfather in Stevens' description of resemblance. By being contiguous, they cannot coincide or substitute. In essence they remain in relation to one another in what can

be seen as an imaginary container just as the defining image of metonymy includes container and contained existing in proximic relation. Metonymy involves a precarious balance between the two elements--as Stevens notes in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "not balances/That we achieve, but balances that happen" (*CP* 386).

However, one term precedes the other in the linguistic conscious act, but not necessarily in the physical.[13] Temporality, as de Man claims, is a critical factor in examining figurative tropes. There is a temporal transfer between the two elements, causing one to be the origin (that which is being named) and the other (which names the origin) to be an Other. The relationship between the tenor and the vehicle in metaphor, too, is temporal. In metaphor, substitution ends with one term displacing the other. In a simple metaphor, there is an equivalence. My car in the metaphor of the steed was physically present first, but linguistically and imaginatively, the steed displaces the car. But metaphor works further: "my steed waits for me in the Wal Mart parking lot." The difference is one between levels of language and reality. Linguistically, the car is identified with the steed and the car disappears (my steed waits). In reality, the steed never exists; there is only the car. The metaphoric steed is an imaginative creation.

The difference is the completeness of the trope. Metaphor insists that it is a complete substitution. Metonymy, on the other hand, is a trope of incompleteness. The gap between the two is the fact that the naming term cannot substitute. With metonymy, however, the origin and the metonym exist both physically and linguistically. The focus is on the marginal, and the center is named only through the marginal. The center is linguistically displaced because the focus is now on the marginal which is still the marginal because there is the center which the metonymy attempts to name, but which it cannot name completely; in other words, it cannot assume identity because it is always only defined by proximity. It can only suggest identity and between the simultaneous existence of the elements there is a gap which cannot be crossed and whose existence implies desire. It is metaphor's power to overrule the gap, but equally it is metonymy's power to hold the two in abeyance.

As such, the center plays a significant role in metonymy, but its ambiguity lies in the question of whether it is present or not, or both. Sherri Williams discusses the concept of the center as related to metonymy in an article on Emily Dickinson and "omitted centers." According to Williams, the center, or focal object which is being described, is lost, or using Williams' term, omitted, if examined closely. Jakobson has also effectively described

this situation of the center in a discussion of Boris Pasternak. He uses Charles Chaplin's silent film *A Woman of Paris* as an illustration:

> Pasternak's lyricism. . .is imbued with metonymy; in other words, it is association by contiguity that predominates. . . .[N]o railway train can be seen in Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris*, but we are aware of its arrival from the reaction of the people, images of the surrounding world function as contiguous reflections, or metonymical expression of the poet's self. (*Language in Literature* 307)

In Chaplin's film, the focal object, the train, is never seen, although it is the central object of attention. It is only reflected through the effects it apparently causes. Steven Scobie describes a similar situation in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* where metonymy is a way of naming the character Alice, when Alice herself cannot be named (116). Metonymic displacement causes the center (Alice) to be lost. According to Scobie, the subject is at once present and absent (112). It may also suggest that it is not a matter of surface and depth, but only surface. Metonymy displaces the idea of a hierarchy and the power of the single name (Scobie 116). The same appears true of much of Stevens'

poetry. If one term names the other, one term must be somehow privileged for this to occur. In one sense, it is the marginal that is privileged--the marginal names for the center. In a metonymic figure with two items related by proximity or contiguity, a sense of identity is exchanged between the two, without ever having the identity completely transferred. The central object, that which is the focus, or which is being defined, is defined by the marginal object. But metonymy subverts this by never clearly making this identity; it is always only a part that attempts at identification of the whole or a part that defines another part. Metonymy's definition as container/contained elicits a sense of unity wherein a center is present, but that unity is never true; it is only an appearance. It is not a one-to-one correspondence as is metaphor, but a many-to-one correlation which offers more possibilities of identification than available with metaphor.

As others suggest, metonymy as a trope demarginalizes the marginalized; it "champions the incidental" (Dickie 26). As with Stevens' problem of the sun, the sensory object cannot, can never, be perceived; it can only be perceived by the effects it causes or the marginal entities that reflect the sun. Metonymy's center cannot be named. As Matus argues, the marginal becomes central: in the process the true center, the origin, is lost. But unlike the center in

metaphor, which is never in question since it is the metaphoric, in metonymy it still exists, both linguistically and physically. If metaphor is an imaginative trope, then that may be one reason Stevens distrusts it so. The loss of a center establishes desire for the center and intrinsically related to the concept of the center is the gap. If a metonymy is to exist, the gap between must remain uncrossed, while at the same time, the purpose of metonymy is to name, which I would argue is to cross that gap. M. Keith Booker, in "Notes Toward a Lacanian Reading of Wallace Stevens," sums up that many critics recognize that desire is a major impetus in Stevens, as well as the knowledge of the futility of the desire (494). The ability to come to terms with this paradox is what separates metonymy from metaphor.

The purpose of this thesis is not to classify Stevens as a metonymic poet. To do so would be to ignore the obvious and important metaphoric moments in his poetry. As Hillis Miller remarks, it is "impossible to find a single one-dimensional theory of poetry and life in Stevens" ("When is a Primitive" 146). Rather, the purpose is to see how metonymic moments in Stevens' poetry suggest an impulse of metonymic thinking in Stevens that works in conjunction with metaphor and how this conjunction is one of the causes of the complexity inherent in Stevens: why Stevens resists neat categories such as humanist, realist, or romantic. A

fundamental difference between metaphor and metonymy is a reliance on identity and definition on the one hand and possibility on the other. Metaphor locks itself into its inherent truth value, presupposing that it correctly identifies. Metonymy does not presume to accurately identify. It offers many alternatives to suggest the intricacies of the subject, although this may lead to a certain ambiguity. Jill Matus succinctly summarizes metonymy's potential:

> metonymies are neither definitive nor absolute; they suspend sentence and make every formulation a probation. . . .[M]etonymy, by its open-ended, accumulative nature, is more amenable to notions of play than metaphor is. (310-311)

Metonymic thinking suggests an ideological shift away from a totalizing metaphoric view toward one that recognizes and embraces the knowledge of desire and the knowledge of the futility of desire. The ability to contain these two impulses marks Stevens as being on the cusp of a new way of thinking.

