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WALLACE STEVENS: THE DETERMINING PERSONALITY

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Wallace Stevens:  
The Determining Personality

by

Michael Norman Dole

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Page references to Stevens' writings are given parenthetically  
in the text with the following abbreviations:

- SP Souvenirs and Prophecies
- L Letters of Wallace Stevens
- CP Collected Poems
- OP Opus Posthumous
- NA The Necessary Angel

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**Dedication**

**To Claire and Andrew.**

## Introduction

Who was Wallace Stevens? The time has come when the question Edmund Wilson asked in "The Kipling that Nobody Read" ("But who was Kipling?") can profitably be asked about Stevens. Like Wilson, I believe that knowledge of an author's life and personality can contribute to a fuller understanding and appreciation of his work.

Stevens himself apparently thought so too. In his commonplace book, "Sur Plusiers Beaux Sujets," he quoted from a review of a Cezanne exhibit and then added the following comment:

I note the above both for itself and because it adds to subject and manner the thing that is incessantly overlooked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matters much.  
(OP, xxxix)

And in two essays, "The Irrational Element in Poetry" and "Effects of Analogy," he discussed the ways in which poems are both determined by and disclosures of the poet's personality (or "temperament," or "sense of the world").

The truth is that a man's sense of the world dictates his subjects to him and that this sense is derived from his personality, his temperament, over which he has little control and possibly none, except superficially. It is not a literary problem. It is the problem of his mind and nerves.  
(NA, 122)

Because of this, Stevens wrote, a poet's work cannot help but be autobiographical, "in spite of every subterfuge" and "even though it may be totally without reference to himself" (NA, 121).

There are two reasons that this seems a good time to move away from

the strictly "literary" problem of Stevens' poems and turn our attention to the problem of "his mind and nerves." First, it seems to me that the exploration of the philosophical ramifications of Stevens' ideas, as contained in his poems, has just about reached the point of diminishing returns. Efforts to pin down the exact nature of Stevens' beliefs about imagination and reality have become increasingly rarified and repetitious. Studies of his late poems as "acts of the mind" have grown progressively more abstract and theoretical, thereby coercing the reader into seeing the poems themselves as unremittingly abstract and theoretical. While Stevens' beliefs about imagination and reality are important, and many of his late poems are undeniably abstract and theoretical, I believe it would be refreshing at this point to remind ourselves that these poems were after all written by a man who actually lived in the world and that their sources lie not only in his "ideas" but also in his feelings and experiences. New Critical canons against such biographically-oriented criticism have eased, and indeed recent Stevens studies have shown an increasing interest in the man. Helen Vendler's On Extended Wings (1969) pointed out the influence of Stevens' ascetic temperament in his poems. By relying on the poetry alone for insight into Stevens' personality, I believe she gave an unbalanced picture of the man, but her willingness to raise the issue of the poet's personality was liberating for Stevens criticism. Other writers such as A. Walton Litz (in Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens, 1972) and Lucy Beckett (in Wallace Stevens, 1974) have quoted extensively from Stevens' letters to support their accounts of his poetic development. An interesting recent example of an effort to

link Stevens' poetry to the personal anxieties reflected in the journals and letters is Richard Ellmann's essay "How Wallace Stevens Saw Himself" (in Wallace Stevens: A Celebration, edited by Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel and published in 1980). According to Ellmann, "How [Stevens] saw himself, how he valued and then revalued what he saw, provided the impetus to write that poetry in which he was both actor and spectator. In this sense he was right to consider that his poetry was personal" (170).

My second reason for deciding that a study of the man is in order is the growing amount of biographical material that is now becoming available. The single most important stimulus and source for my investigation of the man behind the poems is Holly Stevens' Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens (1977), which includes the complete text of the journals Stevens kept from 1898 to 1909. Souvenirs and Prophecies is a rich record of Stevens' ideas, feelings, and experiences during his twenties; thus it complements the previously published Letters of Wallace Stevens, which reveals mainly the older Stevens (few early letters having survived).

The bibliography includes a list of additional biographical material now available, including a number of anecdotal references and brief memoirs by other writers, friends, and business associates. Several of these items have appeared in recent issues of The Wallace Stevens Journal or were published in connection with the Stevens centennial in 1979. (See for instance the contributions by Wilson Taylor, Holly Stevens, and Peter Brazeau in Wallace Stevens: A Celebration, edited by Doggett and Buttel.) Perhaps before long it will be

possible to approach Stevens' life in terms of a full-scale biography. The only existing biographical study, Samuel French Morse's Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life (1970), is a useful survey of Stevens' life, but it does not pretend to be more than a brief overview. My own study is less concerned than Morse's with the external events of Stevens' literary career; what I have attempted instead is a more thorough and systematic analysis of the underlying forces at work in Stevens' temperament and the ways in which those forces stimulated and shaped his poems.

In the journals of Souvenirs and Prophecies we see Stevens as a nineteen-year-old Harvard undergraduate and on a summer vacation in his hometown of Reading, Pennsylvania. We follow him to New York, where he struggles to earn a living as a reporter while learning to adapt to city life. He reluctantly sets aside his literary ambitions and enters law school; for two years he suffers the drudgery of clerking in a law office. He describes his once-in-a-lifetime wilderness experience in the Canadian Rockies following graduation. Then come dismal years of efforts to establish his own law career, years which finally begin to bear fruit when he enters the insurance field in 1908. Meanwhile he carries on a five-year courtship of Elsie Moll, a girl from his hometown, leading to their marriage in 1909.

My first two chapters are devoted to a close reading of these journals and the letters to Elsie which gradually supplanted them. Although written several years before the poems of Harmonium, they clearly reveal in Stevens the preoccupations and contradictions which would eventually shape his poems. Most strikingly, they show that

the vacillation between "imagination" and "reality" (and the struggle to reconcile the two) which characterizes Stevens' later poetic career was an outgrowth of a basic ambivalence which was rooted in his temperament from the beginning. The theme which pervades the journals is the young Stevens' struggle to reconcile his esthetic values with the seemingly harsh facts of life in the "real world." The journals demonstrate Stevens' deep-seated enthusiasm for nature (whether a brilliant sunset or an icy winter day in Central Park) and for marathon walks through the New Jersey countryside, as well as his linguistic inventiveness and playfulness, his love of metaphor and embellishment. They also reveal the darker side of his personality, the black moods that came over him in periods of ennui. Such passages provide a personal context for the "dejection odes" which occur throughout Stevens' career, from "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" to "The Course of a Particular."

The last four chapters deal with the major phases of Stevens' poetic career. These chapters draw on both poems and letters to trace Stevens' psychological growth--his feelings about people and places, his responses to natural surroundings and seasonal changes, his struggle against ennui and the deadening of his emotional life. I have been concerned with the external events of his life only insofar as they shaped and influenced his inner life.

The governing purpose in my discussions of individual poems has been to delineate "the presence of the determining personality." I have tried to bring to light the feelings, anxieties, and enthusiasms which motivate and inform the poems. I hope I have shown that Stevens'

poems are often personal in ways that are not obvious on the surface. My discussion of Stevens' poetry has been selective, concentrating on those poems with the clearest autobiographical content (for example "The Comedian as the Letter C") and on the lyrical passages which offer the most direct expressions of personal feeling. Not only the sensuous poems of Harmonium but many poems from throughout Stevens' career have a strong basis in personal feeling and experience, and these are the poems to which I have given primary attention. If I slight the more philosophical and abstract poems which make up much of Stevens' late work, it is not only because they are less relevant to my biographical concerns but also because they seem to me weaker and less interesting as poetry. I am not aiming to deal with the whole of Stevens, but with the Stevens that matters most to me.

A subsidiary theme running throughout this book concerns Stevens' effort to overcome a private failure of feeling by means of renewed contact with the reality of ordinary appearance, with what he called "the normal." I find the lyrical core of Stevens' poetry in this effort, and in its transitory and problematic successes, rather than in his labored attempts to find consolation in the creation of abstract, transcendent fictions (the "hero," the "supreme fiction"). My last two chapters, on Stevens' late work of the 1940s and '50s, are largely devoted to attempting to show that this affection for "the normal" persisted even when Stevens seemed most preoccupied with his grandiose fictions.

In old age, Stevens turned inward in a poetry of introspective meditation, apparently divorced from the external world. Yet he was

still moved to seek moments in which he could rediscover the feeling for everyday reality. Such moments were rarer and harder to come by, thus all the more precious and poignant. Despite the predominance of Stevens' philosophical concerns, the lyrical voice continues to be heard in his last work, and through it, for me at least, a saving sense of the man behind the poems.

## Chapter One

### Half Dream, Half Deed: 1899-1904

Wallace Stevens began to keep a journal while a student at Harvard in 1898. He wrote little, however--occasional comments on his reading. Most of his creative energy went into the poems and stories he wrote for the Harvard Advocate and other school publications. These early pieces have been given detailed attention by Robert Buttel in Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium. The one period when the undergraduate Stevens kept his journal regularly was the summer of 1899, which he spent at his home in Reading, Pennsylvania, and at Wily's farm in nearby Berkeley. It was a fulfilling time for him, as he stored up a rich supply of impressions and observations. At the end of it he wrote:

The three months have been kind to me. Certainly the memory of them will surpass any other that I have--the complete change of intellectual vestment has been like the exchange of a dusty road for a path through green and happy fields.  
(SP, 59)

Stevens' sense of beauty began with his esthetic response to nature. The summer journal is filled with descriptions of nature, and the descriptions usually emphasize sensuous details--colors, shapes, sounds, and scents. Nature for Stevens was not a subject for scientific study but a source of images, as in the following passage:

In the sunset tonight I tried to get the value of the various colors. The sun was dimmed by a slight mistiness which was sensitive to the faintest colors and thus gave an unusual opportunity for observation. In this delicate

net was caught up first of all a pure whiteness which gradually tinted to yellow, and then to heavy orange and thick, blazing gold; this grew light again and slowly turned to pink. The feathery deer-grass before me twinkled silverly in a little breeze, the ordinary blades of green-grass and wheat stubble glittered at their tips while the ragweed and clover were more dark and secret. The middle-distance remained stolid and indifferent. The horizon, on the contrary, was deepening its blue--a color to which the outermost clouds were already turning. The pink in the sky brightened into a momentary vermilion which slowly died again into rose-color edged with half-determined scarlet and purple. The rose-color faded, the purple turned into a fine, thin violet--and in a moment all the glow was gone. (SP, 55)

At times Stevens was content merely to catalog colors. (In 1909 he went so far as to write a poem which consisted entirely of a list of colors.) But here the colors are incorporated into a little drama of light--deepening, turning, brightening, fading, dying. The denouement comes in the final clause set off dramatically by a dash--"and in a moment all the glow was gone." We even hear the applause in the comment which Stevens added to his description of the sunset: "My feelings tonight find vent in this phrase alone: Salut au Monde!" Another element of Stevens' description which makes it more than simply a detached record of observations is his use of metaphor (the mist is a "delicate net" in which to catch the colors) and his way of characterizing the colors by personification (the ragweed and clover are "dark and secret"; the middle-distance is "stolid and indifferent"; the scarlet is "half-determined"). We can see Stevens' delight in figurative language at work even in what purports to be an objective rendering of "the value of the various colors." The "scientific" tone in the beginning of the paragraph gives way to the pleasure of arranging and dramatizing the

sunset.

Next to colors, Stevens was perhaps most interested in scents. A catalog of flowers in the Wilys' garden includes the appearance and smell of each. Sweet peas are told from everlasting peas by their "frail and delicate" scent; bergamot has a "spicey smell" and its leaf "smells almost as good as the flower"; mignonette is "a little, vigorous flower with a dry, old-fashioned goodness of smell"; and so forth (SP, 44). Again Stevens' love of metaphor is apparent, as in his description of snapdragon as "a close-knit, yellow, tumbled sort of thing which if looked at closely reproduces a man in the moon or rather the profile of a Flemish smoker." There is even an early example in this passage of Stevens' propensity for inventing words. He had written of the poppies, "The least breath of wind shimmers over them and the impression of them is certainly comparable to that of Wordsworth's daffodils," but he revised the ending to read, "the impression of them is daffodylic."

Stevens was attracted to the grand aspects of nature--sunsets, clouds and sky, vistas, weather. But he was not oblivious of the particular and the intimate. He wrote in one journal entry:

The first day of one's life in the country is generally a day of wild enthusiasm. Freedom, beauty, sense of power etc. press one from all sides. In a short time, however, these vast and broad effects lose their novelty and one tires of the surroundings. This feeling of having exhausted the subject is in turn succeeded by the true and lasting source of country pleasure: the growth of small, specific observation. Weary of the deep horizon or green hill one finds immense satisfaction in studying the lyrics of song-sparrows, catbirds, wrens and the like. A valley choked with corn assumes a newer and more potent interest when one comes to notice the blade-like wind among the leaves . . .

It is the getting below the delightful enough exterior into the constantly surprising interior that is the source of real love for the country and open air. (SP, 48)

Apparently the contrast between "interior" and "exterior" is, in this passage, the same as that between "small, specific observation" and "vast and broad effects." But even in his observations of the small and specific, the lyric of the song-sparrow and the wind in the leaves, Stevens was still really dealing with exteriors, with the surfaces of things. He reacted to nature as an artist, delighting in its beauty--not as a scientist who seeks the abstract laws which underlie and "explain" natural phenomena, nor as a mystic who seeks intimations of the transcendent in those phenomena.

Stevens sometimes seemed to regard nature as a superior, because more original, form of art. Soon after his return from Cambridge to Reading, he wrote:

There is one advantage in being here. Instead of the bad photographs of Tintoret and Reynolds or the reproductions of Hermes and Venus you have the real thing: green fields, woods etc. (SP, 41)

A little later he commented that "no one paints Nature's colors as well as Nature's self" (this even though the sunset that inspired it "was not very fine"!) (SP, 41). This observation led him to meditate on the artificiality of literature compared to life. He found a character in a Robert Louis Stevenson story he had been reading to be

a paper doll and entirely literary, patly illustrating the difference between literary creations and natural men. Out in the open air with plenty of time and space I felt how

different literary emotions were from natural feelings.  
(SP, 41-2)

Although this last passage reveals Stevens' distrust of the "artificial" and the "literary," the esthete in him was quite prepared to mingle "literary emotions" with "natural feelings," letting art enhance nature and nature enhance art. One evening, coming home from a field where he had been watching the sunset, he was struck by the moon "hanging in the dark east."

I felt a thrill at the mystery of the thing and perhaps a little touch of fear. When home I began the third canto of "Endymion" which opens with O moon! and Cynthia! and that sort of thing. It was intoxicating. (SP, 46)

It was not enough for the young Stevens to let Keats express his feelings; he felt the need to do it for himself. It was his esthetic response to nature that first stimulated Stevens to write:

It is quite impossible for me to express any of the beauty I feel to half the degree I feel it; and yet it is a great pleasure to seize an impression and lock it up in words: you feel as if you had it safe forever.  
(SP, 48)

Nature was Stevens' source of energy and his source of material:

Today I have been freshening up and storing myself with new [illegible word]: a half-hour in the garden, the sight of two immense white clouds in the field over the bridge and the notes of a catbird singing in the rain. . . .  
Country sights both purge and fill up your fancy . . .  
(SP, 47)

Three days after this entry he remarked, "Have also been planning more poetry: I am full of bright threads--if I could only gather them

together--but I'm afraid I'm almost too lazy" (SP, 48).

Although Stevens wrote hardly any poetry that summer, he did record some ideas for poems. He also recorded his ideas about what poetry should be. The fascinating thing about this early journal is the inconsistency between what Stevens reveals about his own esthetic sensibility and what he says when he philosophizes about the function of art. The division in his mind is nowhere more apparent than in the contrast between his idealistic notion of the moral function of poetry and the purely esthetic feelings which actually prompted him to write. Here is the kind of thing that appealed to his poetic instinct:

Thought for Sonnet: Birds flying up from dark ground at evening: clover, deep grass, oats etc. to Circle & plunge beneath the golden clouds, in & about them, with golden spray on their wings like dew. Produce an imaginative flutter of color. (SP, 51)

This is the esthete in Stevens, the proponent of a "pure poetry" of images that serve a mood rather than an idea. The next journal entry shows Stevens' mind moving from observed particulars to "poetic" generalizations, motivated by the desire to convey nothing beyond "color, sound & motion":

There is a good chance here to write a sketch containing color, sound, & motion. The plants, the sun, the dam, the birds, the flowers, trees, wind, cicadas, shadows, cropping fruit, contrast of stillnesses, contrast of white house, lichens, looming phlox, dead leaves and grass on ground in the green, sun making leaves transparent almost, air of plenty, glitter of birds in air, brown and black blotched barks of trees, Georgic distances, presence of possible romance (moon, stars) etc. etc. (SP, 54)

The frame of mind represented in these remarks lies behind much of the

poetry of Harmonium, written fifteen years later. As late as 1928, Stevens answered a critic's query about "Domination of Black" by saying "its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images & sounds that it contains. . . . You are supposed to get heavens full of the colors and full of sounds, and you are supposed to feel as you would feel if you actually got all this" (L, 251).

Yet Stevens' observations concerning the proper role of poetry often sound like implicit rejections of his own poetic practice. He had begun his journal, in the fall of 1898, with some thoughts on poetry copied from the letters of Benjamin Jowett. In the passage quoted by Stevens, Jowett defined "true poetry" as "the remembrance of . . . the noblest thoughts of man, of the greatest deeds of the past," and condemned lesser poetry as "a flattery, a sophistry, a strain, in which, without any serious purpose, the poet lends wings to his fancy and exhibits his gifts of language and metre--Such an one ministers to the weaker side of human nature; he idealizes the sensual . . ." (SP, 20). Stevens expressed a similar sentiment in an entry made the following March:

Art for art's sake is both indiscreet and worthless. . . . Beauty is strength. But art--art all alone, detached, sensuous for the sake of sensuousness, not to perpetuate inspiration or thought, art that is mere art--seems to me to be the most arrant as it is the most inexcuseable rubbish.

Art must fit with other things; it must be part of the system of the world. And if it finds a place in that system it will likewise find a ministry and relation that are its proper adjuncts. . . . What does not have a kinship, a sympathy, a relation, an inspiration and an indissolubility with our lives ought not, and under healthy conditions could not have a place in them. (SP, 38)

During his summer in Pennsylvania, Stevens had an occasion to argue against art that was "sensuous for the sake of sensuousness." He was looking at some paintings done by his scientifically-minded friend Christopher Shearer, who claimed that "nature was superior to art."

I said that the ideal was superior to fact since it was man creating & adding something to nature. He held however that facts were best since they were infinite while the ideal was rare. Now compare his hesitancy in putting nature above art, his materialistic religion and beliefs, and does it not seem as if he were unaware of anything divine, anything spiritual in either nature or himself? If this be so do his pictures possess humanity? Are they not so much mere paint: sky and trees and blank places holding a bird or two? (SP, 45)

A few days later Stevens asserted, "I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force. Don't, therefore, look at facts, but through them" (SP, 54). This transcendentalist faith was apparently something Stevens would soon outgrow. But what remained was the unwillingness to accept mere fact, even the fact of beauty, as an adequate justification for art. Throughout his life, Stevens had a restless need to go beyond his own genuine response to sensuous beauty and find ways of humanizing his poetry. His idealism became less naive, more guarded, but never entirely left him.

The passage quoted above wavers between the notion of nature as mere "fact," to which man must "add something," and the notion of nature as immanently divine, whose divinity we merely need to recognize. The same distinction between the artist as active creator and as passive receiver (a traditional Romantic dilemma) recurs throughout Stevens'

work. In the earlier poetry, particularly in Harmonium, Stevens seems to emphasize the creative role of the poet ("Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,/ And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard." ["Tea at the Palaz of Hoon"]). In his later poetry the poet's role becomes more passive, more receptive to the world, as in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where the poet's goal is

To discover an order as of  
A season, to discover summer and know it,  
  
To discover winter and know it well, to find,  
Not to impose . . .

(CP, 403-404)

Stevens was aware of the inconsistency between his poetic feelings and his poetic theory. He seems to have deliberately sought contact with reality in its mundane aspects as an antidote to his esthetic side. He had a horror of sentimentality because he sensed his own tendency toward it. When he spent a day collecting insects with Shearer and another scientific friend, he "felt in the two men an entire lack of poetic life, yet there was an air of strict science, an attentiveness to their surroundings which was a relief from my usual milk and honey" (SP, 49). The ironic self-deprecation in the phrase "my usual milk and honey" shows that already Stevens was wary of his tendency toward an over-refined estheticism and sought the bracing influence of unpoetic facts. In the same way, he found a necessary counter-balance to poetry in his Harvard classes. The tedium of his studies and the urge to escape into the out-of-doors is the theme of one of his sketches from the previous spring, "A Day in February" (SP, 26-27). But, as he wrote on June 20, study provides a poet with a needed contrast, "a place to

spring from."

The mind cannot always live in a "divine ether." The lark cannot always sing at heaven's gate. There must exist a place to spring from--a refuge from the heights, an anchorage of thought. Study gives this anchorage: study ties you down; and it is the occasional willful release from this voluntary bond that gives the soul its occasional overpowering sense of lyric freedom and effort. Study is the resting place--poetry, the adventure. (SP, 41)

In later life, Stevens' daily grind at the office was the "voluntary bond" that gave him the needed "anchorage," and without which his poetry might not have been possible.

As Stevens tried to correct his poetic dreaminess, so he tried to avoid aimless shifts of mood and channel his restless energies. In a single paragraph from the July 31 entry he expressed both his ambition and his idealism. Stevens wrote that his friend Livingood

begins to yield to the expectations of the community, desiring more or less to be well-thought of, quenching his independence and getting into the highway. It seems strange that he should take all these things so seriously. I don't think he is quite free, yet, from the fascination of moods. He ought to have one definite and simple ethical rule which like a weather-cock could point every direction and yet be always uppermost. Moods ought not to wreck principles. He needs stability of desire. Personally I mean to work my best and with my might and accept whatever condition that brings me to. Such a principle strikes me as the only true sort of one, the real rockbottom. (SP, 50)

Stevens himself, of course, would soon be "getting into the highway," first as a would-be journalist, then as a lawyer, and finally as an insurance executive.

Interestingly, one of the recurrent themes in Stevens' journals and letters is the inconstancy of his own character through shifting

moods and changing tastes. Thus his desire for a rockbottom principle is a reflection of his own personal need for stability. This impulse to find an absolute, and with it a sense of order, contrasts with his relativism and hedonism.

If Stevens' natural tendency was to dissipate his considerable energy in dreaming and dabbling and self-indulgent moodiness, he was aware of the dangers of such instability. The primary danger, for him, was that of becoming jaded and succumbing to ennui. For Stevens, as for Hawthorne, the one unpardonable sin was the failure of feeling. "Somehow," he wrote a little farther on in the same entry quoted above,

what I do seems to increase in its artificiality. Those cynical years when I was about twelve subdued natural and easy flow of feelings. I still scoff too much, analyze too much and see, perhaps, too many sides of a thing . . .  
(SP, 50)

Although the Wilys had fallen on hard times, he had failed to notice "the pathos of their condition" as quickly as Livingood: "I am too cold for that." This inhibition blocking the "natural and easy flow of feelings" returned to haunt Stevens in such poems as "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad"; it was the strain of melancholia which was the shadow side of Stevens' exuberant sensualism.

A rather desperate effort by Stevens to reconcile his devotion to pure beauty with his determination to participate fully in the active life is recorded in an August entry in the journal:

I thoroughly believe that at this very moment I get none of my chief pleasures except from what is unsullied. The love of beauty excludes evil. A moral life is simply a pure conscience: a physical, mental and ethical source of

pleasure. At the same time it is an inhuman life to lead. It is a form of narrowness so far as companionship is concerned. One must make concessions to others; but there is never a necessity of smutching inner purity. The only practical life of the world, as a man of the world, not as a University Professor, a Retired Farmer or Citizen, a Philanthropist, a Preacher, a Poet or the like, but as a bustling merchant, a money-making lawyer, a soldier, a politician is to be if unavoidable a pseudo-villain in the drama, a decent person in private life. We must come down, we must use tooth and nail, it is the law of nature: "the survival of the fittest"; providing we maintain at the same time self-respect, integrity and fairness. I believe, as unhesitatingly as I believe anything, in the efficacy and necessity of fact meeting fact--with a background of the ideal. (SP, 53-54)

The remarkable thing about this passage is that Stevens sets up two irreconcilable poles and then tries to make them go together by force. Fact and ideal, social Darwinism and the moral life, are rudely juxtaposed but do not achieve any kind of harmonious reconciliation. The gap remains unbridged; the effort to keep the ideal as a "background" in a brutal world of tooth and nail is lame and unconvincing. The ambivalence which Stevens at nineteen could not overcome stemmed from his conviction that "the love of beauty excludes evil." The world for him was still divided into an esthetic realm, pure and unsullied, and a practical realm which he found deeply repugnant. He knew that he could not live exclusively in either realm, but he could not see at this point how to reconcile them. He was divided between an impossibly high idealism and a correspondingly ruthless cynicism. Before he would be capable of his mature poetry, he needed to broaden his esthetic to include evil (for which read ugliness, banality, mundane reality). This conflict is, I believe, at the root of Stevens' lifelong pre-

occupation with the interplay of imagination and reality. It may be that in his life he failed to achieve an integration: he was forced to live one life at the office and reserve his inner poetic life for home. But in his poetry, with its incessant variations on the theme of the interdependence of reality and imagination, he did achieve at least provisional and momentary integrations.

Nine months after his idyllic summer in the country, as Stevens prepared to leave Harvard and set off for a new life in New York, he again expressed his ambivalence between the competing ideals of the active life and the contemplative life, between working and dreaming. He still saw the two ideals as absolute and irreconcilable:

I should be content to dream along to the end of my life--and opposing moralists be hanged. At the same time I should be quite as content to work and be practical--but I hate the conflict whether it "avails" or not. I want my powers to be put to their fullest use--to be exhausted when I am done with them. On the other hand I do not want to have to make a petty struggle for existence--physical or literary. I must try not to be a dilettante--half dream, half deed. I must be all dream or all deed. (SP, 71)

Stevens' fear of being a dilettante was a sound insight, but I would have located the danger precisely in his tendency to be "all dream"--not in the conflict between dream and deed. If Stevens had been content to dream along to the end of his life, he would indeed have remained a mere dilettante. It was the counteracting effect of his drive toward work, toward an accommodation with the mundane world, that strengthened and broadened his esthetic. A major step in that broadening was his confrontation with New York.

On June 15, 1900, the day after Stevens' arrival in the city where he was to spend the next sixteen years of his life, he announced to his journal,

I do not like it and unless I get some position that is unusually attractive I shall not stay. What is there to keep me, for example, in a place where all Beauty is on exhibition, all Power a tool of Selfishness, and all Generosity a source of Vanity? New York is a field of tireless and antagonistic interests--undoubtedly fascinating but horribly unreal. Everybody is looking at everybody else--a foolish crowd walking on mirrors. I am rather glad to be here for the short time that I intend to stay--it makes me appreciate the opposite of it all. (SP, 72-73)

Stevens did not find an "unusually attractive" position--only an unglamorous and low-paid job as a reporter. Yet he stayed--at first to prove himself, and then because he found himself gradually coming to like New York. He never lost his appreciation for "the opposite"--the countryside of Reading or New Jersey, and the pristine beauties of poetry and philosophy--but his world grew to encompass the cruder side of life that at first seemed "horribly unreal" to him.

He was dismayed by the squalor of his surroundings. While describing his boarding house he noted, "I have just slaughtered two bugs in a wall of my room. They were lice!" The people were uncouth; returning from dinner he found the steps on either side of the street lined with boarders "leaning on railings and picking their teeth." The faces of the office buildings looked "hard and cruel and lifeless" (SP, 72). "I shall say my prayers up the chimney," he wrote. "That is their only chance of getting above the housetops" (SP, 73). He missed the countryside around Reading: "Now my flowers are all in milliner's windows &

in tin-cans on fifth-story fire-escapes" (SP, 80).

Stevens' initial reaction to all this ugliness was to try to reinforce his inner world of ideal beauty. "In coming down to brick and stone," he wrote, "I must be careful to remember the things worth remembering. I am going to get a set of Lowell's Plato as soon as I can afford it and use that as a sort of buoy" (SP, 79).

Despite the moments of disillusionment and loneliness, the journal also reflects Stevens' efforts to maintain his spirits and the curiosity he felt about his new surroundings. He was proud of his independence; after a month he was pleased to be able to report that he had not yet written his father for money: "I am beginning to save already--perhaps a bad week will come & consume what I have laid up--still I have saved & the sense of miserliness in me is tickled" (SP, 80). Moreover, he was fascinated by the overwhelming variety of new sensations, the very disorder and heterogeneity of the city. His bias against the artificiality of literature compared to life, already present in the journal of the previous summer, was strengthened by the invigorating example of New York. A clue to his changing esthetic standards appears in his growing impatience with sonnets (which had been his favored form of expression throughout his Harvard years). After perusing Stedman's "Victorian Anthology" he announced,

There's precious little in the sonnet line there that's worth a laurel leaf. Sonnets have their place, without mentioning names; but they can also be found tremendously out of place: in real life where things are quick, unaccountable, responsive. (SP, 80)

In this impressionable twenty-year-old, drawn to the "quick, unaccountable" qualities of "real life," we encounter the antecedent of the middle-aged poet who would celebrate the world's multiplicity and the aging poet who would seek renewed contact with commonplace reality. But for the young Stevens, this discovery of New York was part of the process of breaking away from the effete estheticism of fin de siècle English and American literature.

In the midst of the struggle to survive and earn a living, Stevens found time to observe and to record his observations, sometimes in horror, sometimes in amazement, sometimes in delight, sometimes in pity. The part of the city that most fascinated him was the waterfront. Several passages in his journal describe this scene in detail; let one serve as an example:

Oct. 21.

West street, along the North River, is the most interesting street in the whole city to me. I like to walk up and down and see the stevedores and longshoremen lounging about in the sun. They are always dressed in overalls and a blouse, with a cap on their heads, a pipe in their mouths & their hands in their pockets. They are either fine big-boned, husky fellows, or wretched decrepit wrecks. Then there is such a tremendous amount of business done in West street by the Jew with a few combs or cuff-buttons of cat's-eyes from Mexico to sell, through the hucksters, & fishmen, and grizzly oyster-openers, & ferry-keepers up to the men who run the steamship lines. The street is as cosmopolitan and republican as any in the world. It is the only one that leaves the memory full of pictures, of color and movement. (SP, 88)

In the summer of the previous year, a rural setting of birds, flowers, trees, wind, etc., had suggested to Stevens "a sketch containing color, sound, & motion" (SP, 54). The esthetic appeal of "color and

movement" still held its power over Stevens' sensibility, but he was learning to find it in the urban milieu that had at first repelled him. Yet, characteristically, it was precisely the romantic and exotic aspects of New York, rather than the familiar and mundane, that excited Stevens. Perhaps the "old sailor, drunk and asleep in his boots," who "catches tigers in red weather" (in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," 1915) is a descendant of the man Stevens met in a bar on an August night in 1900, who had been around the Horn and who told wonderful stories about "shark's teeth, shark's timidity, the Magellan cloud (of stars), flying fish & their flight . . ." (SP, 85). Or perhaps the brilliantly colored nightgowns of that poem are a distant echo of the "pajamas of an explosive and screaming character" worn by a sailor Stevens met on a Portuguese sailing-ship (SP, 83). The special virtue of the wharves was their double appeal, to the esthete in Stevens (lover of the strange and exotic) and to the realist--the one who, in "The Comedian as the Letter C,"

. . . inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells  
 Of dampened lumber, emanations blown  
 From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,  
 Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks  
 That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.

(CP, 36)

Like Crispin, Stevens was learning to "round out" his esthetic by including a wider range of experience, even experience that his fastidiousness would earlier have rejected as anti-esthetic.

Stevens wrote about the human misery he observed around him--the derelicts sleeping on benches in Washington Square; a man in rags crossing Fifth Avenue, "his hands in his trousers pockets, his head

bent and his hat well pulled-down" (SP, 74); a man suffering from delirium tremens who "struggled and squirmed--a snake himself" (SP, 85). ("In spite of the horrible sight & example, a bystander picked up & emptied the drunkard's bottle.") But as the months passed, Stevens acquired the New Yorker's protective shell, so that in March he could write:

To illustrate the change that has come over me I may mention that last night I saw from an elevated train a group of girls making flowers in a dirty factory near Bleeker St. I hardly gave it a thought. Last summer the pathos of it would have bathed me in tears. (SP, 101)

I am not sure whether the tone of this passage is boastful or self-critical: is Stevens proud of outgrowing his sentimentality or ashamed of becoming insensitive? (In the summer journal of 1899 he had denounced his coldness in failing to notice the pathos of the impoverished Wilys and contrasted himself to Livingood, who was moved to tears.)

While Stevens was learning to appreciate the urban features of New York, he was also learning to recognize the presence of nature, in however diminished a form. His first dismayed reaction had been a feeling of being cut off from nature. The rugs and wallpaper of his room gave him "flowers and birds enough of rags and paper--but no more" (SP, 73). After a month in New York his homesickness prompted him to write, "Whatever else I may be doing I never fail to think of the country about Reading. During August I hope to run over & see all the roads & hills again. Besides, they do not seem real to me unless I am there" (SP, 80). He reread his rapturous accounts of the moon in

his last summer's journal and lamented, "Neither sun nor moon is part of my world this year" (SP, 80).

When Stevens moved to a new address on West Ninth Street in July, he catalogued his natural surroundings: a glimpse of sky from his window; ivy covering the opposite wall; a couple of mountain asters growing amid the exposed clay of the yard; and several birds "who make a little music for me in the mornings" (SP, 82).

