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Wallace Stevens' Search for a "Supreme Fiction"

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY

WALLACE STEVENS' SEARCH
FOR A "SUPREME FICTION"

by

John H. Thissen

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of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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CHAPTER ONE:
GENERAL BACKGROUND

One of the most quotable quotes of the past two centuries is Nietzsche's assertion that "God is dead." The Christian, or any believer for that matter, must admit to himself that this statement is partially true. No amount of wishing that things were otherwise can alter the undeniable fact that, for a large portion of mankind, God is truly ^{dead} or, at least, irrelevant. Since the Middle Ages there has been a steady glacier of unbelief and religious apathy moving across the Western world, leading some to label our civilization "post-Christian."

One of the most interesting products of post-christianity, Wallace Stevens, is the subject of this thesis. My aim will be to place Stevens in his context of modern unbelief and to evaluate his response to the pressures which life in a godless vacuum of affluent materialism exerts on the soul of a sensitive poet. By examining the methodology he used to create his "world of the imagination," I hope to be able to cast some light on the underlying motives of his whole work.

There are relatively few available facts on his private life other than some schematic, "dust-jacket" resumes. This is typical of the man. He preferred to let his poems speak for themselves, although on occasion he spoke in the form of a sort of allegorical autobiography. A good example of this is a poem I will discuss in Chapter III, "The Comedian as the Letter C."¹ But, for the most part, we have only the bare outlines of his life, encrusted with a good deal of legend.

From first to last Stevens' poems have an amazing homogeneity. Throughout his career as a writer, he developed a group of ideas that were present in almost everything he wrote. Roy Harvey Pearce summarizes Stevens' work during thirty years as "a whole and continuing poetry whose subject is the life, the form and function of the imagination."² More precisely, he wrote about the "poetic" imagination. Indeed, the great majority of his poems are, in some way or other, about poetry, about what he called "the poem of the act of the mind."³ The function of the imagination in shaping the reality it encounters provided him with both a subject matter and a method of handling that subject matter.

¹The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 27-46. This book will be referred to as CP.

²Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," PMLA, LXVI (1951), 361.

³"Of Modern Poetry," CP, p. 240.

Imagination and its contact with reality provided him with a theme on which he worked endless variations. As early as 1917 he expressed his intention of sticking to one problem and thoroughly exploring it. He told Williams

Personally I have a distaste for miscellany. . . . Given a fixed point of view, realistic, imagistic, or what you will, everything adjusts itself to that point of view; and the process of adjustment is a world of flux, as it should be for the poet. But to fidget with points of view leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility. A single manner or mood thoroughly matured and exploited is that fresh thing.⁴

He felt that such single-mindedness would eventually have as its reward a significant addition to esthetics. His wish was a real one: "There is nothing that I desire more intensely than to make a contribution to the theory of poetry."⁵ And so he stuck with his subject until, as an old man, he could say

It makes so little difference, at so much more
Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before.⁶

But, in spite of a sameness in his work, there is a constant newness in his approaches to the one basic problem of imagination vs. reality. And this is because Stevens did much more than merely theorize

⁴William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1950), p. 42.

⁵Ibid., p. 41.

⁶"Long and Sluggish Lines," CP, p. 522. Even in this late poem, he is complaining that, despite all his efforts, "the life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun."

about poetics and "cognitional processes." O'Connor speaks of him as an "explicator," but one "whose subject is esthetics, not merely in its relation to sensibility and intellect, but to belief, morality and society."⁷ It is this larger scope -- the moral world -- in Stevens that is the main concern of this thesis.

He found that the imaginative faculty, so fascinating to him when looked on merely as a sort of cornucopia filled with gaudy treasures, could also be put to much more valuable use. By creating a world it could give mankind something to believe in. O'Connor describes this shift from playfulness to moral concern:

Holding to his major theme, the relation between imagination and reality as coequals, Stevens has moved beyond a concern with esthetics (although he was never, as he had been called, a "pure poet") to a concern with the relationship between imagination and humanistic ideals, morality and belief. Like many of the other moderns, Stevens finds the old beliefs "obsolete." Even though we have lost "the idea of God," we are free to substitute an "idea of man." . . . But Stevens is never naive. He is not asking that the poet project filmy ideals and proceed to live within them.⁸

J. V. Cunningham characterizes Stevens' need as one for "some intuition of permanence in the experience of absoluteness, though this be illusory and transitory, something to satisfy the deeply engrained longings of his religious feeling."⁹

⁷O'Connor, p. 39.

⁸Ibid., p. 26.

⁹J. V. Cunningham, Tradition and Poetic Structure (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 122.

There must be a point of reference, an absolute, or a touchstone of some kind on which to base life. Stevens faced this problem squarely:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.¹⁰

These prologues, of course, are the decline of religion and the rise of unbelief -- the death of God. Jacques Maritain sees Stevens as a man who has "rejected faith in Transcendence and entered into the spiritual experience of the void." Men like Stevens

are bound -- as men -- to turn toward a substitute for what they have rejected; a new god of their own, or a system of revolt against and hatred for the celestial intruder, as Lautreamont put it, or that "profundum physical thunder, dimensions in which we believe without belief, beyond belief" of which Wallace Stevens spoke -- all this sought for in the place of God from whom they had parted. This nostalgia has directly to do, not with their poetic work, but with their humanity, with those substructures and preconditions on which poetry depends indirectly.¹¹

Formerly, in the "ages of faith," man's life was anchored firmly to the immovable rock of Divinity. The poet felt certain of some things at least.

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what

¹⁰"Asides on the Oboe," CP, p. 250.

¹¹Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry (New York: Pantheon, 1953), p. 181 n. For Stevens' comments on Maritain, see The Necessary Angel (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 50. The Necessary Angel will be referred to as NA.

Was in the script.
 Then the theatre was changed
 To something else. Its past was a souvenir.¹²

With the rise of modern rationalism (which Stevens dislikes intensely) and the breakup of much of the West's Christian tradition, the world became an empty one. Like Camus' garden, walled with death and surrounded by nothingness, the world presents a modern thinker with a puzzling void. Louis L. Martz describes the "before and after" as it is found in Stevens' writings:

[He] represents the state of man from which his poems spring. The world of Greek myth and traditional beauty, the world of the Hebrew Deity, the world of Nordic legend--worlds of imaginative faith and of unity between man and the universe--these things are gone. Man, disinherited, has become the alien of the universe. No miraculous mamma fails. Wallace Stevens lives in a world from which the elemental, the supernatural, and the mythical have been drained, and in which the deeper instincts of the human race are consequently starving. Somehow, by his own mind and senses, man must find sustenance, must make terms with air and earth, must establish some relation between himself and the world about him. . . . This is the poet's mission.¹³

The attempt to compensate for a lack of meaning in life has led many men into a private world of schizophrenia. The human mind wishes to attach itself to something and not to remain an uncommitted blank indefinitely. But if the dangers involved in finding an absolute are great, how much more difficult is this attempt when the

¹²"Of Modern Poetry," CP, p. 239.

¹³Louis L. Martz, "The World of Wallace Stevens," in Modern American Poetry (New York: Roy, 1950), ed. B. Rajan, pp. 94-95.

object is openly recognized and admitted to be a fictional one? And yet this is exactly what Stevens does. He sees man as so constructed that he needs beliefs; but, in the absence of moral realities worthy of belief, he proceeds to his conclusion with fearless logic: "The final belief must be in a fiction." As O'Connor explains it,

he acknowledges that beliefs are fictions, but holds that some fictions accord with our needs, like the fiction of heroism, nobility, love, or the brotherhood of man. We can believe in them even though we know that to some extent they are our own creations, that our desires, feelings and rituals help to create and sustain them. Having created them, we can live with them.¹⁴

Such a mission precludes anything like a solipsistic wish to live merely in a private world of the imagination. All men have these needs for belief; and, without being a crusader, Stevens feels that the poet's function is to share his new world with his fellow men. He is obliged

not only to discover but to be sure of this belief, to justify it for his reader, and to express it in symbols that are understandable and affecting. . . He must construct his own state (as, indeed, Stevens himself has done, in terms of a subject matter, beliefs, a dramatis personae and an iconography peculiar to his poetry).¹⁵

Realist that he is, Stevens does not expect to be able to renew the world as he would like, but he feels that he must do what he can. He does not propose the poet as prophet of a new millenium. Rather, "his proposal is more modest -- that we accept the imagination,

¹⁴O'Connor, p. 69.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 120.

and therefore its capacity for helping us live, in esthetic and in moral terms, more humanly. If man cannot be divine, he can be human.¹⁶ And yet, faced with a certain amount of inevitable failure in trying to do what he half-admits is impossible, Stevens acknowledges himself to be

A most inappropriate man
In a most unpropitious place.¹⁷

To what extent is this self-analysis true? It seems probable that the "place," America in the twentieth century, offers little consolation to a controlled romantic like Stevens. But whether or not he is an "inappropriate" poet for this age is another question. The opinions of critics differ considerably. Most acknowledge him to be one of the outstanding artists of our time, but not all do so for the same reason. His metrical skill and power of evoking complex emotions through a masterful use of nuance single him out as one of the best verse technicians America has produced. On this all agree.