CHAPTER THREE

EVOLVING REALITY:

STEVENS' "ESSENTIAL POEM" AS THEORY

William C. Bevis describes "A Primitive Like an Orb" as Stevens' "theoretical" later poem (295), and it is true that Stevens' later poems tend to be more philosophical than the earlier ones.[14] It is useful then to see how the ideas developed in the later poems also work in the early lyrics. A good case in point is "A Primitive Like an Orb" (1948) and "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919). In "A Primitive Like an Orb" Stevens clearly details his ideas about reality and imagination which are intrinsic in the earlier poem.

Stevens begins "A Primitive Like an Orb" with the "the essential poem at the center of things" (*CP* 440). Stevens remarks that the essential poem is good, "an aria," but, at the same time, it is a "gorging good,"[15] and an aria made by spiritual fiddling, connoting not only a "primitive" violin music-making, but also aimless toying or manipulation of the soul. The "slick-eyed nymphs" who fetch the essential poem act like metaphor. Stevens distrusts the easy muse almost as if perception by the senses is misleading, but it is imaginative perception, not sensual perception, he is referring to here. By referring to the essential poem as

the "essential gold," Stevens associates it with the "gold flourisher" of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the misnamed epithet of the unnameable sun, and thus, back to the problem of naming. Here, too, the essential poem cannot be seen and cannot be named, especially when carried forth by "such slight genii." Genii, like the slick-eyed nymphs, are dangerous, mischievous spirits, often trapped by containment of some sort (a lamp or a jar), who try to trick their captors into releasing them. What does Stevens mean by *primitive* and *orb*, these two charged words, and how do they resemble each other if they are *like* one another?

An orb commonly implies a spherical object or ball, but may also be any of the concentric spheres in old astronomy surrounding the earth and carrying the celestial bodies in their revolutions, suggesting the idea of containment. The orb brings out again the ever-recurring image of the sun (another primal, centered source). Like the sun, the orb cannot be properly perceived. Because it cannot be truly seen, the implication remains that it can only be seen by the effects or by contiguously related images. The *orb*, then, is both the center and the surrounding margin, an early sign that things are not as simple as they may seem. Stevens creates a paradoxical construct from the beginning. A *primitive* can be several things, all of which are

plausible knowing Stevens' penchant for using a word's second, third, or fourth dictionary meaning.[16] A *primitive* is something basic, a root word, a core or center, or an unsophisticated person or self-taught artist or an artist who creates in an earlier form. Harold Bloom reads *primitive* in terms of "first," as in the first idea (*Poems of our Climate* 294). A primitive is also reminiscent of the base primitive jar and the ephebe of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

Stevens argues that the essential cannot be known by either the imaginative or the unimaginative primitive. Imagination may seem to make known, but because it is metaphoric, it is a false knowing. What then will make the essential known? The poem is structured as a dialogue between teacher and student, mentor and ephebe. The voice of the narrator-persona is in the role of teacher or guide and is evidenced by the "dear sirs" in the first stanza. There is the sense that Stevens as the narrator is to teach--to make known. The tone of "dear sirs" implies that the audience is not a peer of the narrator. However, the narrator-persona does identify with the audience by using the inclusive "we." At the same time that the narrator is able to teach, the narrator also places himself in the position of ignorance along with the listeners.

The desire of the student, or primitive, is to be like an orb. A primitive is menial, but at the same time has the ability to change, to grow, if taught. The orb, on the other hand, is the highest idea of visible reality, but is unreachable because of its location in another sphere and, at the same time, unviewable because of its supremely luminous essence. Connecting the primitive and the orb suggests desire and longing. The simile "like" promises fulfillment, but the distance between the grounded primitive and the astronomical orb is physically unfeasible. Linking them together shows both the aspiration and the futility, just as Stevens desires the ability to name the essential poem and simultaneously recognizes the futility of that desire. Miller articulates it well in his reading of the poem:

> The interpreter [of the poem] is left with a paradoxical space at once both interior and exterior, objective and linguistic, a space of elements organized as rotating rings around a center that cannot be named or identified as such and that is, moreover, not at the center at all but "eccentric," out beyond the periphery. (181)

The paradoxical space is the space of metonymy, the space metaphor elides in its push for identity. It is metonymy's ability to suspend both spaces or units together, intact,

that raises it above metaphor. Metonymy has the ability to obviate the subject and object, uniting them, but at the same time keeping their separate identities and negating neither.

Stevens never questions the existence of the essential poem; he assumes its existence from the beginning. Still the question remains of how to name it. Simile fails, as does metaphor, because Stevens recognizes the inherent falsity of the tropes. In the second section of the poem, a metonymic sense of identity becomes apparent in the line, "We do not prove the existence of the poem/It is something sensed and known in lesser poems." Lesser poems, poems written in this reality, reflect what we know of the essential poem, again a Platonic idea. Stevens identifies the coming awareness of the essential poem in a metaphor of a harmony, but a harmony "that sounds/A little and a little, suddenly." It is knowledge that takes the perceiver by surprise. Composed of disparate elements, the perception of the whole comes slowly. Stevens also points out the sensuality of the transfer: "it is something sensed" just as the harmony is audibly heard. Terry Eagleton describes the child finding its identity in Lacan's mirror stage: "The image in the mirror both is and is not itself, a blurring of subject and object obtains--it has begun the process of constructing a centre of self" (164). Stevens

describes the harmony of the orb thus: "It is and it/Is not and, therefore, is." Later, in stanza VI he describes the world personified into the mate of summer with "her mirror and her look denouncing separate selves, both one." Does the existence of the unity depend on the elements? According to Stevens, no. The harmony is its own existence separate from the constituents; as in metonymy, the two elements have their own existence. Floyd Merrell discusses how two "boundaried spaces" remain intact in a metonymic structure. But Stevens ends the section with the instant of speech, "The breadth of an accelerando moves,/Captives the being, widens--and *was* there." Significantly, Stevens does not state that it *is* there, but rather *was* there. We do not and cannot ever know the moment. We attempt to name it, but cannot; naming is futile as evidenced also in the sun/Phoebus problem of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