He had written once before of learning to enjoy the minutiae of nature after the first "vast and broad effects" wore off. Now he had to learn to notice the small manifestations of nature which were all that the city offered and to find consolation in them. Like Frost's Oven-bird, he had to learn "what to make of a diminished thing," and in so doing to define for himself an esthetic which could take the place of the previous summer's ecstatic moon-worship.

On August 3, after a month and a half in New York, Stevens had dinner in a restaurant on the top of a twenty-three-story building and made an important discovery: it was possible to enjoy sunsets even in the city.

My first--or practically my first sunset of the summer. Everything deliciously pure & calm. Over Brooklyn was a low, dark ridge like a mountain with deep crimson peaks--or like a wall over which one looked into the rose-gardens of Paradise. . . . Looking toward the West I could see the river--like a shattered crystal. The sun simply went down--no colors--no delays--a simple progress. But the air was incomparably clear & revealing. (SP, 83-84)

It was at this point that Stevens confessed, "I begin to like New York & do like it hard." His habit of working late at the Tribune office

and walking back to his room in the early morning hours gave him a chance to rediscover the night sky and to experience the city in a pensive mood.

September 10--4 A.M.

Have just returned from work. A most lovely night--The morning star--

How keen, how bright, how free from all despair--

So I have gone to seed. The city deliciously still. A few magic stars dropping through the sky--which startle and dazzle one. Amazing freshness & purity in the air.

(SP, 86)

Rereading his country journal had made Stevens wonder "why I write so much about skies" (SP, 81); now, after the hiatus of the first few weeks in New York, he was renewing the habit. By November the moon was once again a part of his world, enough so that he could remark matter-of-factly, "The moon has not been bad of late" (SP, 90).

Skies and sunsets were one phase in Stevens' rediscovery of nature; the other (judging from the length and frequency of journal entries) was Central Park. The first mention comes on October 18:

I have been walking in the Park of late in the mornings. The weather has been cool and clear and bright. The leaves begin to fall thickly & the wind is becoming audible.  
(SP, 87)

These walks in the Park were precursors of the later, more ambitious excursions into the New Jersey countryside and along the Palisades. But during this period, the Park walks were the next best thing to a visit home to Reading. Once, on a wintry February evening, Stevens even recaptured the religious feeling he had missed since coming to the city--though it lasted only a moment.

I got to the Park after sunset, although the Western horizon was still bright with its cold yellow. . . . The park was deserted yet I felt royal in my empty palace. A dozen or more stars were shining. . . . I wandered about in a maze of paths some of which led to an invisible cave. By this time it was dark and I stumbled about over little bridges that creaked under my step, up hills, and through trees. An owl hooted. I stopped and suddenly felt the mysterious spirit of nature--a very mysterious spirit, one I thought never to have met with again. I breathed in the air and shook off the lethargy that has controlled me for so long a time. But my Ariel-owl stopped hooting & the spirit slipped away and left me looking with amusement at the extremely unmysterious and not at all spiritual hotels and apartment houses that were lined up like elegant factories on the West side of the Park. (SP, 98)

Stevens had found that he could embrace the challenge which New York offered to his ambition without having to abandon his esthetic need for nature and solitude. He wanted to be like his Harvard predecessor Philip Henry Savage, who "went into the shoe business & still kept an eye on sunsets & red-winged blackbirds--the summum bonum" (SP, 83).

At the same time he was discovering the excitement of the city's cultural life, feasting himself on plays, concerts, and galleries. He saw Maude Adams in Rostand's L'Aiglon, Sarah Bernhardt in Hamlet, and Ethel Barrymore in Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines three times. ("It pays a fellow to see an ardor through," he remarked. [SP, 100]) The latter inspired him to try his hand at a romantic comedy to be called Olivia, fortunately never completed.

While Stevens was sorting out his impressions of New York he was also getting his first taste of the working world in his capacity as a reporter on the New York Tribune. He was paid according to the space he filled, which at first was "not especially profitable" since he had

to spend much of his day sitting in the office "waiting for something to happen" (SP, 79). But before long he was earning "good wages"--often twenty or twenty-five dollars in a week--until he was put on a salary of fifteen dollars a week. He found himself particularly busy during the presidential campaign. On October 16 he saw William Jennings Bryan "make 4 speeches in 3 hours" (SP, 88). On November 10 he reported in his journal, "Been having a devil of a time--campaign finally over. Went home for election day, & voted the Democratic ticket--Bryan" (SP, 89). (At twenty-one Stevens had not yet become a rock-ribbed Republican. In fact, during the thirties he still considered himself a sympathizer with leftist ideals if not leftist ideology. Apparently his conservative Republicanism was a rather late development.)

Stevens complained that his work on the Tribune was "dull as dull can be" (SP, 90) and wished he could be "up and away and doing something that has some flash to it" (SP, 85). Yet the discipline of journalism may well have been an important influence in his artistic development. According to Witter Bynner, who was a classmate at Harvard and knew Stevens in New York, Stevens' work as a reporter "was a very good offset to the fastidious instruction we had been receiving at Cambridge" (SP, 96). Stevens' account of his first efforts to write for the newspapers gives support to Bynner's view. Shortly after his arrival in New York he applied to the Evening Post for a job and was required to write some "special articles" as samples of his ability. From the titles one can guess the subjective and impressionistic style of these articles: "A Happy-Go-Lucky Irishman," "Wharves and the

Sea," and "A Battery Naples." The day after he took these articles to the Post his journal recorded, "Re-wrote my 'Wharves and the Sea' in an impersonal vein" (SP, 75). Behind this laconic entry we can well imagine the advice given Stevens by the editor of the Post after reading his first effort. Stevens must have sensed that his Harvard-bred literary style might not be suitable for newspaper writing, for he had promised himself a few days earlier,

I have determined upon one thing, and that is not to try to suit anybody except myself. If I fail then I shall have failed through myself and not through the imitation of what such and such a paper wants. (SP, 74)

But apparently pragmatism won out over this resolve; he did try to adapt himself to the paper's standards, and the educational value of the effort was, as Bynner claimed, probably salutary. (His re-write must have been sufficiently impersonal, for the Post did offer him a job.)

In any event, a month later Stevens himself came out against Harvard and for impersonality in a revealing passage. The occasion for his remarks was an article by another Harvard graduate, Daniel Gregory Mason, which he had just read in the Harvard Monthly.

Mason illustrates the effect of Harvard on a man's personality. The essay was written all through by a quaint & entertaining person. As a matter of good taste, it should have been written by nobody at all: it should have been absolutely impersonal. But Harvard feeds subjectivity, encourages an all consuming flame & that, in my mind, is an evil in so impersonal a world. Personality must be kept secret before the world. (SP, 82)

The weakness of such undergraduate poems as "Vita Mea" is that they

convey a blatantly personal, confessional message by means of a stilted form and manner. As Stevens' style matured, he learned to express his deepest feelings through indirection; the manner became more impersonal and reserved, and at the same time the content became more authentically personal. Like Eliot, Stevens hated the idea of consciously displaying himself through his poetry but believed that a poet's personality is the source and formative power of his poems. Poetry that is deliberately confessional may mask the poet's true self more effectively than poetry that is superficially "impersonal." ("Effects of Analogy" contains Stevens' fullest statement of his view of the role of the poet's personality in his work.)

Stevens was led beyond his shallow undergraduate estheticism both by the diverse stimuli of New York--the things he observed as a resident of the city--and by the particular demands of his newspaper work. His taste was changing in the direction of a tougher esthetic, free of sentimentality. But the dualism in his nature continued to be reflected in swings of mood from ambition and energy to lethargy and melancholy. As self-styled "realist," he saw things as they were, took the world on its own terms, and felt confident of his power to compete and make something of himself. ("Hang it--a fellow must live with the world--& for it and in it" [SP, 85].) Yet he loathed the constraints of routine and the sordidness of money-making and yearned for escape into an ideal realm of art and beauty.

Sometimes I wish I wore no crown--that I trod on something thicker than air--that there were no robins, or peach dumplings, or violets in my world--that I was the proprietor of a patent medicine store--or manufactured

pants for the trade--and that my name was Asa Snuff.  
But alas! the tormenting harmonies sweep around my hat,  
my bosom swells with "agonies and exultations"--and I  
pose. (SP, 90)

Stevens recognized that the expression of his esthetic feelings often contained an element of posturing, but the feelings themselves were genuine and made it difficult for him to accept the mundane world. Next to immersing himself in art, the obvious vehicle of escape was travel. He wrote of his "desire to be off somewhere . . ."

. . . I could enjoy mornings in Florida and afternoons  
and long nights in California--breathing fresh air and  
living at leisure--away from the endless chain to which I  
am fastened like a link--at constant strain. . . . The  
calling is remote . . . May will be maddening when it  
comes. I keep asking myself--Is it possible that I am  
here? . . . I hope to get to Paris next summer--and mean  
to if I have the money. . . . But to fly! (SP, 90)

Talked with father--who is kept busy holding me in check.  
I've been wanting to go to Arizona or Mexico, but do not  
have any good reason for doing so. . . . Europe is still  
on the other side of the ocean. (SP, 94)

Stevens was sometimes lonely and homesick. In July he wrote,  
"The proverbial apron-strings have a devil of a firm hold on me &  
a result I am unhappy at such a distance from the apron" (SP, 81).  
When he did go home for a visit in October he reverted to moon-struck  
poeticizing. With Livingood he watched the moon rise and "apostrophized  
it."

Livy very drunk. Coming down the hillsides we would turn  
to the moon through the trees and hold dialogues with it.  
Charming night. (SP, 87)

A few nights later:

I have a great affection for moonlight nights somehow--  
 & could cry "moon, moon, moon" as fast as the world calls  
 "thief" after a villain--What a treasure house of silver  
 and gold [the moon and stars] are--& how lovely the planets  
 look in the heavens--Bah--mere words. (SP, 87)

This moon-worship was a temporary regression to the naively enthusiastic estheticism which Stevens was in the process of outgrowing. He called Reading "childish & weak" (SP, 84) because such enthusiasm was beginning to seem sentimental to him as he became accustomed to New York's cold hard light. It is not surprising that the moon was to become Stevens' emblem of the imagination that enhances the world but also distorts and falsifies it.

At the end of six months in the city Stevens had been won over to his new environment. On January 1, 1901, he wrote:

I have come to like New York heartily and sincerely.  
 It is a fine thing to have your hands full every day--  
 & N.Y. keeps them full. Then the interest of the town  
 is strong. I have about made up my mind never to settle  
 down in Reading. (SP, 96)

In March he was even more emphatic; on a visit to Reading he found it "the acme of dullness & I was glad, therefore, to get back to this electric town which I adore" (SP, 100).

But it was also in March that the conflict between Stevens' literary ideals and his practical judgment came to a head, precipitated by discussions with his father. During the visit home his father urged him to take up law. Stevens hesitated because, he said, "this literary life, as it is called, is the one I always had as an ideal & I am not quite ready to give it up because it has not been all that I wanted it

to be" (SP, 100). He inquired about a job with a publishing firm but was disillusioned to learn that the work would be mainly clerical and would pay starvation wages--"The mirage I had fancied disappeared in the desert--where I invariably land" (SP, 100-101). He wrote to his father suggesting that he quit the Tribune and devote himself to writing, but in his father's reply he found his idea "torn to pieces." Stevens might have rebelled, but he had too much respect for his father's judgment and found himself, however reluctantly, agreeing with it. "He's a wise man," the son wrote. "He seems always to have reason on his side, confound him."

We don't know exactly when Stevens made his decision, for he abandoned his journal in mid-March. This fact in itself is probably a sign that he had given up his aspirations to a literary career. All we do know is that in October he entered New York Law School. His father had won; more accurately, the "father" in Stevens had won.

Stevens spent two years attending the New York Law School and one year clerking in the office of W. G. Peckham while he studied for the bar exam. The first year of this period in his life is a great silence; he kept no journal and there are no published letters to tell us how he felt about his renunciation of the literary life. We can only assume he was concentrating his energy on his studies and repressing his creative impulses. But in the summer of 1902 he began journalizing once again and kept it up, in spurts, from that time until his letters to Elsie Moll began to take precedence seven years later.

The dominant theme of Stevens' journal from summer 1902 until his admission to the bar in June 1904 is his aspiration to a life of health, activity, and physical and mental vigor. He seemed happiest when he could regard himself as "a hearty Puritan." But this major theme is interwoven with a second theme, the impulse toward escapism, estheticism, and dreams, which was still present although often hidden or muted.

Stevens' "Puritanism" was not so much a matter of belief or ideology as it was an outpouring of energy. He needed action and challenge, a channel for his energy, or it turned inward and made him restless and melancholy. His law studies do not seem to have given him the outlet he craved; he found it instead in the long walks which he began taking on his days off. These walks not only released the week's pent-up energy but aroused his mind from its lethargy.

The main elements of the "hearty Puritan" strain in Stevens are brought together in a passage from October 1903, shortly after his return from his vacation in the Canadian Rockies. Stevens' Puritanism was essentially a desire to face the world with hard-headed realism and meet it without evasion, and this desire was rooted in his physical vitality. He was happiest when he could unleash his tremendous physical energy, and marathon hikes were his favorite way of doing so.

On Sunday I stretched my cramped legs--doing my twenty-five miles with immense good cheer. . . . At twilight I picked my way to the edge of the Palisades & stretched out on my belly on one of the dizzy bosses. Overhead in the clair de crepuscule lay a bright star. I've grown such a hearty Puritan & revel in such coarse good health that I felt scarcely the slightest twinge of sentiment.

From the tone of this passage, I gather he was pleased with his freedom from sentiment; at this moment, he would have regarded any strong emotional response to the star as mere sentimentality, akin to his adolescent moon-worship. I am reminded of the earlier entry in which he found it worthy of note that the sight of some poor factory girls did not move him to tears. Of course, there is also the possibility here of a touch of irony. He seems to be bragging about his indifference to the star's beauty, but perhaps he is at the same time slyly mocking himself for that indifference. It would be like Stevens to want it both ways--to want to enjoy his good-humored, unsentimental realism while keeping the door open at least a crack for his tender esthetic sensibility. As the passage continues, he opens the door a little wider:

But tonight I've been polite to a friend--have guzzled vin ordinaire & puffed a Villar y Villar and opened my dusty tobacco-jar--and my nerves, as a consequence, are a bit uneasy; so that the thought of that soft star comes on me most benignly. Tomorrow, however, I shall reassume the scrutiny of things as they are.

He relishes the thought of the star but regards his pleasure as a weakness, a temporary lapse from his true vocation, "the scrutiny of things as they are." This scrutiny is best carried out if one's life-style is based on simplicity and moderation, neither indulging the senses nor mortifying them.

Fielding, in Amelia, rightly observes that our wants are largely those of education and habit, not of nature. My poverty keeps me down to the natural ones; and it is astonishing how the tongue loses a taste for tobacco; how indeed the paunch accommodates itself to the lack

of fire-water. Indeed, sound shoes, a pair of breeches, a clean shirt and a coat, with an occasional stout meal, sees one along quite well enough.

This modest asceticism is sought not for its own sake, but as a means of steadying the nerves and freeing the mind for the vigorous pursuit of the active life.

Only, at the same time, one must have ambition and energy or one grows melancholy. Ambition and energy keep a man young. Oh, treasure! Philosophy, non-resistance, "sweetness and light" leave a man pitiably crippled and aged, though pure withal. (SP, 127-28)

The themes of this passage--walking as physical and emotional therapy, restraint with respect to sensual pleasures, ambition and energy, and facing the world without sentimentality or evasion--are the threads which are woven through his journal.

The immediate occasion of Stevens' resumption of his journal in August 1902 was a bad case of depression. "I might put a light face on it," he wrote, "and say it is merely a depression rising from lack of exercise, but from my present point of view I see nothing but years of lack of exercise before me." He promised himself that he would "go wayfaring all day long" the next day (SP, 103). After his Sunday outing in New Jersey (a 17½-mile walk from Hackensack to Paterson via Spring Valley Road, Ridgewood, and Hohokus--"a good day's jaunt at this time of year"), his spirits showed a dramatic recovery: "I've had a handsome day of it and am contented again." "As usual," he commented, the fresh scenery "set me contemplating. I love to walk along with a slight wind playing in the trees about me and think over

a thousand and one odds and ends" (SP, 104). The physical stimulus of walking released Stevens' mind from its worst affliction, ennui. It was also a sensual delight in itself, as a fall entry demonstrates:

I doubt if there is any keener delight in the world than, after being penned up for a week, to get into the woods on such a day--every pound of flesh vibrates with new strength, every nerve seems to be drinking at some refreshing spring. And after one has got home, how delicious to slip into an easy chair & feel the blood actually leaping in one's pulses, a wild fire, so to speak, burning in one's cheeks. (SP, 111)

Undoubtedly one reason walking had such a good psychological effect on Stevens was that it helped him control his tendency to put on too many of those "pounds of flesh." "Walking," he wrote, "is my only refuge from tobacco & food" (SP, 129). Trapped by his work or limited by bad weather, he would become enraged by his "sleek figure & fat face" (SP, 130). After one such period of forced inactivity, a fine April day gave him the chance he had been waiting for, and he was able to record in his journal that "yesterday, I walked a score of miles sloughing off a pound at every mile (it seemed)" (SP, 131).

An essential element in Stevens' Puritanism was his need for active participation in life. Detached contemplation, he had suggested in the October 20 entry, left him feeling "crippled and aged." His pursuit of the active life was based not so much on a sense of duty or work ethic as on an acute psychological and physiological need. It was a function of his temperament--"a suasion not to be denied," as he later said of writing poetry. He wrote from painful and repeated personal experience when he said that "one must have ambition and

energy or one grows melancholy."

In February 1904, four months after he had proclaimed himself "a hearty Puritan," he complained bitterly of the past two wasted months.

What a duffer I am! I live as much without energy as if I were an old man with a bank account. I don't even dare to make new resolutions--they are so damned disappointing. I have my golden haze--& that's all. (SP, 128)

Another entry, from the following month, repeats and enlarges on this self-criticism:

Walking is my only refuge from tobacco & food; so today I put on an old suit of clothes & covered about twenty miles or more--to Palisades and back. Felt horrible when I started: heavy, plethoric, not an idea in my head & accusing myself for having let the past week go by so vainly. I must instantly become a harder taskmaster to myself. This is all simple enough when one is free on a good road; but somehow it becomes next to impossible in town during the week. It enrages me to see my sleek figure & fat face and to think how I have lost ambition & energy. I haven't a spark of any kind left in me--no will,--nothing. And the worst of it is that if I make new resolutions, I do it with my tongue in my cheek.

The passage goes on to describe "a most beautiful day in the woods." But "there was no spirit in me to feel any elation."

The sky was silver, the trees were touched with blue shadows, the melting snow gleamed on the emerging rocks. Yet feeling that I had done no good, of late, I felt quite as though I carried the burden of some undefined sin--and that feeling deadened me to all others. (SP, 129-30)

In these complaints from early spring we find the dark side of Stevens' Puritan temper--the disgust with his "golden haze" of vague, dreamy

longings; the physical and mental lethargy; the loss of will; the sense of guilt; the deadening of feeling. It was this ennui that Stevens tried to combat with his resolutions to work harder and achieve more. Ambition and energy were the antidotes to morbid self-contemplation and "the burden of some undefined sin."

Stevens had no interest in sin as a theological concept, but he was still enough the child of a Puritan culture to know about guilt. Stevens was not truly the hedonist that Yvor Winters called him, or he would have been content with his escape into estheticism, his "golden haze," and would have remained merely another decadent fin de siècle poet. It was his Puritan temper that drove him to go beyond this outmoded romanticism and discover a new romanticism which would fuse the love of beauty with truthfulness to things as they are.

"The scrutiny of things as they are"--that and the commitment to ambition and energy are the two key elements of Stevens' Puritanism. The two are connected: Stevens' wish to see things as they are found its complement in his determination to act in the real world and make an impact on it. His realism encompassed both thought and deed. He wanted no ivory tower--or rather, he resisted his impulse to sequester himself in an ivory tower.

One aspect of "things as they are" that forced itself disagreeably on Stevens' awareness was the necessity of making a living. In a spring 1903 journal entry, he spoke of his plans for working in a law office until he could get enough business to start his own.

The mere prospect of having to support myself on a very slender purse has brought before my mind rather vivid

views of the actual facts of existence in the world. There are astonishingly few people who live in anything like comfort; and there are thousands who live on the verge of starvation. . . . [S]tarting with nothing whatever--to make a fortune--is not wholly inspiring after a fellow has spent more or less time lolling about. It is decidedly wrong to start there with one's tastes fully developed & to have to forego all satisfaction of them for a vague number of years. . . . Another phase of the thing is that when one has lived for twenty-five years with every reasonable wish granted & among the highest associations--starting at the bottom suddenly reveals millions of fellow-men struggling at the same point, of whom one previously had only an extremely vague conception. There was a time when I walked downtown in the morning almost oblivious of the thousands and thousands of people I passed; now I look at them with extraordinary interest as companions in the same fight that I am about to join. At first, I was overwhelmed . . . (SP, 114)

The uneasy mixture of compassion and condescension in this passage indicates that Stevens' new-found interest in his struggling fellow-men had not entirely overcome his elitist prejudices. (Other passages show Stevens at his misanthropic worst, making snide remarks about Jews with "suspiciously long hair" or a woman who "had a snout like a swine" [SP, 131].) But the need to participate in the tedious task of making a living did undoubtedly have a humanizing influence on Stevens. His cultivated taste was a barrier between him and the average man, but there were moments when he expressed a somewhat wistful desire to be more in touch with ordinary humanity, with what he called "the normal."

Stevens' new consciousness of "the actual facts of existence" was a phase of his effort to outgrow his own sentimentality. His query about Witter Bynner in April 1904--"Has he passed safely through the sentimental, sketchy stage?" (SP, 132)--might be a reflection on

himself. Stevens was uncomfortably aware of his own tendency toward sentimentality and therefore tried to cultivate emotional toughness. I believe Stevens was primarily a lyrical poet of feelings rather than an intellectual poet of ideas. The excessive abstraction and philosophizing in his later poetry were consequences of his effort to guard against the characteristic danger confronting the poet of feelings--sentimentality. (In "Imagination as Value" [1948] Stevens said that the romantic "is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling.") Thus he prided himself (if partly facetiously) on observing a bright star overhead with "scarcely the slightest twinge of sentiment."

Actually, Stevens' response to nature varied considerably according to his mood. Sometimes he was a sharp-eyed observer, delighting in details and recording his perceptions with careful accuracy. At other times, in his more "poetic" moods, his whimsical and fanciful side came into play, and he spun out imaginative metaphors or summoned fairies to occupy the landscape. In the city he wore the mask of urban sophistication, but on his New Jersey jaunts he allowed his ambivalence to express itself more freely. His affection for the real and his creative impulse to transform and add to the real were intimately commingled in his nature descriptions. Here is a passage written in camp on the Kootenay River during Stevens' Canadian Rockies vacation:

There are three fires burning now. One, the moon, lights mountainous camels moving, without bells, to the wide North; another, the twilight, lights the pine tops and the flaring patches of snow; the last one, the camp-fire,

shines on Mr. Peckham in an enormous woolen shirt, on Hosea (Mr. Hosey) warming his hands, on Tommy baking beans--or rather a stew of beans, bugs, dirt and twigs. (SP, 119)

The long sentence begins with a metaphoric picture of clouds as a caravan of camels--a most exotic image considering the actual setting--and ends with an unblinking catalog of the dubious contents of the stew. Stevens the esthete and Stevens the realist join hands--in this instance with rather incongruous results.

Two examples from April 1904 show Stevens as careful observer and amorist of reality:

Once, when I stopped to drink, my eye fell on a green point which in a week will be a weedy skunk cabbage. (SP, 131)

How clean & precise the lines of the world are early in the morning! The light is perfect--absolute--one sees the bark of trees high up on the hills, the seams of rocks, the color & compass of things. (SP, 133)

The last phrase hints at the esthete in Stevens: he is not interested purely in the things themselves but also in their "color & compass." Out in the hills and woods of New Jersey Stevens' detached "scrutiny of things as they are" became also partly an esthetic pleasure in the colors, compositions, and imagery of the landscape. A hillside covered with white flowers seemed to mirror the white clouds above--"carrying out a pretty composition" (SP, 107). The color blue on a distant horizon was both sensuous and emotional in its appeal--"one of the few things left that bring tears to my eyes (or almost). It pulls at the heart with an irresistible sadness" (SP, 133). When mere description was not enough for the poet in Stevens, he turned

to metaphor, transforming clouds into camels. Thus the mountains of British Columbia appeared "hooded in the gray of their rocks like deathly nuns" (SP, 121), and the hills of northern New Jersey, from a good vantage, looked like "very decent waves or like clouds or like great ships" (SP, 132). This impulse in Stevens to transport "the thing itself" into a more ideal or more exotic realm was most pronounced at the shore. "My fancy is not at all marine," he admitted. "The sea is loveliest far in the abstract when the imagination can feed upon the idea of it. The thing itself is dirty, wobbly and wet" (SP, 107). But the metaphoric flights in Stevens' journal are relatively rare; usually he was content to record the appearances of things in a straightforward way. Helen Vendler's assertion that Stevens' "devotion to the physical world was largely nonexistent" may seem justified by his poems, in which an intense imaginative energy has been brought to bear on that world. But her assertion is contradicted by the journals, which are filled with loving accounts of the physical world, both its grandiose forms and its minutiae.

The pantheist/transcendentalist strain in Stevens' feeling for nature was still present despite his growing concern for "things as they are." His religious temper, like Santayana's, was more esthetic than moral or doctrinaire. Both the interior of a church and the out-of-doors could arouse his sense of awe, but his predilection was clearly for the latter. "An old argument with me," he wrote after a visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral,

is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. . . . But today in my walk I thought that after all there is no conflict of forces but rather a contrast. In the cathedral I felt one presence; on the highway I felt another. . . . The priest in me worshipped one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another shrine. . . . As I sat dreaming with the Congregation I felt how the glittering altar worked on my senses stimulating and consoling them; and as I went tramping through the fields and woods I beheld every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the Invisible. (SP, 104)

What Stevens here calls the "priest" and the "poet" in him are both, I think, really aspects of the poet; both demonstrate his susceptibility to beauty and the sense of mystery. The Puritan in Stevens was the part that resisted such susceptibility and sought to demystify the world.

When Stevens discovered a secluded spot in the woods along the Palisades overlooking the Hudson River, he made it his private "temple." He sometimes found there the kind of mysterious presence he had experienced once before in Central Park. One October evening, for instance, he went there after watching the sun "disappear in a dim flame."

Overhead the moon shone from a strange azure of its own creating. Spirits seemed everywhere--stalking in the infernal forest. The wet sides of leaves glittered like plates of steel; nightbirds made thin noises; tree-frogs seemed conspiring; an owl chilled the clammy silence. But pooh! I discovered egg-shells--sure sign of a man & his wife & a child or two, loafing in my temple. How fine, though, was the mystery of everything except the damned egg-shells! How deep & voluble the shadows! How perfect the quiet! (SP, 110-11)

Sometimes Stevens' escapist sentiments took a whimsical form. "Only last night," he wrote in September 1902, "I was lamenting that the fairies were things of the past."

The organismus [i.e. German philosophy] is truck--give me the fairies, the Cloud-Gatherer, the Prince of Peace, the Mirror of Virtue--and a pleasant road to think of them on, and a starry night to be with them. (SP, 108-9)

Here we catch Stevens in one of his unabashedly sentimental moods.

The realist and the poet come together in a passage recording Stevens' reflections on the earth as an untamed "giant." As usual, his ideas were stimulated by a long walk; he meditated during the train ride home.

I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes & barrens & wilds. It still dwarfs & terrifies & crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens & orchards & fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless. And it is a proper question, whether or not the Lilliputians have tied him down. . . . (SP, 134)

On one level, this is Stevens the anti-sentimentalist, confronting the earth as it really is, not as the naive city-dweller would have it. Stevens will not be like the silly girl on the train who talked only of dances and men: "For her, Sahara had no sand; Brazil, no mud." We evade the uncomfortable reality, we "shut out the face of the giant" from our windows. Stevens' rediscovery of the earth's wildness (probably influenced by his impressions of the Rocky Mountains the previous

summer) suggests Crispin's experience (in "The Comedian as the Letter C") when he confronts the sea and realizes that nature is not a genteel affair of gardens and parks but is really something vast, dangerous, and above all inhuman. This refusal to humanize nature is a step away from Stevens' more sentimental tendencies. At the same time, the very act of recognizing man's smallness in the face of the earth becomes a hymn to the sublime in nature. Our response to the earth, seen in this light, is a mixture of terror and admiration. In Stevens' poetry, the terror finds its way into "The Comedian as the Letter C," while the admiration finds its way into "Sunday Morning." This world of rivers and mountains and winds foreshadows the more pastoral wilderness of "Sunday Morning," where "Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail / Whistle about us their spontaneous cries . . ." The awe of earth's power (roaring, crashing, shattering) becomes a delight in its fecundity ("Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness"). In both the 1904 journal entry and the 1915 poem there is a sense of wonder at the earth's plenitude, its diversity, its abundance (even though in the journal he calls that plenitude a "rough enormity" and "disparate monstrosity").

On his rambles through the New Jersey countryside Stevens was sometimes poet and sometimes realist; but when he turned to the New York theaters for relief from his uninspiring law studies he tended to give the poet free reign. In the emotional tonic of music and the illusions of the stage he found an outlet for his esthetic and escapist needs. He wrote of a performance of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony that the adagio contains a theme "that is as languorously despairing as any in the world. It falls on one like a calm--profound and ravishing"

(SP, 130). He saw several Shakespeare productions in the spring of 1904, and what he sought in them was an illusion perfect and free from any jarring note that would allow the real world to intrude.

Nothing is so agreeable to an exacting gallery-god, such as I am, than pleasing minutiae. One cannot very well fly to Illyria, a half-hour after dinner, if the scenes are shabby; or if one catches glimpses of the stage-carpenter, and so on. (SP, 129)

. . . a play like this [As You Like It] should breathe forth rich airs from time past. . . . When the curtain rises, it should be like the opening of a casement through which should stream sweet & lively odors. Some of that delicate perfume tonight suggested something artificial. It showed the difference between a bouquet still wet with dew and a garland of wax. (SP, 130)

Stevens favored a romantic interpretation. He complained of Forbes Robertson's performance of Hamlet that it was "thoroughly English & unemotional."

There was very little shadow, no melancholy; rather delay than irresolution. I don't know that it pleased me. Robertson raises no stage illusion; he is incorrigibly sane, cold, indeed almost familiar & commonplace. (SP, 129)

The "familiar & commonplace" were precisely what the esthete in Stevens wanted to get away from.

This escapist impulse in Stevens was clearly in conflict with his assertive "realism." Even while disparaging his "golden haze" he could add, "That's all that's worth while, too; but, odds boddikins, I have my way to make . . ." (SP, 128). At times he felt that he was living too much in his imagination, and that it was not enough. In one moment of acute loneliness (a Sunday in February) he wrote,

I'm in the Black Hole again . . . I want to see somebody, hear somebody speak to me, look at somebody, speak to somebody in turn. I want companions. I want more than my work, than the nods of acquaintances, than this little room. I do not want my dreams--my castles, my haunts, my nuits blanches, my companies of good friends. (SP, 128)

Stevens is known as a man who jealously guarded his privacy and lived intensely within his own private imaginative world. But as the above passage shows, he also had a craving for human contact. Superficial contact ("the nods of acquaintances") was not enough; he needed friends who were in sympathy with his deeper thoughts and feelings. In his letters we can clearly see this craving turned on Elsie Moll, and in later life on Henry and Barbara Church.

Stevens sometimes oscillated between extremes of estheticism and realism--between pure escapism on the one hand and pure cynicism on the other. What he most desired, I believe, was a middle road which would allow him to keep one foot in his dreams and one in reality without entirely succumbing to either. He wanted to emulate a judge whom he heard lecture at Columbia in March 1903:

Parker very handsome, very strong, very much of a man. Impressed me as a man of great morality & of lofty determination & of kindness of heart. Is in his prime. He was wonderfully encouraging and cheering and agreeable. Something of the country-boy about him--it struck me. He has lived away from cynics & dreamers. (SP, 113)

Stevens had written after Stephen Crane's funeral in 1900 that "There are few hero-worshippers. Therefore, few heroes" (SP, 79). But Justice Parker seems to have struck him as a likely candidate for his idea of a hero--and at the same time as a kind of father-figure.

Justice Parker, neither cynic nor dreamer, came closest to filling the role that Stevens aspired to when he called himself "a hearty Puritan."

## Chapter Two

### Glimpses of Reality: 1905-1914

Two of the central events in Stevens' life occurred in the summer of 1904: he became a lawyer, and he met Elsie Moll. After passing the bar exams in June, he went home to Reading for an extended vacation, during which he and Elsie were introduced by a mutual friend. She was an exceptionally pretty girl, interested in music and books, but handicapped by a painful shyness. She quickly brought Stevens' romantic feelings to the surface.

Dear me, that warm mouth counts too; and that ravishing hand; and that golden head trying to hide in my waistcoat somewhere; and those blue eyes looking at me sweetly though without intent. (SP, 138)

Elsie inspired Stevens' poetic side; she was the idealized figure he set up in opposition to the harsh realities of the city, his "vrai princess lointaine" (SP, 146).

Though their courtship was long and hesitant, Stevens' love for Elsie sustained him through a series of disappointing false starts in his effort to establish himself in a law career. After a partnership in New York failed, he went through several jobs with different law firms. It was not until 1908, when he went to work for the American Bonding Company, that his successful career in insurance got under way.