So much for his poetic structure, what about his content? Did he actually succeed in constructing a satisfactory world? In "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," a work which will occupy a major portion of this thesis (Chapter IV), he spoke of finding his beliefs justified.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁷"Sailing After Lunch," CP, p. 120.

That's it: the more than rational distortion
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mando.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.¹⁸

The next chapter will examine the philosophical background
that helped Stevens in his attempt to find an object of belief,
to "get it right."

¹⁸CP, pp. 406-7.

CHAPTER TWO: IMAGINATION,
THE CENTRAL THEME OF STEVENS' POETRY

An original thinker is never original in a vacuum. His originality consists in overlaying the thoughts of others with his own subjectivity. In Stevens' case we find a highly individualized approach applied to a frequently explored set of values. Speaking simplistically, when philosophers choose up sides, they tend to form the idealists vs. the rationalists. Other names for the basic split range from romanticist vs. realist to James' "tender-minded" vs. "tough-minded." In each case Stevens would tend toward the first group named.

To trace his philosophical genealogy, we could include references to a number of poets and thinkers, but three of them will suggest the basic set of ideas he inherited and worked with: Plato, Coleridge and Santayana.¹ However, before applying philosophical touchstones to Stevens' work, we should admit that he is not primarily

¹Others might be Bergson (Cf. Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 82) and Wordsworth (Cf. Cunningham, p. 115).

a philosopher; he is a poet. Despite his attempts to express a theory of esthetics in prose, he is satisfying mainly as a poet. "I am not competent to discuss reality as a philosopher," he readily admits,² and he says this of his one full-blown prose work, The Necessary Angel: "These are not pages of criticism nor of philosophy. Nor are they merely literary pages. . . . They are without pretense beyond my desire to add my own definition to poetry's many existing definitions."³ Moreover, he adds later, "the philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence."⁴

It is a facile half-truth to say that all thinkers are either in the camp of Plato or Aristotle, but it is at least a half-truth. Taking the distinction with the cautiousness it deserves, we would have to classify Stevens as more Platonist than Aristotelian. His sympathies lie with the type of thinker who sees an ideal world somewhere. For Stevens this world is in the poetic imagination: "[Poetry] is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals."⁵

²Samuel French Morse, Stevens' literary executor and editor of his Opus Posthumous (New York: Knopf, 1957), is currently working on what should be the definitive biography. Opus Posthumous will be referred to as OP. p. 217.

³NA, p. 8.

⁴Ibid., p. 36.

⁵Ibid., p. 27.

As one critic puts it, "the universe of Stevens reflects a Platonism in which the items of experience disclose myriad and interesting resemblances."⁶ And O'Connor says,

Stevens is deeply concerned with the ideal, but for him it is to be found in the individual's imagination, not in some transcendental or Platonic realm of ideas. The poet can create a unity, draw seemingly divergent things together, but he is working from within his own mind.⁷

O'Connor's rejection of a "Platonic realm" must be qualified.

This is the whole problem of the Supreme Fiction: For Stevens the ideal realm is fictitious; for Plato it is real. But for both it is the most important part of human life. In an early poem, "Homunculus Et La Belle Etoile," Stevens mocks the rationalists who, afraid to leave themselves open to beauty, never "know the ultimate Plato."⁸

Stevens' constant comparison of the real and imagined worlds, a subject for discussion later in this chapter, is a Platonic approach. He finds that things are both like and unlike the thoughts they suggest. The mental analogies suggested by the occasions of reality are what make poetry. Albert W. Levi, quoted above, explains this well:

In any poetry of immediate sensory perception there must be a natural duality of reference; toward the qualitative vividness of the object and toward the qualitative vivid-

⁶Albert W. Levi, Literature, Philosophy And The Imagination (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 161.

⁷O'Connor, p. 124.

⁸CP, pp. 24-26.

ness of feeling which the object evokes--delight in the thing, and delight in seeing the thing. It is the latter which is the most significant for Stevens' poetic practice. For if, as his principle asserts, "all things exhibit resemblance," then the crux of the poetic enterprise is the exhibition of resemblance, and the poetic content must be molded according to a logic of analogy. Of course, the resemblances which Stevens details are not a mere consequence of any poetic employment of metaphor. His is a kind of poetic Platonism; a reading of metaphor into the structure of the universe. But the poetry which results from this natural Platonism depends for its effectiveness upon the employment of an analogical method.⁹

It would, of course, be inaccurate to say that Stevens is a Platonist and leave it at that. More properly he can be seen as a man who strongly sympathizes with Plato's attempts to account for the existence of man's mind in a world seemingly alien to it. In his essay, "The Noble Rider And The Sound Of Words," Stevens speaks wistfully of modern man's inability to abandon himself to what he knows to be a Platonic myth.¹⁰ Plato could enthusiastically embrace the image of the soul driving a chariot, all the while realizing it to be merely an image. Modern man's mind, says Stevens, is more earthbound, fettered by the "pressure of reality."¹¹

In the same context he cites Coleridge, another poet who, like Plato, helped form his outlook on esthetics and life.¹² In another essay he says that "as poetry goes, as the Imagination goes,

⁹Levi, p. 162.

¹⁰NA, p. 4.

¹¹Ibid., p. 12.

¹²Ibid., p. 3.

as the approach to truth, or, say, to being by way of the imagination goes, Coleridge is one of the great figures.¹³

Again the problem of backtracking through a man's mental ancestry becomes both intriguing and risky. Just as Coleridge's comments on the world as it is and the world as imagination shapes it, in his Biographia Literaria, are traceable to Kant's on the structuring of phenomena over the noumena,¹⁴ so also Stevens' insistence on the poet "making" a world is partially traceable to Coleridge. But Kant can no more account for Coleridge's complete insights than Coleridge can for Stevens'.

So where is Stevens' debt to Coleridge? O'Connor answers this question:

Coleridge wrote in opposition to a rationalist tradition, and so does Stevens. This is not to say that their theories of the imagination are identical. Coleridge at certain points relates the imagination to the supernatural; Stevens does not. Coleridge believes the power of imagination is denied to the "sensual and the proud"; there is no reason to think that Stevens does.

There are, on the other hand, obvious similarities between their positions. Both oppose the imaginative to the rationalist mind. Both see imagination as the way of establishing communion with nature and enjoying it in the transformed shapes and colors the imagination makes possible. And both employ light, particularly the moon and stars, as a symbol of the imaginative faculties.¹⁵

¹³Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁴See, for example, Literary Criticism (New York: Knopf, 1959), eds. William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, p. 391.

¹⁵O'Connor, p. 90.

In a celebrated passage of the *Biographia Literaria*,¹⁶ Coleridge distinguishes between the "primary" and "secondary" imaginations. The former is "the prime Agent of all human Perception" and "a repetition of the . . . eternal act of creation," while the latter is "an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious human will . . . differing only in degree from the primary." As Marius Bewley, one of Stevens' most perceptive admirers, puts it, commenting on this passage, "The Coleridgean imagination has become the theme of Stevens' poetry as a whole in a way that it never became the theme of Coleridge's poetry as a whole."¹⁷

Northrop Frye points out the parallel between Stevens and Coleridge: "Stevens follows Coleridge in distinguishing the transforming of experience by the imagination from the re-arranging of it by the 'fancy,' and ranks the former higher."¹⁸ O'Connor further explains this same limited dependence on Coleridge:

Coleridge . . . distinguished between the primary and secondary imagination. Only the secondary was associated

¹⁶Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. I, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: University Press, 1907), p. 202.