In this case, and in the case with the central poem and the world mentioned above, the "as if" and the "like" assigned to simile act more to identify equivalence than resemblance. The question Stevens raises is how the essential poem is known or identified and the answer lies in metonymy. Appearances are misleading: "It is/As if the central poem became the world,/And the world the central poem" (*CP* 441). The attempt at simile, as before, here with

the "as if" (what Vendler refers to as the "qualified assertion") fails. Instead of the direct relation of "as," it is now "as if." Stevens questions the power of simile, and those that read the trope as simile overlook the tone of uncertainty the *if* places on the line. The shift from simile (and metaphor) is a shift toward reality, away from the imaginative construct Stevens disdains. The "used-to earth" of reality has no influence--it is only when "the men, earth and sky inform/Each other" that a new Reality is gleaned. It requires a conjunction of contiguous elements seen in context for the new reality to be apparent. It is, however, the elements of this original reality that inform the new reality. Daniel Schwarz, in *Narrative and Representation in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens,* notes the shift in Stevens:

> as Stevens aged, the particular, the thing itself becomes the dominant interest. . . .The distinction between signifier and signified changes. Metaphor--the trope of idealism, including Platonism gives way to metonymy--the trope of Aristotelianism. (220)

Like Aristotle, Stevens rejects the ambiguity of metaphor, relying more on sensation, or intuition, than even reason, or in Stevens' terms, the imagination.[17] This is apparent

not only as Stevens aged, however. It is there from the beginning. The seeming confluence of Plato and Stevens appears symptomatic of the problem with Stevens.

The shift toward reality is reflected in the way Stevens words the poem, and the articles in "A Primitive Like an Orb" are significant to interpreting the implications of reality and imagination. *A* primitive and *an* orb are not the same as *the* primitive and *the* orb, just as *the* essential poem is not the same as *an* essential poem. The title announces *a* primitive like *an* orb, but begins with *the* essential poem. Stevens offers the representative to identify the specific, an offering that he knows is incomplete. Hillis Miller points out the same implication by juxtaposing the poem with a passage from Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Summarizing Derrida's discussion of the metaphor of the heliotrope, Miller concludes:

> by the fact that it [any word] is only a term, a word, it is not *the* word. It is only a derived image in a potentially endless sequence of images, each of which always refers to another image, an[d] so on indefinitely. (169)

We return to linearity and to metonymy as a movement or direction in Stevens' poetry and as a way to make things known. The poem is based upon a linear sequence of

renamings, emphasized in stanza three as the poem trails off into ellipses:

> A space grown wide, the inevitable blue
> of secluded thunder, an illusion, as it was,
> Oh as, always too heavy for the sense
> To seize, the obscurest, as the distant was. . .

The gap of metonymy appears again as the "space grown wide"; it is the space between the abstract and the physical--the gap which the imagination attempts to cross. It is as if Stevens cannot stop the forward motion of his quest. Stevens again begins a list when he ventures on naming the essential poem in section VIII:

> A vis, a principle or, it may be,
> The meditation of a principle,
> Or else an inherent order active to be
> Itself, a nature to its natives all
> Beneficence, a repose, utmost repose,
> The muscles of a magnet aptly felt,
> A giant. . .

In this effort to name the noun of naming, Stevens lists nine alternatives, a vis, a principle, a meditation, an order, a nature, a repose, an utmost repose, muscles, and culminates in the giant. The linear progression is crucial because it never ends; it offers itself as only suggestion or possibility. It is also a deferral, never the thing

itself--a situation that elicits desire. The giant is on the horizon which insists that there is something beyond that which the giant is.

Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology* of the chain of *supplements, which seems an appropriate and useful analogy.* In "Repetitions of a Young Captain" (ca. 1945), Stevens discusses what constitutes reality and notes that "A few words of what is real or may be/Or of glistening reference to what is real,/The universe that supplements the manqué." The manqué could refer to either the primitive or the jar as something with unrealized potential. It is the poet's task to "supplement" it, and what the poet has to supplement it with is language, "a few words," which are only signifiers "of glistening reference." Just as the ellipses continue the poem *ad infinitum*, Derrida's *supplements* continue indefinitely:

> Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception. Immediacy is derived. (157)

All this begins, Derrida notes, with what is "inconceivable to reason" (157). According to Derrida, the supplement is dangerous in that it leads away from nature. This is emphasized by the statement that the thing itself is only a "mirage," an illusion. Language is a supplement to nature, to replace the thing itself. Derrida widens his argument to include all sign systems, stating that the sign is always the "supplement to the thing itself" (145). In fact, there has never been anything outside the text: "the absolute present. . .ha[s] already escaped, ha[s] never existed" (159). Stevens then is playing with something dangerous, a possible reason he stops himself with the ellipses, although ellipses themselves signify that there is something else, just as the giant on the horizon does. There is the urge toward presence in Stevens, however, which cannot be left alone. This urge toward presence is an urge toward Reality. By eliciting as many instances as possible, there is a chance the center, Reality, may be known. Derrida argues that as one continues to progress from resemblance to resemblance it implies the possibility of getting closer. Stevens would agree, although he recognizes that he can never reach the center.

Still the question remains how to grasp the essential poem. The sound of the statement "here then" announces the certainty, as if the speaker has the answer. That answer is

an "abstraction given head," physicalized, or in the words of another poem, "an abstraction blooded." Stevens attempts to get at the most physical. Neil Easterbrook notes a similar instance in William Carlos Williams, arguing that "This is just to say" "isolates. . .raw experience. . . .No symbol, no metaphor, no trope, but literally the objects themselves" (32). Even though Easterbrook places Stevens in opposition to Williams, Stevens, too, insists on the raw experience. He defines the abstract by physicalizing it into the giant. The giant is the center, "at the center of the horizon, concentrum." Everything revolves around the giant, "whirroos/And scintillant sizzlings. . .Moving around and behind." Not only is the giant the center, but it is the origin or the source--even more, it predates the origin, being the patron of origins. The essential poem, the poem most basic, most primitive, is at the center; it is the source and the focal object, but it is clear that this center cannot be seen by Stevens as evidenced by the frustrated ellipses, so he creates the giant as an apparent metaphor.