Stevens did gain one important benefit from his work during this dismal period. In the summer of 1905 he made his first business trips to the West and the South. The first whirlwind tour, in July, took him to Chicago, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Nebraska, and Iowa. Then,

after a two-week vacation in Reading, he set off for the South, traveling through Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. These trips, like the ones he made after his marriage, filled his mind with new images and impressions which would form much of the raw material of the Harmonium poems: "green, hilly, sunny-cloudy" Tennessee; "rotten melons in a creek"; a lightning storm on the prairie when "great clouds would flare & the ground would flash with yellow shadows"; a thunder storm in Louisiana with "terrifying percussions that made the house quite jump from its piles"; "the pine wood white with mist" ("that is something"); razor back hogs; oxen drawing a wagon; orange trees, banana trees, banyan trees, live oaks "thick with moss" (SP, 148; 150-52). These new stimuli refreshed and invigorated Stevens' appetite for reality.

But the dominant forces acting on Stevens during this period tended to reinforce his predisposition to escapism. His struggle to master the world of ambition and work, in which he was so anxious to prove himself, was going badly. And his romance with Elsie, carried on mostly by letter with only occasional visits, was inevitably idealized and sentimentalized in his mind.

On January 1, 1905, Stevens started a new journal which he kept up fairly regularly until his letters to Elsie began to take its place in 1907. This record of his mid-twenties shows him still struggling through a prolonged period of uncertainty about his own identity, of groping and ill-defined longing and role-playing. More than ever,

during these years, he often found his life dull, confusing, and purposeless. The same complaints recur periodically in his journal:

[February 1905] Dull life of it! Office and theatre and perpetual cold weather. (SP, 144)

[April 1905] I fear that the habit of journalizing has left me. Still one doesn't care to write a story all of one thing and my own history nowadays would make rather a monotonous Odyssey at best. (SP, 144)

[September 1905] I am indefatigable in procrastination. (SP, 154)

[November 1905] A month of bitter far niente. (SP, 154)

[December 1906] I am afraid to review the last two months. They seem to have changed me--I no longer read, and no longer think. . . . Busy with many things--that's it, I'm busy. A walk now and then, a little music, a few pages, a trip home at Thanksgiving time--there's no Iliad in that. (SP, 171)

[April 1907] I suppose if I turned my glass back on the last few months I should find something to record--but tremendously little. I am drifting. (SP, 175)

The root of Stevens' malaise was a dissatisfaction with himself. He felt that he had no clearly defined self, no stable beliefs, no consistent desires. He accused himself of being an actor, an imposter, a role-player. He felt estranged from himself. "Tonight, there was a long twilight and after dinner I took a stroll as I am wont to do in summer-time," he wrote in April 1905.

I could not realize that it was I that was walking there. The boy self wears as many different costumes as an actor and only midway in the opening act is quite unrecognizable. Now and then something happens to me, some old habit comes up, some mood, some scene (both of the sun, and of the moon) returns, and I return with it. But more often my days are mere blots on the calendar. (SP, 144)

He found himself trying on different beliefs--one day a monk, the next an Ibsenist:

When you first feel the truth of, say, an epigram, you feel like making it a rule of conduct. But this one is displaced by that, and thus things go on in their accustomed way. . . . There is a perfect rout of characters in every man--and every man is like an actor's trunk, full of strange creatures, new & old. But an actor and his trunk are two different things. (SP, 166)

"Each of one's passing moods has been a life-time to someone else," Stevens mused, and he imagined some of the possible lives to which others might devote themselves: the artistic, the altruistic, the religious, the military. But as for himself--"I pass from one thing to another. . . . May it be that I am only a New Jersey Epicurean?" (SP, 159).

Allied to Stevens' uncertainty about his true self was his fear of being a dilettante. He enjoyed many pleasures--in art, in nature, in food and drink--but without some guiding philosophy, some steadiness of purpose, all these pleasures seemed to him trivial and transitory. He was not content to be "only a New Jersey Epicurean." Nor was he content, in later years, to be a Hartford Epicurean. Stevens always affirmed the importance of pleasure in art, but the whole thrust of his later career was to define the value of poetry as something central and significant for human life, something more than an amusement or an embellishment. Stevens' anxiety about the role of poetry can be seen as an outgrowth of his early anxiety about his own life.

Stevens' frustration with his life--its monotony, lack of clear purpose, the chameleon-like quality of his character and opinions--

spilled over into his surroundings, so that he disparaged the things and people around him and expressed a "loathing (large & vague!), for things as they are" (SP, 146). He found his weekday routine tedious and barren. "There is so little in reality," he wrote. "My office is dingy, and I go to and from it, underground" (SP, 171-72). He continued to suffer from spring bouts of melancholy, when his brain was "like so much cold pudding," he "loathed every man [he] met," and even the trees on the hill-sides and the first pussy willows seemed "dull and hard and tiresome" (SP, 158).

Stevens tried to analyze this recurrent ennui. In an April 1907 journal entry he suggested that his problem was the critical, skeptical, reductive tendency of his mind: "One of my maladies is to rub the freshness off things and then to say, 'So, how commonplace they really are!' But the freshness was not commonplace" (SP, 175). Stevens was torn between this impulse to reduce things to their commonplace reality and his desire for "freshness," for change, and beauty, and sensuous pleasure. He described his restless dissatisfaction in a letter to Elsie in March 1907:

I am so full of misery tonight that I am ridiculous. Every Spring I have a month or two of semi-blackness and perhaps the mood is just returning. Perhaps, it is just a revulsion against old things--habits, people, places--everything: the feeling the sun must have, nowadays, when it shines on nothing but mud and bare trees and the general world, rusty with winter. People do not look well in Spring. They seem grimy and puffy and it makes me misanthropic.

Spring fills me so full of dreams that try one's patience in coming time. One has a desire for the air full of spice and odors, and for days like junk of changing colors, and for warmth and ease, and all the other things that you know so well. But they come so slowly.--Earth

and the body and the spirit seem to change together, and so I feel muddy and bare and rusty. (SP, 174)

It is interesting that Stevens here describes his malady not as an alienation from the world, but rather as an excessive identification with the world, as if he shares in the earth's labor as it brings forth the new creation. His ennui seems to be not a failure to respond to the weather but an extreme sensitivity to the weather and to the progress of the season, so that "earth and the body and the spirit seem to change together." It is difficult to say how much of this is simply metaphor, a projection of his dreams and desires onto a personified nature--so that his own feelings are like "the feeling the sun must have"--and how much it is an expression of the dependence of his mood and state of mind on his surroundings, that is to say, an actual causal relationship.

Another of Stevens' efforts to explain his malady (and make light of it) appears in a May 1905 entry. "For two weeks I have been in a frightful mood," he wrote.

. . . Today, too, I could have been seen on Broadway with my head down and my hands behind my back destroying everything and everybody. I shan't go into it. It's simply New York and a bad liver combined, I suppose, for I am capable of excessive delight. (SP, 146-47)

There were still times when his weekend escapes into the country cured his depression and restored that delight to him. As he wrote in a letter to Elsie in March 1907,

The sun clears my spirit, if I may say that, and an occasional sight of the sea, and thinking of blue valleys, and the odor of the earth, and many things. Such things make a god of a man . . . (SP, 174)

The pagan hedonist of "Sunday Morning," for whom the earth is enough, speaks in these words. But Stevens' problem was that sometimes the consolations of nature were not enough; sometimes even the sea and blue valleys and the odor of the earth seemed merely "dull and hard and tiresome," devoid of "freshness." These periods when all the things he loved seemed old and stale continued to haunt Stevens throughout his life and grew even more pervasive as he moved into old age.

It was at such times that Stevens felt the lack of some underlying faith, some fundamental belief which would sustain him and give his life a purpose. Sitting in Christ Church one evening, he found himself recoiling from the "painful people" around him.

I can't make head or tail of Life. Love is a fine thing,  
 Art is a fine thing, Nature is a fine thing; but the average  
 human mind and spirit are confusing beyond measure. Sometimes  
 I think all our learning is the little learning of the maxim.  
 To laugh at a Roman awe-stricken in a sacred grove is to laugh  
 at something today. I wish that groves still were sacred--  
 or, at least, that something was: that there was still some-  
 thing free from doubt, that day unto day still uttered speech,  
 and night unto night still showed wisdom. I grow tired of  
 the want of faith--the instinct of faith. . . . It would  
 be much nicer to have things definite--both human and divine.  
 (SP, 158-59)

Growing tired of the want of faith, Stevens was forced to rely on his dreams and illusions for a substitute. He craved a belief which he could accept as the Truth, "free from doubt." In the absence of such a Truth, however, he sought a surrogate in his private imaginative world. He escaped into the transitory but accessible consolations of charming fictions. Such self-induced illusions appealed to the esthete

in Stevens but left the realist scornful. It was only much later that Stevens tried to reconcile his skepticism with his desire for faith through the idea of a belief which was a fiction, and which he knew to be a fiction, but which nevertheless would have the power of an authentic faith. At this early period Stevens still felt his internal division sharply, unable to accept his own irresistible tendency toward escapism. Thus on New Year's Eve at the end of 1905 he wrote,

Pulled my curtains shortly after four and lit my lamp,  
feeling rather lonely--& afraid of the illusions and  
day-dreams that comfort me--and frightened at the way  
things are going, so slowly, so unprofitably, so  
unambitiously. (SP, 156)

The illusions and day-dreams that comforted Stevens took many forms. At times they were the expression of a sophomoric cynicism in which he dismissed everything that he cared for--not only fantasy but also love, nature, friendship, and work--as mere "consolation."

I say to myself that there is nothing good in the world  
except physical well-being. All the rest is philosophical  
compromise. (SP, 146)

In this frame of mind, typical of him in the spring, he would conclude that "Life is not important.--At least, let's have it agreeable" (SP, 176). Sometimes Stevens relied on alcohol for consolation:

What a business! Been drinking gin & courting the moon.  
That's done for now & I shall be decent until autumn.  
(SP, 147)

Or he would immerse himself in books:

Lately, I have been buying almost any book that struck my fancy. I wish I might line my walls with them and devote myself to study, or rather, reading; for if I have ardor left for anything at all, it is for books. (SP, 176)

But usually he was able to conjure up day-dreams and fantasies out of his own imagination, as in these excerpts from April 10 and 11, 1905:

Sometimes, just before I go to sleep, I fancy myself on a green mountain--Southward, I think. It's simply green, the grass,--no trees, just an enormous, continental ridge . . .

I'm going to come down from the green mountain tonight and imagine a warm sea booming on a tropical coast. (SP, 145)

An even better escape than the green mountain was the thought of suicide, which prompted one of the more elaborate fantasies recorded in the journal.

Somehow, in this season, I like to get my pipe going well, and meditate on suicide. It is such splendid melancholy, and, mixed with a little beer and whiskey--divine. If only one could look in at the window when they found one's body--one's blood and brains all over the pillow. How terrible the simple books would look,--and the chairs and the curtains so carefully drawn! How empty, for a moment, the lawns would seem,--the Sunday twittering of the birds! How impotent all the people! Such a death is a death to everything--Then one would tap on the window and laugh and say, "It is all a mistake. Let me come in again. I know how foolish it all is. But what is one to do?" (SP, 164-65)

At the opposite pole from this repudiation of life was the impression created in Stevens' mind by his study of ancient Greece. "The impression of Greece is one of the purest things in the world," he wrote to Elsie--

a noble conception of a pagan world of passion and love

of beauty and life. It is a white world under a blue sky,  
still standing erect in remote sunshine . . . (SP, 177)

Though Greece might represent an affirmation of life to Stevens, it was definitely an ideal far removed from the actuality of life in New York City in 1907, and thus for Stevens one more escape into imagination.

Entries written a few days apart in April 1906 describe imagination acting in two different ways for Stevens. First, imagination could be a pure escape from reality. Perhaps Stevens was feeling particularly oppressed by the prospect of his law career when he wrote,

. . . one must begin to live out a certain, definite life. The horror of it is to be able to see the end of that life. That takes away all desire to live it. A clerk ends as a clerk--and so on. In ignorance of this plain destiny, a clerk, too often, imagines marvels for his old age, or even has some hallucination that supports a present pimp. At least, romantic clerks do. What a bore it would be not to!  
(SP, 165)

Self-deception is the only relief from the horrible burden of life's predictability. But imagination does not have to mean self-deception or hallucination; it can complement reality, add the ingredient that makes reality bearable. It can make reality complete.

Clear sky. The twilight subtly mediaeval--pre-Copernican. A few nights ago I saw the rim of the moon, and the whole black moon behind, just visible. The larger stars were like flares. One would have liked to walk about with some Queen discussing waves and caverns, like a noble warrior speaking of trifles to a noble lady. The imagination is quite satisfied with definite objects, if they be lofty and beautiful enough. It is chiefly in dingy attics that one dreams of violet cities--and so on. So if I had had that noble lady, I should have been content. The absence of her made the stealthy shadows dingy, atticy--incomplete. (SP, 166)

Probably Elsie Moll had something to do with the romantic Queen of Stevens' fantasy--whether by inspiring it or by embodying it. What seems significant to me is that Stevens is groping toward a conception which reconciles imagination and the reality of "definite objects"; he repudiates the escapist imagination which conjures up "violet cities." Yet he seems to beg the question when he says that the imagination is satisfied with definite objects "if they be lofty and beautiful enough." What else is it but imagination that gives us the power to see objects as "lofty and beautiful"?

The emotional tensions and contradictions I have been describing influenced Stevens' efforts to define an esthetic philosophy. These efforts are reflected in his comments on the books he read and the paintings he saw. He still rejected the "art for art's sake" doctrine and was convinced that art should serve a moral and social purpose. Yet his delight in his own powerful esthetic responses to color and music encouraged him to place a growing emphasis on the central role of pleasure in art and led him toward the ideal of "pure poetry" which would dominate Harmonium. What becomes clear from a reading of Stevens' youthful journals is that the seriousness of purpose which emerges in his later poetry is not a new development; rather, the joyous estheticism of Harmonium temporarily overshadowed a moralistic strain that was present from the beginning. In a sense, Harmonium was an aberration in Stevens' poetic career, a momentary indulgence in the pure play of imagination before the need to justify and inform and improve, in short, before Stevens' conscience, reclaimed its authority. Of course the love of physical beauty and the delight in language never

left Stevens, and they account for some of the most satisfying moments in his work; but their role tends to become subordinated to an overriding vision of poetry as a substitute for religion which makes Stevens' later writing so much more didactic and philosophical than the Harmonium poems.

Although Stevens was deeply interested in French language and literature, he did not join in the fashionable enthusiasm for the Impressionist and Symbolist esthetic ideas that were current in the early years of the twentieth century. In an April 1906 entry he dismissed two of the leading popularizers of French estheticism, Arthur Symons and James Huneker. Symons had written the influential The Symbolist Movement in Literature in 1899. "Arthur Symons has great weight with several fellows I know," wrote Stevens. "What has always made him impossible for me is his terrible chatter about Art." Others called Symons perverse; to Stevens he was "otiose." "Morbid, of course--& so concerned with intense situations." (Stevens would later describe himself as a poet of the "normal" who sought to put himself at the center of experience rather than seek out the extraordinary.) As for Huneker, a tireless enthusiast for the new and the foreign and a champion of Symons, "Huneker is a bee--with well-covered thighs--but, after all, a bee-bug. His beating about is mere buzzing: no air whatever, no tune" (SP, 163). Stevens refused to make novelty the criterion of esthetic value. His criticism of Huneker recalls the remarks he had made seven years earlier when he had repudiated "art for art's sake" for being detached from the world and called for an art that would have "a kinship, a sympathy, a relation, an inspira-

tion and an indissolubility with our lives" (SP, 38).

In another entry written a few days later Stevens questioned whether esthetic values could be sought independently of ethical values. Could beauty alone, without conscience, serve as the origin of nobility?

It must be a satisfaction to be without conscience. Conscience, nowadays, invades one's smallest actions. Even in that cell where one sits brooding on the philosophy of life, half-decided on "joyousness"--one observes one's black brother in a corner, and hears him whisper, "The joyous man may not be right. If he dance, he may dance in other people's ashes." It is the may that dashes one. (SP, 164)

In this passage the esthete in Stevens appears to be struggling unsuccessfully with the moralist. Considering the direction Stevens' poetry took in Harmonium, and his general lack of sympathy with social and political causes, one might be inclined to dismiss his "conscience" as superficial and insincere. One can't be sure how much of this piety is mere self-deception and posturing. But it seems to me that Stevens' social conscience was in fact rather deep-seated and that it came to the surface to haunt him in the thirties. The defensiveness that makes much of "Owl's Clover" such uncomfortable reading is, I suspect, the result of a bad conscience. In other words, Stevens tried so hard to answer the attacks of Burnshaw and others precisely because he was stung by them, and he was stung because he felt a degree of justice in them. If Stevens had really been the hedonist that Yvor Winters thought him (in his 1943 essay, "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress"), he would have simply accepted and

enjoyed his authentic and powerful esthetic responses. But conscience drove him to validate his art in ethical terms. Thus, in "The Man With the Blue Guitar" and the work that followed, he made great claims for poetry as that force which, in the absence of religion, creates for us the sanctions which help us to live our lives.

Stevens developed his distrust of estheticism further in May 1906, when he discussed the relation of art to ideas.

Been reading poetry. What strikes me is the capable, the marvelous, poetic language; and the absence of poetic thought. . . . We get plenty of moods . . .; and we get figures of speech, and impressions, and superb lines, and fantastic music. But it's the mind we want to fill--with Life. We admit now that Truth is the warrior and Beauty only his tender hide, as one might say. Santayana's Sonnets are far nobler and enduring in our eye than Phillips' tragedies. (SP, 167-68)

Again, as in 1899, Stevens rejects art that is "sensuous for the sake of sensuousness."

Paul Elmer More, the critic whose attacks on modernism made him (along with Irving Babbitt) the guiding spirit of the New Humanist movement of the late twenties, was a congenial mind for the moral and philosophical side of Stevens. More's Shelburne Essays, which began to appear in 1904, urged the importance of traditional values, particularly ethical values, in literature, and castigated the heresy of "art for art's sake." He tried to approach literature as a philosopher and defined art (in a passage recorded by Stevens) as "the desire of select spirits to ennoble and make beautiful their lives" (SP, 221). The fluctuations in Stevens' opinion of More help to dramatize the division within Stevens. And perhaps, at a deeper

level, Stevens was drawn to More because he sensed in the critic the same ambivalence that he felt, between art as esthetic pleasure and art as a guide to philosophical truth. More said of himself,

I was too much addicted to literature to be accepted by the philosophers, and too fond of interpreting art by an ethical criterion to find favour among the literary. And by an odd mischance I, whose life has been a passage through storms of emotion, am regarded as a cold and heartless intellectual.<sup>1</sup>

From at least 1906 on Stevens read a good deal of More's work, copied many passages in his journal, and commented on More's ideas. His initial reaction, as recorded in April 1906, was critical: he found More "capable" but lacking "vigor, life, originality" and wrote, "I do not consider him distinguished, either as a thinker or writer." Three years later Stevens was going through his old papers and notebooks, preparing to move to the house he would share with his bride, when he came across this entry and wrote in the following note: "No longer my opinion--far from it 9-9-9" (SP, 164). Stevens' comments on More in letters to Elsie in February and March of 1909 show that he was attracted by More's high-minded idealism but still had misgivings about an approach to art that undervalued simple pleasure. On February 28 he told Elsie,

I . . . spent the afternoon and evening at the Astor Library looking through the books of Paul Elmer More, one of the most discriminating, learned and soundest critics of the day. He has a very marked tendency to consider all things philosophically, and that, of course, gives his views both scope and permanance.

Stevens read More's essays, as he had earlier read Matthew Arnold's Notebooks, for maxims containing

those principles of moral conduct that should guide us in every-day life--as distinct, say from the peculiar life of Sundays. . . . To think occasionally of such things gives me a comforting sense of balance and makes me feel like the Brahmin on his mountain-slope who in the midst of his contemplations--surveyed distant cities--and then plunged in thought again. (SP, 210-11)

But in the same letter Stevens turned to the question of pleasure in art and tried to persuade Elsie that the most important function of art, in painting as in poetry, is the pleasure it gives.

People's pleasure in good poetry is simple pleasure. But people's pleasure in good painting is a timid, unbelieving thing, involved somehow with the idea that the pleasure is incomplete without some understanding of the technique of art. . . . That is all nonsense. A good painting should give pleasure, like any other work of art. (SP, 211)

No doubt Stevens had an ulterior motive in stressing the role of "simple pleasure"--to encourage Elsie to enjoy paintings without feeling she had to be an expert in formal techniques. Therefore he probably oversimplified his own real opinion. But in doing so he put himself in conflict not only with More's precepts but with his own oft-repeated belief in the moral function of art. A few days later he wrote again to Elsie:

. . . I find that I was all wrong (according to my latest reading) in saying that the function of art was to give pleasure. It seems that "the pursuit of beauty as something unconnected with character is a most insidious danger," which "must inevitably become corrupt"; and that, in a way, art is "the desire of select spirits to ennoble

and make beautiful their lives!"

. . . I am still reading Paul Elmer More, and expect to do so all week. I imagine that his limitation is to be found in his learning: his philosophical bias. --One does not invariably care to have the simple pleasures of life discussed with such importance. It is always a relief to know that the great poets and the great artists were not such devilish scholars. (SP, 212)

There is no question but that Stevens was temperamentally and philosophically attracted to More. But perhaps it was More's extreme advocacy of an ethical interpretation of art that caused the esthete in Stevens to recoil and demand equal time for the pleasure principle. Thus Stevens defined his own attitude by reacting against views which he shared partially but not totally.

Stevens' remarks on particular paintings, unlike his more theoretical remarks, are generally free of moralism and idealism; they emphasize his pleasure in the subject-matter. At the same time, his taste in subject-matter shows once again his preference for the reality of "life as it is" over escapism and dreaming. The reality Stevens enjoyed in painting might be idealized and pastoral in comparison to his real life in New York, but he wanted domesticity and earthiness rather than poetic flights into a fanciful antiquity. Consequently he expressed a liking for genre painters:

They are un-Italian. --On the contrary they are really human--with the humanity, more or less, of the *bête humaine*. They know a green field, and a golden sun, and a sweet face, and a sad face, and the face of the working-man and working-woman. Their moonlight falls on friendly cattle and comfortable villages. Life is very much in their minds--as it is. Their fancies are the fancies of children. They are in general intensely bourgeois. --After all, it appeals to one. It leaves

one content. It is, somehow, masculine--not in the bounding virile way--but just masculine. (SP, 182)

Here is Stevens' powerful nostalgia for the common reality of ordinary humanity--the world which he later called "the normal." This moonlight does not transform the world into something imagined; it merely falls on "friendly cattle and comfortable villages." Though the life in these pictures is selected and arranged, it is recognizable, familiar, bourgeois. The pictures express that "accord with reality" that Stevens sought.

A similar attitude appears in Stevens' comment on a painting by Joseph Israels of a girl knitting by the sea:

I liked her bare feet & the ordinary sand & the ordinary water. But what I liked best was that she was not dreaming. There was no suggestion even of that trite sorrow. It was a capital point--exquisite prose instead of dreary poetry. It was as if she had confidence in the ordinary sand & the ordinary water. (SP, 161)

Here Stevens' affinity with More's ethical precepts vanishes completely. The only morality involved is that implicit in having "confidence in the ordinary sand & the ordinary water." It is a morality which is essentially esthetic, like Pater's "morality of the right sensation." But it rests on a faith in the physical world as the authentic source of all sensations. Stevens repudiates "dreaming," that is, imagination divorced from its necessary basis in the immediate, the concrete, and the physical.

Stevens' rejection of escapist art did not mean that he had come to terms with the frustrations of his daily life. On the contrary, his quarrel with "things as they are" seemed to come into sharper focus in 1908 and 1909. "Why, I must be an ill-natured crow to quarrel so with everything," he wrote in December 1908. The escape that he sought, however, was not so much an escape from reality as an escape from the emptiness, the nothingness, of a "reality" devoid of meaning, beauty, and feeling. What he sought was a more intense, more authentic reality. At times he found it in familiar things touched by emotion. But when emotion failed him and his sensibility seemed to dry up, he turned to the exotic and the extraordinary, to "the external world at its height of brilliance" (SP, 213).

Little record remains of Stevens' intellectual and emotional life during 1908. The journal begun in 1905 had tapered off into silence, and all that remain of his letters to Elsie in 1908 are the excerpts which she copied out of them. Perhaps he was working so hard at his new job with the American Bonding Company that he had little energy left over for writing. But when he went home to Reading at Christmas, he and Elsie became engaged, and a flood of letters followed which he kept up until their marriage the following September.

Does the shift in tone and emphasis between passages quoted earlier and these written in 1909 reflect a real change within Stevens, or does it reflect only the change of medium from journal to letters? Undoubtedly the fact that he was writing to impress Elsie has a bearing on the prevalence of whimsical, merry, inventive, fanciful, silly, and romantic passages in the letters. But I think

the important point is that the stimulus Elsie provided was itself a significant influence on Stevens' feelings. If he seems more impatient with the mundane realities of his life and more preoccupied with the need for poetry, beauty, and escape into imagination, it is reasonable to assume that this is at least partly the effect of being in love and having an intimate and sympathetic audience on which to lavish his creative energy.

Stevens was apparently doing well in his new job, at least well enough to give him the confidence to propose to Elsie. His law career was at last showing promise; yet the disparity between his daily life and his inner needs seemed to be growing sharper and more bitter than ever before. Every reference to his law work during this period is disparaging. He belittled its significance, calling it "surely the quaintest way of making a living in the world" (L, 124), but found it exhausting nonetheless. Writing to Elsie in the evenings was his outlet from the pressures of the day. He concluded one long and unhappy letter,

Well, I feel as if I had been returning to-night--from very rough water to the only haven I have. -- I cannot tell you how hard it has been at the office--the work staggers one. But pooh! I'll not think of it. (L, 132)

Elsie was the haven. The imaginative energy, the whimsey and the playfulness that had been held tightly in check all day could be released and indulged in the letters Stevens wrote to her.

I have been drawing up an agreement full of "Whereas" and "Now, Therefore" and I thought I'd take a fling--to prevent myself from growing too sedate.--It has

been a terrific day at the office, and I am really too tired to bother with things that mean anything and all the blessed commas and exclamation points. Hey-ding-a-ding. (L, 113-14)

It is significant that even in his exhaustion what bothered Stevens was the fear of growing sedate. One of the themes running through the letters of this period is that a dull routine puts one to sleep, and what Stevens wanted was to be fully awake, to keep all his faculties alert and active. He uses words like "sedate," "sleepy," "half-unconscious," and "stupor" to describe the condition from which he wants to escape. The lethargy and boredom associated with the office seemed to annihilate his very identity, and only in poetry and letters to Elsie could he reclaim it and "strut [his] individual state":

I certainly do not exist from nine to six, when I am at the office. To-day was the anniversary. The year has been marked by important advances;--but to-night I could not write a single verse. There is no every-day Wallace, apart from the one at work--and that one is tedious.--At night I strut my individual state once more--soon in a night-cap. (L, 121)

Again there is the sense of fragmentation, of being split into an "everyday Wallace" and a more genuine nocturnal Wallace. The daytime Wallace exists tediously or not at all (like the protagonist of "The Snow Man" who is "nothing himself"); the night-time Wallace, free to express his creative energy, "struts" and asserts his unique identity like the speaker of "Bantams in Pine-Woods."

Stevens preferred uniqueness and individuality in others as in himself. The depressing ordinariness of his day-to-day existence

was writ large in the city around him.

My chief objection to town-life is the commonness of the life. Such numbers of men degrade Man. The teeming streets make Man a nuisance--a vulgarity, and it is impossible to see his dignity. (L, 141)

He was oppressed by the crowding, the poverty, the ruthless competition, all of which made up "the pressure of Life" in New York City. A book of essays "written from the socialistic point of view" which he read during the summer of 1909 apparently contributed to his feeling of oppression. He tried to dismiss the book, first by complaining that "it comments on irremediable things as if someone were to blame," and then, inconsistently, by suggesting that the victims of harsh city life could easily remedy their plight by moving to the country. He did not want to be reminded of unpleasant realities by "these fearful books with their fearful thoughts."

But I cannot dream. I cannot altogether spread wing-- I am dragged down by this strange book I have been reading. . . . The pressure of Life is very great in great cities. But when you think of the ease with which people live and die in the smaller places the pressure seems self-imposed. (L, 149)

If only it were possible to escape from what the dreadful Galsworthy calls Facts--at the moment, no more serious than that neighborly bag-pipes and a dog singing thereto--. All our dreams, all our escapes and then things as they are! (L, 150)

This opposition between the dreary reality of "Facts" and "things as they are," on the one hand, and "dreams" and "escapes," on the other, is familiar from Stevens' earlier journals. But in the letters of 1908-1909 Stevens began to redefine the terms in a way that made

his esthetic and emotional needs more acceptable to him. Instead of dignifying what he found banal, vulgar, or ugly with the name "reality," he began to see it as an empty world, a void. "Things as they are," the world without feeling, without value or interest--was this not an inferior "reality," indeed a kind of nothingness?

The desire for new things--is a part of our need for stimulation. And what more restless motive is there, since that need is so constant, than the desire for new things? . . . Man flies from nothingness. Not less than nature he abhors a vacuum--or what is the same--staleness. (SP, 239)

Stevens was beginning to realize that his argument was not with reality as such but with the dull, insipid reality which surrounded him. He craved not escape from reality but more intense stimuli. He wanted to be aroused into full wakefulness, not lulled into a dreamy contentment.

When Stevens was invited in January 1909 to a ceremony honoring Poe, he commented to Elsie that Poe's appeal rested on the desire for stimulus, which Poe satisfied through his use of "the stranger and more freakish phenomena of the mind--hallucinations, mysteries and the like." Stevens explained why he was drawn to Poe by referring to his own situation:

When I complain of the "boreness"--I have in mind, very often, the effect of order and regularity, the effect of moving in a groove. We all cry for life. It is not to be found in railroading to an office and then railroading back. . . . You see the effect of the railroading in my letters: the reflection of so many walls, the effect of moving in a groove. (L, 122-23)

Books were one form of relief from the "bareness":

--But books make up. They shatter the groove, as far as the mind is concerned. They are like so many fantastic lights filling plain darkness with strange colors. (L, 123)

If books "shatter the groove" in which the mind moves, perhaps they are more than a mere escape from reality; perhaps, on the contrary, they free the mind to rediscover the reality that was obscured by familiarity. (This idea, which recalls Shelley's "Defense of Poetry," is central to many of Stevens' later poems--"The Latest Freed Man" is an example.) In Stevens' imagery, the "fantastic lights" and "strange colors" of books may sound rather escapist; but note that they are contrasted not with the common light of day but rather with darkness. They are less an escape from reality than an antidote to nothingness. They do not displace or obscure the real world, but "fill" what would otherwise be a void.

Books are only one way of satisfying "the desire for new things." The physical world itself is a source of continual change--hence Stevens' preoccupation with weather. His desire for new things is underscored (literally) in the following passage, in which he describes to Elsie "a cloudy, misty evening--the color of November" (though the actual month happened to be June):

At seven o'clock the top of the Metropolitan Tower (the subject of study just then) was as cloud-capped as Fujiyama, or any marvellous mountain; and it was new to watch the wraiths drift through the upper scaffolding. (L, 145)

But more than books and the weather, it was the experience of being in love that restored meaning and vitality to Stevens' world.

Let us think only of each other. The thought has become a large part of us (at least of me) and the chief comfort. . . . Sometimes I am terribly jangled, full of clashing things. But, always, the first harmony comes from something I cannot just say to you at the moment--the touch of you organizing me again--to put it so. (L, 131)

Usually Stevens speaks of the need for stimulus and change; in this passage the impulse toward order emerges. Having Elsie as a sympathetic listener to whom he could express the things that mattered most to him gave him a necessary outlet for his creative energy, and the act of expression was a way of achieving inner harmony. A reticent man coping with the practical world of law and business, Stevens had a powerful need to feel that there was someone to whom he could express his poetic side without fear of ridicule or indifference. In the following passage two themes--the need for Elsie's organizing touch, and the need to be awakened from sleep--are brought together:

. . . last night's endless sleep has clapped me in a mental cellar, and I shall need a day or two to get back to daylight. . . . I only write turbulently to say that I am back again--and that I wish you were with me--wish it immensely. --I could say more--there is a great sleepy jumble in me seeking to be arranged, to be set in order, and then to be spoken. (L, 115)

The lack of order is a "sleepy jumble"; the act of setting in order is an act of speaking (as in a letter, or a poem).

The references in these letters to Stevens' personal malaise

foreshadow the concern with "ideas of order" that would emerge in his poems twenty years later. It seems to me that Stevens' characteristic *bête noir*--ennui, the staleness of experience, loss of the ability to feel--is associated with what he here calls "a great sleepy jumble in me seeking to be arranged." The "sleepy jumble" is the random accumulation of meaningless sensations and experiences. Setting those experiences in order means fitting them into a framework which gives them significance and restores their affective value for the individual. There is some truth, I think, in Yvor Winters' claim that Stevens pursued novelty and sensation to compensate for the lack of belief in a harmonizing order; but Winters underestimated the strength of Stevens' own impulse toward order. Winters saw the hedonist--the esthete--in Stevens but overlooked Stevens' countervailing need for a philosophically coherent value system.<sup>2</sup>

Stevens' attitude toward order, in these letters as in the later poems, is ambivalent. He desires order as a cure for the sleepy jumble within him--but this is an internal order, the order of an artist harmonizing his discordant experiences into an esthetic whole. Stevens hated and resisted the imposed order of rigid routine--the railroading to and from the office that wearied him and deadened his sensibilities. The contrast between imposed orders and discovered orders in the Canon Aspirin section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" seems to reflect this distinction between a mechanical order (as in "railroading") and an organic order (as in "the touch of you organizing me again").

Stevens felt confined by the imposed order that left his mind

blank and his body sedentary; his ideal was an order that would stimulate his mind and his body both.