¹⁷Marius Bewley, "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens," *Partisan Review*, XVI (1949); reprinted in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1962), eds. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller, p. 154.

¹⁸Northrop Frye, "Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," *Hudson Review*, X (Fall, 1957), 355. Stevens' own definition of fancy is given in *NA* (pp. 10-11): "An exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have already been fixed."

or, as he would say, coexisted with "the conscious will." Thus the imagination of Stevens' "subman" although not seen as "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the Infinite I am," is quite similar to Coleridge's primary imagination. It might be noted also that imagination in its value-creating capacity, held by Coleridge to be a function of the secondary imagination, is an essential concern with Stevens.¹⁹

The "value-creating" capacity, spoken of here, is just another aspect of Stevens' basic search and of the theme of this thesis: value is found in something made (fiotum) by a poet; consequently, his highest value will be a "supreme fiction."

The idea of value suggests "value-judgment," which in turn suggests "morality." This notion of a man creating human value or human goodness leads us to examine a third thinker who strongly influenced Stevens: George Santayana.²⁰

According to Buttet, "any study of the development of Stevens' theme would have to take Santayana's prose into account."²¹ Kermode illustrates the impact Santayana's Interpretations of Poetry And Religion must have had on the young Stevens by citing passages that closely parallel his later work. He calls it a "key book for the thought of Stevens."²² For example, Santayana had proposed "the

¹⁹O'Connor, pp. 93-4.

²⁰Cf. John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1964), p. 205.

²¹Robert Buttet, "Wallace Stevens at Harvard: Some Origins of His Theme and Style," ELH, XXIX (March, 1962), p. 94 n.

²²Kermode, p. 81.

sphere of significant imagination, of relevant fiction," and spoken of "poetry raised to its highest power" as being "identical with religion grasped in its utmost truth."²³ Kermode feels that Stevens' works contain portions of Santayana's thought which are "hardly explicable except in terms of direct influence."²⁴

Others have pointed out this derivative part of Stevens' worldview. Guy Davenport explains his love of landscapes and his cryptic comment that "his soil is man's intelligence,"²⁵ as modeled after Santayana's "realm of matter." As Davenport says,

It is when Santayana asks [in Realms Of Being] "what inmost intelligence, what ultimate religion, would be proper to a wholly free and disillusioned spirit?" that we see the root of the drama in "The Comedian As The Letter C," and the central idea in "Sunday Morning," *L' [sic] Esthetique du Mal,* and "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction."²⁶

The parallel between Santayana's other realm, the "realm of essences," and Stevens' concept of an ideal world is also evident, as is the aversion both men have for any belief in an afterlife.²⁷

²³Ibid., italics mine.

²⁴Ibid., p. 82.

²⁵"The Comedian As The Letter C," CP, p. 36.

²⁶Guy Davenport, "Spinoza's Tulips," Perspectives, VII (Autumn, 1954), 148. The whole issue is devoted to Stevens. See also Joseph N. Riddell, "Wallace Stevens' 'Visibility of Thought'" PMLA, LXXVII (Sept., 1962), 482-498.

²⁷This is the theme of Stevens' "Sunday Morning" (CP, pp. 66-70). For Santayana's feelings about it, see George Hougats, George Santayana (Philadelphia, 1938), p. 124.

Stevens' own remarks about Santayana show a great affection for the man. Speaking of philosophers who were also poets, he singles him out:

In the case of Santayana, who was an exquisite and memorable poet in the days when he was, also, a young philosopher, the exquisite and memorable way in which he has always said things has given so much delight that we accept what he says as we accept our own civilization. His pages are part of the douceur de vivre.²⁸

Three weeks before his death, one of the nursing sisters attending Santayana attempted to bring him from atheism back to Catholicism (he was born a Catholic). He replied simply, "I will die as I have lived."²⁹ The thought of this man, leaving the only real life, prompted Stevens to write one of his finest poems, "To An Old Philosopher In Rome."³⁰ Stevens asks Santayana to say the right things about death "with an accurate tongue / And without eloquence,"

so that each of us
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
In yours, master and comiserable man.

This look at three of the thinkers, Plato, Coleridge and Santayana, who helped Stevens form his own unique outlook, has, I

²⁸OP, p. 187.

²⁹Richard Butler, O.P., "Memories Of Santayana, II," Con-
monwealth, LVII (Oct. 31, 1952), p. 96.

³⁰CP, pp. 506-11.

hope, served to highlight various features of what was really his basic area of concern: the relation between reality and the imagination. The facets of this relationship provided him with an inexhaustible source of poetry and convinced him that reality itself could be supremely "real" if it were fictionalized by the imagination. From first to last, Stevens was absorbed by the problem of the "real" vs. the "imagined" world.

Henry Wells speaks of the imagination "dominating Stevens even more than the same theme dominated Coleridge."³¹ He even calls this Stevens' "obsession, a compulsive drive toward the study of principles of poetry in relation to the experience of reality."³² But this obsession, if it be such, resulted in "a remarkably organic body of writing, from his earliest years to his last; few poems or pages of poems could be mistaken for those of another hand."³³

O'Connor frequently reiterates the idea that Stevens' work is all of one piece, concerning itself with imagination: "To read Stevens with enjoyment and understanding it is necessary to perceive that each subject, however commonplace or esoteric, becomes a

³¹Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1963), p. 109.

³²Ibid., p. 138.

³³Ibid., p. 6. He adds at this point that, despite his thematic stability, Stevens moods "are almost Shakespearean in their infinite variety." This remark and the use of "obsession" mentioned earlier show that Mr. Wells' book is somewhat marred by overstatement.

variation upon the all-controlling theme: the role of the human imagination."³⁴ And Hi Simons, one of Stevens' earliest admirers, describes the poet's central idea as that of "total reality" being "a combination of the reality of things as they are and the reality of the imagination."³⁵ Robert Pack states this epigrammatically: "Reality without imagination is mere fact; imagination without reality is mere fancy."³⁶

Thematic stability appears in *Harmonium* as a process of approaching the imagination from all sides. His early poem, "To The One Of Fictive Music," begged Poetry to

give back to us what once you gave:
The imagination that we spurned and crave.³⁷

Louis Marts finds in this poem Stevens'

aesthetic and philosophy (or rather his aesthetic-philosophy) fully developed, as perhaps one might expect in a poet who published his first volume at the age of forty-four. His later poems re-explore and restate, but do not centrally modify this view of the imagination's role in life.³⁸

The consistency--Wells' "obsession" seems too strong a word--with which Stevens developed his central complexus of ideas is singular.

³⁴O'Connor, p. 29.

³⁵Hi Simons, "The Genre Of Wallace Stevens," Sewanee Review, LIII (Aug., 1945), p. 571.

³⁶Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens: An Approach To His Poetry And Thought (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 82.

³⁷CP, pp. 87-8.

³⁸Marts, pp. 95-6.

O'Connor suggests that

Possibly no other poet with abilities comparable to Stevens' has worked so intensively and extensively with the same subject--the relations of imagination and reality--over so many years. It is interesting, whether one agrees with the procedure, to know that this has always been his intention.³⁹

Why was he always so concerned with the imagination? This question brings us to the final notion of this chapter. Stevens needed this world-shaping faculty because his world was empty without it. God was dead. Something must be done to fill the void: "If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man."⁴⁰ Stevens states this lack explicitly:

The earth for us is flat and bare,
There are no shadows. Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns.⁴¹

Putting the same notion into prose, he said that "in an age of disbelief, . . . in one sense or another, it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief."⁴² And he spelled out what he meant by "an age of disbelief":

³⁹O'Connor, p. 42.

⁴⁰"Imagination As Value," NA, p. 150.

⁴¹"The Man With the Blue Guitar," CE, p. 167.

⁴²OP, p. 206.

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. Since we have always shared all things with them and have always had a part of their strength and, certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise this experience of annihilation. It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure, we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness.⁴³

"Crisis of belief," a term so thoroughly overworked in recent years, is, nevertheless, one of the best phrases available to describe the dilemma of a modern questioner like Stevens. One critic, speaking of him, widens the problem's application to include most poets since the Romantic movement; it is one of trying "to situate his work in a universe from which transcendence has disappeared, to find a fixed point from which to move his world, given that poetry has to create a cosmos or nothing."⁴⁴

Irving Howe defines Stevens' question as follows:

How shall we live with and then perhaps beyond the crisis of belief--it is to confront this question that Stevens keeps returning to the theme of reality and imagination. Nor merely because he is interested in epistemological forays as such--though he is; nor because he is fascinated with the creative process--though that too; but because his main concern is with

⁴³OP, p. 206.