Stevens first uses the giant in what could be considered his war poems, "Gigantomachia" and "Repetitions of a Young Captain," both from *Transport to Summer* published in 1947.[18] Possibly as a response to the war, Stevens

creates the giant to gird himself against the fragmentation he perceives resulting from the war. In "Gigantomachia" soldiers who look at the war non-metaphorically, in order "to strip off the complacent trifles,/To expel the ever present seductions,/To reject the script for its lack-tragic,/To confront with plainest eye," are able to "become a giant," and hence are able to transcend the horror of war by pure perception, foregoing the falsity of metaphor.

Similarly, "Repetitions of a Young Captain" deals with the new reality caused by the war: "The giant of sense remains/A giant without a body. If, as giant,/He shares a gigantic life, it is because/The gigantic has a reality of its own." The senses are directly related to the physicality of reality. If the sun is the bodiless half, then the giant coalesces all that is of the body, all that is sensual.

The giant becomes a focal element of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" as major man, the MacCullough, and as the "thinker of the first idea." As major man the giant is abstract, which is an important element in Stevens' conception of reality. Stevens notes in section ten of "It Must Be Abstract" that "The major abstraction is the idea of man/And the major man is its exponent, abler/In the abstract than in his singular" (388). The paradox in Stevens

continues as the more abstract Stevens becomes, the closer to a central reality he is.

But the giant is not the center; it is not a metaphor. In "A Primitive Like an Orb" the giant is on the horizon, a metonymic figure linearly spread out. Additionally, the giant is a mediatory term. According to Kronick, without the giant, immediacy and a oneness with nature would result (94). The giant is not the end product; it is part of an evolution, not what Stevens desires. Stevens describes a process. The giant is always what is evolved, but also always what will change. There is no beginning or end to the process. The appositives in the series are equivalent. Each is formed from a resemblance of the previous idea and a resemblance from that idea goes on to form the next. There is not a center--there is no depth. Stevens deals only with surfaces. Miller notes that the structure of the poem mirrors the "serial arrangement of image organized in a circular structure around an absent center" (167); the structure is that of a clock with its twelve stanzas. A clock implies a center, but with a clock, as with this poem, we are not concerned with the center. Instead, the focus is on the fringes, just as Stevens is ultimately concerned with the fringes of the poem (and reality). The giant cannot be seen because of the "whiroos" surrounding it and blocking

the view; rather we see it as a metonymic sign of something on the horizon.

Stevens ends the poem with "That's it." Either a pointing sign to the object of the poem, or a statement of resignation, or possibly both: that is all that he can do. Stevens objectifies the abstract by invoking the senses: touch, sight, and hearing--"The lover writes, the believer hears,\The poet mumbles and the painter sees." The sensual abilities are the bases of reality and the knowledge of one's relation to it. Even here Stevens shies away from a totalizing figure; instead, it is a more metonymic figure delineated by distinct particulars. Stevens notes that each is a part, separate but whole: "Each one, his fated eccentricity,/As a part, but part, but tenacious particle." The part is a sign of an other, an Other of the totality, "the total/Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods of color."

Stevens' desire in "A Primitive Like an Orb" and most of his poems is to make things known, to name the unnameable, be it the Sun or the essential poem, or even more so, intertwined with these terms, Reality. Metaphor is the easy way to name the abstract--to substitute something already known for the unknowable, but Stevens realizes that this is not truly naming, that metaphor is false. Metaphor clouds and loses the abstract with the substitution of the

metaphoric term for the abstract. Metaphor is a totalizing figure in that the metaphor becomes a center to its own system. Stevens recognizes the lack of a way to name the abstract. Much of the complexity in Stevens results from the juxtaposition of the abstract, the unnameable, with the physical. He therefore culminates with the "giant of nothingness" as the final statement of the series of the total. An oxymoronic ending, combining the giant with nothing. But it must be remembered that the giant is only an attempt, a partial attempt at best, to name; it is one aspect of the process of naming.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIGURING REALITY:

STEVENS' JAR AS METONYMY

"Your trouble, Wallace, is that you
write about--*bric-a-brac*."
--Robert Frost to Wallace Stevens

Stevens' 1919 poem "Anecdote of the Jar" is one of his most well-known and anthologized poems. Its seemingly simplistic, but simultaneously ambiguous, appearance invites critical attention. Every major critical work on Stevens must and has, if only passingly, turned its attention to this little poem. Reflective of Stevens criticism as a whole, criticism on "Anecdote of the Jar" has ranged over a variety of approaches and reached a number of conclusions. A metonymic reading of the poem shows how the poem addresses the underlying issues of reality and imagination and confronts the problem of metaphor.

Romantic readings of the poem focus on the jar and ascribe to it a transcendent, metaphoric value.[19] They comment on how the jar acts as an ordering agent by juxtaposing the jar with the wilderness, and suggest that the jar is a metaphor for Stevens' rage for order. Frank Kermode describes the poem in these metaphoric terms: "jar as symbol of fixed, orderly and dead, within natural, diffuse and live landscape." In his book *Wallace Stevens'*

Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism, Joseph Carroll remarks that the jar "serves as an extension of the poet's own drive to order" (36); for Carroll, the jar corresponds to the Romantic notion of the inner self aligning with the external world. Yvor Winters, in the *Anatomy of Nonsense*, is one of the earliest critics to cite the Romantic identification of the jar as art and to interpret the poem as describing how art corrupts nature. Patricia Merivale agrees with Winters but claims that the jar is a transposed Keatsean Grecian urn, and that the poem mocks the death of Romanticism. Early on, the debate was evident as the editors of *The Explicator* argued that Winters' reading seemed forced. The poem, according to them, is a statement of aesthetics and imagination. However, the poem is not to be accorded the "validity or status of a philosophical conclusion." The implication is that this early poem is slight in comparison with other, later works. I maintain, however, that "Anecdote of the Jar" contains all the complexity of Stevens' later works.