I wish I could spend the whole season out of doors, walking by day, reading and studying in the evenings. I feel a tremendous capacity for enjoying that kind of life--but it is all over, and I acknowledge "the fell clutch of circumstance." -- How gradually we find ourselves compelled into the common lot! (L, 141)

He did not want an escape from discipline, the indiscriminate indulgence of every hedonistic whim; he wanted a discipline suited to his temperament. Stevens' intense nervous energy was the underlying force at work in that temperament. The lethargy and boredom of which he complained may be explained as the result of that energy thwarted and turned inward. In his job, the frustrated energy turned into irritability, which he tried to control in turn by the narcotic effect of smoking.

Often, when there is a great deal to do at the office, lots of people to see, and so on, I smoke incessantly to quiet my nerves. The result is that, when the day is over, and the strain is gone, I find myself in a kind of stupor and find it very difficult to do anything at all. I do not even feel like reading--unless it be the newspapers. --On the other hand, if I do not smoke, my nerves tingle and I am full of energy: yes: tingle with it. And then I want to walk violently, work violently, read, write, study--all at a bound. The trouble is, however, that I am intolerably irritable at such times and make life miserable for everybody who must assist me and am apt to be very short and sharp to people with whom I must do business. (SP, 243-44)

The escape from this stupor, as always for Stevens, lay in vigorous physical exertion.

Yesterday afternoon I went a-Parking. . . . The snow was just commencing to fall, blowing from the North, the direction in which I was going, so that my cheeks were, shortly, coated with ice--or so they felt. -- It would be very agreeable to me to spend a month in the woods getting myself trim; for while I enjoyed that flow of North wind and the blowing snow, I felt as if I did not enjoy it quite as much as possible--as if (in so short an experience of it) it did not go the deepest possible. There is as much delight in the body as in anything in the world and it leaps for use. I should like to snow-shoe around our hills--from Leesport to Adamstown, from Womelsdorf to East Berkeley--long trips made at a jog that would pull the air down and give one life--all day trips, hard, fast; and I could do it very well except for the need of being here. (L, 122)

"We all cry for life," he said. And for Stevens, life meant "delight in the body," which "leaps for use." Though the philosophical questions Stevens posed in later years were intellectual and emotional, the solution as often as not was visceral--a change of weather, a walk around a lake ("Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake, / A composing as the body tires . . ." [CP, 386]).

The importance of a change of weather for Stevens is illustrated by a letter he wrote on a July evening in 1909:

I cannot tell you, dear, how glad I have been for these last two bracing days--the weather, I mean--to be sure. I remember reading a description by Lafcadio Hearn of the effect of tropical weather on the mind and spirits--the lassitude, the diffidence. -- Really I feel as if I had been half-unconscious for a month and as if I were now about to recover and get back into shape. (L, 150)

In the key words "lassitude," "diffidence," and "half-unconscious" we see again the theme which recurs throughout these letters, the desire to become fully awake, alert, and active.<sup>3</sup> Above all, it was the desire to restore the capacity to feel. The loss of that

capacity, the failure of feeling, was for Stevens the greatest evil. It was the reason for his life-long complaint against staleness, dullness, and repetition, a complaint which became more acute in his old age but which was strongly present even in his twenties. (Stevens' letters from the 1940s amply demonstrate this, and I will refer to some of them in Chapter Six.)

Was the failure of feeling the result of a deadening environment, or was it a failure in Stevens' mind which caused the sense of staleness? This, of course, is the central question around which all of Stevens' poetry revolves: the inter-relationship of subjective and objective, "imagination" and "reality." And, finally, the question is moot: the reality that each of us experiences is subjective, yet it is in the nature of our minds that we must perceive it as having objective validity. (Even a dream seems to be external to the dreaming self.) Stevens' treatment of the question in his poems was often philosophical, but it was rooted in a psychological need--the need (familiar in Romantic poetry, e.g. Coleridge's "Dejection Ode") for an affective dimension in one's relation to the world.

Aside from the fundamental satisfaction of long, hard walking to work off pent-up energy, Stevens' feelings were of course aroused by the beauty of the physical world which he rediscovered on his walks. The day after his exhilarating walk in Central Park (when the snow was blowing from the North and his cheeks felt coated with ice), he found this:

The Park was turned to glass to-day. Every limb had its coating of ice and on the pines even every needle. The sun made it all glitter. . . . At a distance clumps of trees looked like winter clouds.--And the wind made the trees jingle. (L, 121)

(The resemblance of this scene to the imagery in "The Snow Man," written twelve years later, is rather striking.) The kind of scenery or weather that aroused Stevens' feelings, the natural phenomena that most strongly affected him, were a function of his temperament. His loathing for lethargy and indolence made a languorous summer day torture for him; such weather left him feeling wilted and overcome with a kind of blank despair. But the bracing weather of fall and winter, and the associated landscapes, stirred him and made him feel alive and hopeful. Thus Stevens' energy and ambition influenced his esthetic responses.

Temperament is a vague term, but an important aspect of it is the fact that one's experiences create a store of personal associations which color one's responses to the world. Stevens' letters from the summer of 1909 provide two good examples of the kinds of associations which stimulated and informed his sensibility. In the first, he is trying to explain to Elsie how the country near New York differs from the country around Reading.

There is one fundamental difference that has nothing to do with the difference in the country itself. I am not emotional; but I am aware that I look at the country at home with emotion. The twenty years of life that are the simplest and the best were spent there. It has become a memorable scene. But I do not look at the country here with emotion. When it is beautiful I know that it is beautiful. When the country at home is beautiful, I

don't only know it; I feel it--I rejoice in it, and I am proud. (L, 148)

This passage emphasizes that Stevens' estheticism was not based only on sensuous and formal elements but also on emotional associations with his personal background and experience. In this case the sense of home and nostalgia for childhood were the forces involved in his appreciation of beauty. They gave the beauty of the Reading countryside a meaning for him which it would otherwise have lacked, and which the New York/New Jersey countryside could never have, no matter how much he might admire it.

A few weeks later he wrote to Elsie about a walk he had just taken. Here is a humorous but poignant illustration of Stevens' continual need to renew and refresh his capacity to feel.

It was the old route along the Palisades. . . . The woods along the side of the road looked at their height. And yet at twilight, in the neutral light, as I looked over the edge, I observed, meekly, that what I had thought to be various shades of green, were, indubitably, green and brown and yellow--oh, the faintest brown and the faintest yellow, yet brown and unquestioned yellow. You see! -- I did not altogether respond--my sensibilities were numb--emotion sealed up. It is true. -- But when the sun had set and the evening star was twinkling in the orange sky, I passed a camp--where gypsies used to camp a few years ago. There were two or three camp-fires and at one they were broiling ham. Well, Bo, it may sound absurd, but I did respond to that sugarey fragrance--sensibilities stirred, emotions leapt--the evening star, the fragrance of ham, camp-fires, tents. It was worth while, by Jupiter! Not that I give a hang for ham--horrid stuff. But it was the odor of meat--the wildness or the sense of wildness. You know--when you camp in wild places--and come in at the end of the day, you always find venison over the fire, or a dozen trouts--and then, there is the hot bread, and your pipe afterwards, and then you roll up in your blanket--and the fire begins

to fall together--and you fall asleep, so tired, so contented. -- I am glad I passed the camp--and I am glad they were not eating boiled potatoes. (L, 158)

Here the association that colored the moment and heightened Stevens' emotional response was what he called "the sense of wildness." This was more than just a romantic concept for him; it was obviously connected with the memory of his camping trip in the Canadian Rockies six years earlier. As far as I know, the trip to the Rockies was the only time in his life that Stevens ever camped out, so his tone of experienced woodsman ("You know--when you camp in wild places . . . you always find venison . . ." etc.) seems a bit of a pose, an effort to impress Elsie no doubt. But this single camping experience undoubtedly did instill in him a taste for "the sense of wildness." It "left a great impression on him," according to Holly Stevens, and "in the last few weeks before his death he spoke of the trip frequently" (SP, 117).

Moments like the one by the campfire were perhaps what Stevens meant when he said that "one should have only glimpses of reality--and get the rest from the fairy-tales, from pictures, and music, and books" (L, 141). The glimpses were those special moments when reality was touched by personal feeling and thus took on meaning, became more than the inert world of routine, everyday existence. What Stevens got from fairy-tales, pictures, music, and books--from art--was something that mundane reality lacked for him, that is, the subjective reality of beauty, feelings, values. He began, in his letters to Elsie, to speak of this subjective reality as being more authentic

than everyday reality. Certainly for him it was more intense and more important. And it was the very fact that he could communicate it to Elsie that made it seem legitimate and not merely a form of escapism.

Your voice comes out of an old world. That is not eloquence. It is the quickest way to express it. It is the only true world for me. An old world, and yet it is a world that has no existence except in you. -- It is as if I were in the proverbial far country and never knew how much I had become estranged from the actual reality of the things that are the real things of my heart, until the actual reality found a voice--you are the voice. -- What I mean is that these hideous people here in the house (it is not polite to say so) and the intolerable people that come and go all day at the office--they make up the far country and occupy me so much that I forget that I am not one of them and never will be.--What am I then? Something that but for you would be terribly unreal. A dreamy citizen of a native place--of which I am no citizen at all. Sometimes I am all memories. They would be all dream except that you make them otherwise. (L, 131)

On the most literal level, the "old world" was probably the world of Reading and childhood, the world Stevens inhabited at the times when he was "all memories." But in a larger sense, it is "the actual reality of the things that are the real things of my heart." Stevens' alienation from his immediate surroundings--his rooming house, his office, and the "intolerable people" around him--is the most striking feature of this passage. But what particularly interests me is the way he plays with the concept of reality and allows "real" and "unreal" to become interchanged. On one hand, he refers to the subjective world of values and memories with such expressions as "terribly unreal" and "all dream." Yet at the same time it is "the only true world for

me . . . the actual reality . . ." In reading through the 1909 letters, I discovered numerous other occasions where Stevens juggles the terms "reality" and "irreality," testing and frequently reversing their roles. The roots of his life-long preoccupation with the relationship between subjective or imaginative reality and objective reality can easily be seen in these letters.

Sometimes Stevens spoke of real things as if what he liked most about them was that they should seem unreal. But what he meant was that they should be extraordinary or unusual; "unreal" was hyperbole for "out of the ordinary," "exceptional," "stimulating." Objets d'art from China were interesting because their distant source was so far removed from Stevens' familiar surroundings:

I do not know if you feel as I do about a place so remote and unknown as China--the irreality of it. So much so, that the little realities of it seem wonderful and beyond belief. (L, 137)

Significantly, what appeals to Stevens here is the conjunction of real and unreal. He wants the realities to be realities but to seem "wonderful and beyond belief." (It was at another time, in another state of mind, that he wrote, "Let be be finale of seem.")

The enhancing aura of irreality might attach not only to the exotic but also to a remembered moment from Stevens' own experience, if the moment were of sufficiently special quality. In this letter to Elsie, for instance, see how he suddenly turns away from fantasy to a reality even better than fantasy:

So let us call that golden, misty moon rising over Picardy our own--and see the elves dancing in its beams--and forget the wise and their folly. -- And suppose we could really meet there at such an hour--and by chance--and when we happened to be thinking most of each other. . . . Oh, but I think of a real evening--a real summer night when we lay in the clover and wild yarrow and watched that soft witchery expand and fill a familiar valley--and I kissed you so often! -- That seems like some sweet, imagined irreality. (L, 135)

At times, in these therapeutic letters, Stevens let himself go in unabashedly sentimental fantasies of escape from the world, such as this one stolen from Keats:

We are where we have never been, listening to what we have never heard. We are in a dark place listening--contentedly, to--well, nightingales--why not? We are by a jubilant fountain. . . . And is it all on a stage? And can't you possibly close your eyes and, by imagination, feel that it is perfectly real--the dark circle of poplars, with the round moon among them, the air moving, the water falling, and that sweet outpouring of liquid sound--fountains and nightingales . . . (L, 149-50)

Before one can enjoy the imagined world as "perfectly real," one must first annihilate the competing world of the senses. At such moments, therefore, Stevens chose to be a radical idealist:

. . . when I sit at the window and write, I look out on real things and am a part of them; but with my lamp lighted and my shade down--there is nothing real, at least there need not be and I can whisk away to Arcady . . . (L, 134)

This theme reappears in the poem "Of the Surface of Things" (CP, 57), where Stevens asserts that the world is nothing more nor less than what appears to the senses:

In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;  
 But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four  
 hills and a cloud.

This being the case, one can effectively shut out the world simply by blocking up the senses; one is then immersed in pure imagination:

The singer has pulled his cloak over his head.  
 The moon is in the folds of the cloak.

Stevens' act of pulling down his shade is equivalent to the singer's act of pulling his cloak over his head, and for the same purpose.

But this extreme solipsistic position was not really characteristic of Stevens, and he held it playfully rather than in earnest. Most of the time, he maintained a qualified respect for what he called reality, but he wanted reality defined on his own terms. Almost every reference to "reality" in 1909 is ambivalent. He repudiated it, for example, when it was "limited"; but he embraced it when it was "beautiful" and "brilliant."

I like to write most when the young Ariel sits, as you know how, at the head of my pen and whispers to me--many things; for I like his fancies, and his occasional music.-- One's last concern on a January night is the real world, when that happens to be a limited one--unless, of course, it is as beautiful and as brilliant as the Park was this afternoon. (L, 123)

Like so many other passages from these letters, this one tries to have it both ways--an affirmation of reality, but a selective affirmation. (Incidentally, the afternoon in the Park characterized here is the same one described in the quotation on page 80.)

Stevens thought it would be delightful to be moonlight "through

and through"--but only "for the night." This letter was inspired by a moonlit August evening in 1911. (Elsie, by then his wife, was staying in Reading at the time.)

Such nights are like wells of sweet water in the salt sea . . . --like open spaces in deep woods.--Why cannot one sit in such rich light and be filled with--tableaux! At least, why cannot one think of new things, and forget the old round--past things, future things? Why cannot one be moonlight through and through--for the night? (L, 170)

But Stevens' skeptical intellect stepped in to answer the rhetorical question. It was "a great pleasure to be so poetical"; but balanced against this pleasure was the intellect's preference for "the clear outline of visible things."

Psychologically, the obscurity of twilight and of night shuts out the clear outline of visible things which is a thing that appeals to the intellect. The clear outlines having been obliterated, the emotions replace the intellect and

Lo! I behold an orb of silver brightly  
Grow from the fringe of sunset, like a dream  
From Thought's severe infinitude - -  
I swear, my dear Bo-Bo, that it's a great pleasure to be so poetical. -- But it follows that, the intellect having been replaced by the emotions, one cannot think of anything at all. (L, 170)

Again he tries to have it both ways. The wish for escape into moonlight imagination is powerful, but the intellectual loyalty to "the clear outline of visible things" tethers him to the earth.

Stevens' ambivalence emerges in a different context in a letter of January 1909 describing his interest in Germany. His comments to Elsie were prompted by an article he had seen in Scribner's on contemporary German painting.

You know I am still hammering at them, trying to get the feel of them. . . . I feel my kinship, my race. To study them, is to realize one's own identity. It is subtly fascinating.--In Scribner's, there is a picture of an iron foundry. The mass of machinery, the hot iron, the grimy workmen--I looked at them for a long time, they were so familiar. -- There was also a picture of two old women sitting in a field, tending geese. The hard faces full of suffering endured revived the old puzzle: what do old people think? -- Only the moderns reflect much on old age. The Greeks shuddered at it. In that respect I am Greek. To live while one is strong--that is enough, I think. No race has ever occupied itself with the realities of life more than the Germans. -- I should rather spend a year in Germany than in any other part of Europe . . . (L, 127)

The Greeks "shuddered" at old age; the Germans paint it. Stevens calls himself a Greek, yet he is fascinated by the Germans' preoccupation with "the realities of life" and would "rather spend a year in Germany than in any other part of Europe." Apparently the realistic pictures of grimy factory workmen and aged, suffering faces both repelled and attracted him. This passage should remind us that the aspect of reality Stevens found hardest to accept was not ugliness or suffering, but dullness. Ugliness and suffering, rendered pathetic or even perhaps tragic through art, had meaning and interest, and Stevens could face them more readily than he could a world without value. In addition, of course, the sense of his hereditary tie to Germany gave these German artists a special significance for Stevens. He studied them to "realize [his] own identity" as in the 1940s he would study his Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors. Realism for its own sake was meaningless, but realism informed by personal associations was significant.

Stevens' "selective realism" appears clearly in his remarks on art. He favored realistic art, but he wanted the reality portrayed

to be a heightened, exceptional reality. He wanted "vivid colors" like the ones he found in an exhibit of jades and porcelains:

And now that I am home again, and writing, in semi-obscurity, lights lit, boats whistling, in the peculiar muteness and silence of fog--I wish, intensely, that I had some of those vivid colors here. When connois[s]eurs return from the pits of antiquity with their rarities, they make honest, everyday life look like a seamstress by the side of Titian's daughter. (L, 169)

"Semi-obscurity, . . . muteness and silence . . ."--these were the drab features of "honest, everyday life" that Stevens longed to dress with "vivid colors."

Even nature, though "lovely in itself," could be "common-place" unless the artist infused his rendition with the excitement of personal discovery:

Today I made a second visit to the exhibition of the National Academy of Design. It does not wear well. . . . the landscapes, largely impressionistic in a half-decided way, are only transcripts of common-place Nature--lovely in itself, but, as Art, common-place. There is no revelation. There are no remarkable styles. It might happen anywhere. (SP, 188-89)

"Vivid colors" versus "honest, everyday life" . . . "revelation" versus "common-place Nature"--in such phrases Stevens tried to define the opposition between a hollow, empty realism and the stimulating, enhanced realism that was coming to be his esthetic ideal. Perhaps the opposition is best expressed in his comment on the Hispanic Museum's exhibition of paintings by the Spanish artist Joaquin Sorolla in February and March 1909. The event was received with tremendous enthusiasm, judging from newspaper accounts; some called it the most

important exhibit of paintings thus far in the century. The Hispanic Society published a two-volume edition containing reproductions of the more than three hundred paintings in the exhibit along with several essays on Sorolla and a compendium of newspaper accounts. Stevens wrote in his journal for March 7, 1909 (one of the rare entries from so late a date):

The most remarkable exhibition of pictures that has been held in New York in recent years is the exhibition of the pictures of Sorolla at the Hispanic Museum. The pictures are extraordinary for their effulgent sunshine in beach scenes and for their realism generally. But this is not the realism of every day but the realism, say, of holiday,-- of the external world at its height of brilliance. (SP, 213)

"The realism of holiday"--"the external world at its height of brilliance"--such was the ideal Stevens set in contrast to "the realism of every day."

Stevens' description of Sorolla's paintings strikes me as an apt summary of the world which he depicted in the poems of Harmonium. It seems likely that his point of view changed little from the time of his marriage in September 1909 until he began publishing poems around 1915. During that period he kept no journal and wrote few letters except for those to Elsie during her visits in Reading. But it would appear that the esthetic stance and the relationship with the world around him that Stevens had worked out by 1909, after ten years of groping and hesitant progress, was to provide the underlying sense of the world which informs the Harmonium poems.

When Stevens appeared in print for the first time since leaving Harvard, submitting "Carnet de Voyage" to The Trend in 1914, he drew

on poems originally written for the "Little June Books" of 1908 and 1909. Most of them were, in A. Walton Litz's words, "flimsy and derivative" poems. Litz makes the following suggestive comment:

The title "Carnet de Voyage" refers to the structure of the collection, an imaginary voyage to those exotic landscapes and seascapes that inspired so much of his verse during the post-Harvard years.<sup>4</sup>

What happened between these weak poems and the immensely superior poems of Harmonium was that Stevens' travels in the South provided him with "exotic landscapes and seascapes" that had actual existence and that were based on first-hand experience rather than pure imagination or literary imitation. Thus, in these exotic yet actual subjects, Stevens was able to reconcile his escapist impulse and his allegiance to the real.

## Notes to Chapter Two

1

Pages from an Oxford Diary, as quoted by Alfred Kazin in On Native Grounds (1942; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 234.

2

Yvor Winters, "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress" (1943); rpt. in On Modern Poets (Cleveland: Meridian Books [The World Pub. Co.], 1959), pp. 11-35.

3

Cf. "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad": "One might in turn become less diffident" (CP, 96).

4

Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 11.

### Chapter Three

#### The Reality of Holiday: 1915-1923

The poems of Harmonium are a unique event in Stevens' career, as they are in modern literature. Their basic themes are the themes of all Stevens' work--the need for contact with sensuous reality, the counter-need for something noble, sublime, some sustaining value--yet the style, the voice, the manner, are unmistakably Harmonium. They are the closest Stevens ever came to a poetry of earth, filled as they are with colorful, brilliantly rendered landscapes, with flora and fauna, weather, all the varied minutiae of this physical world. Yet they are also, I believe, less personal, because more mannered, than many of the later lyrics. They are a series of tours-de-force, exquisite, perfect, but finally limited by their own preoccupation with style. Stevens' beliefs about reality and imagination did not alter over the long run (though they altered continually in the short run), but his way of expressing them did alter, through the silence of the mid- and late-1920s, the experiments and false steps of the thirties, to the effortless repetitions of the late work, when style had become second-nature. In the late poems I feel closer to the feelings which prompted the poems. The poems of Harmonium are brightly colored but opaque, like stained-glass, but the late poems are transparent; their quiet rhetoric allows Stevens' sadness and love to emerge close to the surface.

Not that the lyrics of Harmonium are not expressions of personal feeling: a number of them are as "confessional" as anything written

by Lowell or Plath. But the feeling is masked, distanced, by the energetic and inventive language. The central difference between Harmonium and the later work is a lessening of esthetic distance. This does not mean that the later poetry is lacking in restraint or reserve--far from it--but that the Harmonium poems are very mannered indeed. This is precisely what puts off some readers; they see Stevens as nothing but a flippant, frivolous dandy, luxuriating in an effete art-for-art's-sake estheticism. They overlook the strong feelings which Stevens was attempting to control and relieve by means of a sometimes excessively fancy style. Personally, every time I go back to Harmonium I rediscover my delight in the denseness of its variegated textures; but I am glad Stevens did not stop with Harmonium, for the late poems are the ones that touch me most deeply, that come closest to creating an authentic "American sublime."

There is in Harmonium a strong drive toward reductiveness, toward reality regarded as the void that remains after all illusions have been stripped away. My central purpose in this chapter will be to show that, while the style of the Harmonium poems is dominated by Stevens' estheticism, the subject matter reflects his concern with reality. The voices of Harmonium are so gay, brilliant, and inventive that they tend to distract us from the underlying themes or motives, which are often quite somber. Throughout Harmonium Stevens wrestles with his demons: ennui, the failure of feeling, the necessity of confronting a blank and meaningless universe. But his exuberant style masks the painfully personal nature of many of these poems. "The Weeping Burgher" is one of Stevens' most explicit self-revelations,

a clue to the "excess" of his style:

It is with a strange malice  
That I distort the world.

Ah! that ill humors  
Should mask as white girls.  
And ah! that Scaramouche  
Should have a black barouche.

The sorry verities!  
Yet in excess, continual,  
There is cure of sorrow.

Permit that if as ghost I come  
Among the people burning in me still,  
I come as belle design  
Of foppish line.

And I, then, tortured for old speech,  
A white of wildly woven rings;  
I, weeping in a calcined heart,  
My hands such sharp, imagined things.  
(CP, 61)

This poem is both a statement and an example. It suffers from the very "excess," the propensity for foppishness, to which it makes reference. It suffers more than most of Stevens' poems, with its stilted rhetoric, its mawkish self-pity, its superfluous exclamation marks--and the reason for this weakness, I suspect, is precisely that it is so uncharacteristically revealing. The closer Stevens comes to explicit statements about himself, the greater is his need for the mask of an artificial style. It is no coincidence that Harmonium's most autobiographical poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C," is written in the most outrageously elaborate style.

Stevens admitted in later years that he had once had a liking for what he called "pure poetry"--poetry which was sensuous and esthetic rather than intellectual in its appeal (L, 288). "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," for example, was "not meant to be a collection of epigrams or ideas, but of sensations," he told a correspondent in 1928. "Domination of Black," similarly, was a poem whose

sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images & sounds that it contains. A mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it. You are supposed to get heavens full of the colors and full of sounds, and you are supposed to feel as you would feel if you actually got all this. (L, 251)

Several of the short lyrics in Harmonium seem to fit this concept; they reflect Stevens' feeling for color, imagery, and music, all of which combine to convey a mood or atmosphere. But only the determined and ingenious critic can extract a "meaning" from such a poem--a meaning which generally turns out to be disappointingly reductive. "Domination of Black," for example, can be read as a poem about the fear of death--a plausible reading, but unnecessarily restrictive. The power of the poem depends on the fact that the cause of the fear is not specified. The furthest I would want to go in pinning it down is to call it a fear resulting from vertigo--the ceaseless "turning" in which everything--leaves, flames, peacocks, the planets themselves--becomes blurred into a single identity, featureless and colorless. The familiar, solid world of appearance becomes dissolved, and the poet is overcome by a feeling like that of Sartre's protagonist in Nausea. No doubt the idea of death--death as nothingness, death as process,

death as the annihilation of the phenomenal world--is somewhere at the back of this (and Harmonium is certainly pervaded by a preoccupation with death), but we do violence to this poem if we force on it so explicit an interpretation.

The poems which come closest to "pure poetry" are the ones in which Stevens was most obviously influenced by the imagist movement. They are mostly quite early (from 1914 to about 1918) and are usually short, compressed lyrics. Certain sections of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" are rather like that quintessential imagist poem, Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"--compact, sharply etched images held up before the reader's eye with absolutely no editorial comment:

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

(CP, 92)

Other sections, which come closer to paraphrasable statements (VIII, for example), are by that token less "pure." If Stevens' goal, in "Thirteen Ways," was to write pure poetry, then his failure to maintain the level achieved in section I through the twelve succeeding sections is an instructive lesson in the difficulty of using language without conveying paraphrasable meaning. (The only section that approaches the finesse of the first is number XIII; the others all seem obtrusively didactic by comparison.)

"Tea," written in 1915, is one of the most effective of Stevens' early efforts at pure poetry. In a few short lines, a moment and a mood are precisely and economically rendered:

When the elephant's-ear in the park  
 Shrivelled in frost,  
 And the leaves on the paths  
 Ran like rats,  
 Your lamp-light fell  
 On shining pillows,  
 Of sea-shades and sky-shades,  
 Like umbrellas in Java.

(CP, 112-13)

The poem turns on the contrast between the outdoor scene (cold, dark, windy) and the indoor scene of warmth, comfort, beauty, and companionship. In an inhospitable world the room is a haven of security; in a shrivelled, ugly world the room provides escape into a private world of estheticism, of "sea-shades and sky-shades" and exotic imagined places. (Why Java? Perhaps because when Stevens visited the Bronx Botanical Garden in July 1915 he was struck by the fact that coleus comes from Java. "Good Heavens," he wrote to Elsie, "how that helps one to understand coleus--or Java" [L, 184].)

"Tea" is not reducible to a paraphrasable statement, but it represents the attitude which becomes the explicit theme of other early poems, such as "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" (1915), "Explanation" (1917), and "Gubbinal" (1921). Each of these is a variation on the theme of imagination as the saving difference that redeems life from banality and emptiness.

In "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" the absence of imagination is signified by the ordinariness of white night-gowns:

The houses are haunted  
 By white night-gowns.  
 None are green,  
 Or purple with green rings,  
 Or green with yellow rings,  
 Or yellow with blue rings.  
 None of them are strange,  
 With socks of lace  
 And beaded ceintures.  
 People are not going  
 To dream of baboons and periwinkles.  
 Only, here and there, an old sailor,  
 Drunk and asleep in his boots,  
 Catches tigers  
 In red weather.

(CP, 66)

In the word "haunted" Stevens introduces the ghost metaphor which will reappear in later poems (e.g. "the non-physical people, in paradise" in "Esthétique du Mal" and the "ghosts who returned to earth" in "Large Red Man Reading"). In the 1915 poem, a ghost is one who lives without imagination (and is therefore condemned to a drab, colorless existence). In the later poems (from the 1940s), a ghost is one who suffers the impoverishment of not living in a physical world, one who lacks "the feeling for things as they are." In both early and late poems, Stevens is concerned above all with the necessity of feeling, without which life is mere existence. In an early lyric such as "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," he tends to identify feeling with the imagination, as a kind of flight from reality into a never-land where one can "dream of baboons and periwinkles." In the later poems, to feel means to be more fully in touch with the physical world. This is still an imaginative act, but it has lost the connotations of escapism. Thus Stevens' understanding of the terms "imagination" and

"reality" undergoes an important shift during his life.

"Explanation," like "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," affirms the need for imagination by positing its absence:

Ach, Mutter,  
This old, black dress,  
I have been embroidering  
French flowers on it.

Not by way of romance,  
Here is nothing of the ideal,  
Nein,  
Nein.

The old, black dress--like the white night-gowns--is an emblem of a life lived without imagination. But imagination is more than mere embellishment--more than French flowers embroidered on the black dress. (Similarly, the pigeons embroidered on the dead woman's shroud in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" do not redeem her from the finality of "being.") Imagination is a radical re-vision of reality; it changes reality:

It would have been different,  
Liebchen,  
If I had imagined myself,  
In an orange gown,  
Drifting through space,  
Like a figure on the church-wall.

(CP, 72-73)

What would have been different? The very absence of a referent for the pronoun implies the answer: everything! One would be liberated from all earth-ties, floating free like a figure in a Chagall painting. Again, Stevens thinks of the imagination in terms of escape. Pure poetry is the esthetic based on this concept of imagination.

Both "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" and "Explanation" celebrate the imagination by negation: the people "are not going / To dream of baboons and periwinkles"; the flowers embroidered on the dress are "not by way of romance" and have "nothing of the ideal." Stevens seems to be writing from the perspective of one who has failed to escape; he longs for flight into imagination, but cannot throw off the bonds of reality. This failure leads to the bitter sarcasm of "Gubbinal."

Have it your way.

The world is ugly,  
And the people are sad.

(CP, 85)

"Your way" is the way of unrelenting realism. For Stevens as poet, the imagination is above all the metaphor-making power, which can turn the sun into a "strange flower," a "tuft of jungle feathers," an "animal eye," a "savage of fire," a "seed." But for the brutal realist whom the poem addresses, a metaphor is simply an untruth. The curiously ambivalent tone of "Gubbinal" betrays Stevens' dilemma: implicitly asserting the truth of metaphor ("That strange flower, the sun . . ."), he is yet unable or unwilling to argue against the realist's extreme position ("Have it your way."). Stevens himself is the realist, ruthlessly seeking to suppress his own will to illusion, saddened and depressed by the dreadful world of Facts. But even in the act of submission, a part of him resists and protests the reductive view of reality, and the protest takes the form of a heavy irony. For Stevens, in the mood which prompted this and a significant number of other poems in Harmonium, the world is ugly and the people are sad; but he is

unwilling to have it so. He persists in affirming the reality of imaginative and esthetic values even when he lacks the courage of his own convictions. In the words of "The Wind Shifts," he is "Like a human without illusions, / Who still feels irrational things within her" (CP, 83-84).

Thus the gentle, whimsical tone of 1915's "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" had turned darker by 1921. After 1920 the imaginative vision seemed harder to sustain, the disillusionment more pervasive--leading, perhaps, toward the silencing of Stevens' poetic voice between 1924 and 1930. The ideal of "pure poetry" had by this time become a phase of Stevens' past.

But Stevens' devotion to pure poetry was never more than partial and transitory, even in the mid-1910s when his first mature work was appearing. Estheticism, as I have said, dominates the style of much of Harmonium, but not the content. The tension in Stevens' mind between the need for imaginative release and the need to confront the world honestly was well established long before he began writing poetry in 1913--his journals have made this abundantly clear. Most of the poetry in Harmonium is not an exercise in pure poetry but rather an exercise in the esthetic treatment of reality. I find four main themes in Harmonium, all involving efforts to cope with, rather than simply escape from, reality. The first is the theme most often associated with Harmonium: the celebration of the physical world as terra paradise. Here Stevens practices selective realism: he draws his subject matter from observations of the real world, but he restricts his vision to aspects of reality that he finds esthetically pleasing. In the other

major themes, all closely related, Stevens reveals his darker side and his unwillingness to seek comfort in any kind of imaginative illusion: a preoccupation with death (implicitly the ultimate reality); the death of feeling; and the danger of solipsism (which threatens to engulf him when he tries to reject appearances as illusory).

When Stevens wrote of Sorolla's paintings that they portrayed reality, but the "reality of holiday" rather than that of "every day," he anticipated his own hymns to the sun-lit reality of Florida and the South. His reactions to Florida are amply documented in the letters he wrote home to his wife. "It is difficult to believe in the absolute midsummer of the place," he wrote on his first visit in April 1916. He described the tropical flowers, the "brilliant birds and strange things" in the jungle, the colors of the sea ("pale blue shading as the water deepens to indigo"), and the dominating presence of the sun ("After all, the important thing in Florida is the sun.") (L, 191-93). Midwinter visits to Miami or the Keys, combining business and pleasure, soon became an annual event. Of his many enthusiastic accounts, the most rapturous came from Long Key, to which he was introduced by his Georgia colleague Judge Arthur Powell in 1922:

The place is a paradise--midsummer weather, the sky brilliantly clear and intensely blue, the sea blue and green beyond what you have ever seen. (L, 225)

The beauty of this place is indescribable. This morning the sea was glittering gold and intense deep blue. When it grew cloudy later the sea turned to green and black.

Later in the morning it faired off, as they say, and by noon there was not a cloud in the sky. The sky is perfectly clear and the moon full tonight. The palms are murmuring in the incessant breeze and, as Judge Powell said, we are drowned in beauty. (L, 233)

Here was a reality which fully satisfied Stevens' need for escape from everything stale, familiar, and ordinary, a reality which aroused and stimulated his imagination.