⁴⁴A. Hartley, "Minimum Myth: On Wallace Stevens," 20th Century, CLXVII (June, 1960), 545.

discovering and, through his poetry, enacting the possibilities for human self-renewal in an impersonal and recalcitrant age.⁴⁵

The "recalcitrant age" is one perched on the edge of nothingness. In the mellow mood of "Sunday Morning," he can speak of death as "the mother of beauty", but at other times lack of any after-life appears as frosty emptiness. His frequent symbol for this is snow, representing "the negativism of a part of nature, the nothingness into which man will ultimately descend."⁴⁶

Nature abhors a vacuum, according to the old dictum, and so does the human spirit abhor the threat of ultimate vacuity. So Stevens "requires some intuition of permanence in the experience of absoluteness, though this be illusory and transitory, something to satisfy the deeply engrained longings of his religious feeling."⁴⁷ Faced with a godless cosmos, he seeks to fill it for himself, and his whole poetic talent is turned to this task. Singleness of purpose is apparent to one who views his work as a whole: "Stevens poems are in one sense a history of his attempts to answer these questions, to find the balance of reality and the gesture or 'pose'

⁴⁵ Irving Howe, "Another Way of Looking At The Blackbird," New Republic, CXXXVII (1957); reprinted in Identity and Anxiety (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960), eds. Maurice R. Stein et al., p. 536.

⁴⁶ Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor, Poems For Study (New York: Rinehart, 1953), p. 610.

⁴⁷ Cunningham, p. 122.

of the artist who faces their complexity."⁴⁸ As he put it in his collection of "Adagia," or aphorisms, "after one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." How he attempted to work out a habitable universe will be considered in the remainder of this thesis as we follow his search for a "supreme fiction."

⁴⁸Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing In The Postwar Decade (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 183.

CHAPTER THREE:
WORK ON THE SUPREME FICTION
EXCLUSIVE OF
"NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION"

The search for a Supreme Fiction involved a constant pre-occupation with the faculty that could fashion the fiction, namely, the poetic imagination. It also involved, for Stevens, a perennial interest in the raw stuff upon which the imagination must work, namely, "reality." These two poles of what was basically one problem concerned him from his earliest days as a writer.

As an undergraduate, he gave a hint of the direction his thoughts would take when he wrote an editorial for the Harvard Advocate on a plan to put a fence around the Harvard Yard. He insisted that

putting a fence around the yard strikes us as being the easiest way of achieving order out of chaos. . . . we have no point of concentration. . . . Bring back to the Yard some of the prestige which it has lost . . . and thus the Yard would regain the hold on our imagination which it is gradually losing.¹

Robert Buttel points out that, even at this early date, "for

¹Buttel, p. 106, quoting from the Advocate, March 24, 1900, p. 17.

Stevens the imagination, order, and art were not simply literary matters; they were relevant to experience, to the actual world."² Buttel's study of the early Stevens gives a valuable insight into the mental road the poet traveled before publishing Harmonium in 1923. "The Harvard work," he explains, "is worth examining . . . since it shows the genesis of Stevens' preoccupation with the conflicting yet interdependent worlds of imagination and reality and the early stylistic development which resulted from this preoccupation."³

In several prose pieces . . . he had developed his plots in terms of the conflict between ideal beauty, art, or imagination, and coarseness, disorder, or reality. In these stories Stevens emphasized both the lifelessness of beauty and art detached from the actual world and the futility of the actual world ungraced by the imagination. More and more his Harvard work juxtaposed the worlds of imagination and the world of reality, and thus began his lifelong meditation on their interrelationship. Out of this general but central theme arose all the later, more specific variations of his theme.⁴

At this point, Stevens' prose was considerably better than his poetry. An example of the latter, cited by Buttel, shows why this was the case:

Ah yes! beyond these barren walls
Two hearts shall in a garden meet,
And while the latest robin calls,
Her lips to his shall be made sweet.

²Ibid.

³Ibid. p. 90.

⁴Ibid., p. 91.

And out above these gloomy tow'rs
 The full moon tenderly shall rise
 To cast its light upon the flow'rs
 And find him looking in her eyes.⁵

But other poems were better, and the work would gradually improve along lines that are familiar to students of his later writing.

When Stevens finally began to publish his poetry, at first in the "little magazines" of the Twenties, and then in Harmonium, he repeatedly wrote of the problem of an empty reality that needed imaginative fulfillment. Although critical attention was first focused on the diction and seeming dandyism⁶ of the early poems, these aspects gradually were considered of secondary importance, and the deeper questions raised by Stevens began to occupy his readers. Questions of style in Harmonium have long ago been worried to death, but more meaty problems still remain. As Geoffrey Moore, an English critic, remarked, after briefly touching on the question of Stevens' allegedly "precious" diction,

I should like to pass over this . . . for the sake of considering a group of poems which deals more precisely with a theme which was to occupy him throughout his poetic life and which, reflected in the light of the later "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," assumes the first importance. I refer to

⁵Ibid., Advocate (March 10, 1900). Buttel admits that this is one of the weakest poems of this period.

⁶Gorham B. Munson, "The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens," The Dial, LXXXIX (Nov., 1925); reprinted in Brown and Haller, p. 44.

those poems which deal specifically with the matter of belief in the modern world.⁷

Mr. Moore's statement expresses the purpose of this present chapter.

In one of these works on belief, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens stated baldly "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame." But perhaps the best example of his earlier attempts to account for a disinherited universe is the blank verse masterpiece, "Sunday Morning."

Critics have been lavish in their praise of this often anthologized work. Frank Kermode, commenting on the final section of "Sunday Morning," remarks casually that "in isolation this stanza has such quality that to call Stevens the greatest twentieth-century master of blank verse seems a tiresome understatement."⁸ In addition to Kermode's remark we find no less a poet than Randall Jarrell comparing the poem to the best of Wordsworth as containing "lines as beautiful . . . as any in American poetry."⁹ And J. V. Cunningham states unequivocally that this is Stevens' greatest poem.¹⁰ Marts calls it "the highest achievement of what we might call the 'hieratic' style of the earlier Stevens."¹¹

⁷Geoffrey Moore, "Wallace Stevens: A Hero Of Our Time," in Brown and Heller.

⁸Kermode, p. 43.

⁹Randall Jarrell, Poetry And The Age (New York, 1935), p. 139.

¹⁰Cunningham, p. 117.

¹¹Marts, p. 108.

"Sunday Morning"¹² is an attempt to solve the crisis of Christian faith as it might be experienced by an average, twentieth-century American. In this case it is a woman whose complacent rest on the Sabbath is troubled by "the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe," the crucifixion.

These thoughts are challenged for the woman by Stevens' question "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" God, after all is dead, and now "Divinity must live within herself."

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch,
These are the measures destined for her soul.

But still she is unsatisfied by the reassurance that all the myths are only myths.

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."

And Stevens answers cryptically

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires.

Cunningham explains this:

Yes, he says, we feel that only in death is there fulfilment for our illusions and our desires. Even though death be in fact the obliteration of all human experience, yet it is attractive to us; it has the fatal attractiveness of the willow

¹²CP, pp. 66-70.

in old poetry for the love-lorn maiden. Though she has lovers who bring her gifts--that is, the earth and its beauty--she disregards the lovers and, taking the gifts, strays impassion-ate toward death.¹³

Only through death can change come and life go on. Human mortality is seen here, not as the grim "being-unto-death" of Martin Heidegger, but as a constantly self-renewing process. If, in heaven, ripe fruit never falls, then heaven is not beautiful. Someday men will realize this and will

chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.

Supplanting the Christian liturgy, this new halleluia will bind them in "the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish." The final answer comes to the troubled woman: Rejoice, for Christ has not risen! Accept reality for what it is,

an old chaos of the sun
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.
Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

By means of a fiction, the pain of loss has been eased.

¹³Cunningham, p. 119.