Alison Ensor and John William Corrington resist partially the impulse to metaphorize the jar. Both discuss the jar in terms of its ambivalence. For one, Ensor refutes the argument that the word *Tennessee* refers to a specific place or event, such as the Fugitive poets at Vanderbilt or

the Tennessee Valley Authority dam project, and that the poem then is a social commentary.[20] It is not a specifically political allegory. She concludes that both the jar and Tennessee are based in uncertainty--Stevens both praises and damns them. Corrington makes an important shift by emphasizing the presence of the narrator-persona and moving the activity of the poem into the mind of the narrator. Corrington refutes Riddel's and others' claim that the tension exists between art and nature symbolized by the jar and the wilderness. Corrington states that the tension exists only in the mind of the narrator. While Corrington does argue that the jar represents (synonymous with metaphor and symbol in this instance) the metaphorical act, he concludes that the poem ends with a realization of the irresolvable dilemma--"wholeness is forever sought, never to be realized" (51).[21]

However, the jar is not an allegory or a metaphor. Stevens never attempts any metaphoric implications in the poem. It is helpful to quote the poem in its entirety:

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> The wilderness rose up to it,

And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

First, Stevens clearly defines the poem as an anecdote in the title. That he uses the term *anecdote* often in titles is significant because it announces the marginal nature of what follows.[22] In *Ariel and the Police*, Frank Lentricchia relates the marginal nature of the jar to the whole notion of anecdote. Discussing anecdote as representation, Lentricchia states the following:

> [An anecdote] apparently stands in for a bigger story, a socially pivotal and culturally pervasive biography which it illuminates--in an anecdotal flash it reveals the essence of the larger unspoken story. (3)

While Lentricchia's reading politicizes the jar, taking the unspoken story to be a politically social one, a criticism of literary and social history (20), his focus on the incidental and marginal are well taken. It is the function

of the jar as marginal to suggest, while not directly stating the identity of the center. As Lentricchia puts it, the anecdote gives the "essence" but not the actual thing itself.

Stevens also avoids ascribing metaphoric value to the jar by noting that the jar resists substitution. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that the author does not make the jar but only places it (707), eliding over the fact of its manufacture, seeing it somehow as an essential nature. It is as basic as Stevens can get. Stevens could have selected anything as the focal point of the poem, but he decided to use the container image of the jar. The word itself is an interesting choice, as "jar" connotes baseness, not an abstraction or an ornate figure. The sound of the word indicates an abrupt shaking, as in "to jar," as if Stevens is attempting to shock the reader into realizing that this is something different. It is not a vase or an urn, but rather a simple jar, in Stevens' mind an "American" object. The baseness of the jar, the object he selects, implies that it is a reality untouched by the imagination, non-altered, just the basic reality. This is where Stevens' concept of the imagination differs from the Romantics'; Keats' Grecian urn, for example, is clearly not the same as Stevens' jar.

The jar is simplistic, not a "meaningless chaos of sense impressions" (Johnson 30), but like the poem, it is

deceptive. It does not become part of the wilderness. The jar will not replace the wilderness or the hill. The focus of the poem is the whole context of the jar along with the hill, the wilderness, Tennessee, and the narrator. What results is a vertical pile-up, a metonymic chain. Verticality, the common purview of metaphor, is undercut here in that the poem describes a pile-up, and thus the elements will not substitute as metaphor would do. The jar and the wilderness never come into contact; there is only movement upward, and they remain separate. Each element becomes related to the other, not by any sense of identity or resemblance, but by their contiguous relation. That Stevens' metonymic figure is vertical, instead of horizontal, suggests Stevens is questioning metonymy's traditional formulation. Stevens shifts the structure from a horizontal axis leading off into infinity to a structure based partly on the idea of the horizon. He suggests that more so than even a figure composed of a center surrounded by contiguous objects, his metonymic structure is a figure which partakes of the horizon. The distinction between the subject and object is marked by their being on either side of the horizon with the mediating metonymic term on the horizon. The subject and object are forever separated by the gap formed by the horizon.

Not only is there a gap physically between the elements, there is also a gap that does not allow identity. Attempting to bridge this gap, the romantics transform the jar into a metaphor for order, effacing the jar in the process. However, the jar is not effaced. As marginal, the jar maintains its own unique existence and identity. The jar is the jar--Stevens insists on its reality with the insistent declaration of its existence by the use of identificative statements: the jar "was round," the jar "was gray," and the jar "did not give of bird or bush." The jar does not become part of the wilderness: the wilderness around the jar only "rose up to it." It is in this space between the contiguous elements, between the jar and the wilderness, and the jar and narrator, that there is lack where a desire for metaphor would be manifested. There is no substitution and no metaphor. By creating the jar as metaphor, Stevens would lose the sense of reality of the jar; it would become something else, a deceptive metaphor. This tension, between substitution and contiguity, is a key tension in Stevens.

The third way Stevens subverts metaphor is through a close examination of the center. Stevens is ambivalent about the place of the center in "Anecdote of the Jar." The image of a center appears repeatedly in Stevens' poetry.

Thomas F. Walsh, in his *Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, cites eighty-seven references to the words "center," "centre," and "central." With the synonyms "core," "essence," "essential," quintessence," "epitome," "core," "earth," "nave," "axis," "pivot," "converge," "clou," "nuclear," and "concentrum" the total comes to 205. While not so prevalent in *Harmonium*, the image of the center becomes more and more common later. The most explicit example from *Harmonium* is "Life is Motion." Here the center or the central focus of action is the stump: "Bonnie and Jose,/Dressed in calico,/Danced around a stump" (*CP* 83), an interesting choice for a center, the castrated, lacking stump. Various critics have seen the center as important to Stevens. According to James Baird in *The Dome and the Rock*, "always it is the center which is sought" (108). The search for a center becomes a metaphor for Stevens' poetry, characterized by such words as "voyage," "seeking," and "search."[23] Isabel McCaffrey notes that "Stevens' voyage toward the possible. . .is also a voyage to the center" (611), and Joseph Carroll discusses Stevens' poetics in terms of seeking (3). McCaffrey implies that Stevens' search is for the real by using the term "possible." Northrop Frye describes this aspect of Stevens as related to William Blake: "Perhaps Stevens, like Blake, has so far

only given us the end of a golden string, and after traversing the circle of natural images we have still to seek the center" (70). Frye suggests a tenuous link with the Romantics, which would lend Frye's reading then to a metaphoric reading, but the image of the center suggests a metonymic possibility: we never get to the "thing itself." About the idea of searching for a center, Stevens wrote in a letter to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, who was on the faculty of the College of St. Teresa, Winona, Minnesota:

> I don't want to turn to stone under your very eyes by saying 'This is the centre that I seek and this alone.' Your mind is too much like my own for it to seem to be an evasion on my part to say merely that I do seek a centre and expect to go on seeking it. I don't say that I shall not find it or that I do not expect to find it. It is the great necessity even without specific identification. (*L* 584)

For something to be central demands something other to surround or contain it. Containment creates a system, a context of all elements. The initial level of containment in "Anecdote of the Jar" is the hill surrounding the jar. The placement of the word *round* in the second line acts with double meaning, implying both the roundness of the jar and

the circular geometry of the hill. The poem exudes a *round* circular image with *round* appearing several more times throughout the poem: round (line 1), sur*round* (line 4), a*round* (line 6), round and g*round* (line 7).