The poems which Florida inspired Stevens to write are certainly not realistic in the sense of being merely descriptive. He reworks and transforms the landscapes into ingenious and idiosyncratic verbal structures. The poems are celebrations but by no means imitations of the natural phenomena that so strongly affected him. Yet it was important to Stevens that these poems had their source in the observed world and he chose to emphasize this aspect of them when he wrote to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1935 (at a time when he was especially defensive about being labeled an esthete):

While, of course, my imagination is a most important factor, nevertheless I wonder whether, if you were to suggest any particular poem, I could not find an actual background for you. I have been going to Florida for twenty years, and all of the Florida poems have actual backgrounds. The real world seen by an imaginative man may very well seem like an imaginative construction. (L, 289)

Of course, as Stevens would be the first to insist, the "real world," seen by anybody, is an imaginative construction. But the point of his letter is not really to deny that his poems are imaginative constructions--only to affirm their connection with a world shared by other human beings.

One of the first poems to emerge from Stevens' travels south was "In the Carolinas." Without trying to locate a particular "actual background" for the poem, one can find suggestive parallels between its imagery and the things Stevens noted in his letters home during the same period. On April 15, 1916, he wrote to Elsie from Atlanta:

I have had the most amazing trip. Dogwood, apple-blossoms, cherry and peach blossoms, irises in the gardens, laurel in the woods. The country is full of bare-foot boys, girls in white, boys in white trousers and straw hats. I am perspiring as I write! But I am tired and sickeningly dirty and am going right up-stairs to bathe my weary hide and to sleep over the beautiful things I have seen. (L, 191)

"In the Carolinas" appeared in 1917 and was probably a direct result of this trip. A letter from Knoxville, Tennessee, gives further evidence of the impression made on Stevens by the Southern spring. (Although this letter belongs to another April, in 1918, it describes sights similar to what Stevens must have seen on the earlier trip.)

I saw no end of irises in people's gardens. There were peonies, tulip-trees, locust trees and an unknown tree, very large and spreading, covered with purple blossoms. You remember, no doubt, the pungent, slightly acrid, odor of locust blossoms. I found lots of motherly old hens guiding their broods of ber-bers through the grass, already deep. And, of course, I saw many boys and girls, both black and white, loafing in pleasant places. (L, 207)

The irises, the mothers and children, and the general feeling of amazed delight found their way into "In the Carolinas," one of Stevens' simplest and most direct lyrics (even the title is straightforward). It consists of a four-line catalogue of the phenomena of spring, a three-line apostrophe to the earth, and the earth's reply:

The lilacs wither in the Carolinas.  
 Already the butterflies flutter above the cabins.  
 Already the new-born children interpret love  
 In the voices of mothers.

Timeless mother,  
 How is it that your aspic nipples  
 For once vent honey?

The pine-tree sweetens my body  
The white iris beautifies me.

(CP, 4-5)

A celebration of birth and renewal, tinged by intimations of mortality. The near-perfection of the moment (marred only by the word "wither" in the first line) is underscored by the awareness of its briefness (implicit in the words "Already . . . Already . . . For once . . ."). This poem looks back to "Sunday Morning" ("Death is the mother of beauty.") and forward to "Esthetique du Mal" ("Life is a bitter aspic."), but it stands firmly in the present, a fragile moment in April when the earth is sweet and beautiful and governed by love.

"Fabliau of Florida" and "Nomad Exquisite," both published in 1919, show the influence of Florida's beaches and swamps on Stevens. "Fabliau of Florida" represents the more imaginative side of Stevens, with its greater reliance on exotic metaphors (barque of phosphor, moon-monsters, black hull); "Nomad Exquisite" is more realistic, rooted in the observed particulars of the landscape. The seascape setting of "Fabliau of Florida" is inherently more abstract and elemental and thus provides the poet with more incentive to devise metaphorical interpretations:

Barque of phosphor  
On the palmy beach,

Move outward into heaven,  
Into the alabasters  
And night blues.

Foam and cloud are one.  
Sultry moon-monsters  
Are dissolving.

Fill your black hull  
With white moonlight.

There will never be an end  
To this droning of the surf.

(CP, 23)

Sky and surf are mirrored in each other: phosphorescent foam and moonlit cloud. As in "Domination of Black," there is a dissolving of form and a merging of identity ("Foam and cloud are one"). But here the mood is not ominous; the movement "outward into heaven" seems to promise rich discovery. The white moonlight "fills" the otherwise empty "black hull" of the wave, as imagination "fills" reality with meaning. The curious solemnity of the last couplet is puzzling. Does its abrupt abandonment of metaphor imply a fall from imagination back to the "droning" of literal reality? Or does the never-ending surf suggest the unceasing interplay of sea and moon (reality and imagination)--the theme which would be developed much more elaborately five years later in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"?

"Nomad Exquisite," like "In the Carolinas," is a poem of fecundity and generation, of "bringing forth." The "immense dew of Florida" stands for the procreative power that brings forth the infinite variety of the physical world, the "big-finned palm" and "green vine angering

for life." On another level, this same power generates the poet's emotional response to the world, the "hymn and hymn" of "the beholder." The poem moves from the particular ("big-finned palm," "green vine") to the more abstract ("green sides / And gold sides of green sides") and finally to the subjective, the poet's inner response to the outward phenomena:

So, in me, come flinging  
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.  
(CP, 95)

The poet invokes the power that has generated this plenitude, this lush reality, to inspire him with creative energy.

For Stevens, however, there was a thin line between plenitude and excess, and in such poems as "Banal Sojourn," "O Florida, Venereal Soil," and "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs" he recoiled against a fecundity that had become cloying and oppressive. In these poems Stevens' selective reality or "reality of holiday" breaks the boundaries of esthetic decorum and becomes a threatening force. The imagery is animalistic: summer, in "Banal Sojourn," is like "a fat beast"; the rivers in "Frogs Eat Butterflies" are "swine-like." In these two poems, the incipient plenitude of spring has degenerated into the gross plenitude of full summer.

The poet in "O Florida, Venereal Soil" addresses Florida as a "lover" to his "donna." He asks to be spared "the dreadful sundry of this world"; what he desires is the clean, austere reality of a single star,

Sequestered over the sea,  
 Wearing a clear tiara  
 Of red and blue and red,  
 Sparkling, solitary, still,  
 In the high sea-shadow.

Yet in the closing lines he shifts to a more earthy and sexual image,  
 asking his inamorata to

Conceal yourself or disclose  
 Fewest things to the lover--  
 A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,  
 A pungent bloom against your shade.  
 (CP, 48)

For Stevens, less is more. He does not ask for escape from physical sensation, but for sensation at a level which allows him to make the fullest response. A glut of sensation (as in the over-abundance of summer) overwhelms him and he recoils into emotional numbness; the sensation of "fewest things"--the evening star, the fragile emergence of life in early spring--prompts his feelings to unfold and embrace the world.

The excess of fecundity in a poem like "Banal Sojourn" is really a kind of death--a stasis, a drugged state of semi-consciousness. And for Stevens, above all, it is the death of feeling. Death, regarded as the fundamental reality behind all the illusions of day-to-day existence, and the death-in-life which is the inability to respond emotionally to one's environment--these are the two dark themes woven into the bright fabric of Harmonium.

Many poems in Harmonium reveal Stevens trying to come to terms with the reality of death by means of various esthetic strategies.

The reality was borne in upon him by the deaths of his parents in 1911 and 1912, almost exactly a year apart, and again by his sister Catherine's death in 1919 (L, 212-14). His mother's death in July 1912 affected him deeply; he took up his journal (which he had abandoned three years before) and wrote at length about two visits home when she was dying. He seemed anxious to remember and record every detail of these last days--his mother's appearance and conversation, the things in the house, and the nostalgic memories they aroused. These passages convey a sense of sadness, affection, and, at times, horror:

I went home to Reading to see mother on Saturday. She was so glad to see me. On Sunday morning she was very bright and natural--altogether in possession of herself: infinitely more natural than she has been since last summer; and cheerful. She had had a good-night, with "a delicious sleep" from about four o'clock in the morning, to use her own words. She spent Sunday sitting up between long naps. The beating of her heart in the veins of her throat was as rapid as water running from a bottle. It was a terrible thing to see. (L, 173)

He returned to the city, where he sought consolation in nature poetry. He wrote to Elsie, who was spending the summer at a resort in Pennsylvania:

You know, all this meditation on old age, death and the other bare-bones of the scheme of things, would be dissipated in easier surroundings.--So with you, now that July is coming on, and the earth is sweet with sweet breaths, sweet fruits, sweet everything, make the most of it. Love it and store up the love of it.  
(L, 174)

Stevens' "meditation on old age, death and the other bare-bones of the scheme of things," stimulated by the loss of his parents, would

continue throughout the period when the poems of Harmonium were being written. Besides "Sunday Morning," the apotheosis of romantic faith in death as the "mother of beauty," there were the grim, unsentimental poems of death as the final reality--"The Worms at Heaven's Gate," "The Death of a Soldier," "Cortege for Rosenbloom," "Another Weeping Woman," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." And, of course, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," about the coming of age and the extinction of desire.

In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (CP, 64), the end of illusion is ordained: "Let be be finale of seem." If seeming is false appearance, fictive and deceiving, what is the reality revealed in the lamp's beam? On one level, the poem suggests that the reality is death--portrayed as starkly and unsentimentally as Stevens can make it:

If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.

Ice cream, too, is cold, and thus might be connected with the idea of death. But in later correspondence Stevens spoke of ice cream as an "absolute good" (L, 341), and in the poem the phrase "concupiscent curds" emphasizes that ice cream is an object of desire, something sweet and delectable. I think that Stevens meant ice cream to be associated with the pleasure of being alive. (Big cigars, flowers, and embroidered fantails are other sources of sensuous and esthetic pleasure in the poem.) But the quality of ice cream which makes it significant is that it is so impermanent--it melts! It is the emblem of the pleasure which must be seized in the moment and which cannot be prolonged or protected against time. To be is to exist in an

instant of time; the only reality is the reality of the present moment; the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream, which melts from our grasp unless eaten at once. Thus death is not itself the ultimate reality, but it is that which makes us aware of the ultimate reality--which is the transitory instant of immediate consciousness. If my reading is correct, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is a poem of life disguised as a poem of death.

"The Snow Man" (CP, 9-10), in contrast, is a poem of minimal reality--the reality of winter, and ultimately the reality of the vacuum--what Stevens would call in a later poem ("The American Sublime") "the empty spirit in vacant space." The empty spirit here is the man with "a mind of winter," the man who is "nothing himself." The vacant space is the "bare place" where he "beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." The lesson seems clear: the rejection of illusions leaves one confronting "the nothing." But is everything we see, hear, and touch an illusion? What about "the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow"; "the junipers shagged with ice"; "[t]he spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun"; even "the sound of the wind" blowing through "a few leaves"? How can this rich store of sensory impressions--visual, tactile, and aural--be dismissed as "the nothing"?

"The Snow Man" can be taken as a metaphysical statement about the nature of ultimate reality--a nihilistic statement. But I think such a reading focuses on the wrong thing. The poem is less about the nature of reality than about the failure of feeling. The winter landscape is present to the listener's senses, but it is "nothing" to

him because there is an emotional void between him and his surroundings. He sees, hears, touches, but he cannot make contact because he does not feel. This is what it means to have a mind of winter; this is what it means to be a snow man. The syntax of the poem almost contrives to make us misread its literal meaning and to associate misery with the protagonist; but of course what the poem does is precisely to dissociate the snow man from misery, or any other human response to the landscape.

One must have a mind of winter . . .  
 And have been cold a long time . . .  
 . . . not to think  
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind . . .

It is the inability to think of misery, or any other human emotion, that makes the protagonist a snow man, that makes him "nothing himself."

Stevens' image of a man incapable of any feeling for the winter landscape is especially poignant in the light of journal entries and letters demonstrating his own love for that landscape. In letters of 1909 he had described the exhilaration of cold, snowy, windy weather and the beauty of ice-coated trees glittering in the sun (L, 121-22; cf. pp. 78-80). Stevens was partial to winter scenery and weather, and the loss of the capacity to respond to it would be a severe one for him.

The failure of feeling which is implicit in "The Snow Man" is the theme of numerous other poems in Harmonium, notably "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" but also including "Depression before Spring," "Banal Sojourn," "Palace of the Babies," "Last Looks at the Lilacs," and "The Place of the Solitaires." These

poems all date from 1918 and after; "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" and "The Snow Man," perhaps the two most extreme expressions of ennui in Harmonium, appeared in 1921. Much earlier, in "Sunday Morning" (1915), Stevens had offered a ringing affirmation of the feelings as the one salvation available on this earth:

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.  
(CP, 67)

Stevens' faith in the efficacy of feeling as the fundamental source of human values would never desert him. "That's it," he would exclaim with the air of a triumphant discoverer, at age 63: "The fiction that results from feeling" (CP, 406). But belief in feeling is not the same as feeling. In Harmonium as in later books Stevens repeatedly expresses the despair of being unable to feel, unable to respond to the natural beauties or the human presences around him.

In 1918, when Stevens wrote "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (CP, 13-18), he was nearing forty and had been married nine years. The poem is presented as a series of meditations on age and mortality, but it takes its impulse from an experience of loss--loss of the erotic desire which not only attaches one to a particular person but also colors one's feelings towards the larger world. The loss is a fall from grace, an expulsion from the Garden.

This luscious and impeccable fruit of life  
 Falls, it appears, of its own weight to earth.  
 When you were Eve, its acrid juice was sweet,  
 Untasted, in its heavenly, orchard air.  
 (CP, 14)

It is tantamount to a loss of interest in life:

The measure of the intensity of love  
 Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.  
 For me, the firefly's quick, electric stroke  
 Ticks tediously the time of one more year.  
 (CP, 14-15)

Though Stevens poses as a witty, cynical philosopher who can look back on his life with detachment, the opening stanza admits that he is speaking out of pain, a pain from which he wishes to be delivered but which can still move him to tears:

I wish that I might be a thinking stone.  
 The sea of spuming thought foists up again  
 The radiant bubble that she was. And then  
 A deep up-pouring from some saltier well  
 Within me, bursts its watery syllable.  
 (CP, 13)

The mock-pedantic style of "Le Monocle," anticipating "The Comedian as the Letter C," is perhaps his way of distancing himself from the too-painful emotion: the next-best thing to being a "thinking stone."

When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink  
 Into the compass and curriculum  
 Of introspective exiles, lecturing.  
 (CP, 15)

Paradoxically, the very pain he suffers is the regret that he can no longer feel anything strongly; he is like the "weeping burgher"

("weeping in a calcined heart") who weeps because his heart is turned to stone. He finds consolation in universalizing his predicament and ascribing it to age:

If men at forty will be painting lakes  
The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one,  
The basic slate, the universal hue.

(CP, 15)

In "Last Looks at the Lilacs" Stevens represents the inability to respond to spring as the loss of desire for a woman:

Poor buffo! Look at the lavender  
And look your last and look still steadily,  
And say how it comes that you see  
Nothing but trash and that you no longer feel  
Her body quivering in the Floreal

Toward the cool night and its fantastic star . . .  
(CP, 49)

And in "From the Misery of Don Joost" he celebrates the body as "the very self of the storm / Of sun and slaves, breeding and death" and laments its loss of power:

The old animal,  
  
The senses and feeling, the very sound  
And sight, and all there was of the storm,  
Knows nothing more.

(CP, 46-47)

Weakening of the senses is linked to dulling of the feelings; perception and emotion are interdependent.

Stevens pretends to be older than he really is in these poems, as if to rationalize his loss of emotional power as an inevitable

decline. But the ennui which afflicted him from time to time throughout his life was more a function of his temperament than of age. It was the same boredom with the everyday world that he had described in the journals of his twenties. One solution (to which he turned increasingly in his later years) was to rediscover a sense of pleasure and beauty in the familiar, to embrace and celebrate the world of the senses, of things as they are. But when that solution seemed too hard to attain, the alternative was to seek stimulus in extremes, to indulge his love of the exotic and novel. It was this aspect of Stevens that led Yvor Winters to compare him to Poe and the French symbolists as a hedonist in pursuit of ever stronger derangements of the senses. I think that this second side of Stevens is less characteristic, ultimately less satisfying for him, than the first. It is the side which seems to be dominant, however, in his 1921 dejection ode, "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad."

The paradox of "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" (CP, 96) is that the novelty he appears to desire, the ultimate summer or the ultimate winter, turns out to be more oppressively static than the real world of changing seasons. And he seems to realize this, for he undercuts his own argument with repeated qualifications ("perhaps"; "one might") and chilling images: summer bounded by "obsidian horizons" (suggesting imprisoning black walls?), winter "persisting bleakly in an icy haze." The final stanza turns to mocking self-parody: "Out of such mildew plucking neater mould / And spouting new orations of the cold."

Stevens will never find release from his ennui in the fixity propounded here: first, because "time will not relent" (nothing lasts

forever), and second, because even if time did relent Stevens would soon repent of his wish. "Banal Sojourn" shows clearly enough how Stevens felt when a season dragged on too long. He longed for the refreshing, stimulating change that would reawaken his feelings and help him rediscover the world around him. The closest he would ever come to a solution would be infinitely varied repetitions within the constancy of a larger pattern (the continually changing seasons, the constancy of the seasonal cycle).

The solitude which oppressed Stevens at those times when he was emotionally alienated from his surroundings could appear metaphorically in the poems either as being locked in or as being locked out. Like Eliot, Stevens at times felt his mind to be a prison. "I am too dumbly in my being pent," he wrote in "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad." But in "Palace of the Babies" (CP, 77) he depicted the loneliness of a man outside the gates of the palace, shut out from the "shimmering room" which he imagines behind the "blank window[s] of the building." In his emotional poverty, he contrasts himself with the babies; he is shut out from the maternal, nurturing security which they enjoy inside the palace.

Night nursed not him in whose dark mind  
The clambering wings of birds of black revolved,  
Making harsh torment of the solitude.

He is shut out because he is a "disbeliever"; he lacks the comfort of a sustaining faith.

The walker in the moonlight walked alone,  
And in his heart his disbelief lay cold.

But for Stevens, the disbelief that hurts most is not disbelief in the old religious consolations, but disbelief in reality. ("I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life, / As a disbeliever in reality," he asks in the late poem "As You Leave the Room" [OP, 116-17].) In its dreamlike, surrealist vision of the solitary nocturnal walker, "Palace of the Babies" is somewhere between Frost's "Acquainted With the Night" and Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night."

In certain Harmonium poems, for example "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" and "Bantams in Pine-Woods," Stevens plays with the idea that the world he knows is a projection of his own mind:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself . . .  
(CP, 65)

I suspect this is less a serious case for solipsism than a case of hyperbole: an extreme statement of the half-truth that each person's reality is selected and shaped by his mind. In any event, the tone is cheerful, recognizing the potential plenitude of the mind's created world. "The Place of the Solitaires" shows the dark side of solipsism, in which the mind, deprived of external stimuli, is imprisoned within itself and forced to circle endlessly among its own thoughts--thoughts which lead nowhere and connect with nothing:

Let the place of the solitaires  
Be a place of perpetual undulation.

Whether it be in mid-sea  
On the dark, green water-wheel,  
Or on the beaches,  
There must be no cessation  
Of motion, or of the noise of motion,

The renewal of noise  
And manifold continuation;

And most, of the motion of thought  
And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,  
Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation.  
(CP, 60)

The poem closes with a repetition of its beginning, mirroring the mind's circular activity. This unending "restless iteration" seems stifling, limiting; for all the "noise of motion," it is ultimately another form of stasis. This "place of the solitaires" is a kind of hell for those who are cut off from contact with external, objective reality.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP, 27-46), written during the summer of 1922, sums up Stevens' poetic development as a quest for a reality that will suffice. Once Crispin abandons his initial precious, egocentric estheticism, he can never go back. The issue for him is not a choice between estheticism and realism, but the need for a new esthetic rooted in reality. The fact that Crispin nevertheless goes through a series of transformations shows how problematic the commitment to reality is. The problem for Crispin is to discover which interpretation, which sense of reality can best satisfy him. The poem concludes with two alternate judgments of Crispin's journey: either he has found "what will suffice," or he has failed to find it and has given up the search. In the double moral Stevens' ambivalence about his own position is apparent.

In the first section, "The World without Imagination," the conflict between Crispin's illusions and the inescapable reality represented by the ocean is clear-cut. Crispin is overwhelmed by the immediacy, the presentness, of the external world, the world of the not-self. The one word which repeatedly characterizes this world is here:

Here was the veritable ding an sich, at last . . .

Here was no help before reality.

The imagination, here, could not evade,  
In poems of plums, the strict austerity  
Of one vast, subjugating, final tone.

(CP, 29-30)

Crispin, like all human beings, has exaggerated his own importance in the universe, but now he confronts his own insignificance:

. . . nothing of himself  
Remained, except some starker, barer self  
In a starker, barer world . . .

(CP, 29)

The last distortion of romance  
Forsook the insatiable egotist.

(CP, 30)

His sense of self annihilated, Crispin is reduced to a mere cipher, a letter. These lines help to explain the title of the poem:

What word split up in clickering syllables  
And storming under multitudinous tones  
Was name for this short-shanks in all that brunt?

(CP, 28)

The "clickering syllables" are full of the sounds of the letter C, which, as Stevens explained in a letter to Hi Simons (L, 351-52),

mark the passage of Crispin through the poem.

The characterization of "reality" in this section seems consistent: stark, bare, austere, vast, final. In sharp contrast we find the human world of imagination, mythology, the distortions of romance-- all "ruses" with which to evade that reality. Although Crispin thinks he is confronting reality, he is actually divorcing himself from it, by defining it as whatever is utterly without human relation or meaning. He renounces his affective relation with the world he perceives; he believes his senses but rejects feelings as distortions and falsifications. The world has been stripped bare of human meaning; the old false, outmoded meanings will no longer do. But the task remains of recreating a humanly meaningful reality, as the closing lines of the section suggest:

What was this gaudy, gusty panoply?  
 Out of what swift destruction did it spring?  
 It was caparison of wind and cloud  
 And something given to make whole among  
 The ruses that were shattered by the large.

(CP, 30)

"The World without Imagination" is the clearest, most unified, most consistent section of "The Comedian as the Letter C." The destruction of Crispin's comfortable second-hand beliefs and second-hand esthetic has a dramatic power lacking in the rest of the poem. Once Crispin's quest for a new reality is underway, his discoveries become more arbitrary and ambiguous.

Crispin, like Stevens, is divided between the sublime beauty of austere and elemental nature (represented first in the sea and later in the thunderstorm) and the opulent beauty of earth's plenitude.

The next two sections, "Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan" and "Approaching Carolina," are permeated by this contradiction. As a "searcher for the fecund minimum" Crispin tries to unite his disparate instincts. Perhaps there can be such a thing as a "fecund minimum"; Stevens sought it in "O Florida, Venereal Soil." But most of the time the two impulses clash and produce either paradox or inconsistency.

These two ideas of reality are in turn opposed to a third idea, the romantic escapism symbolized by the moon. But the moon never has much of a chance in this poem.

Moonlight was an evasion, or, if not,  
A minor meeting, facile, delicate.

(CP, 35)

Though Crispin's voyaging may be conceived as "a fluctuating between sun and moon," his moonlight moments are never more than temporary "indulgences":

But let these backward lapses, if they would,  
Grind their seductions on him, Crispin knew  
It was a flourishing tropic he required  
For his refreshment, an abundant zone,  
Prickly and obdurate, dense, harmonious,  
Yet with a harmony not rarified . . .

(CP, 35)

The real issue is not sun (reality) versus moon (imagination), but the reality of earthy abundance versus the reality of "beautiful barenesses as yet unseen." Whether noting the lush tropical world of Yucatan or the rank harbor scene of "Approaching Carolina," Crispin is fascinated by the richly detailed texture of the physical world. Yet he simultaneously yearns for the cleansing purity of the essential

reality which he presumes to lie behind these superficial stimuli--  
 "the relentless contact," "the essential prose."

Crispin the born-again realist seeks an esthetic beyond decorum,  
 unlimited in its subject-matter--

. . . an aesthetic tough, diverse, untamed,  
 Incredible to prudes, the mint of dirt,  
 Green barbarism turning paradigm.

(CP, 31)

Yet his initial delight in the "fabulous and its intrinsic verse,"  
 the "flourishing tropic" of Yucatan, is only temporarily satisfactory.  
 Like the Florida that Stevens had discovered, this Yucatan is an earth

So thick with sides and jagged lops of green,  
 So intertwined with serpent-kin encoiled  
 Among the purple tufts, the scarlet crowns,  
 Scenting the jungle in their refuges,  
 So streaked with yellow, blue and green and red  
 In beak and bud and fruity gobbet-skins,  
 That earth was like a jostling festival  
 Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent,  
 Expanding in the gold's maternal warmth.  
 So much for that. The affectionate emigrant found  
 A new reality in parrot-squawks.

(CP, 32)

Obviously Stevens is poking fun here at the "affectionate" emigrant,  
 whose affections have been too facilely engaged. Already, while  
 exploring this "too opulent" jungle world, Crispin has

. . . sensed an elemental fate,  
 And elemental potencies and pangs,  
 And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen . . .

(CP, 31)

Now the thunderstorm arouses him to his role as "connoisseur of elemental fate." The reality represented by the storm is "the quintessential fact," a harsh reality like that of the ocean he has already crossed. But now he perceives it as sublime rather than simply inhuman. And in this new discovery of reality he discovers a new sense of self to replace the one that was "washed away by magnitude."

His mind was free  
 And more than free, elate, intent, profound  
 And studious of a self possessing him,  
 That was not in him in the crusty town  
 From which he sailed.

(CP, 33)

In the next section, "Approaching Carolina," Crispin again changes direction, turning from his discovery of the sublime to embrace the "vulgar." Despite occasional regressions into his old moonlight escapism, he still pursues a "relentless contact"--but contact with what? The jungle of Yucatan was too rich for his blood, "too opulent"; approaching Carolina, he now regards himself as a "searcher for the fecund minimum." But he is still moved by the same "violence for aggrandizement," the need to assimilate the myriad concrete particulars of his surroundings. The harbor scene provides him with subjects that have not been exhausted and sentimentalized by long poetic usage. (This description probably derives from Stevens' visit to Charleston in July 1922, but it also recalls his first impressions of the bustling Manhattan waterfront in his journal of 1900.)

A river bore  
 The vessel inward. Tilting up his nose,  
 He inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells  
 Of dampened lumber, emanations blown  
 From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,  
 Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks  
 That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.  
 He savored rankness like a sensualist.

(CP, 36)

This is not asceticism in the service of truth; it is inverted estheticism. Therefore it rather undercuts Crispin's pretensions as a truth-seeker:

He gripped more closely the essential prose  
 As being, in a world so falsified,  
 The one integrity for him . . .

(CP, 36)

Crispin may believe he has discovered "the essential prose," but clearly the rankness which he savors "like a sensualist" is a great novelty for him, just as much as the tropical jungle was when he first arrived in Yucatan. When the novelty has worn off, and Crispin has fallen into a conventional life of domestic routine, he will discover what "the essential prose" really is.

The next section gives Crispin a chance to theorize about his plans for a colony, and it reveals the weakness of his newfound commitment to reality. For in celebrating the familiar and commonplace, he falls back on a precious, cloying language which makes one feel he might as well never have left Bordeaux:

The melon should have apposite ritual,  
 Performed in verd apparel, and the peach,  
 When its black branches came to bud, belle day,  
 Should have an incantation.

(CP, 39)

This from the man who had recently rejected spring as "gemmy marionette to him that sought / A sinewy nakedness"! Stevens' own attitude toward Crispin's progress becomes increasingly unclear from this point on. The desperate cleverness of his language seems to betray his uneasiness, as he satirizes Crispin and, through Crispin, himself.

Crispin's "realism" has up until now been self-conscious, willed, and perhaps this helps explain why it has seemed less than wholly authentic. Reality was something to be "gripped," seized and held by an act of will. Crispin was a "prickling realist" seeking a "relentless contact." But now, in "A Nice Shady Home," his will is sapped by the quotidian, infected by the blue of the sky, and he relaxes into an acceptance of "things within his actual eye."

In the presto of the morning, Crispin trod,  
 Each day, still curious, but in a round  
 Less prickly and much more condign than that  
 He once thought necessary.

(CP, 42)

Crispin seems to regard the abandonment of his grandiose plans as a failure. But in yielding the urgent desire to possess reality, he discovers a new openness toward it--something of the "wise passiveness" advocated by Wordsworth. His "apposite rituals" and "incantations" for melons and peaches were false and artificial; paradoxically, his willingness to let the plum exist in and for itself, free of the entanglements and confusions of words, produces a more natural and

appropriate poetry of celebration:

The plum survives its poems. It may hang  
 In the sunshine placidly, colored by ground  
 Obliquities of those who pass beneath,  
 Harlequined and mazily dewed and mauved  
 In bloom. Yet it survives in its own form,  
 Beyond these changes, good, fat, guzzly fruit.  
 (CP, 41)

Crispin approaches closer to reality because of his humility before it.

At the same time, a price has been paid. There is something a bit pathetic about this "indulgent fatalist" holding grotesque caricatures of daughters on his knee. The passion of youth has been replaced by the apathy of maturity. The "return to social nature" may be "anabasis or slump, ascent or chute," but in any event it leaves no room for poems. "The Comedian as the Letter C" proved prophetic; the demands of a daughter (born less than a year after the publication of Harmonium) and his insurance career kept Stevens occupied during the following years, and whether by choice or necessity he wrote virtually no more poetry until 1930.

Read as the story of a quest for a satisfactory reality, "The Comedian as the Letter C" leads to the conclusion that all esthetic stances falsify, and that the only authentic reality is found in simply living. The strained language, especially in the latter sections, is an indication of how dissatisfied Stevens was with this conclusion. He needed more, much more, than a quotidian world devoid of poetry, and his later poetic career would be a series of attempts to create an idea of nobility, a heroic fiction, or a metaphysical concept of "being"--some imaginative construct that would enlarge his

sense of reality. Yet he would continue to feel the need periodically to renew contact with the ordinary, commonplace world, to participate in what he called "the normal." The precarious balance he had achieved at the time of the publication of Harmonium could not be sustained.

## Chapter Four

### Cold Is Our Element: 1923-1937

The dominant esthetic of Ideas of Order is marked by a new spirit of austerity, by renunciation of the physical joy and imaginative freedom of Harmonium. While many of the poems Stevens wrote in the early and mid-1930s express regret over the loss of that youthful hedonism, it is important to recognize the positive element in his quest for a "new romantic" to replace the outmoded romantic of Harmonium. Stevens' poetic silence during the years following Harmonium's publication was a kind of "absence in reality" such as he had depicted in the last part of "The Comedian as the Letter C." When he returned to writing in the early 1930s, he saw more clearly than ever the weaknesses in Harmonium's sensuous imagery and lush rhetoric. A repetition of the themes and styles of Harmonium would not provide the "freshening of life" that was, for him, the true function of poetry. "Poetry is essentially romantic," Stevens wrote in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1935, "only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic. . . . What one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure: eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic" (L, 277). For Stevens, the colorful Florida landscapes and the mannered style of his own earlier poems had become part of an outmoded romantic.

Behind Stevens' desire to mold a new esthetic of the minimal lay his perennial malaise, the deadening of emotional response that

made his world seem flat and lifeless. The esthetic problem of how to sustain the sublime was linked to the personal problem of the failure of feeling. This private ennui, frequently mentioned in Stevens' letters (and, as we have seen, in his journals), is expressed with unusual directness in the 1935 poem "Anglais Mort à Florence":

A little less returned for him each spring.  
 Music began to fail him. Brahms, although  
 His dark familiar, often walked apart.

His spirit grew uncertain of delight,  
 Certain of its uncertainty, in which  
 That dark companion left him unconsolated

For a self returning mostly memory.  
 Only last year he said that the naked moon  
 Was not the moon he used to see, to feel

(In the pale coherences of moon and mood  
 When he was young), naked and alien,  
 More leanly shining from a lankier sky.

Its ruddy pallor had grown cadaverous.  
 He used his reason, exercised his will,  
 Turning in time to Brahms as alternate

In speech. He was that music and himself.  
 They were particles of order, a single majesty:  
 But he remembered the time when he stood alone.

He stood at last by God's help and the police;  
 But he remembered the time when he stood alone.  
 He yielded himself to that single majesty;

But he remembered the time when he stood alone,  
 When to be and delight to be seemed to be one,  
 Before the colors deepened and grew small.

(CP, 148-49)

I find this one of Stevens' saddest and most touching poems. As an elegy for a lost world of spontaneous passion when "to be and delight to be seemed to be one," it recalls Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode"

and "Tintern Abbey." Like those poems, it laments a world that may be more imagined than truly remembered (note the qualifying "seemed to be"), but no less true for all that as a vision of a potential state of grace, a union of perceptions and feelings that we may never achieve but can always aspire to. Wordsworth found consolation in "the philosophic mind" and "the still, sad music of humanity." Stevens (for I consider the "he" of the poem a fairly transparent alter ego of the poet) finds consolation in the music of Brahms, with which he feels himself united in "a single majesty" (a substitute for the "pale coherences of moon and mood" which had once united him with nature). He and the music together are "particles of order"; but, like the "fragments" Eliot "shored against [his] ruins" in "The Waste Land," they create an order too fragile to hold up for long. Brahms is a stop-gap, an effort of "reason" and "will" to find support in something outside himself. But reason and will cannot take the place of feeling, and when even music begins to fail him, he is left with only memory, and with the factitious external props of institutional authority: "God's help and the police." "Anglais Mort à Florence" describes the emotional and esthetic dead-end which Stevens felt he had reached.

I think it was this personal need for a rejuvenation of feeling, more than a need to respond to the pressure of current events, that accounts for the changes in Stevens' style and subjects in the thirties. Certainly he was aware of the urgent economic and political realities of the period, and wanted to be able to include them within the realm of the legitimate subject matter of poetry. "It is an

extraordinary experience for myself to deal with a thing like Communism," he remarked concerning "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue."