"Creating fictions" appeared in another metaphor in the longer "Man With The Blue Guitar." This is generally considered to be one of his major works, although I have only found one critic who considers it his best.¹⁴

Stevens employs a series of rapid couplets, like the strumming motion of a guitarist, to show how reality is transformed by the imagination, how "things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar."¹⁵

The stage is set for a concert by the man whose guitar can change the world from green to blue. In Stevens' private color symbolism, green always represents the real world, and blue the real world as seen by the imagination. In this stage setting, several dramas are played out, but, as William York Tindall says, the stage is actually "the speaker's [i.e., Stevens'] head."¹⁶

Many of the ideas contained in this poem foreshadow the later themes of "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction." He speaks of the difficulty of attaining his goal:

I cannot bring a world quite round
Although I patch it as I can.

¹⁴Julian Symons, "A Short View of Wallace Stevens," Life And Letters Today, XXVI (Sept., 1940); reprinted in Brown & Haller, p. 117.

¹⁵CP, pp. 165-184.

¹⁶William York Tindall, Wallace Stevens (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 28.

And he tells what he looks for.

A dream (to call it a dream) in which
I can believe, in face of the object,

A dream no longer a dream, a thing,
Of things as they are, as the blue guitar

After long strumming on certain nights
Gives the touch of the senses.

The most significant section of the poem, as far as giving an insight into what Stevens considers poetry to be, is section XXII.¹⁷ "Poetry," he explains, "is the subject of the poem." Poetry must begin from a poet and return to a poet. But it must also be fed on the real world and, in turn, transform the real world. Otherwise there will be "an absence in reality." This absence needs poetry just as poetry needs the world in which absences are possible. To paraphrase Socrates, Stevens seems to be saying that "the unimagined life is not worth living," and, conversely, a poem about unreality is not a true poem.¹⁸

Another long poem which shows his concern with an imaginative reconstruction of reality is "The Comedian As The Letter C."¹⁹ This strange, semi-autobiographical piece traces the course of

¹⁷CP, pp. 176-7.

¹⁸For a fuller treatment of this section, see Newton P. Stallknecht, "Absence in Reality: A Study In The Epistemology Of The Blue Guitar," Kennedy Review, XXI (1959), 545-62.

¹⁹CP, pp. 27-46.

Crispin (Stevens) through a grotesque aesthetic odyssey. O'Connor calls this poem

A history of the development of his understanding of the nature of poetry and the poet's role in society. The poet, viewed as a valet-comedian, although certainly not as a ridiculous or unwitting one, moves from a highly personal romanticism through, first, a stark, then an exotic realism that means for him accepting the world on its own terms and viewing experience both indulgently and skeptically. It is an account of a voyage between the "sun," the objective world, and the "moon," the subjective world.²⁰

Again, the same set of imaginative challenges are raised and met.

As Cunningham says,

Most of what is interesting in Stevens issues from the [same] problem. It can be put in various terms. It is the problem of traditional religion and modern life, or imagination and reality, but it can be best put for Stevens in the terms in which it is explicitly put in "The Comedian." The problem is the relationship of a man and his environment, and the reconciliation of these two in poetry and thus in life.²¹

While Tindal agrees that "The Comedian" illustrates a stage on Stevens' road toward a supreme fiction, he would disagree with Cunningham's praise of the poem. He feels, rather, that it is the "least successful" of the long poems.²² As usual, judgments on this

²⁰O'Connor, pp. 120-21.

²¹Cunningham, p. 115.

²²Tindall, p. 25.



controversial poet are mixed. Hi Simons, writing in 1940, felt that this poem deserved the kind of serious attention given to Eliot's *Wasteland*.²³

To attempt to follow the circuitous journey taken by Crispin / Stevens in this poem, would not further the main purpose of my thesis. Much of what "The Comedian" contains in highly artificial, rhetorical wording appears in a more satisfying form in "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction."

One final poem is worth singling out from the many possible illustrations, and that is the haunting "Esthetique Du Mal."²⁴ Critical reception of this work has been increasingly favorable since its publication in 1944. One of the few dissenting voices was that of George Dillon. In a review of the poem, he remarked patronisingly of Stevens that

at times the ironic, smiling guitarist, who doesn't care whether or not he is overheard, seems momentarily replaced by an earnest business executive who is trying to clarify and expound his ideas in a staff meeting but²⁵ finds that everything he says comes out as double talk.

Although it is not double talk, "Esthetique" is, admittedly,

²³ Hi Simons, "The Comedian As The Letter C: Its Sense And Its Significance," Southern Review, V (Winter, 1940); reprinted in Brown & Haller, p. 97.

²⁴CP, pp. 313-26.

²⁵ George Dillon, "Blue Phenomenon," Poetry, LXVIII (May, 1946), p. 98.

a difficult poem. But its theme is a further restatement of ideas that should be familiar to anyone who has read "Sunday Morning" or "The Man With The Blue Guitar." Wells states it succinctly: "The basic argument is that grief, evil, or, more specifically, bereavement can be endured if conceived by the poetic imagination or an imagination analogous to it."²⁶

Again we see how necessary it is to keep the notion of a redeeming imagination central in any overall treatment of Stevens. Whether the real world is viewed as a place of pleasant death, sudden change or evil, its one hope lies in the human mind. Man--the poet--can reshape what already exists.

"Esthetique Du Mal," according to Kernode, "lacks the emotional progression that one senses, however obscurely, in 'Notes'; and it has moments when the metaphysic and the fable, the idea and the image, seem to jostle each other."²⁷ O'Connor, also, after giving limited praise to the poem, itemizes a few of its shortcomings:

This subject, it would seem, does not engage his imagination so powerfully as his other subjects. . . . Evil too often is treated thematically, not as actual, painful experience; and only limited aspects of the subject are examined. The sections in their arrangement too often are discrete. Most readers are likely to see Section XII as the kind of intellectual leger-domain into which Stevens' genius for language seldom betrays him.²⁸

²⁶Wells, p. 25.

²⁷Kernode, p. 105.

²⁸O'Connor, p. 74.

The section referred to begins like this:

He disposes the world in categories, thus:
 The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is
 Alone. But in the peopled world, there is,
 Besides the people, his knowledge of them. In
 The unpeopled, there is his knowledge of himself,
 Which is more desperate in the moments when
 The will demands that what he thinks be true?

The puzzled reader will read such a section and begin to suspect that "there is less to this than meets the eye." But other sections avoid this kind of sterile "quodlibeting" and are far more rich. Generally speaking, as Wells remarks, the poem "appears to have been written under an extraordinarily happy dominance of the poetic imagination,"²⁹ although "happy" is not a very apt word to use in this context. The fact is that Stevens has written in "Esthetique" a rich, dark mixture of thoughts on the world as it is when it is most painful.

Among life's miseries are bereavement, death and war; but that is the way real life is; and, without sounding trite, he accepts this and remarks that

The greatest poverty is not to live
 In a physical world.

Again, as in "Sunday Morning," comes a rejection of the seemingly escapist notion of Christian afterlife:

Perhaps,
 After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
 Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
 The green corn gleaming and observe
 The minor of what we feel.

²⁹Wells, p. 24.

Evil itself, Stevens seems to be saying, is a necessary evil if we are to have a real world, one fit for the labor of the redeeming imagination of man. Poetry is what suffering mankind needs, not

an over-human god,
Who by sympathy has made himself a man
And is not to be distinguished.

"The Lord" is not our god, but, rather,

Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
The gaiety of language is our seigneur.

Even though life is "a bitter aspic," it is food for imaginative thought. As O'Connor sums the poem up, "there is great pain in our physical existence, but consider the delight in the 'many selves' and 'sensual worlds' that our experience of evil makes possible."³⁰

Before proceeding to a consideration of "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," I want to point out some of the areas in his prose where Stevens examines the problem of ultimate relief in a fiction. The danger here is great because he spoke without the precision of a philosopher and left himself open to misunderstanding. Tindall, who knew Stevens, remarked that you could prove anything you wanted to prove by his prose.³¹ Like statistics in the hands of a person trying to make them illustrate a preconceived notion, Stevens' prose statements can be excerpted and juggled in various ways.

³⁰O'Connor, p. 74.

³¹Tindall, p. 17.