Around the hill, Stevens places the wilderness "to surround the hill" as the second level of containment. For most readers, the poem remains at this level, distinguishing the connection between the wilderness and the jar. Even more than this, the state of Tennessee surrounds all three: the wilderness, the hill, and the jar. Being an arbitrary abstraction, the concept of Tennessee as a state is a man-made construction, like the jar. Both of these are an ordering, an act of man's imagination, and can be possibly read as an effort to contain. Tennessee surrounds not only the elements of the poem but also the poem itself. The word *Tennessee* brackets the poem, appearing in the first and the last lines. Essentially all of the words in the poem are contained between the two instances of the word *Tennessee* (only the first five, "I placed a jar in," remain outside). The "I" is outside the context, but contiguous with it. It is indeed the instigator, the cause of the system, for it injects the jar into the previously closed system.

In an attempt to bring the jar to the center, to give structure to the poem, and to satisfy his rage for order,

Stevens remarks that the jar dominates: "it took dominion everywhere." Roy Harvey Pearce deduces that the jar is a fruit jar, a "Dominion Wide Mouth Special," ("Iconological Note" 65), an obvious play on the word "dominion" from the poem itself. If Pearce's assumption is correct, then the transparency of the glass clearly exhibits its emptiness, although the greyness of a Dominion Wide Mouth Special jar also suggests a sense of translucence which would tend to hide the contents. Stevens indicates the lack of a center, but also clouds that indication with this choice of subject. At the same time that the poem is constructed around increasing levels of containment, then, what would be considered the center, the jar, itself hides the center. The jar as a container is only an empty one; not only is it base, but it is incomplete. By foregrounding the object, Stevens establishes it as privileged reality, and the real becomes the center in Stevens' poetry. Stevens claims this center as a non-metaphorical center, but by the end of the poem, he realizes it is not a center. In "Anecdote of the Jar," the word *was* in line 7 is the actual center of the poem (excluding the title), not *jar*. One word before *was*, however, is *jar*. Contiguous with the center, the jar is just off center, the climax of the poem and thematically the central part.[24] In the line before, the wilderness becomes

"no longer wild" and the jar can dominate. As the poem concludes, however, the jar is reduced by its being "grey and bare" and by the fact that it "did not give of bird or bush." Also, as noted above, the first appearance of the word *jar* in the poem's first line appears outside the bracket of Tennessee. Other than the first occasion of the word, the word itself only appears two more times. Elsewhere it is referred to as *it*. Its no longer being mentioned by name might imply that the jar truly exists outside the frame of containment.

If the jar is not a metaphor, what is it? Most readers focus on the jar, just as they focus on the giant at the end of "A Primitive Like an Orb." But the giant is not the end of the process--there is not a beginning or an end to the process as the appositive structure of the poem suggests. Likewise, the jar is only part of a system: the other elements, the hill, the wilderness, Tennessee, and the narrator-persona are also involved. Taken together, they inform each other, as Stevens declares must happen in "A Primitive Like an Orb." The jar is empty and "does not give of bird or bush," but when placed in conjunction with the wilderness, it partakes of some sense of dominance. Likewise, the wilderness is chaotic on its own, but with the jar it is "no longer wild." It gains a sense of order.

Even the "I" is informed by the context. The "I" is the instigator of the system, and has a metonymic relation to the jar, the wilderness, and Tennessee. Because the "I" can place the jar, it has a structural importance to the contextual creation. Each part is a part of the whole. Together they create a harmony.

However, a problem arises. Just as Stevens becomes definite, he undercuts his own statement. When the jar comes to dominate, Stevens remarks that "It took dominion everywhere." The next line is "The jar was grey and bare." The jar's dominion is short-lived. By its physical nature alone, the jar is nothing--base, empty, nothing; it is only a jar. In the gap between these lines, Stevens subverts the jar's avowed dominance and power. The jar is man-made, like the state of Tennessee, and it has an origin, an Other that precedes it. It is the "I" which is the initial ordering agent, the "I" that places the jar in Tennessee. This agent is another centering urge in the poem, but the "I" in the poem is also part of the poem that is not contained in the bracket of Tennessee; it too has been omitted, or displaced. The wilderness sprawled around. As some critics suggest, the wilderness never loses its chaotic, slovenly nature. Only with the jar does it have an order, but it is only an imaginative one, created by a conjunction between the jar and the wilderness.

For Stevens the conception of reality is a problem. The jar is empty and does not contain what Stevens desires. It is a center that Stevens cannot reach, only one he can desire, a fragile desire that cannot be met. He makes the significant difference in the title and the rest of the poem, similar to what he does in "A Primitive Like an Orb." In the title, it is *the* jar, whereas in the poem, it is *a* jar.[25] It is a difference between specificity and generality, or model and exemplum. Stevens desires to locate *the* jar, the essential reality, but to do so he can only describe *a* jar, an example of reality which may correspond with Reality. By emphasizing the apparent centeredness of the jar and then unmasking it, he leaves a gap, the gap between *the* jar and *a* jar. By locating the gap, Stevens emphasizes the lack of *a* jar to represent *the* jar, leaving only a jar as the poetic material, which for Stevens is an appropriate situation.