"Nevertheless, one has to live and think in the actual world . . . ." (L, 292). This was the voice of the realist in Stevens. But the poetic treatment of the actual world meant the rendering of that world into terms that were imaginatively and esthetically meaningful to Stevens as an individual.

The overall impression Ideas of Order leaves with me is not of an attempt to deal with Communism or any such thing, but of an attempt to come to terms with the inability to find adequate consolation in the old pleasures (of nature, of "pure poetry") and an attempt to find a substitute in a sterner, less self-indulgent poetry, whose hallmarks are a plainer style, an imagery of bareness and winter, and an aspiration toward the sublime. The short poems of this period are not primarily statements about contemporary society but lyrics whose variations in tone mark the range of Stevens' attitudes toward his new esthetic, from rejection to enthusiastic acceptance.

The new esthetic is "new" only in the prominent position it occupies in Ideas of Order. It is to some extent a flowering of the ascetic side of Stevens' personality which had been clearly present in his journals but had been partially masked by the exuberant manner of Harmonium. Stevens' journals had displayed his predilection for the stimulus of winter over the indolence of summer and his moralistic notions about the uselessness of poetry that was merely "sensuous for the sake of sensuousness." In the long view of his career, the stylistic estheticism of Harmonium was an aberration, at least in the

degree to which it was carried. When Stevens looked back on his early poetry from the vantage of 1935, he was clearly defensive about the "common opinion" that his verse was "essentially decorative" and his landscapes imaginary. "I have delayed answering your letter," he wrote to Latimer,

because I was on the point of saying that I did not agree with the opinion that my verse is decorative, when I remembered that when Harmonium was in the making there was a time when I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in pure poetry, as it was called.

I still have a distinct liking for that sort of thing. But we live in a different time, and life means a good deal more to us now-a-days than literature does. In the period of which I have just spoken, I thought literature meant most. Moreover, I am not so sure that I don't think exactly the same thing now, but unquestionably, I think at the same time that life is the essential part of literature. (L, 288)

The seeming contradictions in this passage stem from Stevens' need to justify both literature and life, and to find a formulation which includes both without slighting either. Pure poetry, as an esthetic ideal, was clearly too one-sided. In another letter to Latimer a few weeks later, Stevens went so far as to say,

I am very much afraid that what you like in my poetry is just the sort of thing that you ought not to like: say, its music or color. If that is true, then an appropriate experiment would be to write poetry without music and without color. (L, 297)

This is an overstatement but indicates the direction in which Stevens wished to move. Compared with the poems of Harmonium, the music of Ideas of Order is less lilting, the colors less brilliant.

In 1923, soon after the publication of Harmonium, Stevens wrote "Academic Discourse at Havana." Oddly, he left the poem out of the 1931 edition of Harmonium but then included it in Ideas of Order four years later. Perhaps he found that its portrayal of a lost Eden and a decayed order suited the later book. It rejected the idyllic side of the Harmonium world, in an early "farewell to Florida":

And serener myth  
 Conceiving from its perfect solitude,  
 Lusty as June, more fruitful than the weeks  
 Of ripest summer, always lingering  
 To touch again the hottest bloom, to strike  
 Once more the longest resonance, to cap  
 The clearest woman with apt weed, to mount  
 The thickest man on thickest stallion-back,  
 This urgent, competent, serener myth  
 Passed like a circus.

(CP, 143)

The "serener myth" was that myth of terra paradise, that naive delight in the physical world, of which "Sunday Morning" is Stevens' most perfect rendering. The competence of the myth had, of course, been questioned repeatedly even in the poems of Harmonium, and the myth had been systematically demolished in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Yet the imagery of "Academic Discourse" anticipates the world of Stevens' 1930s poems more directly than anything in Harmonium:

Life is an old casino in a park.  
 . . . a grand decadence settles down like cold.  
(CP, 142)

What "Academic Discourse" shares with the earlier poems is a gaudy rhetoric virtually identical to that of "The Comedian as the Letter C."

Its over-ripe style clashes with the predominantly plain, subdued style of Ideas of Order. What "Academic Discourse" shows is that already in 1923 Stevens was ready to put the "estheticism" of Harmonium behind him, but that his poetic practice lagged behind his poetic aims. It shows, as well, that the elegiac tone of Ideas of Order was not simply a response to the political and economic turmoil of the thirties. It might be more accurate to say that Stevens found in those external crises an objective correlative for his own inner spiritual anxiety.

Harmonium celebrated the body, but the poems of the thirties are more concerned with something less tangible--the "spirit." As Stevens grew less susceptible to the world of the senses, or less willing to trust in it, he turned to the idea of something inner, some core of identity, which could sustain him. In "Anatomy of Monotony" (1930) it is the spirit which refuses to accept the body's deceptions. Although this refusal is the source of the poet's grief, it is also a kind of integrity. It is Stevens' recognition that death--death of the individual, death of the planet--is the ultimate fact of existence.

If from the earth we came, it was an earth  
That bore us as a part of all the things  
It breeds and that was lewder than it is.  
Our nature is her nature. Hence it comes,  
Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows  
The same. We parallel the mother's death.  
She walks an autumn ampler than the wind  
Cries up for us and colder than the frost  
Pricks in our spirits at the summer's end,  
And over the bare spaces of our skies  
She sees a barer sky that does not bend.

The autumnal images of cold, wind, and "bare spaces" describe the landscape of Ideas of Order. Stevens' personal response to the physical

realities of wind, frost, and sky provides the human link to something more than human. Our subjective response to the season becomes a metaphor for a larger truth--"a barer sky that does not bend."

In the second part of "Anatomy of Monotony," Stevens describes how we are consoled by the "comforts of the sun" which he had celebrated in "Sunday Morning":

The body walks forth naked in the sun  
 And, out of tenderness or grief, the sun  
 Gives comfort, so that other bodies come,  
 Twinning our phantasy and our device,  
 And apt in versatile motion, touch and sound  
 To make the body covetous in desire  
 Of the still finer, more implacable chords.

Are these "other bodies" nothing but a charade, a projection of our needs and desires, an answer to our loneliness? The final lines imply that such is the case:

So be it. Yet the spaciousness and light  
 In which the body walks and is deceived,  
 Falls from that fatal and that barer sky,  
 And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved.

(CP, 107-8)

The body is deceived, but "the spirit sees." What it sees is its own alienation. Stevens in this poem is a solipsist who has created the world out of his own mind and then lost the power to believe in his own creations.

The tone of "Anatomy of Monotony" is impersonal and formal; as the title indicates, it is a dissection, a pseudo-logical analysis of the phenomenon of monotony. It disguises its origin in Stevens' personal feelings by its studiously detached manner--as in the

understatement of the final line. In its rather ponderous ingenuity, it resembles some of the poems of Harmonium which masked personal feelings behind an elaborate style.

"The Sun This March," also dating from 1930, expresses a similar idea in a totally different style--simple, direct, lyrical, unabashedly first-person.

The exceeding brightness of this early sun  
Makes me conceive how dark I have become,

And re-illuminates things that used to turn  
To gold in broadest blue, and be a part

Of a turning spirit in an earlier self.  
That, too, returns from out the winter's air,

Like an hallucination come to daze  
The corner of the eye. Our element,

Cold is our element and winter's air  
Brings voices as of lions coming down.

Oh! Rabbi, rabbi, fend my soul for me  
And true savant of this dark nature be.

(CP, 133-34)

The poem seems poised uncertainly between nostalgia for the "turning spirit in an earlier self" and the realization that "cold is our element." It pivots on the eighth line: the first two sentences raise the hope of a return to the "earlier self"; the last two sentences dash that hope. The poet no longer trusts the "turning spirit," which now seems to him a "hallucination." But the recognition that "cold is our element" does not strike me as despairing; this is the stoical courage of the man who wants to know himself, to understand, not deny, his own "dark nature." The "voices as of lions coming

down" may signify danger (an implication strengthened by the next line), but they also suggest power--the power, perhaps, of poetry itself. In "Lions in Sweden" the lions are "majestic images" which, though corrupted into a cliché, "the whole of the soul . . . / Still hankers after . . ." (CP, 124-25). And they reappear, restored to potency, in "Poetry is a Destructive Force":

The lion sleeps in the sun.  
Its nose is on its paws.  
It can kill a man.

(CP, 193)

and in "The Glass of Water," where metaphor transforms the glass into a jungle pool and "Light / Is the lion that comes down to drink" (CP, 197).

Despite the seductions of Florida, cold really was Stevens' element. The metaphorical weather of Ideas of Order seems less depressing when we remember that Stevens had always loved the literal weather of which it is an extension. Thus, in an entry in his journal for February 5, 1906, Stevens anticipated not only the thought but the very phrasing of "The Sun This March": "Yesterday I was more in my element--alone on an up-and-downish road, in old clothes, quick with the wind and the cold" (SP, 158). And in March 1907 he wrote to Elsie Moll:

I seem to get more good from raw weather than from mild weather. . . . The sheets of mist, the trees swallowed up at a little distance in mist, the driving cold wind, the noisy solitude, the clumps of ice and patches of snow--the little wilderness all my own, shared with nobody, not even with you--it made me myself. It was friendly so much deeper than anything else could be.  
(L, 98-99)

Twenty-eight years later, when Ideas of Order was published, Stevens' sympathy with the bracing northern climate had not altered. Returning to Hartford after a February vacation at Key West in 1935, he wrote to Robert Frost (who had been at Key West at the same time):

If you feel about New England as I felt when I returned on Saturday, you will be surprised at your passion for it. Whole gulfs of the loveliest cold air have been blowing about. The ground is still covered with snow, but the grass is coming through, matted down like the hair on a horse that has been in the stable too long. It is the season after winter and before spring.  
(L, 275)

In "How to Live. What to Do" the conviction that cold is our element receives its most positive expression, inspiring Stevens to a rhetoric of praise. Written in 1935, this poem is the one Stevens chose as his favorite in Ideas of Order, "because," he told Ronald Lane Latimer, "it so definitely represents my way of thinking" (L, 293). It has an assertiveness and confidence that are rare in Stevens' poems; a syntax of unhesitating declaration here replaces the tentative and qualified syntax that usually characterizes Stevens' style:

Last evening the moon rose above this rock  
Impure upon a world unpurged.  
The man and his companion stopped  
To rest before the heroic height.

Coldly the wind fell upon them  
In many majesties of sound:  
They that had left the flame-freaked sun  
To seek a sun of fuller fire.

Instead there was this tufted rock  
 Massively rising high and bare  
 Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown  
 Like giant arms among the clouds.

There was neither voice nor crested image,  
 No chorister, nor priest. There was  
 Only the great height of the rock  
 And the two of them standing still to rest.

There was the cold wind and the sound  
 It made, away from the muck of the land  
 That they had left, heroic sound  
 Joyous and jubilant and sure.

(CP, 125-26)

The central images are elemental: wind and rock. They illustrate the esthetic of austerity which demands that one give up the hedonistic pleasures of Florida ("the flame-freaked sun") and offers in return the possibility of something higher--nobility, majesty, an approach to the sublime. Thus the wind falls upon the man and his companion "in many majesties of sound," and its "heroic sound" is "joyous and jubilant and sure"; and the rock is a "heroic height," its "ridges thrown / Like giant arms among the clouds."

While the tone of insistent affirmation in "How to Live. What to Do" recalls the more celebratory poems of Harmonium, the object of affirmation has changed. Whereas in Harmonium Stevens celebrated the lush tropical world of Florida and the foliage of summer, here he exults that the rock rises "beyond all trees" and "away from the muck of the land." As in "Sunday Morning," orthodox religion is rejected: "There was neither voice nor crested image, / No chorister, nor priest." Earth, not heaven, is the home of what is sacred to man. As A. Walton Litz points out, "The measured quatrains, formal and

serene, make the poem a kind of secular hymn."<sup>1</sup> But the object of worship has shifted from the "flame-freaked sun" which the ring of chanting men celebrated in "Sunday Morning" to the "tufted rock" rising in the moonlight.

The poem seems to represent a transitional point between early and late Stevens: the stance and tone of Harmonium applied to the theme of The Rock. By providing a unique point of contact between the early and late poems, "How to Live. What to Do" helps to clarify what they have in common. First there is the temperamental affinity for the kind of starkness and bareness which is celebrated here. Second, there is the need to find some form of belief that will give a sense of firmness and stability, even though one knows on an intellectual level that the belief is illusory. I think that this idea, which Stevens develops most thoroughly in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," is implicit in all of his work, from the most "creative" hymns of joy in Harmonium to the most "decreative" meditations in The Rock. The supreme fiction in Harmonium is the earth itself in all its multiplicity and the vivid life that is enjoyed amid that multiplicity. This enjoyment of earth depends on a creative, imaginative participation in the diversity of things. The late poems do not abandon the need for a supreme fiction, but they seek it in the idea of an underlying unity, in "bare reality" or "mere being" or whatever one chooses to call the essential oneness in which all things participate by virtue of existing. Stevens had already anticipated the direction in which he would move when he wrote, in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle":

If men at forty will be painting lakes  
 The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one,  
 The basic slate, the universal hue.

(CP, 15)

Yet there is no point in Stevens' life when he is exclusively devoted to one or the other mode of understanding. As Helen Vendler says, he always "wants reality both as monad and as plenitude."<sup>2</sup> Of course, they are not really contradictory; they represent alternate kinds of emphasis within the mind. Any view of reality which insisted on regarding it solely as monad or solely as plenitude would be too exclusive, an over-simplification of human experience.

In one sense, the image of the rock represents objective reality independent of the action of the poet's (or any man's) imagination. In Roy Harvey Pearce's words, "The poet as decreator apprehends reality as it has been before it could be overcome and transformed by the poet as creator."<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Stevens himself would assert in "The Plain Sense of Things" (CP, 502-3), to apprehend reality is to have transformed it in the imagination already ("... the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined"). As Richard Blessing puts it, "Neither pure imagined land nor pure objective land exists for us, but the truth of our being consists of a constant oscillation between those poles, even though the poles have existence only as necessary postulates of the mind" (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> In other words, both the imagined land and the objective land are supreme fictions, ways of comprehending the world.

The title of "How to Live. What to Do" is probably, on one level, a satirical response to those who were insisting, during the thirties,

on the moral and social obligations of the artist (meaning the obligation of the artist to support some particular political ideology). But the title is absolutely serious on that deeper level which Stevens had in mind when he said in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" that the poet's role is "to help people to live their lives"--to help not in a narrowly utilitarian sense but in the essential and fundamental sense of providing an imaginative realization of the world.

What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, 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. (NA, 30-31)

The supreme fiction in "How to Live. What to Do" is that sense of nobility and of heroism which Stevens experienced in Verrocchio's equestrian statue of Bartolommeo Colleoni and which seemed to him so difficult to maintain against the pressure of twentieth-century reality. He wanted to renew, for himself and others, that nobility which is the "peculiarity" that "imagination gives to everything that it touches" (NA, 33).

"Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" (CP, 127-28) and "The American Sublime" (CP, 130-31) are variations on the theme of "How to Live. What to Do." (All three poems date from 1935.) They share the belief that in renouncing easy consolations one gains access to a kind of solitary strength. The "companion," shadowy enough in "How to Live," disappears entirely in "Waving Adieu" and "The American Sublime." In "Waving Adieu" the rejection of false hopes of heaven leads to a heightened appreciation of this world--not so different, really, from

the "death is the mother of beauty" motif in "Sunday Morning." But here the poet's attitude seems more stoical than exultant, and the idyllic wilderness paradise of "Sunday Morning" has been replaced by the "weather."

To be one's singular self, to despise  
 The being that yielded so little, acquired  
 So little, too little to care, to turn  
 To the ever-jubilant weather, to sip

One's cup and never to say a word . . .

The poem ends with a rhetorical question:

Ever-jubilant,  
 What is there here but weather, what spirit  
 Have I except it comes from the sun?

This reduction of the world to weather and spirit is carried a step further in "The American Sublime," where even the weather has ceased to count:

But how does one feel?  
 One grows used to the weather,  
 The landscape and that;  
 And the sublime comes down  
 To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,  
 The empty spirit  
 In vacant space.

In the vocabulary of "How to Live. What to Do," this is a vision of the world purged of all impurities, a world sublime in its transcendence of "the muck of the land." Everything trivial having dropped away, one is left with a sense of freedom that is at once exhilarating

and dizzying. Ultimately, it is too rarified a vision to nourish a human being, and the poem ends by asking for something to fill the "empty" spirit:

What wine does one drink?  
What bread does one eat?

The need to find this spiritual nourishment runs throughout Ideas of Order, and if the reductivism of "The American Sublime" is past redemption, in many other poems we see Stevens trying out tentative answers--seeking a "new romantic," founded on the minimal reality still available to him, to replace the outmoded romantic of Harmonium. In a poem of the early 1930s, "Autumn Refrain" (CP, 160), the attempt to define this minimal affirmation is still essentially personal; in later poems, especially from 1935 on, Stevens tries to relate his own quest to the general loss of faith in the social order. In "Autumn Refrain" the loss is primarily esthetic--the nineteenth-century romantic esthetic represented by the nightingale. The real moon has become a "yellow moon of words"; the nightingale is "not a bird for me / But the name of a bird." When art no longer has its roots in the real world it becomes effete and decadent, mere words. (This is of course precisely the doctrine the young Stevens propounded in his journal--cf. SP, 38.) The new romantic must somehow be built on the unpromising reality that remains after the warmth of summer and of day has passed away:

And yet beneath  
The stillness of everything gone, and being still,  
Being and sitting still, something resides,  
Some skreaking and skrittering residuum . . .

Like Frost in "The Oven-Bird," Stevens poses the question of "what to make of a diminished thing." "Autumn Refrain" does not have the answer, but it offers the hope that there is one. It raises the possibility that poetry can still be made out of what Stevens, in his 1934 introduction to Williams' Collected Poems, called "the anti-poetic." "To a man with a sentimental side"--and surely this applies as much to Stevens himself as to Williams--"the anti-poetic is that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing" (OP, 255).

A whole series of short poems from 1935 elaborate this theme. In "Sailing After Lunch" (CP, 120-21) the first four stanzas describe the failure of the old romantic ("this heavy historical sail"), while the last two offer the possibility of at least momentary transcendence. As in "The American Sublime," the possibility is dependent more on the spirit than the senses:

It is least what one ever sees.  
It is only the way one feels, to say  
Where my spirit is I am,  
To say the light wind worries the sail,  
To say the water is swift today . . .

What matters is not the external stimulus but our capacity to feel, to be moved, and the motion of the boat is a metaphor for the emotion within the self:

. . . and so to give  
That slight transcendence to the dirty sail,  
By light, the way one feels, sharp white,  
And then rush brightly through the summer air.

The poems which make overt reference to the social crisis of the

thirties (the Depression, the threat of Communism) are still fundamentally rooted in Stevens' personal need for a sanction, and that sanction must be esthetic rather than moral or ideological. Thus, in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" (CP, 121-22), the "mobs of men" who cry "without knowing for what, / Except to be happy" cannot be satisfied by any act of church or state, but only by a "music" which will restore to them an inner, personal sense of order:

The epic of disbelief  
 Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant.  
 Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music  
 Will unite these figures of men and their shapes  
 Will glisten again with motion, the music  
 Will be motion and full of shadows.

Again, in "Mozart, 1935" (CP, 131-31), the poet can transcend the vulgar present ("its hoo-hoo-hoo, / Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic, / Its envious cachinnation"), not be evading it but by confronting it directly and turning it into music. If the present is composed of fear and pain (both personal and collective), the poet must express that fear and pain, become its voice:

Be thou, be thou  
 The voice of angry fear,  
 The voice of this besieging pain.

Be thou that wintry sound  
 As of the great wind howling,  
 By which sorrow is released,  
 Dismissed, absolved  
 In a starry placating.

Like Shelley, to whom he here alludes, Stevens believed the poet is the unacknowledged legislator of mankind, that collective pain is only the sum of individual pain and that the poet, better than the

priest or politician, can address the pain where it lies in the heart of each individual. Stevens would have shared Nietzsche's question (in the third Untimely Meditation): "How should a political innovation be sufficient to make men once and for all into happy inhabitants of the earth?" Walter Kaufmann's commentary on this passage in Nietzsche also, I believe, illuminates Stevens' attitude (for which he was condemned by Burnshaw and other leftists as an esthete):

Nietzsche opposes not only the State but any overestimation of the political. The kingdom of God is in the hearts of men--and Nietzsche accuses Christianity of having betrayed this fundamental insight from the beginning, whether by transferring the kingdom into another world and thus depreciating this life, or by becoming political and seeking salvation through organizations, churches, cults, sacraments, or priests. He will not put his faith either in a church or in a political party or program, for he believes that the question of salvation is a "question for the single one."<sup>5</sup>

Stevens likewise believed that a new political or economic system would not make men fundamentally happier, and that the poet, in working through his own personal struggle with a difficult reality and translating that struggle to the level of art, could provide other people with a means of coming to terms with their personal realities. The poet must first justify life to himself; then his justification, through whatever artistic form it happens to take, will become available to anyone who is open to it.

"The Idea of Order at Key West" (CP, 128-30) and "Evening without Angels" (CP, 136-38) are in some respects companion pieces. Written

at about the same time (both in 1934), longer and more fully developed than the short lyrics which make up most of Ideas of Order, they are perhaps Stevens' most serious attempts in this book to provide a convincing affirmation. But the affirmations they offer are significantly different. "The Idea of Order" promotes the artist as creator of the world (or of as much of the world as we need to concern ourselves with); "Evening without Angels" takes a more humble view of man's relation to the external world. In "The Idea of Order" man creates the world; in "Evening without Angels" he responds to it. The distinction is at least as old as Wordsworth (who wrote, in "Tintern Abbey," that he was a lover "of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear, --both what they half create, / And what perceive"), and Stevens affirmed its importance for himself in a letter to Latimer in December 1935:

Whether beauty is roused by passion or whether passion is roused by beauty is pretty much the same thing as the question whether a poem about a natural object is roused by the natural object or whether the natural object is clothed with its poetic characteristics by the poet. While I brush that sort of thing aside, it is not because I am not interested. But I feel very much like the boy whose mother told him to stop sneezing; he replied: "I am not sneezing; it's sneezing me".

If one could truly play the role of poet with all the books, leading the special life that a poet should lead, reaching out after every possible experience, questions of this sort would be commonplaces. They are, in fact, commonplaces now, but I am dealing with my own experience. I think that things come both from within and from without. (L, 302)

In "The Idea of Order at Key West" things come almost entirely from within:

She was the single artificer of the world  
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
 Whatever self it had, became the self  
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
 As we beheld her striding there alone,  
 Knew that there never was a world for her  
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

If the woman represents the artist, the lights of the fishing boats represent the art object. Like the jar in "Anecdote of the Jar," which mastered the wilderness of Tennessee, the lights of the boats

Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

But Stevens' ambivalence in "Anecdote of the Jar," half favoring the jar and half favoring the wilderness, is gone in "The Idea of Order"; here Stevens is interested only in the singer, and the sea is "merely a place by which she walked to sing." There is some justice in Hugh Kenner's rather caustic remark about the woman: "Her song absorbs the neutral 'given' world: sea, sky and hour grown gossamer-light, to be taken into song. They offered little noticeable resistance."<sup>6</sup> The sea in this poem is a pale ghost of the powerful presence that confronted Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C."

It seems to me that Stevens in "The Idea of Order at Key West" makes a claim for the artist's self-sufficiency (as creator of his own reality) that he cannot sustain. In fact, the lines about Hoon in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" (written the following year) amount to a retraction of the claim:

And then  
 There's that mountain-minded Hoon,  
 For whom desire was never that of the waltz,

Who found all form and order in solitude,  
 For whom the shapes were never the figures of men.  
 Now, for him, his forms have vanished.

There is order in neither sea nor sun.  
 The shapes have lost their glistening.

(CP, 121-22)

As a matter of fact, the singer in "The Idea of Order" bears a strong resemblance to the Hoon of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," who proclaimed,

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,  
 And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.  
 I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
 Or heard or felt came not but from myself . . .

(CP, 65)

So when Stevens admits, in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," that Hoon's power to order his universe has failed, his words apply with equal force to the singer in "The Idea of Order."

Because it is so eloquent and fully realized a statement of a particular esthetic theory, "The Idea of Order at Key West" tends to overshadow the slighter poems of Ideas of Order and to put its stamp on the volume as a whole. (And the title Stevens chose for the book reinforces this effect.) Yet it strikes me as an anomaly, an unrepresentative piece which works magnificently when read by itself but seems unconvincing and strained when read in the context of the other poems of Ideas of Order. (To some extent the same might be said of "Sunday Morning"; we tend to think of it as the key "thesis" poem of

Harmonium, when in fact the bulk of Harmonium is much more shadowed and ambivalent than the celebratory romantic hymn of "Sunday Morning.") What "The Idea of Order" shares with much of Ideas of Order is Stevens' tendency during this period to turn inward and seek a beauty of the spirit to replace the fading beauty of the senses. ("Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew / It was the spirit that we sought . . .") But the dominant lesson of Ideas of Order is that this tendency, carried to its extreme, leads to a sterile nihilism ("The empty spirit / In vacant space").

"Evening without Angels" is a more satisfying poem, more balanced and more representative of Stevens' sense of the world. It recognizes the truth that "things come both from within and from without." The inter-relationship between man and nature is complex and subtle; we project ourselves outward, not to impose our human attributes on nature, but to find in nature something that answers to our human desires and moods.

Light, too, encrusts us making visible  
 The motions of the mind and giving form  
 To moodiest nothings, as, desire for day  
 Accomplished in the immensely flashing East,  
 Desire for rest, in that descending sea  
 Of dark, which in its very darkening  
 Is rest and silence spreading into sleep.

To impose ourselves on nature would be to anthropomorphize it, as when we make "angels of the sun" and "attendant ghosts" of the moon. But for Stevens, in this poem, the sense of identity between ourselves and nature does not deprive nature of its independent, inhuman existence:

Air is air,  
 Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.  
 Its sounds are not angelic syllables  
 But our unfashioned spirits realized  
 More sharply in more furious selves.

If "the wind . . . speaks always with our speech," it is because our speech is itself a "true response" to the world around us.

The beautiful final lines of "Evening without Angels" evoke Stevens' esthetic of austerity, the sublime simplicity of "bare night" and "bare earth," and then balance against it a sense of the nobility of humanity, of the human voice which, rising out of its humble source, answers the night. What Stevens achieves here is a recognition of man's smallness before nature coupled with a profound respect for what it means to be human.

. . . Evening, when the measure skips a beat  
 And then another, one by one, and all  
 To a seething minor swiftly modulate.  
 Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare,  
 Except for our own houses, huddled low  
 Beneath the arches and their spangled air,  
 Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire,  
 Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,  
 Where the voice that is great within us rises up,  
 As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.

Eight years later, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens would state more explicitly what I think this comparison of "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "Evening without Angels" implies. In part VII of "It Must Give Pleasure," the Canon Aspirin "imposes orders as he thinks of them," and "it is a brave affair."

But to impose is not  
 To discover. To discover an order as of  
 A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find,  
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,  
 Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible.

(CP, 403-4)

These "possible" moments of discovery are Stevens' epiphanies.

"Evening without Angels" expresses such a moment.

Even though the dominant motif of Ideas of Order is the new esthetic of bareness and cold, several of the short lyrics reveal Stevens rebelling and trying to reassert the old Harmonium values of spring and earthy plenitude. Such moments usually occur in times of acute need rather than in times of fulfillment. In his fifties, Stevens still felt the same restless dissatisfaction in early spring that had afflicted him in youth. One example is the brief lyric "Mud Master":

The muddy rivers of spring  
 Are snarling  
 Under muddy skies.  
 The mind is muddy.

As yet, for the mind, new banks  
 Of bulging green  
 Are not;  
 Sky-sides of gold  
 Are not.  
 The mind snarls.

Blackest of pickanines,  
 There is a master of mud.  
 The shaft of light  
 Falling, far off, from sky to land,  
 That is he--

The peach-bud maker,  
 The mud master,  
 The master of the mind.

(CP, 147-48)

Stevens' mind, responsive to the season, shares the general muddiness of rivers and skies. This affinity between mind and nature--both at their low point--recalls Stevens' description of his spring mood of "semi-blackness" in a journal entry from March 1907: he saw around him "nothing but mud and bare trees and the general world, rusty with winter," "and so," he wrote, "I feel muddy and bare and rusty" (SP, 174). "Mud Master" bears a resemblance to "The Sun This March," but that poem comes to the realization that "cold is our element," while this one looks forward to "new banks / Of bulging green" and hails the coming sunlight as the "peach-bud maker."

"Ghosts as Cocoons" (CP, 119) is a similar but more elaborate statement of the desire for spring, for the "bride" who will come to redeem "this mangled, smutted semi-world hacked out / Of dirt."

She must come now. The grass in in seed and high.  
Come now. Those to be born have need

Of the bride, love being a birth, have need to see  
And touch her . . .

. . . . .

Come now, pearled and pasted, bloomy-leafed,  
While the domes resound with chant involving chant.

"Farewell to Florida," with its invocation of a North which "is leafless and lies in a wintry slime," was placed by Stevens as the opening poem in Ideas of Order; "Ghosts as Cocoons" was placed second. Together they seem intended to mark the extreme poles of the book's contents, or, to use a musical analogy, the tonic theme and the dominant theme. (Incidentally, they were both among the last poems

written for Ideas of Order, dating from 1936, so the radical contrast between them cannot be explained in terms of chronological development.)

A third poem of spring, "Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial," strikes a note of ecstatic pleasure almost unique in Ideas of Order:

The wild warblers are warbling in the jungle  
Of life and spring and of the lustrous inundations,  
Flood on flood, of our returning sun.

Day after day, throughout the winter,  
We hardened ourselves to live by bluest reason  
In a world of wind and frost,

And by will, unshaken and florid  
In mornings of angular ice,  
That passed beyond us through the narrow sky.

But what are radiant reason and radiant will  
To warblings early in the hilarious trees  
Of summer, the drunken mother?

(CP, 123-24)

What is being rejected here is not so much winter itself as the idea that reason and will can substitute for authentic feeling. (Similarly, in "Anglais Mort à Florence," the protagonist "used his reason, exercised his will" in an unsuccessful effort to compensate for the spontaneous delight in being which he had lost.)

In "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)" (CP, 134-35), Stevens fights back, rather weakly, against the modern realism which would relegate beauty to the realm of mere sentimentality. The tone is resentful, a kind of "Gubbinal" with political overtones:

Panoramas are not what they used to be.  
Claude has been dead a long time  
And apostrophes are forbidden on the funicular.  
Marx has ruined Nature,  
For the moment.

Stevens imagines a lost past of classical, ordered beauty (represented in Claude's paintings), and concludes that

the panorama of despair  
Cannot be the specialty  
Of this ecstatic air.

And in "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" (CP, 135-36) he asks

. . . who could tolerate the earth  
Without that poem, or without

An earthier one, tum, tum-ti-tum,  
As of those crosses, glittering,

And merely of their glittering,  
A mirror of a mere delight?

These attempts to revivify the outmoded enthusiasms of Harmonium are slight and unconvincing. But they show, at least, that Stevens was not content to accept "the panorama of despair."

"A Postcard from the Volcano" (CP, 158-59) succeeds much better at conveying Stevens' love for the world, and manages to give that love a tragic dimension.

Children picking up our bones  
Will never know that these were once  
As quick as foxes on the hill;

And that in autumn, when the grapes  
Made sharp air sharper by their smell  
These had a being, breathing frost;

And least will guess that with our bones  
We left much more, left what still is  
The look of things, left what we felt

At what we saw.

Like "Evening without Angels," this poem respects both the integrity of the physical world and the importance of our subjective human response to it. But it goes beyond this traditional romantic affirmation in its vision of the world as a mansion in decay. Presumably this is a vision of the twentieth century, a world deprived of traditional orders and beliefs. The naked "spirit" to which Stevens felt himself reduced in "The American Sublime" is all that remains--that, and the unexplainable glory of the "opulent sun" which somehow continues to shine even on this "gutted world":

Children,  
Still weaving budded aureoles,  
Will speak our speech and never know,  
  
Will say of the mansion that it seems  
As if he that lived there left behind  
A spirit storming in blank walls,  
  
A dirty house in a gutted world,  
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,  
Smearred with the gold of the opulent sun.

## Notes to Chapter Four

- 1  
Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens  
(New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 185.
- 2  
On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge,  
Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 42.
- 3  
The Continuity of American Poetry, Third Printing, with Corrections  
and Revisions (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 412.
- 4  
Wallace Stevens' "Whole Harmonium" (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ.  
Press, 1970), p. 150.
- 5  
Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist (1950; rpt.  
Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1956), p. 141.
- 6  
A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers (New York:  
Alfred A. Knopf, 1975),

## Chapter Five

### The Casual Reunions: 1937-1946

In 1939 Stevens was sixty and Europe was at war. More than ever before he questioned the sufficiency of his own lyric voice; increasingly he returned to the longing for moral and philosophical certitude which he had sought in the journals of his twenties. In December, in a letter to the critic Hi Simons, he described his need for a sustaining value that would be final and absolute:

Of course, what one is after in all these things is the discovery of a value that really suffices. Only last night I saw an expression in a French paper which is in point. It was something like this: "the primordial importance of spiritual values in time of war". The ordinary, everyday search of the romantic mind is rewarded perhaps rather too lightly by the satisfaction that it finds in what it calls reality. But if one happened to be playing checkers somewhere under the Maginot Line, subject to a call at any moment to do some job that might be one's last job, one would spend a good deal of time thinking in order to make the situation seem reasonable, inevitable and free from question.