Because of this looseness, Enck insists that "no finely argued theory can be coaxed from The Necessary Angel and the pieces in Opus Posthumous."³²

However, on this matter of the poet's ability to give the world what it needs to fill its post-Christian void, Stevens leaves little room for misinterpretation. He says, for instance, that what makes the poet the "potent figure" that he is "is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it."³³

His prose "Adagia" contain various statements of the theme in addition to the ones I have quoted:

Poetry is a means of redemption.³⁴

It is the belief and not the god that counts.³⁵

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.³⁶

The death of one god is the death of all.³⁷

³²Enck, p. 211.

³³NA, p. 31.

³⁴OP, p. 160.

³⁵Ibid., p. 160.

³⁶Ibid., p. 163.

³⁷Ibid., p. 165. This line reappears in "Notes", CP, p. 381.

It is possible to establish aesthetics in the individual mind as immeasurably a greater thing than religion. Its present state is the result of the difficulty of establishing it except in the individual mind.³⁸

God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry.³⁹

Only a noble people evolve a noble God.⁴⁰

The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created heaven were, as it happened, one.⁴¹

An essay, casually entitled, "Two or Three Ideas," says that "when the gods have come to an end,"

when we think of them as the aesthetic projections of a time that has passed, men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in a new reality.⁴²

Examples like this can be pulled from almost any of his essays and speeches. The impression given by an overall look at his prose is consistent with the one given by his poetry: Stevens is a man with a single diamond who spends his life looking at its various facets. The irony of this image is in the fact that, as Stevens well knows, the diamond is a fiction. That this is not the same as saying it is

³⁸ Ibid., p. 166.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 176.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 209.

⁴² Ibid., p. 362.

a fake is shown by his reverent approach to it in the work I will consider next, "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction."

CHAPTER FOUR:

NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION

This work defies neat analysis because it is not a logically constructed sequence of ideas. It is, as its title implies, a groping attempt to objectify in words something which, by definition, can only be lived in the imagination. The fiction sought for is not one subject to definition; it is a supreme one, transcending all mankind has been able to say so far. Consequently, the problem of the commentator parallels the problem of the poet whose work he is explicating. An attempt to elucidate another's attempt to elucidate the inexpressible is bound to be difficult. As always, the final act of a critic viewing a great poem must be to drop his paraphrases, point to the poem itself and say "There, that is what it says."

However, because "Notes" is, in the opinion of reputable critics,¹ and in my own opinion, Stevens' greatest poem, I will try to explain what it means. More than any other, this poem enables us to judge the extent to which he succeeded in finding a substitute

¹Kernode, p. 5; Harold Bloom, "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), ed. Marie Borroff, p. 76.

for the God that died. He insisted that the poet "gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive" of the world,² and he tried to show what he meant by this.

Although the poem's ideas overlap, they are divided into three main sections: (1) It must be abstract, (2) It must change, and (3) It must give pleasure. A misleading appearance of orderliness is given by the verse division. Each main section contains ten subdivisions which in turn contain seven, three-line verses. But coexisting with this rigid framework is a heterogeneous collection of statements, vignettes and visions which defy orderly transition from one to the next. Within the main sections, the general idea is adhered to, but the progression is not strictly logical.

As Geoffrey Moore explains the difficulties involved in treating this poem,

with Stevens, more than with most other poets, one is constantly and uneasily aware of the inadequacy not only of the humble paraphrase but of any known critical method. His poetry exists as an aggregate of ideas and feelings, expressed with such a mutational amplitude, with such controlled jugglery of parenthetical, qualifying and extending impressions that one needs half a dozen or more streams of simultaneous commentary.³

Before examining the parts individually, I think a few remarks on the whole poem are necessary.

²NA, p. 31.

³Moore, p. 264.

Imagined reality, as we have seen, is Stevens' prime focal point. Here he is attempting to show what the poetry should be like which properly resolves the conflict between things as they are and things as we would like them to be. Such poetry must have the three qualities mentioned above. But to say this is merely to scratch the surface. In addition to explaining what poetry must be, this poem attempts to illustrate itself, to be what it is talking about, to be, as the title of a later work puts it, "Not Ideas About The Thing But The Thing Itself."⁴

And yet it does, obviously, contain ideas. Martz emphasizes this: "Let us be clear about this. . . . Stevens is often called a hater of ideas and of reason. Though some of his less guarded exclamations may seem to bear this out, 'Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction' should dispel any misconception."⁵ And the ideas are often tortuously involved. As Richard Eberhart said in a review of the work, "sufficient unto the changes over earlier works are the subtleties thereof," but "one does not protest when drinking a sparkling water."⁶

O'Connor's summary remarks on the poem are, as usual, apt ones.

⁴CP, p. 534.

⁵Martz, p. 98.

⁶Richard Eberhart, Accent, III (Winter, 1943), 122.

"Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," the exposition of three major aspects of the ways in which we see the world, exhibits a rare and wonderful artistry. It is told in a language that is discursive and subtle but which never for more than a line or two fails to suggest and evoke, by image, connotation and inconspicuous rhythms, the realm of sensibility in which our fictions are born.⁷

I. IT MUST BE ABSTRACT

After an introductory apostrophe to poetry as his only real love, Stevens begins by instructing an "ephebe," or young disciple of poetic theory, to get back to the original idea of reality before it was man's idea. He must start with the sun as it was before it became a human concept called Phoebus. In this sense the world is to be abstract in that it has to be abstracted from the body of thought man has developed around it. And, if, by separating the sun from its myth, the death of Phoebus is possible, then god is dead, for "the death of one god is the death of all."

Discontent with excessive rationalizing sends us back to this original abstract idea, but, unfortunately, man is fatally fascinated by his ability to spin theories around basic fact. "The ravishments of truth" lead us to make up more and more concepts, and the original fact of the physical world can get lost in the shuffle, can become "the hermit in a poet's metaphors." Priests and philosophers, as well as poets, sometimes realize that they have sacrificed

⁷O'Connor, p. 73.

reality for the sake of mental constructs. If a thinking mind can realize this, finally,

It knows that what it has is what is not
And throws it away like a thing of another time
As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.

A poem enables us to recapture the pristine freshness of what the world was as it shone out before man began to overlay it with ideas and concepts about it. Primitive concepts of astronomy, bird-song and the sound of the sea are examples of how the unspoiled world shines out in its "ever-early candor."

Martz explains this section:

Candor, in its root meaning, here signifies the thing grasped in its radiant essence, the full, clear, white, pure, dazzling realization of the world and all things in it. The "ever-early candor" is the original idea of the thing, or the thing as it should be. "Its late plural" is the varied manifestation of that essence as now exhibited in the world about us--often a sorry assortment of objects encrusted with the dirt of time, but, seen in their first idea, radiant. Then "life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation," and the imagination has, for the moment, achieved its constant function, for "The first idea is an imagined thing."

Such perceptions are hardly to be planned, but they come to the man who trains his imagination to perceive them.⁸

A further discussion of the "first idea" explains that it preceded any of the men--from Adam to Descartes--who thought it. The first idea, taking idea to mean the raw stuff of the original world upon which men construct ideas, preceded man. Adam came before Descartes as a thinker, and before either of them came the thing they think about. Before there could be myths, there had to be some-

⁸Martz, pp. 99-100.

thing that could be mythologized.

There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.

The poem springs from the fact that there is a world outside the
poet's mind for him to imitate.

We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues
The air is not a mirror but bare board,
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

And comic color of the rose, in which
Abyssal instruments make sounds like pips
Of the sweepings that we add to them.

But marvelous as the natural world may be, its wonder can
only be realized by human beings. Stevens admits that the lion,
who "reddens the sand with his red-colored noise," the elephant and
the bear are all more at one with the real world than man can claim
to be. They are already simple, uncomplicated parts of a world,
while man struggles to become one. This is an agonizing process
for us:

You, ephebe, look from your attic window,
Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

Yet voluble dumb violence.

And yet, weak and writhing creature that he is, man is the one who
can tame all the raw richness he sees in the world.

These are the heroic children whom time breeds
Against the first idea--to lash the lion,
Ceparison elephants, teach bears to juggle.

Next, Stevens shows that appreciation of the real world, as well as appreciation of man who can appropriate for himself the intelligibility of this real world, is difficult. And this is as it should be; the object of the poem must, paradoxically, be visible and invisible at the same time.