When Robert Frost charges Stevens with writing about bric-a-brac, he is actually aptly describing Stevens' poetics. Bric-a-brac--ephemeral, marginal, cluttered items--is what fills Stevens' poems. Stevens does not focus on *things*. Instead, he focuses on the marginal: the long lists of appositives, the multiple ways of naming something, the many attempts to elicit the essence of Reality. Stevens

knows he cannot directly name the *thing*, that is, Reality--it is beyond the reality in which he exists. The "seem" of naming, especially metaphoric naming, is disdainful to Stevens, so he suffices to live with that knowledge. As he states in "The Emperor of Ice Cream" "Let be be finale of seem" (*CP* 64). By enumerating metonymic instances, he does not give in to the metaphoric impulse to exist in an imaginative construct that he knows to be false. Instead, he dwells on the pleasures of reality to articulate his desire for Reality.

Notes

[1]This line along with the headnote to chapter four is from a conversation between Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost that took place in Key West, Florida, February, 1940, as reported by Lawrence Thompson in *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938*, p.665-666. Thompson notes that he heard Stevens make "half-playful, half-serious complaints" against Frost's poetry (666).

Stevens and Frost met several times in Florida, as well as in Connecticut. Thompson cites a reminiscence of Robert Bartlett concerning Stevens' and Frost's relationship:

> Robert Frost told a story of an evening, much of a night, spent in Florida with a New Englander, vice-president of a big Connecticut insurance company, but also a poet--kept the two lives absolutely separate. . . .The vice president-poet drank heavily at dinner, offended by making passes at the waitresses, and in the hotel room was very drunk. . . .The next day he remembered nothing whatever of what had happened. . . .Seen in Connecticut at a later date, the vice-president rather shamefacedly had referred to the Florida episode. Down there he drank--never at home; but his countenance belied his statement. Robert

> Frost rather liked the man in some ways. (665-666)

[2]This adulterated reality may be a symptom of the common theme of sexual perversion in modernist literature also exhibited by writers such as D.H. Lawrence and by T.S. Eliot in "The Waste Land."

[3]B.J. Leggett, in the introduction to her study, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory*, states the ambiguity as follows:

> Stevens is the poet of the imagination; he is the poet of reality. He is the doctrinal poet of ideas; he is the poet of words, less concerned with doctrine than with feeling. He is a Symbolist; he stands opposed to the Symbolist and post-Symbolist poets. He belongs to an idealist tradition; he belongs to a naturalistic tradition. He has shown no major change in growth, so that his late poems partake of the same sensibility and the same intellectual climate as his early verse; he exhibits a great change in sensibility and a major change in growth from the early to the late poems. He works through a dialectical process from thesis to antithesis to synthesis; his poetry is not dialectical in any Hegelian sense. His

> private symbolism is consistent throughout his poetry; his symbols such as the sun and moon, blue and green, do not always mean the same thing. His poet-hero is not a human individual but an abstraction who does not exist in our world; his hero is always the human individual, and he may be any man who exists among his fellows in a mythless age. (3)

[4]It is a "well-worn path," according to Leonard and Wharton (1).

[5]Most of the recent scholarship on Stevens includes some sort of survey of the diverse and changing reaction to Stevens' poetry. Of these, the most useful include Melita Schaum's *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools* and Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese's introduction to their 1988 volume, *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens*. Although an earlier work, Joseph Riddell's essay "Contours of Stevens' Criticism" is also valuable. Writing at the end of Stevens' life, Riddel prophecies a Stevens industry to come. His choice of the word "contours" in the title of the review essay establishes a metaphor that aptly describes the ups and downs of Stevens' critical reception and understanding.

What I have attempted in this first chapter is only a representative sample of the major critics of Stevens. A

full survey of the critical scholarship is beyond the scope of this study. John Serio's annotated bibliography of Stevens criticism is the most valuable reference work for Stevens study that has recently appeared.

[6]Serio's bibliography and Melita Schaum's book, as well as Abbie Willard's earlier review, create a similar narrative.

[7]Although Vendler's book has been well-received by many, it has also been under scrutiny. Paul Bové has discussed her ironic reading of Stevens as discrediting the Romantic impulse. Bové's critique progresses from seeing her as too New Critical. He writes this charge:

> Vendler's view of Stevens' poems as circles gathering 'beginning to end' and apotheosizing themselves as Absolute Images of verbal purity is the result of a circular argument which stems from the sedimented, reified, covered-over habits of reading Modern texts from a New Critical point of view. (184)

See also Joseph Riddel's critique "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking."

[8]For a further discussion of the sun as metaphor, especially in terms of the heliotrope, see Jacques Derrida's essay "White Mythology." For a discussion of Derrida's works, in terms of the heliotrope, see Rael Meyerowitz's

"The Uncanny Sun" in *Hebrew University Studies in Literature* and Patricia Parker's "The Motive for Metaphor: Stevens and Derrida" in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.

[9]In contrast to Bump, Stuart Peterfreund states that the goal of science from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century had as its purpose the understanding of natural cause and effect in order to reassert Adamic power and forge a closer relationship with the divine as first cause. Peterfreund argues that the metonymic was the best approach to this power (66). Peterfreund's formulation of metonymy, however, derived from Abrams, Vico and Umberto Eco, suggests metonymy is causative as well as substitutive. Metaphor, on the other hand, is contextual. This argument, I would counter, takes its precedence from assuming that language precedes reality.

[10]Willard Bohn's "Roman Jakobson's Theory of Metaphor and Metonymy: An Annotated Bibliography" is a valuable survey of the criticism employing these terms. It does, however, leave out several articles appearing after its publication in 1984, including Leon Surette's "Metaphor and Metonymy: Jakobson Reconsidered," Barbara Johnson's "Metaphor, metonymy and voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," and Jill Matus' "Proxy and Proximity: Metonymic Signing."

[11]*The Modes of Modern Writing* contains Lodge's best discussion of metonymy, including a schematicized table labeling different discourses as either metaphoric and metonymic:

METAPHOR	METONYMY
Paradigm	Syntagm
Similarity	Contiguity
Selection	Combination
Substitution	[Deletion] Contexture
Contiguity Disorder	Similarity Disorder
Contexture Deficiency	Selection Deficiency
Drama	Film
Montage	Close-Up
Dream symbolism	Dream Condensation & Displacement
Surrealism	Cubism
Imitative Magic	Contagious Magic
Poetry	Prose
Lyric	Epic
Romanticism & Symbolism	Realism

(81)

[12]See De Man, *Allegories of Reading;* Culler, *Pursuit of Signs;* and Jameson, *The Political Unconscious.*

[13]For further discussion along these lines, see Floyd Merrel's discussion of the process in *Semiotic Foundations: Steps toward an Epistemology of Written Texts* (esp. 52-54). Merrel uses the construction of "boundaried spaces" as semiotic units, and sees metaphor as a contraction of two boundaried spaces, which results in negation. Metonymy, on the other hand, is considered as an expansion as the two boundaried spaces can coexist.