I suppose that, in the last analysis, my own main objective is to do that kind of thinking. (L, 345-46; emphasis added)

The satisfaction that rewards the mind "rather too lightly" is what Stevens liked to call "the casual"--as in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," where he referred to "ecstatic identities / Between one's self and the weather and the things / of the weather" as the "casual reunions" (CP, 258). These privileged moments of reunion between the self and the world are casual because they are spontaneous, not willed; discovered, not imposed. They "occur as they

occur" (CP, 222). In such moments we remember that "we are physical beings in a physical world" and we enjoy the weather as "one of the unphilosophical realities" (L, 348-49).

Now, however, shaken by the violence sweeping Europe and moved, no doubt, by a growing consciousness of his own mortality, Stevens was reluctantly coming to feel that "the casual is not / Enough" (CP, 397). These inner doubts were rooted in that basic ambivalence about the role of poetry in life that had always divided him. As a youth of nineteen Stevens had insisted on the need to make of poetry a redeeming force in people's lives:

Art for art's sake is both indiscreet and worthless. . . .  
What does not have a kinship, a sympathy, a relation,  
an inspiration and an indissolubility with our lives  
ought not, and under healthy conditions could not have  
a place in them. (SP, 38)

Now, in his sixties, he renewed this moral imperative with an almost messianic fervor:

Can we suppose that [the poet] will be content merely  
to make notes, merely to copy Katahdin, when, with his  
sense of the heaviness of the world, he feels his own  
power to lift, or help to lift, that heaviness away?  
(NA, 63)

This exalted image of the poet's role led Stevens to characterize the poet as the "hero" who consoles us with his "stanzas of final peace," and who creates in poetry the "supreme fictions" that take the place of religious sanctions in our lives.

Unfortunately, however, in attempting to make poetry the source of "a value that really suffices," Stevens allowed his later work to

be taken over by an increasing tendency toward abstraction and generalization. In both poems and essays, he tried to develop a theoretical account of poetry which would justify the central importance he wished to ascribe to it. In doing so, he relied so heavily on the concepts of "imagination" and "reality" (used at a high level of abstraction) that Stevens critics ever since have found it almost impossible to talk about his poetry except in terms of this sterile dichotomy. The irony is that Stevens wanted to show that poetry is relevant to people's lives, yet his own poems from the early and mid-forties are the most abstract, the most arcane, and the most remote from ordinary life of any that he wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Stevens put his finger on the problem, I think, in the introduction to his collection of essays, The Necessary Angel, in which he differentiated between poetry itself and "definitions" of poetry:

One function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time. Ordinarily he will disclose what he finds in his own poetry by way of the poetry itself. He exercises this function most often without being conscious of it, so that the disclosures in his poetry, while they define what seems to him to be poetry, are disclosures of poetry, not disclosures of definitions of poetry. The papers that have been collected here are intended to disclose definitions of poetry. (NA, vii)

The abstruseness of so many of the poems in Parts of a World, Transport to Summer, and The Auroras of Autumn, the dry, recondite manner that reminded Randall Jarrell of "G.E. Moore at the spinet,"<sup>2</sup> is a result of the fact that they are primarily disclosures of definitions of poetry, and only incidentally disclosures of poetry.

Stevens' affection for "the casual" continued to influence him despite his philosophical preoccupations. The essays and letters from the early 1940s reveal his ambivalence. Two of his best-known essays--"The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941) and "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (1943)--are permeated by the contradiction that was still fighting itself out within him.

Both essays insist on reality and imagination as equal and interdependent. Yet the emphasis is clearly on the imagination. Stevens argues that the balance has shifted too far toward reality (in terms of both the violent reality of wartime and the gradual weakening of faith in God and other traditional mythologies). He affirms the role of imagination in order to redress the balance. The characteristic movement of thought in these essays is an impassioned evocation of the poet's imaginative power, followed by a reminder not to forget the dependence of imagination on reality. The reminder has the quality of an afterthought; the poetic imagination is Stevens' central theme.

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," for example, Stevens says of his "possible poet":

He will consider that although he has himself witnessed, during the long period of his life [i.e. the last two thousand years], a general transition to reality, his own measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination. (NA, 23)

Yet Stevens immediately qualifies this paean to the abstracting power of imagination with a warning that the poet "knows perfectly that he cannot be too noble a rider." Not wanting to undervalue either imagination or reality, Stevens characteristically moves toward a reconciling balance:

. . . he will find that it is not a choice of one over the other and not a decision that divides them, but something subtler, a recognition that here, too, as between these poles, the universal interdependence exists, and hence his choice and his decision must be that they are equal and inseparable. (NA, 24)

This assertion of the equal importance of imagination and reality rings false against the dominant voice of "The Noble Rider," which proclaims the power of imagination to transform and transcend reality:

. . . what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, 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. (NA, 31)

Similarly, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" is of two minds: exalting the poet as a quasi-religious figure ("with his sense of the heaviness of the world, he feels his own power to lift, or help to lift, that heaviness away"), it nevertheless displays, in certain passages, a more humble attitude of respect for the world of fact, for the "many things that seem to be poetry without any intervention on our part, as, for example, the blue sky . . ." (NA, 59).

Stevens' apotheosis of the poet receives what is perhaps its most extreme formulation in the following passage comparing the poet to

the mystic and the saint. Note Stevens' concern that poetry should have a more than merely esthetic value. He questions the identity of the feeling, the "state of elevation," that is experienced alike by poet and mystic:

It may be dismissed, on the one hand, as a commonplace aesthetic satisfaction; and, on the other hand, if we say that the idea of God is merely a poetic idea, even if the supreme poetic idea, and that our notions of heaven and hell are merely poetry not so called, even if poetry that involves us vitally, the feeling of deliverance, of a release, of a perfection touched, of a vocation so that all men may know the truth and that the truth may set them free--if we say these things and if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in His seat in heaven in all His glory, the poet himself, still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, would have seemed, whether young or old, whether in rags or ceremonial robe, a man who needed what he had created, uttering the hymns of joy that followed his creation.  
(NA, 51)

After the accumulated weight of all these grandiose phrases, the final characterization of the poet as "a man who needed what he had created" seems strangely understated. But it is this phrase, restoring the poet to a human level, which stands out in simple dignity from a mass of inflated verbiage. (Stevens himself, embarrassed no doubt by his own rhetoric, immediately adds, "This may be a gross exaggeration of a very simple matter.")

Stevens' efforts to make poetry a substitute for religion always seem to me a bit desperate and unconvincing. I respond better to the more restrained defenses of poetic truth which follow the posturing of the passage just quoted. Contrasting poetry with philosophy, he says that it offers "empirical knowledge" (as opposed to "logical

knowledge"); contrasting it with metaphysics, he says that it seeks "agreement with reality." He warns the poet to be on guard against what he calls "double characters"--"the poetic philosophers and the philosophic poets." (This is precisely the danger which Randall Jarrell accused Stevens of failing to heed.) With what almost sounds like a return to the hedonistic estheticism of Harmonium, he says,

The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence. The philosopher thinks of the world as an enormous pastiche or, as he puts it, the world is as the percipient. Thus Kant says that the objects of perception are conditioned by the nature of the mind as to their form. But the poet says that, whatever it may be, la vie est plus belle que les idées. (NA, 56)

This may be as much of an exaggeration in its own way as the earlier passage about the poet as creator of God. But what is significant for Stevens' poems of this period is that so many of them seem to be concerned with what Stevens here allocates to the realm of the philosopher--that is, they are variations on the idea that "the world is as the percipient."

When Stevens says that poetic truth (unlike philosophic truth) is empirical knowledge, he means that it is closer to immediate experience--our experience of the external world as we perceive it, feel it, and live in it. Poetry is perceived reality informed by sensibility.

In consequence, when men, baffled by philosophic truth, turn to poetic truth, they return to their starting-point, they return to fact, not, it ought to be clear, to bare fact (or call it absolute fact), but to fact possibly beyond their perception in the first instance and outside the normal range of their sensibility. (NA, 59-60)

Stevens recognizes at this point that

the imagination never brings anything into the world but that, on the contrary, like the personality of the poet in the act of creating, it is no more than a process . . .  
(NA, 59)

Earlier and later in the essay Stevens emphasizes the separateness of the real world and the artificial, created world of imagination; yet here he comes close to annihilating any distinction between them. "Absolute fact," he says, can mean "fact destitute of any imaginative aspect whatever," but it can also include

so many things which, as they are, and without any intervention of the imagination, seem to be imaginative objects that it is no doubt true that absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes.  
(NA, 60-61)

The real world, as revisited in memory, is essentially no different from the world of imagination.

For example, if we close our eyes and think of a place where it would be pleasant to spend a holiday, and if there slide across the black eyes, like a setting on a stage, a rock that sparkles, a blue sea that lashes, and hemlocks in which the sun can merely fumble, this inevitably demonstrates, since the rock and sea, the wood and sun are those that have been familiar to us in Maine, that much of the world of fact is the equivalent of the world of the imagination, because it looks like it. (NA, 61)

By believing that "the visible is the equivalent of the invisible," we destroy

the false imagination, the false conception of the imagination as some incalculable vates within us, unhappy Rodomontade.

Finally, having eliminated the "false imagination" and demonstrated the essential oneness of fact and poetry, it remains for Stevens to spell out the role of the mind--the human element in poetry. As Stevens presents his conception of poetry in this passage, it seems to be as much discovered as created. It is not necessarily the verbal construction on the page, but can be simply the experience of an emotional response to something in the perceived world. In its essence, poetry need not have anything to do with words.

A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it. When, therefore, we say that the world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable from one another and when, by way of illustration, we cite, say, the blue sky, we can be sure that the thing cited is always something that, whether by thinking or feeling, has become a part of our vital experience of life, even though we are not aware of it. It is easy to suppose that few people realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there--few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings. On that occasion, the blue sky is a particular of life that we have thought of often, even though unconsciously, and that we have felt intensely in those crystallizations of freshness that we no more remember than we remember this or that gust of wind in the spring or autumn. (NA, 65-66)

I have quoted and paraphrased at such length from "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" because they display so clearly the contradiction between Stevens' affection for the "casual" moments of intense feeling ("those

crystallizations of freshness") and his desire to transcend the casual, to define for the poet a more noble and priestly role. Much of Stevens' late poetry is dominated by the latter impulse, but my purpose is to trace the moments when the former impulse comes to the surface. It is in those moments, as I have said, that I find Stevens' truest "disclosures of poetry."

One of the chief satisfactions of Stevens' letters is that they place the poems in perspective by reminding us that the man who wrote them actually did live in the "real" world. Reality--both its pressures and its satisfactions--saved Stevens from the temptation to lose himself entirely in abstract theorizing. The idea of a supreme fiction, he told Henry Church in December 1942, could have been endlessly elaborated, if he "had nothing else in the world to do except to sit on a fence and think about things."

When I get up at 6 o'clock in the morning . . . the thing [the idea of a supreme fiction] crawls all over me; it is in my hair when I shave and I think of it in the bathtub. Then I come down here to the office and, except for an occasional letter like this, have to put it to one side. After all, I like Rhine wine, blue grapes, good cheese, endive and lots of books, etc., etc., etc., as much as I like supreme fiction. (L, 431)

To show how little Stevens' life had changed in fundamental respects, let me compare this letter to one written in 1920, where we find a similar example of an early-morning reverie interrupted by the demands of the work-a-day world:

. . . when I woke up and propped myself up on my pillows to induct myself gradually into the world about me, I found that there had been a heavy frost during the night, that all the roofs were white as snow in the strong, glittering morning light. Looking at this and the great, blooming trees not far off and the blue lake beyond, at least a minor phase of immensity, I felt most agreeably inclined. I hopped into my bath and was lolling there when the telephone rang and I was under way for the day--floating on a Gulf Stream of talk with lawyers, contractors, dealers in cement, lumber and so on. (L, 219)

The distractions of work and domestic life may have interfered with Stevens' indulgence of his taste for literature and philosophy, but they kept him from losing touch with "common earth." Stevens' relationship with the young Cuban editor José Rodríguez Feo is interesting in this regard. In a somewhat avuncular fashion he liked to chide the younger man for what he saw as an excessive withdrawal into the world of books. Rodríguez Feo felt isolated from European culture in Cuba; Stevens urged him to use the Cuban reality around him instead of trying to flee from it. Stevens saw in Rodríguez Feo what some critics have seen in Stevens--an estheticism too refined for the world in which ordinary human beings live and breathe. "His view," Stevens told Henry Church, "is that of the platonic young intellectual. . . . He lives like the perpetual reader, without sex or politics" (L, 508).

When Stevens wrote to Rodríguez Feo, he tried to counter the young man's cynicism and ennui. Rodríguez Feo, who was apparently independently wealthy, complained of "the monotony of elegance." Stevens replied,

To live in Cuba, to think a little in the morning and afterward to work in the garden for an hour or two, then to have lunch and to read all afternoon and then, with your wife or someone else's wife, fill the house with fresh roses, to play a little Berlioz (this is the current combination at home: Berlioz and roses) might very well create all manner of doubts after a week or two. But when you are a little older, and have your business or job to look after, and when there is quite enough to worry about all the time, and when you don't have enough time to think and the weeds grow in the garden a good deal more savagely than you could ever have supposed, and you no longer read because it doesn't seem worth while, but you do at the end of the day play a record or two, that is something quite different. Reality is the great fond, and it is because it is that the purely literary amounts to so little. (L, 505)

Perhaps Stevens saw in Rodríguez Feo the kind of dilettante he himself might have become, had he been free to devote his life entirely to "the purely literary." Rodríguez Feo's world-weariness ("Is it because everybody knows and is bored to death before actually dying of everything?") reminded Stevens how much he depended on that daily contact with the inelegant world. His ordinary life provided a context in which literature could take its appropriate place, and on which literature could draw for sustenance. (To Samuel French Morse, then trying to write poetry while serving in the Army, Stevens remarked, "After all, one's best things are more than likely to come in the midst of floor scrubbing" [L, 450].)

The letters to José Rodríguez Feo show Stevens' continuing affection for the ordinary, everyday world. This theme would become more pronounced in later years, as in the following remark from a 1951 letter:

It gives me the greatest pleasure to hear from you and, as you know, to find things in your letter about your family and friends because these things really add something to life whereas most ideas don't, and most people want to write to me about ideas. (L, 736)

The pressures of everyday life were an antidote to the temptations of effete estheticism or of withdrawal into the purely theoretical. But to stay in touch with mundane reality did not mean to lose one's capacity for emotional (and therefore imaginative) response to that reality. Such a loss still represented for Stevens the extremest form of poverty.

When Stevens wrote in his journal of the dehumanizing routine of "railroading" to and from the office every day, and when he wrote in Harmonium of "the malady of the quotidian," or of the snow man who, "nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," he had this kind of poverty in mind. The same sense of impoverishment appears in certain of the poems in Parts of a World and Transport to Summer. In "The Dwarf" (CP, 208), as in "The Snow Man," the absence of imagination corresponds to the diminution or near-annihilation of the self:

Now it is September and the web is woven.  
The web is woven and you have to wear it.

. . . . .

It is all that you are, the final dwarf of you,  
That is woven and woven and waiting to be worn,

Neither as mask nor as garment but as a being,  
Torn from insipid summer, for the mirror of cold,

Sitting beside your lamp, there citron to nibble  
And coffee dribble . . . Frost is in the stubble.

Even more reminiscent of "The Snow Man" in its evocation of a bleak, wintry landscape is "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" (CP, 293):

It is deep January. The sky is hard.  
The stalks are firmly rooted in ice.

It is in this solitude, a syllable,  
Out of these gawky flutterings,

Intones its single emptiness,  
The savagest hollow of winter-sound.

In this waste land human beings are reduced to grotesque shadows of themselves, like Eliot's "hollow men":

In this bleak air the broken stalks  
Have arms without hands. They have trunks

Without legs or, for that, without heads.  
They have heads in which a captive cry

Is merely the moving of a tongue.

In other poems, such as "Loneliness in Jersey City" (CP, 210) and "The Common Life" (CP, 221), Stevens' personal sense of imaginative poverty becomes a commentary on the whole social order: "The steeples are empty and so are the people." (One recalls the sleepers in white nightgowns in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock.") In "The Common Life" the reduction of life to geometry reminds us of the rationalists in square hats of "Six Significant Landscapes." "The Common Life" is Stevens' view of a modern industrial society in which human beings have been reduced to ciphers without emotion or individuality: "The men have no shadows / And the women have only one side." Everything that should be real to the senses and to the feelings has been reduced

to an abstraction: to black lines on white paper.

Stevens found an emblem of the man without imagination in Jose Rodriguez Feo's accounts of his mother's mule Pompilio. Stevens wrote that he liked to think of Pompilio as the "blank realist who sees only what there is to see without feeling, without imagination, but with large eyes that require no spectacles" (L, 512).

Pompilio, although devoid of feeling and imagination, still apparently accepts the evidence of his senses--he "sees . . . what there is to see." In the 1940 poem "Landscape with Boat" (CP, 241) Stevens portrays an even more radical "realist"--the "floribund ascetic" who renounces the world revealed by his senses because he seeks a certainty which can never be available to the senses. He believes that if he can strip away the illusory phenomena of the physical world, what remains will be essential, unquestionable truth--a minimal certitude.

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,  
 Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still  
 The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.  
 He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see  
 And not be touched by blue. He wanted to know,  
 A naked man who regarded himself in the glass  
 Of air, who looked for the world beneath the blue . . .  
 . . . Nabob  
 Of bones, he rejected, he denied, to arrive  
 At the neutral centre, the ominous element,  
 The single-colored, colorless, primitive.

Stevens' language here can be misleading. "To see," for the floribund ascetic, does not mean to see the physical world ("what there is to see," for Pompilio). It means to see in a visionary, not physical, sense. The blue of the sky is what the physical eye sees; it is what

Pompilio would see. The "world beneath the blue" is a hypothetical substratum not accessible to the physical eye. From Stevens' point of view, this "neutral centre," this "truth beyond all truths," is in fact, and most ironically, pure fiction, a figment of the floribund ascetic's imagination--or more precisely, an abstract construct of his intellect:

. . . because  
 It was nowhere else, its place had to be supposed,  
 Itself had to be supposed, a thing supposed  
 In a place supposed, a thing that he reached  
 In a place that he reached, by rejecting what he saw  
 And denying what he heard.

Stevens' most crushing rebuke of the ascetic comes when he says that to arrive at the supposed place "He had only not to live . . ." The ascetic is like those "non-physical people" in "Esthetique du Mal" who suffer the "greatest poverty": "not to live / In a physical world" (CP, 325).

Stevens' ascetic bears an interesting resemblance to Nietzsche's conception of the ascetic in Toward a Genealogy of Morals. For Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal is a desperate attempt to save the will in a world which seems to lack meaning. In the face of an ennui so overwhelming that it amounts to a loss of the capacity to will, one turns to the ascetic ideal as a last straw:

. . . that hatred against everything human, even more, against everything animal, everything material, this disgust with the senses, with reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this desire to get away from all semblance, change, becoming, death, wish, desire itself--the meaning of all this, should we dare to comprehend it, is a will to nothingness, a will running

counter to life, a revolt against the most fundamental presuppositions of life; yet it is and remains a will! . . . rather than want nothing, man even wants nothingness. <sup>3</sup>

Clearly for Stevens as for Nietzsche this will to nothingness (sometimes calling itself a will to truth) is destructive. The ultimate good is to recognize that life is "semblance, change, becoming, death, wish, desire"--and to affirm it as such.

The floribund ascetic is only the first of several characters in Stevens' poetry who, wishing to penetrate surface illusions in order to reveal an underlying reality, reject the knowledge of their own senses. The floribund ascetic's sister-in-renunciation might well be Mrs. Alfred Uruguay. ("Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" appeared in December 1940, a couple of months after "Landscape with Boat.") Mrs. Uruguay tells her donkey,

"I have said no  
To everything, in order to get at myself.  
I have wiped away moonlight like mud. Your innocent ear  
And I, if I rode naked, are what remain."

Even the donkey (unlike Pompilio) wishes for "a falsifying bell."  
But Mrs. Uruguay, in her refusal to admit any falsifying "moonlight," any "elegance," condemns herself to a "real" barren in its poverty, incapable of transformation into anything more rewarding:

And for her,  
To be, regardless of velvet, could never be more  
Than to be, she could never differently be,  
Her no and no made yes impossible.

(CP, 249)

The floribund ascetic repudiates his physical senses; Mrs. Uruguay

repudiates the fictive adornments of "elegance." But both are alike in their passion for no-saying, for rejecting whatever appears to give pleasure or consolation, and they clearly represent for Stevens a dead-end. He explicitly rejects each of these characters.

But other characters in Stevens' poems repudiate the illusory and are praised for it. The difference is that they repudiate the stale, second-hand illusions which have been added to the world by our predecessors. This act of renunciation allows them to experience the world freshly, as something newly discovered or re-discovered. Whether this fresh vision of the world is a "truth" behind the illusions, or merely a new fiction, remains problematic. But at least it is a "yes" which is still possible after the initial "no." Among the poems which illustrate such a fruitful negation are "The Man on the Dump," "The Latest Freed Man," and the first section ("It Must Be Abstract") from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," dealing with "the first idea."

"The Man on the Dump" (1938; CP, 201) is on one level an attack on an outmoded poetic language which has become cloying and sentimental, that "old romantic" which, as Stevens had argued in Ideas of Order, needed to be replaced by a "new romantic." But something more fundamental is under attack here: the inescapable human tendency to interpret the world, to transform it into "images" which can be taken in by the mind and related to other "images" in what will appear to be a coherent whole. The man on the dump is disgusted with images because they interfere with his ability to confront the external world directly and to know it in its essential otherness: "the the." Stevens here launches a radical attack on the metaphor-making power which in other poems he

regards as the poet's key imaginative faculty.

The dump might appear to represent the reductive world of facts unredeemed by poetry, but it seems more likely to me that, in the context of this poem, it is the dumping-ground of those stale images which are the detritus of yesterday's poetry. It is the resting-ground of the outmoded romantic:

The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche  
Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho . . . The dump is full  
Of images.

Sardonically Stevens holds up these trite, sentimental metaphors for our contemptuous inspection. The sun and moon lose their identity in these circumstances; they have been used, and thus corrupted, like a waterfall in a cigarette advertisement. His goal is to strip away the encrusted images and see the objects as they really are, respecting their autonomy:

Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon  
(All its images are in the dump) and you see  
As a man (not like an image of a man),  
You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

But how does one reach this purity? Even "the freshness of morning"--one of those things which is for Stevens inherently poetic--is spoiled by being used, too many times, to elicit an automatic response, its pleasure trivialized to the level of a good cigar. Stevens' exaggeratedly repetitious diction demonstrates how the beauty of the morning dew can become cloying:

The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green  
 Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea  
 On a cocoanut--how many men have copied dew  
 For buttons, how many women have covered themselves  
 With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads  
 Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.  
 One grows to hate these things except on the dump.

(Why "except on the dump"? Perhaps because only here are "these things" seen for what they are: trash.) Stevens used the expression "smacks in the eye" again, in a 1940 letter, where it clearly refers to the power of grasping a sense impression in its physical immediacy, as opposed to merely absorbing it into some abstract mental category:

Is he personally a man of vigor? After all, it takes an unbelievable vigor to attach oneself to the things that smack one in the eye. It is so much easier to call a wheel a wheel than to see it as, say, Holbein . . . would see it and to name its parts. (L, 356)

It is precisely the easy assumption of the things of the world into our human categories that he wants to avoid in "The Man on the Dump." But everything that we think of is assumed into some such category, is turned into an "image," the moment we think of it. Everything is either already on the dump, or soon will be. Therefore the only possible escape from images must come in some infinitesimal moment between the beginning of a perception and its transformation into an image. Such a moment may not actually exist, but we can at least imagine it:

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,  
 Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),  
 Between that disgust and this, between the things  
 That are on the dump (azaleas and so on),

And those that will be (azaleas and so on),  
 One feels the purifying change. One rejects  
 The trash.

That's the moment when the moon creeps up  
 To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time  
 One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.  
 Everything is shed . . .

Although the man on the dump is not the radical nihilist of "Landscape with Boat," he is, in his own way, another ascetic, seeking purification, rejecting "the trash" in order to get near what may (the poem's final line implies) be indeed "the truth." In a world devoid of images (and thus of imagination), the sky will be empty.

"The Latest Freed Man" (CP, 204), like the man on the dump, sheds outmoded human interpretations of the world in order to get closer to an immediate, present reality. He, too, begins with an act of renunciation. But there the similarity ends, for the freed man is no ascetic. His newly-discovered reality is not some irreducible "truth," but a sensuous participation in the moment.

Tired of the old descriptions of the world,  
 The latest freed man rose at six and sat  
 On the edge of his bed. He said,  
     "I suppose there is  
 A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just  
 Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,  
 Which is enough: the moment's rain and sea,  
 The moment's sun (the strong man vaguely seen),  
 Overtaking the doctrine of this landscape. . . ."

Doctrines (or "descriptions") are man-made explanations of the world which we adopt out of habit or laziness, and which interfere with our personal response to the things around us. It is appropriately at the moment of first rising from sleep that one sees the world freshly,

before the routines of the day begin to close in and reinforce habitual modes of thought. But for that brief interval, one comes closest to experiencing what Emerson called an original relation to the universe. The world freshly perceived free of doctrine may still be a fiction, but it is at least not a second-hand fiction. "Description" is a form of what J. Hillis Miller calls "the will to power over things";<sup>4</sup> in abandoning this will, the freed man learns how "To be without a description of to be." ("Being, as I think of it," Stevens remarked in 1943, "is not a science but merely eating duck, or doing some such thing" [L, 453].) What one gains by this abnegation of will is a sense of a potent exterior reality, and at the same time, paradoxically, an enlarged sense of the self, through identification with this potent reality ("To have the ant of the self changed to an ox"):

It was everything being more real, himself  
 At the centre of reality, seeing it.  
 It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself . . .

In "The Man on the Dump" and "The Latest Freed Man" Stevens proposes the rejection of conventional images and descriptions. In "It Must Be Abstract" (the first section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction") we see what happens when this rejection is pushed farther, carried to an extreme, developed and elaborated, one might almost say, into a "science." But in the course of this elaboration, Stevens' attitude toward the first idea undergoes such radical transitions that his position cannot be determined. Like the man on the dump, he rejects the images man has imposed on nature:

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,  
 Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven  
 That has expelled us and our images . . .  
 (CP, 381)

And like Mrs. Uruguay (and the latest freed man, for that matter), he wants to strip away the false "elegance" with which we try to embroider the bare fact of "being." Compare these lines from "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay"--

And for her,  
 To be, regardless of velvet, could never be more  
 Than to be . . .  
 (CP, 249)

with these from "It Must Be Abstract"--

The sun  
 Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be  
 In the difficulty of what it is to be.  
 (CP, 381)

Yet by the end of "It Must Be Abstract" Stevens has moved from this purgative vision to the confected elegance of his "major abstraction," "the idea of man":

The man  
 In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,  
 It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect  
 The final elegance . . .  
 (CP, 389)

On one level, the first idea refers to the external, unknowable reality of the ding an sich. This idea, like the supreme fiction itself, must be abstract because it can never be known by direct

perception. It must always remain for us "a thing supposed." Belief in this idea only reinforces our sense of separation from any such ultimate reality:

The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.  
There was a myth before the myth began,  
Venerable and articulate and complete.

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

It is the impossible desire to overcome this separateness that makes Stevens say, "The casual / Is not enough," that impels him to conjure up his "major abstraction."

Yet interposed throughout "It Must Be Abstract" is a quite different sense of the first idea, as of something closer and more accessible than any abstraction. This is the first idea of the latest freed man-- not a final, static reality, but the fresh reality continually rediscovered in every moment:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,  
For a moment, the first idea . . . (CP, 382)

It is the reality that emerges in continual references to the birds, flowers, and weather of spring: "the effortless weather turning blue . . . the myosotis on its bush" (II); "the gay forsythia" and "fragrance of the magnolias" (VI); "a stop / To see hepatica" during "a walk around a lake" (VII). The "flick" of feeling in our response to these



need for belief in a way that the "casual" cannot. Yet the paradox of the poem is that its most lyrical moments--the moments when it seems most highly charged with the author's feeling--are precisely those passages which celebrate the casual, the "incalculable balances" that are "fortuitous" and "personal." The impression I get in reading "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is that Stevens set out to compose a theoretical poem about the abstract idea of the supreme fiction, but that the "casual" reality of the spring weather, and the "irrational" exhilaration it aroused in him, kept breaking in, interrupting the orderly development of his argument and skewing it off in another direction. Some of Stevens' own remarks about the composition of "Notes" tend to support this view. Explaining to Henry Church why "the NOTES are a miscellany in which it would be difficult to collect the theory latent in them," he said,

At first I attempted to follow a scheme. . . . But I very soon found that, if I stuck closely to a development, I should lose all of the qualities that I really wanted to get into the thing, and that I was likely to produce something that did not come off in any sense, not even as poetry. (L, 430-31)

What exactly were these "qualities" that Stevens "really wanted to get into the thing," that would make it "come off . . . as poetry"? I think the poetic qualities Stevens was after are rooted in the contingencies of the "casual" world of spring weather, even though those contingencies interfered with the orderly development of his ideas. He tried to explain the relation between the poem's abstract theme and the real weather in a letter to Hi Simons. (The specific reference

is to section VI of "It Must Be Abstract," but I think the comment applies to "Notes" as a whole.)

The abstract does not exist, but it is certainly as immanent: that is to say, the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract. First I make the effort; then I turn to the weather because that is not inaccessible and is not abstract. The weather as described is the weather that was about me when I wrote this. There is a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro. (L, 434)

Once again we find Stevens turning away from the sterile struggle with abstraction to find emotional nourishment in the weather, as "one of the things that we enjoy, one of the unphilosophical realities."

Such moments of renewal continue to occur throughout the second and third parts of "Notes," as in "It Must Change," VII--

For easy passion and ever-ready love  
 Are of our earthy birth and here and now  
 And where we live and everywhere we live . . .  
 (CP, 395)

and especially in the last part, "It Must Give Pleasure," in which the supreme fiction itself has ceased to be a transcendent idea and has become something quite simple and common-place: "The fiction that results from feeling." And feeling cannot be willed or captured by the intellect; it finds us as and when it does, and all we can do is be open, ready to receive:

But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,  
 On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,  
 As when the sun comes rising, when the sea  
 Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.  
 Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.  
 We reason about them with a later reason.

(CP, 398-99)

The imaginative union with the external world is implicit in the moment when we "catch from that / Irrational moment its unreasoning"--not in the subsequent time when we "reason about [these things] with a later reason." The later reason is an effort of the intellect to explain what it can no longer experience. The poem written on the page is an attempt to preserve some trace of the feeling which animated the fleeting moment.

The movement toward a "major abstraction" described in the first section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" can be traced back to the year 1940, which seems to have been a turning point for Stevens. The characteristic poems of the late '30s ("On the Road Home," for example, or "The Latest Freed Man") celebrated immediate experience; an acceptance of spontaneity, of "the casual," was seen as the cure for emotional poverty. In 1940 Stevens could still write such poems (as in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas"), and, as we have seen, "Landscape with Boat" and "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" are explicit attacks on asceticism and abstraction. But in 1940 there also appeared some of the first of the more theoretical and abstract poems which would dominate the early and middle 1940s. These poems reflect Stevens' need to justify poetry itself and to delineate an abstract, idealized figure of the poet as "hero." Only in this way, apparently, could

Stevens reassure himself that poetry still mattered in the face of the catastrophic war that was going on.

The famous companion pieces "Man and Bottle" (CP, 238) and "Of Modern Poetry" (CP, 239) were published as "Two Theoretic Poems" in May 1940. These poems are quoted and anthologized so often presumably because they are relatively simple and straightforward statements of Stevens' "ideas" about poetry. Thus they illustrate the didactic and theoretical bent which I take to be the characteristic weakness of Stevens' writing in this period.

Both are about the mind's need to find "what will suffice." "Man and Bottle" emphasizes the need to destroy outmoded structures ("romantic tenements / Of rose and ice") and finds in the War a metaphor of the mind's destructive energy ("It has to persuade that war is part of itself"). Like the philosopher's man in "Asides on the Oboe," the mind (i.e. the poet's mind) is likened to "A man at the centre of men" who will save us "From an old delusion, an old affair with the sun . . ." The old delusion is presumably the consolation found in the physical world by the romantic mind.

"Of Modern Poetry" takes up the argument, emphasizing the "act of the mind" as the creation of something new to take the place of what has been destroyed: "It has / To construct a new stage." The poem's imagery suggests the artificiality of the new creation: the mind is depicted as an actor speaking words on a stage, as a "metaphysician in the dark, twanging / An instrument" (like the man with the blue guitar). (The identification of poetry with language becomes very insistent in the later poems of Parts of a World, which repeatedly

characterize the poet's essential function in terms of "words," "stanzas," "chants," "pages," "syllables," "consonants," "cantos," etc. These terms imply the conception of a poem as a linguistic construction rather than as an expression of feeling. The issue, of course, is one of emphasis, not of mutual exclusiveness.) At the end of "Of Modern Poetry" (as in "Paisant Chronicle") Stevens turns from a long abstract definition to a short series of concrete images. But the images are arbitrary and emblematic, more like titles of paintings than allusions to reality:

It must  
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may  
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman  
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

The poem which most clearly anticipates Stevens' quest for a vision of the poet as hero is "Asides on the Oboe," published in December 1940. Here we encounter the sterile perfection of the "philosopher's man":

If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,  
Can never stand as god, is ever wrong  
In the end, however naked, tall, there is still  
The impossible possible philosopher's man,  
The man who has had the time to think enough,  
The central man, the human globe, responsive  
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,  
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

(CP, 250)

This is Stevens' idealized image of the ultimate poet, the savior he would call for in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" to lift away "the heaviness of the world":

He is the transparence of the place in which  
 He is and in his poems we find peace.

This figure, meant to bring comfort to war-torn humanity, is in fact so abstract, so generalized, that to me it seems more chilling than consoling.