Because it is so difficult, sometimes it is best to stand before reality with a blank mind. At times like this, we may (like Wordsworth at Tintern Abbey?) be granted sudden insights into reality which have "a kind of Swiss perfection," smoothly oiled and precise.

The next sections approach the manner in which man himself is to be an "abstract" subject for poetry, and here Stevens proposes a theory that has troubled his admirers. He feels that poetic man, or "major-man," is diluted if he is considered in his particulars. No one man or one set of human qualities can ever satisfy our notion of what man is, so man is best considered as an abstraction.

O'Connor comments on this seeming coldness:

If there is a characteristic persistent throughout Stevens' work, it is his impersonality. There are in discussions of other writers no little personal asides. He gives no attention to the fullness of their personalities. It is also true that there are no people, there are merely symbolic figures, in his poems or in his plays. There are only ideas about people and aspects of people. There is, on the other hand, a constant process of abstraction that serves his theory of poetry.⁹

And Randall Jarrell complains loudly:

⁹O'Connor, p. 39.

When the first thing that Stevens can find to say of the Supreme Fiction is that "it must be abstract," the reader protests, "Why, even Hegel called it a concrete universal"; the poet's medium, words, is abstract to begin with, and it is only his unique organization of the words that forces the poem, generalizations and all, over into the concreteness and singularity that it exists for. But Stevens has the weakness . . . of thinking of particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths, or else as aesthetic, abstracted objects simply there to be contemplated; he often treats things or lives so that they seem no more than generalizations of an unprecedentedly low order. But surely a poet has to treat the concrete as primary, as something far more than an instance, a hue to be sensed, a member of a laudable category.¹⁰

Still, Stevens clearly favors an abstract hero, one who is too beautiful to be disfigured by particulars.

Give him
No names. Dismiss him from your images,
The hot of him is purest in the heart.

The final verses of this section sum up the poet's belief that the concept of man is most worthy of belief when it is an abstract concept.

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular,

More sacred as principle than particle
.....
Though an heroic part, of the commonal.

The major abstraction is the commonal,
The inanimate, difficult visage. Who is it?

His answer to this question is a strange image, combining the wisdom of a rabbi with the power of a chieftain in a humble, slouching

¹⁰Jarrell, p. 140.

figure. This is the man.

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound,

II. IT MUST CHANGE

The second major division stresses contingency and mutability. Like Spenser in his cantos for the unfinished book of The Faerie Queene,¹¹ Stevens speaks of a world that is constantly changing.

A poet, looking at springtime scenes, realizes that individuals are like the individuals that preceded them, but that everything passes and is in a state of flux. The fact that cyclical repetition is always the same may strike us as unpleasant. We feel a distaste for "this withered thing."

But change is inevitable. Can the metaphysician confer unchanging immortality on a bee simply by so ordaining? Stevens answers that the bee's definition may be a static thing, but the bee will always be new because nature is always changing and coming forth with new bees. Similarly, the attempt to concretize humanity in a statue is foolish. The statue of General Du Puy, with the horse whose "right, uplifted foreleg"

Suggested that, at the final funeral
The music halted and the horse stood still,
makes the General look "a bit absurd." Man's essence is to keep moving and to change. A static representation of him is indicative

¹¹Wells, among others, points out this echo of Spenser, p. 85.

of one of "our now vestigial states of mind,"

Change in man, he continues, as well as change in all things, comes from interaction of polar opposites.

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

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Thesis and antithesis result in synthesis, although not in the rigid, Hegelian sense.

Unless a man appreciates the beauty of changeable nature, he does not know what he is losing when he dies. The planter, living in a "green baked greener than the summer sun," like the woman of "Sunday Morning," must learn that "Death is the mother of beauty."

The next verses, beginning "Bethou me," are puzzling ones. Frank Doggett, after pointing out that its phrasing is borrowed from Shelley (Ode To The West Wind), states the theme to be the following: "By conceptualizing we tend to shape external reality into something akin to the self, and it is our eternal desire that this be so."¹² Personally, I cannot see how he obtains this reading for this section. It may be a satire on Shelley and on the excesses

¹²Frank Doggett, Explicator, IV (Feb., 1957), number 30.

of the Romantic nature poetry, as Enck suggests,¹³ but basically the section seems to be saying that not all change is appealing. Sometimes it is merely monotonous, "a single text, a granite monotony." But that is just the way certain things are, and eventually they may cease to change.

When the world is changing around, its beauty is so seductive that we have "not the need of any paradise." Life is a passion-producing fruit, waiting to be plucked, "the purple odor, the abundant bloom," always changing. Symbolised as a bride, it never stands completely naked but, because of its changeability, is clothed by imagination.

A fictive covering
Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

However, there is a danger in this world of change. It can lead the poet into "gibberish" because of its "senseless element," Is poetry dangerously close to irrationality? Can the gulf between poetic and prosaic thought be bridged? Stevens says the poet's gift is the ability to combine his imagination with the world's blunt plainness through the medium of proper words. He tries "to compound the imagination's Latin," with the world's "lingua franca et laudatissima."

Surrounded by change, the poet struggles to comprehend it and express it in poetry as a picture of himself in the act of appreciating change. Eventually he will be able to; "Time will write them down."

¹³Enck, p. 167. See also O'Connor, p. 72.

III. IT MUST GIVE PLEASURE

In his commentary on the entire poem, Harold Bloom makes the following observation:

There is much in "It Must Be Abstract" that grows into the reader's consciousness with the inevitability of greatness, yet one's experience of "Notes" is that the poem becomes better as it develops, "It Must Change" being superior to the first part, and "It Must Give Pleasure" finer still. "Notes" could therefore be judged an uneven poem, but the ascending intensity of the work is certainly a matter of design, a movement from the essential prose of our condition in "It Must Be Abstract" to the ecstatic celebration of the marriage between flesh and air in "It Must Give Pleasure."

I think that a sympathetic reading of the poem will prove the validity of Bloom's judgment. "Notes" gets better as it goes along, and the third section is the most powerful of the three. It is also the most concrete and the most difficult to synopsise.

Stevens begins it by saying that to compose traditionally cheerful sentiments about conventionally accepted poetic themes--"to sing jubilas at exact accustomed times"--is not difficult. This is the work of the versifier and the Fourth of July platitudiniser. But it is difficult to capture the irrational element of reality when it is suddenly confronted in a new light

As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven,¹⁴

Poetry can give pleasure because it is founded on a pleasure-

¹⁴I believe this last phrase was borrowed from Gerard Manley Hopkins, although I have not seen this mentioned by any critics.

giving world. But, sometimes, Stevens says, it is enough to merely remember something as it actually was without cluttering up the memories by comparisons with other remembered things or by use of metaphorical expression. A person can remember the beauty of "frothy clouds" without bothering to remember that they were like "foamy waves." The extended image of man in the third group of verses drives this home in a paradoxical way: By an extended simile comparing man to an earthbound stone, Stevens emphasizes the fact that man's real nature must never be overshadowed by the process of decorating him with figures of speech.

This "earthliness" is the thing that attracts the Captain and Bauda, his bride, to each other, and

They married well because the marriage-place
Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell.
They were love's characters come face to face.

The next sections, the "Canon Aspirin" group, are among the richest and most difficult of all Stevens' work, but they contain the heart of his conception of the Supreme Fiction.¹⁵ With "deliberate banality" he introduces the Major man, eating a meal that is anything but abstract, "lobster Bombay with mango Chutney." The man looks favorably on the world with its four seasons and seven days of the week

¹⁵Bloom compares them favorably with the best of Yeats and Keats, and feels they "can scarcely be matched in English poetry since the Romantics." (p. 88).

because it is just what it is: neither too plain to be interesting, nor too gaudy to be worth appreciating.

Then, in the clarity of poetic vision, he sees that there is only nothingness outside of the world we know. Within that world we do not need to reject anything as unsuitable for human imagining because all of it is good. We must only choose to accept all of it for what it is.

He had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the smassing harmony.

Unfortunately, he continues, the poet is forced to the expedient of constructing partial order out of what he manages to discover in the world. But it must be possible that someday he will discover a way to construct an absolute order, the fiction of an absolute. Here, I feel, is the most poignant cry in all of Stevens' poetry.

It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute--Angel,
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound.

He argues: If I can imagine an angel, a supremely happy being, am I not somehow as happy as my creation? If my fiction

grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?