[14]Many discussions of Stevens utilize the shorter lyrics such as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Earthy Anecdote," "Emperor of Ice Cream," and "Anecdote of the Jar" to establish basic issues that are expanded in later, longer poems. *Teaching Wallace Stevens: Practical Essays*, edited by John N. Serio and B.J. Leggett, contains many accounts of the practice of prefacing the longer poems with the shorter poems. In her contribution, for example, Helen Vendler suggests teaching a long poem together with a short poem having similar subjects, such as "Sunday Morning" and "Ploughing on Sunday" (7). Milton J. Bates' problem is deciding on which poem to first confront students with; he has considered "short" poems such as "Anecdote of the Jar," "The Snow Man," and "Earthy Anecdote," but considers "The Emperor of Ice Cream" the best (18-19). Finally, James C. Ransom's teaching of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" assumes a familiarity with the shorter lyrics (74-75). Reversing this approach, however, works just as well, and it is useful to note how the issues elaborated on in the longer poems work in the shorter poems.

[15]The gorging adjective is one of the few gustatory images in Stevens that I have noticed. The poem "Someone puts a Pineapple on the Table" from "Three Academic Pieces" printed in *The Necessary Angel*, is one that does include the

sense of smell. There is a decided emphasis on the senses, but it is usually sight, hearing, or touch, not taste or smell.

The title of Stevens' poem "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs" (*CP* 78) does suggest a certain carnivorous attitude. The ever-increasing levels of containment, or in this case, consumption, is an interesting turn on the idea of containing which raises several questions. Does the act of eating/containing alter or transform the thing(s) eaten? Is there a basic reality in the middle of all of the "containers?"

[16]In his oral biography of Stevens, Peter Brazeau includes remarks by several assistants at the Hartford Insurance Company which detail their trips to the library in order to look up a word, presumably for inclusion in Stevens' poetry. Charles O'Dowd, for one, remembers reading words in Stevens' correspondence that did not seem to fit:

> [I] would do exactly what he [Stevens] used to do all the time: go out into the law library and get Webster's big dictionary, look [up] the word, and sure enough, it was right on the spot. . . . Maybe it was the tenth or twelfth meaning, but it would be exactly the word that fitted what he was

> trying to get across. . . . He [Stevens] would go after a precise, even though remote meaning. (40)

[17]Stevens' most pervasive philosophic influence, widely agreed by critics, is the Platonic philosopher Santayana. George Lensing describes one way Santayana may have influenced Stevens:

> [In Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*] Santayana approaches Stevens' own resolution of the dichotomy [fact-ideal]: the mind begins with facts but proceeds to 'ideal constructions.' Another part of his theory, however, was less consistent with Stevens'. While Stevens would go 'through' facts to discover the imaginative ideal, Santayana insisted that the alliance between the real and the imagined was in the end an unholy one. . . .Although Stevens would later share Santayana's notion that the imagination was 'unreal,'. . .he would hold more firmly than Santayana to the role of facts as not only a 'starting point' but also a pervasive and continuing presence in the exercise of the imagination. For Santayana, the

> imagination. . .should acknowledge its discrete efficacy apart from 'brute fact' and thus resist the temptation to validate itself in the name of empirical truth. (27-28)

[18]Although not as prevalent as other modes of Stevens criticism, there has been recent work on political thought and influence in his poetry, including the effect of the world wars. Alan Filreis has published several studies, including *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, "Stevens' Home Front," and "'This Posture of the Nerves': Stevens Partisan Center." See also works by Jahan Ramazani, including "Stevens and the War Elegy" and "Elegy and Anti-Elegy in Stevens' *Harmonium*: Mockery, Melancholia, and the Pathetic Fallacy."

[19]See chapter one for an explanation of the use of the term Romantic as type of critic.

[20] Henry V. Wells first claimed "Anecdote of the Jar" to be about the Fugitive poets, while Charles Walcutt tells of a student paper which suggested the idea of the Tennessee Valley Authority dam project.

[21]Other criticism of "Anecdote of the Jar" includes Eugene Nasser's figurative study of the jar, Jonathan Holden's mathematically-based study, Donald Gutierrez's circular study, and W.J.T. Mitchell's and Kinereth Meyer's

studies of ekphrasis. Frank Lentricchia has an interesting account of the jar as an introduction to his book *Ariel and the Police.*

Tom Quirk discusses "Anecdote of the Jar" in his discussion of American Realists. According to Quirk, there are two concepts of reality working in American literature:

> There is the real of realism--i.e., the natural realism of a common vision--and there is the naive realism of pure experience before secondary conceptions have been interposed between that experience and our appropriation of it as thought. (47)

Quirk's description aptly describes Stevens' conception of reality and imagination. Quirk says of "Anecdote of the Jar" that it is an "immanent world of unceasing change, only glimpsed by the senses but formalized and composed by the imagination" (50).

[22]Other anecdotal titles include "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand," "Anecdote of Canna," "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks," and "Earthy Anecdote," all from *Harmonium.* This idea is further reinforced by noting that Stevens considered titling *Harmonium, The Whole of Harmonium: Primary Minutiae.*

[23]From Walsh's concordance, there are thirty-five references to "seek," "seeker," "seeking," and "seeks;" thirty-one references to "search," "searched," "searches," "searching," and "sought;" and nine references to "voyage," "voyager," and "voyaging." Other synonyms are possible.

[24]In his introduction to Stevens, Robert Pack also notices the apparent structural play in Stevens. He describes how the "stump" around which Bonnie and Josie dance in Stevens' poem "Life is Motion" is the actual center of the poem (69).

[25]This small difference appears to elude some. Donald Gutierrez cites the title as "Anecdote of a Jar" at one point, and "Anecdote of the Jar" at another in his article on Stevens and William Carlos Williams (53-54).

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