It is almost as if God were attempting to prove his own existence by using St. Anselm's famous proof: "If something can exist that is greater than this supremely great idea of mine, it must be me!"

Then Stevens carries this a step farther. If he can satisfy himself momentarily in this way, why should it be impossible to extend the time of contentment from a moment to an hour.

And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

Suddenly the tempo shifts from mounting exhilaration to controlled peace. The poet can do all that his mental angels can do. But, perhaps, the real greatness of Major man consists in being master of a recalcitrant earth in which existence is a series of "vast repetitions," a "going around,"

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

And we enjoy like man, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master.

The final verses, before the epilogue, are addressed to the personification of all he is trying to achieve, an imaginative fiction formed out of the real world, which is abstract, changeable and plea-

surable. Someday, he assures his vision, he will find the right name for her, one that will express her elusive desirability, her irrational rationality. In fact, someday all men will "get it straight" and

We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

Stevens' "mundo," according to Bernard Heringman, is

the world he is in and the world he is, the world beyond reason. [It is] fixed and illuminated in a supreme fiction. In a moment of epiphany, knowing the world, knowing himself, and knowing reality and imagination in intersection, he knows the supreme reality. It is the reality of poetry.¹⁶

The poem concludes with a word of encouragement from the poet to his fellow man, the soldier, actually a word from one aspect of all men to the other. The actual, real side of man is as necessary as the imagining, fiction-producing side of him. Both are indispensable.

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

With the imagined world made available by the poet, the human being can now do what he has to do. He can even die.

¹⁶Bernard Heringman, "Wallace Stevens: The Use of Poetry," ELH, XVI (1949), p. 334.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Wallace Stevens tried to do something, and we have seen how he tried to do it. Building on the insights of others, he proposed poetry as the solution to a problem of emptiness in a world where reality needs to be imagined to be appreciated.

Before concluding with a personal summing-up of Stevens, I want to preface my remarks with some of the general critical comments that have been made about the value of his work and about its relevancy for present day readers.

Samuel French Morse shows his complexity and ambiguity:

He is both a symbolist and not a symbolist, logician and anti-logician, a player of things as they are and as they are imagined. The "Adagia" furnish the simplest and most powerful proof in support of this hypothesis. The inconsistencies they reveal can, of course, be broadly resolved under the loose designation of the romantic. Romantic Stevens certainly is; and in many respects his romanticism resembles that of his great predecessors and contemporaries who have shaped and given the doctrine its continuing vitality. He is eclectic, idiosyncratic, self-centered, and, as many self-styled classicists say, a little contemptuously, an amateur.¹

I suspect that not many would call him an amateur, but not

¹Samuel French Morse, "The Native Element," Kenyon Review, xxx (Summer, 1953), p. 459.

everyone gives him credit for having succeeded as a poet and thinker. Richard Wilbur, for instance, voices the opinion of those who doubt his depth, saying that what makes him "unsuccessful as a constructive thinker" is

his excessive mistrust of reason both high and low. He sees imagination not as the issue of a harmony of the faculties, but as something opposed to the rational. . . . Since the apprehensions which most engage him, and are the bricks of his desired imaginative edifices, partake little of reason (or of religious insight), and are neatly pure products of sensibility, his thinking is licked from the start. It is licked by that fruitful and refreshing relativity of sensibility in which Stevens takes so much delight; there are "so many worlds," so many ways of seeing a pineapple or a blackbird or anything else.²

O'Connor typifies the other side of the argument, namely, that Stevens should not be judged with the criteria applied to philosophers since "he does not trace the history of philosophical theories of imagination nor state his own theory in any definitive fashion."³

Part of the reason for his poetic method and approach is explained by the way he fit into his age. The aptness of his expression for contemporary readers depends on the extent to which he understood modern life. Here, too, opinions vary.

Jacques Maritain feels that he is typical of an aberration present in some modern poets of going "mad on the subject of what poetry is."⁴ And Jarrell is among those who question his ability to

²Richard Wilbur, Review of O'Connor's The Shaping Spirit, The New England Quarterly, XXIV (March, 1951), 126.

³O'Connor, p. viii.

⁴Maritain, p. 256.

really appreciate what his contemporaries want to believe in:

Stevens' myths spring not from the soil but from the clouds, the arranged, scrubbed, reasoning clouds in someone's head. He is too rational and composedly fanciful a being to make up a myth--one could as easily imagine his starting a cult in Los Angeles.⁵

In Chapter One I raised the question of the decline of traditional religion. In this regard Stevens is most certainly a creature of his age. Amos Niven Wilder, of Harvard's divinity school, cites Yeats and Stevens as examples of the widespread aversion to Christianity found in modern artists. But he feels, and with good reason, that Stevens' writings are of a type that can "when scrutinized more deeply surprise us, for we discover how far they are, after all, rooted in our religious tradition, witness to it, and in some cases move toward its fuller recovery."⁶ It would be interesting to hear Stevens reaction to the suggestion that his efforts to replace Christianity could be instrumental in rebuilding it.

Geoffrey Moore represents another of the intriguing views held in regard to Stevens' worth:

I consider Wallace Stevens to be a hero of our time. Seriously, consistently, and with great courage he tackled what he saw to be the central problem of the age. . . . I can think of no other poet the body of whose work yields so much more than the sum of the individual poems.⁷

⁵Jarrell, p. 143.

⁶Amos Niven Wilder, "Protestant Orientation in Contemporary Poetry," Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), ed. Stanley Romaine Hopper, p. 259.

⁷Moore, pp. 269-70.

Ultimately, whatever a person thinks about Stevens, his opinion should be arrived at after careful thought. Snap judgments are easy, but he is worthy of and demands as such painstaking scrutiny as anyone who has written in our language. After careful study he begins to take shape in the reader's mind.

After examining various aspects of a poet's work and life, as has been done in this thesis, it would be satisfying to be able to draw together the loose threads and reach some tidy conclusions about him. This is not as easy with Stevens as I might wish. The problem of neatly packaging him in apt descriptive phrases is a large one because Stevens is a complicated figure and a major poet. The central theme of my treatment of him has been to show how he found himself with a need that he tried to fill, all the while realizing that possibly it could not be filled.

As he was working toward a goal, he was, because of the peculiar nature of his quest, forced to keep trying to figure out just what his goal was. Clearly, he wanted to contribute to the body of aesthetic knowledge. He said as much on several occasions, as we have seen. But he also wanted to do something that can only be talked about with such partially adequate terms as "meaningful" and "believable." Situations and desires which some men can handle by recourse to the concepts of "God" and "immortal soul" were present in Stevens' life. But he found these traditional answers invalid. So he was forced to either ignore the questions or attempt to answer them in his own way. Fortunately, he chose to do the latter.

As I have stated it, his problem was to account for the fact that man wants to believe in something but has nothing he can believe in. His solution was to propose the greatest possible creations of the human imagination as objects of belief.

The question, oversimplified, to be sure, that we want to ask is: Did his solution work? Or, to further delimit the question, did Stevens' proposed solution solve the problem for Stevens?

I think the best answer to this question is a qualified no. But the world was made richer by his "failure," and so, paradoxically, was Stevens. He enjoyed enough partial success and personal satisfaction in his work of redemptive poetry to give him reason to keep hoping for a breakthrough. He always managed to have the enthusiasm to keep telling himself that there was really no telling what human imagination might be able to do someday. If its potentialities were going to be realized someday, he wanted to have had a hand in preparing for that day.

He did not hope so much for knowledge of something new as for a new way of knowing. In the "Adagia" he suggested this:

Perhaps there is a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one; a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet.⁸

Everything he wrote tended toward this goal. Given his temperament and his capacity for articulating what in most men remain

⁸OP, p. 166.

dumb desires, it was natural that he would try to make poetry into something larger than just a private method of communication used among members of a literary clique.

Value, for Stevens, was the extent to which something was real. But only the imagination could make "real" things into objects of belief. If poetry was the best tool available to the imagination in this transformation, it followed that the state to aim for was one in which a poem could actually become the thing it was written about. Poems would still be made, would be "fictions," but they would be more than words about something. Then, eventually, the best possible poem would also be the best possible thing. It would be a Supreme Fiction, and man could stand before it and say, happily, "I believe."

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by John H. Thissen has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

JAN. 14, 1966
Date

Joseph G. Milovan SJ.
Signature of Adviser (PK)