The imagery of "Asides on the Oboe" bears a close resemblance to that of "Landscape with Boat" (which was published only a little earlier, in autumn 1940). The floribund ascetic of "Landscape with Boat" wants the air to be colorless--"imperceptible," like "glass"--and in that glass to regard himself; the philosopher's man is a "man of glass," a "transparence" who reflects us like a mirror. The floribund ascetic seeks the truth in "the neutral centre"; the philosopher's man is "the central man." (Both of these concepts--transparence and centrality--appear frequently in Stevens' poems of this period, often in conjunction with the idea of peace. See for example the prologue of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" [CP, 380].) Most important, it seems to me that what the philosopher's man offers--an object of "final belief"--is essentially the same as what the floribund ascetic seeks--"a truth beyond all truths."

It strikes me as curious that Stevens would use such similar language for such opposed ends--to condemn the floribund ascetic and to celebrate the philosopher's man. Yet, if I read the tone of these poems correctly, this is what he has done. And what this suggests is simply that in attacking the floribund ascetic Stevens was attempting to repudiate a tendency which was present within himself. Taken together, "Landscape with Boat" and "Asides on the Oboe" represent

the poles between which Stevens wavered.

During the next couple of years Stevens persistently struggled to define and elaborate his vision of the ultimate poet as the man who would redeem us from "the heaviness of the world" with his "chants of final peace." "Montrachet-le-Jardin" (1942) is particularly interesting in its explicit repudiation of the "Terra Paradise" of Harmonium for a new "hero-land" of man's own making.

A little while of Terra Paradise  
I dreamed, of autumn rivers, silvas green,  
Of sanctimonious mountains high in snow . . .

. . . . .

No more. I can build towers of my own . . .  
(CP, 263)

The poem begins with a backward glance at this sensuously idyllic world, in a tone which begins as nostalgic affection but turns with jarring suddenness to mockery in line 5:

What more is there to love than I have loved?  
And if there be nothing more, O bright, O bright,  
The chick, the chidder-barn and grassy chives

And great moon, cricket-impresario,  
And, hoy, the impopulous purple-plated past . . .  
(CP, 260)

In this and the passage just quoted Stevens implies that his old celebrations of the physical world--the brilliant seascapes of Florida, the Edenic wilderness of "Sunday Morning"--were romanticized, idealized pictures which no longer satisfy him. They were the "dream" of Terra Paradise from which he has awakened. He now must look for "something

more to love," and he finds it in the humbler reality of immediate experience, demythologized and stripped of false rhetoric:

But if there be something more to love, amen,  
Amen to the feelings about familiar things,

. . . . .

Amen to thought, our singular skeleton,  
Salt-flicker, amen to our accustomed cell . . .  
(CP, 260)

In accepting the "familiar things" which furnish "our accustomed cell" we find "something more," not "more" in the sense of transcending the Terra Paradise fable but in the sense of enduring beyond the loss of the fable--a residuum, an irreducible reality which is firmly grounded in our everyday lives. This is a kind of asceticism, a coming down to "a state of fact," but fact touched by the feelings, "responsive fact." In the last part of the poem, Stevens offers to proclaim "the grace / And free requiting of responsive fact," and to project "the naked man in a state of fact, / As acutest virtue and ascetic trove" (CP, 263). This grace is illustrated by a catalogue of particulars--"facts" which "fall like rejuvenating rain": "The cocks crow and the birds cry and / The sun expands"; "The wind . . . / Mouthing its constant smatter throughout space"; "green fish pensive in green reeds." Each of these is "an absolute," a thing justified in itself, "not varying / Toward an inaccessible, pure sound." Perceiving these innumerable and endlessly varied particulars, we "breathe upon the centre of / The breath life's latest, thousand senses"; yet all are united by the "one sense" that is "the single main"--the affective dimension, the responsiveness

which we bring to the world around us and which makes "fact" more than "bare fact."

My paraphrase of "Montrachet-le-Jardin" has deliberately avoided the middle section, in which Stevens identifies his pursuit of "something more to love" with his pursuit of nobility through the idea of man as hero. This is the familiar Stevens hero whose "words" and "chant" will rescue us from "our accustomed cell"--"the deliverer"

Delivering the prisoner by his words,  
So that the skeleton in the moonlight sings,  
Sings of an heroic world beyond the cell,

No, not believing, but to make the cell  
A hero's world in which he is the hero.  
Man must become the hero of his world.

(CP, 261)

As Stevens celebrates "the naked man as last / And tallest hero and plus gaudiest vir," his rhetoric rises to pseudo-religious heights, inviting us to enter "the hero-land to which we go," purging "the poison in the blood," performing "An inner miracle and sun-sacrament" (CP, 262). This seems to me a long way from "the feelings about familiar things." Once again, Stevens betrays a lack of confidence in the validity and sufficiency of his own inner responses by trying to inflate them into something noble and universal, something which can pass for metaphysics or sacrament. Stevens tries to bring together the modest affirmation of "responsive fact" and the march into "hero-land"; craving both common earth and nobility, he struggles to make them equivalent, and produces a strained and contradictory rhetoric.

The world of Harmonium was not, as "Montrachet-le-Jardin" implies,

a mere "dream" of Terra Paradise; it was a compound, I believe, of Stevens' authentic feeling for the physical world and his tendency toward rhetorical over-kill. In the later poetry, the feeling for nature persists--although matured into a deeper concern for the close and familiar reality of ordinary experience as opposed to the exotic and sensuous. The rhetorical straining persists too, but in a new and unexpected quarter: it insinuates itself into the conception of the supreme or heroic fiction. In other words, I think the striving for nobility by means of a saving fiction becomes a vehicle for the reappearance of some of the weaknesses of Stevens' "old" romanticism.

I have no intention of tracing all the permutations of the hero, but I would like to look briefly at "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" (1942) and "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" (1943). Both show Stevens backing away from the assertiveness of "Asides on the Oboe" toward a more subtle, or more evasive, conception of the hero. "Examination of the Hero" makes several attempts to represent the hero ("He walks with a defter / And lither stride. His arms are heavy / And his breast is greatness. All his speeches / Are prodigies in longer phrases" [CP, 277]), but rejects them in stanza XII with the admission that the hero is not an image but rather a feeling:

The hero is a feeling, a man seen  
As if the eye was an emotion,  
As if in seeing we saw our feeling  
In the object seen . . .

(CP, 278)

The hero, in this sense, becomes a kind of mythological representation of something which by its nature cannot be represented, a process

rather than a thing. Just as the imagination, like light, "adds nothing, except itself," to reality (NA, 61), so the hero in this poem "adds nothing / To what he does" (CP, 279).

How, then, to represent this personification of feeling without allowing it to become crudely literal and therefore blatantly false? "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" is, I think, Stevens' most ingenious attempt, through indirection and suggestion, to convey the sense of the hero without the heavy-handedness which usually results. This poem is an exercise in introspection, the attempt to catch one's own thought process in the act, like something seen out of the corner of the eye but lost the instant one confronts it directly:

Physical if the eye is quick enough,  
 So that, where he was, there is an enkindling, where  
 He is, the air changes and grows fresh to breathe.  
 (CP, 301)

Like the theologians who attempted to define the undefinable--God--in terms of what He is not, Stevens adopts the same technique of negation to define the hero (without, incidentally, ever actually using the word "hero"):

He was not man yet he was nothing else.  
 If in the mind, he vanished, taking there  
 The mind's own limits, like a tragic thing  
 Without existence, existing everywhere.  
 (CP, 298)

Stevens' attempt to abstract the process of feeling from the world of objects toward which feeling is directed is more subtle and engaging here than in some of the earlier "hero" poems, but the resulting

detachment from anything concrete produces a rarified atmosphere in which few readers will find the air grown "fresh to breathe" which is to be the hero's (or poetry's) legacy.

The 1945 poem "Description without Place" displays even more clearly Stevens' insistence on separating and isolating "feeling," as a kind of Platonic essence, from the conscious human experience which is its essential matrix. "Description" is a rather misleading word for what Stevens has in mind, which seems to be analogous to what Husserl called intentionality--the mind's innate tendency to find meaning in the objects of its perception. In Stevens' words, "description" is "an expectation, a desire, . . . [t]he difference that we make in what we see" (CP, 344). In apparent contrast to "The Latest Freed Man," which celebrated the freedom of the moment as "being without description," this poem celebrates "description" freed of the associations of place and time. In the earlier poem, however, "description" connoted a second-hand or habit-ridden interpretation of the world ("Tired of the old descriptions of the world . . ."). If we admit that the freed man, even in the freshness of his morning vision, still sees a "description" of the world (albeit a new description), then the two poems do not necessarily contradict one another. But they clearly differ in their primary emphasis, for "The Latest Freed Man" accepts the perceived world as a good sufficient in itself, whereas "Description without Place" disparages the world of "flat appearance" and celebrates description as

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

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

In one poem the particular is essential; in the other it is incidental.

In the early sections of "Description without Place" Stevens' attitude seems close to that of "The Latest Freed Man." Rejecting the factitious "truth" that was sought by the floribund ascetic of "Landscape with Boat," he argues that the only reality we can know is the reality of appearances: to seem is to be.

Such seemings are the actual ones: the way  
Things look each day, each morning . . .  
(CP, 339)

The way things look depends, of course, on the way they are seen; the perceiver adds some intangible portion of himself to "flat appearance."

In flat appearance we should be and be,  
Except for delicate clinkings not explained.

These are the actual seemings that we see,  
Hear, feel and know. We feel and know them so.  
(CP, 340)

When we generalize about the world beyond our senses, we lose the intensity and immediacy of these "actual seemings." But what if that intensity and immediacy could somehow be extended to a wider radius of vision, so that we no longer had to depend on intellectual constructs to make sense of the world? This "potential seeming" is the subject of one of Stevens' most beautiful and impassioned passages:

There might be, too, a change immenser than  
A poet's metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where  
Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,  
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete  
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind.

There might be in the curling-out of spring  
A purple-leaping element that forth

Would froth the whole heaven with its seeming-so,  
The intentions of a mind as yet unknown,

The spirit of one dwelling in a seed,  
Itself that seed's ripe, unpredictable fruit.

(CP, 341)

The "secret arrangements . . . in the mind" are the logical constructs and systems that scientists, philosophers, and theologians use to "understand" the world, as well as the more informal arrangements that we all use to make sense of our everyday experience (similar to the "old descriptions of the world" from which the latest freed man wished to liberate himself). Stevens hypothesizes a visionary state in which we would not need such interpretations because, like God, we would enjoy direct consciousness of the whole world at once; the mere act of "observing" would provide us with total knowledge. The virtue of such knowledge is that it attains universality without sacrificing the particular. It is an enormously expanded concrete knowledge, rather than a generalizing from the concrete to the abstract. If such knowledge were a genuine human possibility, it would answer Stevens' dilemma--to find a saving absolute without giving up the flawed

satisfactions of this imperfect sensuous world. Unfortunately, despite Stevens' hopeful "might be," this passage, for all its beauty, is a deadend, a digression.

It is in the last three sections of "Description without Place" that the whole focus seems to shift from evocation toward increasingly abstract definition. "The actual seemings that we see, / Hear, feel and know" are left behind for a concept which is emphatically artificial and theoretical, and which has existence only when it takes the form of language:

It is a world of words to the end of it,  
In which nothing solid is its solid self . . .  
(CP, 345)

Like "Montrachet-le-Jardin," "Description without Place" resists the attempt to bring it into coherent focus because of the innate contradiction between Stevens' love for the "actual seemings" of daily life and his desire for an artifice "Intenser than any actual life could be." At the end of "Description without Place" Stevens justifies his claim that "the theory of description matters most" by arguing that all we can say of the past and the future is description without place--the past, because its "place" no longer exists; the future, because its "place" is as yet only potential. Significantly, Stevens omits any mention here of the present--and it is the present that matters most to the latest freed man.

But there are moments in Parts of a World and, less frequently, in Transport to Summer, when "The shadow of an external world comes near"

(CP, 350). There are short poems, and parts of longer ones, in which Stevens is more concerned with enjoying the world of appearance than with dissecting it into objective and subjective components. As early as 1936 Stevens had written in "The Irrational Element in Poetry,"

If it is true that the most abstract painters paint herrings and apples, it is no less true that the poets who most urgently search the world for the sanctions of life, for that which makes life so prodigiously worth living, may find their solutions in a duck in a pond or in the wind on a winter night. (OP, 222)

Such solutions could not permanently satisfy Stevens' restless intellect, but they were the necessary ground to which he returned repeatedly for emotional and esthetic sustenance.

The realization of one's place in a physical world depends on an imaginative union between the self and reality. Stevens attempts to represent such a union in a number of short lyrics including, among others, "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," "Yellow Afternoon," "Martial Cadenza," "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers," and "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream." In their individual ways these are all repetitions of the latest freed man's experience. They celebrate the close, the particular, the personal. In "Yellow Afternoon":

Everything comes to him  
From the middle of his field. The odor  
Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word.  
There he touches his being. There as he is  
He is.

(CP, 237)

In "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers" the colors are more real, and have more human meaning, as the qualities of particular objects than

as mere abstractions:

Hoot, little owl within her, how  
 High blue became particular  
 In the leaf and bud and how the red,  
 Flicked into pieces, points of air,  
 Became--how the central, essential red  
 Escaped its large abstraction, became,  
 First, summer, than a lesser time,  
 Then the sides of peaches, of dusky pears.

Hoot how the inhuman colors fell  
 Into place beside her, where she was,  
 Like human conciliations, more like  
 A profounder reconciling, an act,  
 An affirmation free from doubt.  
 The crude and jealous formlessness  
 Became the form and the fragrance of things  
 Without clairvoyance, close to her.

(CP, 246-47)

These lines suggest that the "affirmation free from doubt" for which Stevens longed might be found by rejecting abstractions and returning to the physical sensations from which the abstractions are derived. The "central, essential red" is a kind of Platonic idea, detached from any particular physical manifestation of red and therefore remote, "inhuman." Stevens traces the color down the ladder of abstraction from pure idea, through its various emblematic and metaphorical roles ("summer," etc.), and finally to its source in immediate perception of (for example) "the sides of peaches, of dusky pears." Reminiscent of Crispin's "good, fat, guzzly fruit," these are the tangible realities that are "close," accessible, that have "form and fragrance." Whether such perceptions are more "real" than abstract ideas is a question for metaphysicians; for the poet, what matters is that they are more humanly satisfying.

Two of Stevens' finest expressions of his feeling for the physical world are sections IV and VII of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (published in 1940). In both cases the reunions with reality are especially poignant because they come after periods of separation. The separation in IV has been imposed by winter. The lake which the man has not seen for months has faded in his mind into an abstraction, losing its distinctive details in the blurring of memory, becoming merely "an" empty place (a member of a class, indistinguishable from other members) rather than "the" empty place (possessing a unique, specific identity). To restore the lake to its reality as a particular he must renew contact with it; at the same time, in rediscovering the use of his senses and feelings, he will himself become whole again:

On an early Sunday in April, a feeble day,  
 He felt curious about the winter hills  
 And wondered about the water in the lake.  
 It had been cold since December. Snow fell, first,  
 At New Year and, from then until April, lay  
 On everything. Now it had melted, leaving  
 The gray grass like a pallet, closely pressed;  
 And dirt. The wind blew in the empty place.  
 The winter wind blew in an empty place--  
 There was that difference between the and an,  
 The difference between himself and no man,  
 No man that heard a wind in an empty place.  
 It was time to be himself again, to see  
 If the place, in spite of its witheredness, was still  
 Within the difference. He felt curious  
 Whether the water was black and lashed about  
 Or whether the ice still covered the lake. There was still  
 Snow under the trees and on the northern rocks,  
 The dead rocks not the green rocks, the live rocks. If,  
 When he looked, the water ran up the air or grew white  
 Against the edge of the ice, the abstraction would  
 Be broken and winter would be broken and done,  
 And being would be being himself again,

Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self,  
 Black water breaking into reality.

(CP, 254-55)

This passage comes closer than most in Stevens' writing to a poetry of closely observed natural description; set in a particular time and place, it depends on a marshaling of physical details--grass, water, snow, trees, rocks, ice--presented with a minimum of metaphorical embellishment. The first eight lines are in a narrative mode almost banal in its matter-of-fact recounting of the weather ("It had been cold since December," etc.). The syntax throughout is, for Stevens, uncharacteristically simple and straightforward--a syntax of uncomplicated declarative sentences (until the climactic conditional sentence, whose expansive rhetoric gains power from the contrast). In short, the language in this poem has an unobtrusive naturalness and transparency unusual in Stevens. This is not a poem about the power of language to transform reality but a poem about the power of renewed contact with reality to transform the self.

Stevens' strongest feeling for reality seems to come when he feels he is at the edge, when his hold on reality is tenuous. He is more touched by the half-light of evening than by the full sun of noon. Section VII of "Extracts from Addresses" portrays such a moment of "thinnest light." Stevens imagines himself returning from the moon (with its connotation of pure imagination) to rediscover the reality of earth in its frailest, most minimal form, and to recognize in that reality "the subtle centre" on which he depends:

## What

One believes is what matters. Ecstatic identities  
 Between one's self and the weather and the things  
 Of the weather are the belief in one's element,  
 The casual reunions, the long-pondered  
 Surrenders, the repeated sayings that  
 There is nothing more and that it is enough  
 To believe in the weather and in the things and men  
 Of the weather and in one's self, as part of that  
 And nothing more. So that if one went to the moon,  
 Or anywhere beyond, to a different element,  
 One would be drowned in the air of difference,  
 Incapable of belief, in the difference.  
 And then returning from the moon, if one breathed  
 The cold evening, without any scent or the shade  
 Of any woman, watched the thinnest light  
 And the most distant, single color, about to change,  
 And naked of any illusion, in poverty,  
 In the exactest poverty, if then  
 One breathed the cold evening, the deepest inhalation  
 Would come from that return to the subtle centre.

(CP, 258)

The weather, the things and men of the weather--these are the things of the earth, which is our element, and in which we must believe, there being nothing more: familiar Stevens doctrine. But the anecdote of the journey to the moon and back makes the doctrine concrete, giving the poem its emotional power as lyric utterance. The imaginary voyage to the moon (or beyond) is a trope for the abandonment of belief in our element, for the alienation of the self from its physical surroundings. The reality we know through our senses is like the air we breathe: it sustains us, enables us to live; without it we would drown. The point of this imaginary departure from earth is to dramatize the return. The absence represents Stevens' concept of poverty (as in "Esthétique du Mal," where "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world"); returning from this poverty to breathe once again the earth's air would be returning to one's necessary contact with the

physical world. After having been "drowned in the air of difference," one would be resuscitated by this "deepest inhalation."

The poems of Transport to Summer, written during the period 1942-1946, are mostly concerned with the fictive element in appearance and with the poet's activity as a self-conscious, inward-looking mental process. We find Stevens at his most dryly solipsistic, for example, in "Men Made Out of Words":

Life consists  
Of propositions about life. The human

Revery is a solitude in which  
We compose these propositions . . .

(CP, 356-57)

Yet the later poems of Transport to Summer, those written in 1946, include a number which show a renewed interest in a poetry of earth and in seeking an accord with reality. (See for example "The Dove in the Belly," "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," and "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream.") But it is the long poem "Credences of Summer" which represents Stevens' most extreme effort to depict an accord with reality. And because it is extreme, and yearns for an impossible kind of finality and absoluteness, it seems to me more strained and less convincing than the under-stated reunions of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas." On the one hand, this "land too ripe for enigmas, too serene," suffers from the sterility of perfection--even if we know the perfection will turn out to be transitory. On the other hand, Stevens' desire for an accord with reality seems too desperate, especially in VII where it takes the form of a violent

struggle to "possess" and "subjugate" reality. This is a far cry from "the grace / And free requiting of responsive fact"--an act of rape, not of love.

But this poem is an experiment for Stevens--trying "the limits of reality." It marks the renewal of an aging man's feeling for the physical world and the life that is lived in it, and this feeling will play a vital part in Stevens' moving last poems.

## Notes to Chapter Five

1

Stevens' letters reveal his own concern about the tendency of his mind toward abstraction. "It is difficult for me to think and not to think abstractly," he confessed in 1935 (L, 290), and later in the same year he wrote, "my real danger is not didacticism, but abstraction" (L, 302).

2

Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage-Knopf, 1953), p. 131.

3

The Portable Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), p. 454.

4

Poets of Reality (1965; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 8.

5

Recall my discussion on page 71 of the sleeping/waking imagery in Stevens' journals.

## Chapter Six

### A New Knowledge of Reality: 1947-1955

Estrangement, nostalgia, discovery--these terms describe the relation between Stevens in old age and the world about him, the world which the ordinary person calls "reality." The estrangement or alienation from the world which had always affected Stevens in his periodic moods of ennui came more and more to be a constant of his existence, as the intensity and vigor of his feelings faded with advancing age. At the same time, he felt an enormous nostalgia for the physical reality of other people and things from which he felt cut off; he felt his estrangement as a severe loss. Finally, in certain moments and in a number of his last poems, he captured, or came close to capturing, the sense of a newly discovered or rediscovered reality, of a freshness that restored life's savor--"the state," he wrote to Barbara Church, "in which one once enjoyed the mere act of being alive" (L, 615).

It must also be admitted that Stevens at times sought estrangement from reality as an escape from the "dreadful sundry" of the world. One of his last poems, "Solitaire under the Oaks" (published shortly after his death in 1955), expresses his desire for release from the world of facts into the oblivion of pure principles; it represents meditation as a form of escape:

In the oblivion of cards  
One exists among pure principles.

Neither the cards nor the trees nor the air  
Persist as facts. This is an escape

To principium, to meditation.  
One knows at last what to think about

And thinks about it without consciousness,  
Under the oak trees, completely released.

(OP, 111)

This is not release from daily life into a richer, finer life of the imagination; it is release from life itself into the oblivion and unconsciousness which are tantamount to death--the death, at least, of the feelings. I think Stevens' remark in a 1954 letter is relevant (note the use of the same image of sitting under the trees):

Just as one experiences the world in terms of one's age and physical condition, so one experiences poetry, I am afraid, in the same terms. The feelings, the great source of poetry, become largely the feeling of + desire to sit under the trees on a bench in the park. (L, 842)

"Solitaire under the Oaks" resembles the strange limbo described by Stevens in the 1919 poem "The Place of the Solitaires," where nothing exists but "the motion of thought / And its restless iteration." Both poems represent a solipsistic withdrawal into an enclosed and solitary world of the mind. The difference, in the late poem, is that thought has come to rest in a static world of "pure principles," a completed world in which "one knows at last what to think about . . ." Here knowledge is absolute and final, and the implication of the poem is that only such knowledge can give Stevens peace.

Stevens' whole philosophical tendency toward the formulation of an absolute is a needed release from the pressure of reality. But it

should be viewed, I believe, as a means rather than an end for Stevens-- a means of refreshing the self, resting from the world in order to return to it with renewed love. Stevens always returns to the facts of cards, trees, and air--to consciousness. The things of the world, should they "persist as facts" too long, would (and often do) grow stale for Stevens; the temporary escape permits the renewal of his desire for the world.

During the final years of Stevens' life, the fluctuations of his mood between ennui and joy were expressed in a series of intimate letters to three friends: Barbara Church (widow of Henry Church), the young Cuban intellectual José Rodríguez Feo, and the Irish poet Thomas McGreevy. Although these letters include discussions of art, philosophy, and even occasionally politics, they are especially interesting for the insight they give into Stevens' daily life, with its periods of depression and boredom and its moments of delight. Above all, one sees how strongly Stevens' whole attitude toward life was affected by what might seem relatively minor things: the fresh bloom on his wife's roses, a new painting, a change in the weather.

The two people to whom Stevens probably felt closest, outside his own family, were Henry and Barbara Church. Ever since the beginning of their correspondence in 1939 (when Henry Church had written to ask permission to print translations of some of Stevens' poems in his French-language journal Mesure), Stevens had found in Church the kind of sympathetic understanding which encouraged him to speak freely of his deeper concerns. When the War forced the Churches to return from France to America and take up residence at Princeton, Stevens had a

chance to get to know them better in person.

After Henry Church's death on April 4, 1947, Stevens' friendship with his wife continued and deepened. Stevens' letters of condolence and encouragement to Barbara Church in her loss testify to his own search for consolations which would justify life in the absence of traditional religious sanctions. Allowing for the fact that these letters were intended to be uplifting, they seem to me authentic expressions of Stevens' philosophy of courageous stoicism combined with an appreciation of the earth's "casual" satisfactions.

In June 1947 Mrs. Church was preparing to return to the home which she had shared with her husband in France for many years. The prospect must have appeared painful to her, for Stevens wrote these words of reassurance:

It will take courage and intelligence to go through what lies ahead in Ville d'Avray. But you have both. Life was not one thing yesterday and another today. Only, we live it differently. And it might well be an exquisite happiness to be back in a place where you had never been anything except happy. It might be like returning to a place enhanced by a flood of new feelings about it, new senses of what it had really been . . . (L, 558)

The last sentence contains the key to the lyrical power of Stevens' late poems, the "new knowledge of reality" which is really a return to a reality always available but temporarily lost. It is not an intellectual discovery, but a new sense of, or new feeling about, what one has always known. (I think this is similar to what Eliot had in mind when he wrote in "Little Gidding," "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place

for the first time.") Furthermore, it is the very fact that one has been estranged from the physical world which makes the "flood of new feelings" so intense. Admitting his own "metaphysical affinities," Stevens told Thomas McGreevy:

The mind with metaphysical affinities has a dash when it deals with reality that the purely realistic mind never has because the purely realistic mind never experiences any passion for reality . . . (L, 597)

And he spoke on another occasion of "the momentum toward abstraction, the counter-effect of a greatly increased feeling for things that one sees and touches" (L, 608). Though couched in objective terms, these remarks clearly reveal Stevens' view of himself.

In the letter to Barbara Church, Stevens goes on to illustrate his own capacity to find greater satisfaction in the quiet enjoyment of the familiar than in the more abstract pleasures of politics or philosophy; the passage might be a paraphrase of the line from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake . . ."

Last evening, after dinner, and after all the noisy Katzenjammer children in the neighborhood were upstairs saying their prayers, I walked around, lá-bas, without politics and without philosophy--even the superficial politics and philosophy that represent my maximum. This sort of thing answers a good many questions. (L, 558-59)

("Lá-bas" refers to the garden with its "rose-bushes . . . thick with big buds. . . . If we should have two or three days of the bright, warm, humid weather that roses like, the place would be a triumph.") Again, we see that for Stevens the answer to "a good many questions"

(which I translate as the basic existential question: What is the point of living?) lies not in a rationalized explanation or doctrine, but in the resurgence of emotional vitality which makes the question seem meaningless.

In July, after Mrs. Church had returned to France, Stevens again compared her experience to his own:

The true happiness to be found in such a spot is the sense that it restores and strengthens. When I was much younger, in New York, I went back home occasionally because it was a way of going back to an earth which always filled me with whatever I really needed at the time. (L, 563)

And in August, learning that Mrs. Church was thinking of visiting Munich, her birthplace, he wrote once more in the same vein:

I walked in the little park near us, before starting in town, this morning. There is a good enough woods there and I inhaled the deep woods-coolness as I used to at home. Don't you look forward to some such restoration if you visit Germany again . . .? Here in the trance of midsummer all things come together again and one is happy to be alive. (L, 564)

Inhaling the "deep woods-coolness" of the park in Hartford is both a present union with the natural world and a recapturing of a world remembered from Stevens' Reading childhood. "All things"--past and present, the remote world of memory and the immediate world of the senses--"come together . . ."

After these kind and cheerful letters, full of the happiness of being alive, it is saddening to find Stevens the next summer again oppressed by his old demon of ennui. The unchanging routine at the

office, monotonous weather, and an inability to find stimulation in his usual pleasures--books, music, paintings--all these factors, combined with his isolation from like-minded people, left him asking Mrs. Church (and himself), "How is one to restore savor to life when life has lost it? By making one's self able to play the piano well? By restoring one's self physically? By a gesture of the will? They are all absurd." Stevens, seeing the absurdity of all our efforts to disguise the fundamental nothingness which underlies our existence, nonetheless refuses to settle for a nihilistic despair. Like Camus, he would rather accept an absurd life, even while recognizing it as absurd, than repudiate it in the name of some intellectual argument. And so his letter to Mrs. Church continues, "All the same each one of us has (or probably has) his own personal absurdity, by means of which to restore the status quo ante: the state in which one once enjoyed the mere act of being alive" (L, 615).

But despite his unwillingness to give in to ennui, the "restoration" he sought seemed out of reach during the summer and fall of 1948. To his friend and colleague Wilson Taylor he put it this way:

Listening to the same music, I mean to say, keeping on listening to the same music over and over again is about like drinking the same water over and over again or, better, like chewing the same food over and over again, as a cow does. What I want more than anything else in music, painting and poetry, in life and in belief is the thrill that I experienced once in all the things that no longer thrill me at all. I am like a man in a grocery store that is sick and tired of raisins and oyster crackers and who nevertheless is overwhelmed by appetite. (L, 604)

Writing to José Rodríguez Feo in October, "in the mood of autumn, the mood in which one sums up and meditates on the actualities of the actual year," he complained, "What music have I heard that has not been the music of an orchestra of parrots and what books have I read that were not written for money and how many men of ardent spirit and star-scimitar mind have I met? Not a goddam one" (L, 622).

Stevens' favorite escape whenever Hartford grew oppressive and monotonous was to spend a day in New York--his personal version of "a trip in a balloon." But in his weariness even this time-tested cure for the blues seemed more trouble than it was worth, as he told Rodríguez Feo in June:

In recent years it has meant at least a little something to me to go to New York for a day: to buy a raincoat, to choose wall paper, to look at books from Europe, to walk through the streets. But all this bad weather has brought it about that I say that I already have a raincoat, that the present wall paper is good enough, that it is hopeless to get anywhere by reading, that the streets are all dug up anyway and, in general, the hell with it. (L, 598-99)

At least Stevens was still able to poke fun at his own dejection.

Stevens' letters to Rodríguez Feo usually urged the young Cuban to involve himself in the real world, especially the reality of his own locale, rather than turning away from it toward an over-refined intellectualism and estheticism and toward an imitation of second-hand European cultural values. But the oppressive reality of 1948 had become for Stevens something to resist and overcome rather than to enjoy and celebrate, and this attitude finds expression in his letter to Rodríguez Feo. He feels a need to infuse reality with the color

and variety which it no longer seems to possess:

It is like changing records on a gramophone to speak of the red and the almost artificial green of mango skins and then speak of blue and white Munich. But unless we do these things to reality, the damned thing closes in us [sic], walls us up and buries us alive. . . . [A]ren't you in an extraordinary position to carry on the struggle with and against reality and against the fifth column of reality that keeps whispering with the hard superiority of the sane that reality is all we have, that it is that or nothing. . . . It is nice to be able to think of José combatting the actual in Cuba, grasping great masses of it and making out of those masses a gayety of the mind. (L, 599-600)

Stevens seems almost to have regressed to that youthful escapism in which "combatting the actual" meant daydreaming about the exotic and distant ("mango skins . . . blue and white Munich")--anything to block out the dreary here and now. Note that what Stevens is really looking for in the first sentence of this passage is the shock of contrast. Mango skins alone, or Munich alone, would soon grow as monotonous as Hartford; the piquancy of their appeal depends on the ability of the mind to shift suddenly from one to the other. But it is just this freedom from any tie to the solid, predictable everyday world that Stevens fundamentally distrusts, that seems to him to lead to sterile fancy rather than fruitful imagination.

The last letter should be compared with one written to Barbara Church four months later (October 15). Again Stevens seeks escape from ennui in the idea of a combat with reality:

I have been saying to myself pretty constantly of late that life is a dull life. That may have been the result of the long spell of dry weather: very good for chrysanthemums, which seem to prosper on aridity and monotony,

but not at all good for a man living in a very small spot and disliking aridity and monotony when, by being continued, they become reality itself. Perhaps poetry, instead of being the rather meaningless transmutation of reality, is a combat with it; and perhaps the thing to do when one keeps saying that life is a dull life is to pick a fight with reality. . . .

But at this point Stevens abruptly changes direction, turning in mid-paragraph from metaphysician to weatherman:

In any case, yesterday and today, when the weather has been constantly changing, with rain at night and a great to-do of clouds all day, and when the air has been all colors with the leaves which are turning and falling and covering everything, the stale reality of this last summer seems to have come, or to be coming, to an end. (L, 620-21)

So the weatherman is a metaphysician after all! For Stevens, a change in the weather is a change in reality, obviating the need to "pick a fight with reality." The key phrase in the letter just quoted is "when, by being continued, they become reality itself" (emphasis added). In June Stevens had complained about the wet weather; here he complains about the dry weather. Actually he likes any kind of weather, as long as it is not continued unduly. He can accept aridity, even monotony, as parts of reality; he rebels when they begin to seem like all there is or will ever be. This is hyperbole of course, but it represents the state of mind to which Stevens was subject at such times. These were the times when life resembled "listening to the same music over and over again." Hence the need for "changing records"--that is, imposing change on reality by a willed act of the imagination.

But Stevens' letter to Mrs. Church demonstrates how the impatient

wish to escape from the monotony of reality could be dissipated by a freshening within reality--by a "great to-do of clouds, . . . the air . . . all colors . . ., the leaves . . . turning and falling and covering everything . . ." Reality itself, at such moments, ceased to be a static condition and revealed itself as a process, full of variety and motion (like the leaves "turning and falling and covering").

Stevens realized that his pleasure in nature and the seasons might be an evasion of reality's harsher aspects. A letter to Mrs. Church in April 1948 expressed this concern somewhat wistfully:

Sunday . . . was a day of resplendent exhibition and in spite of today's cold the warmth and brilliance of that one day opened up all the daffodils and magnolias. One wants to be sure that it is right to be made happy by these things. They do make me happy and I am not sure that it is not right that they should. But how nice it would be if I was sure that it was right in the sense that Wirklichkeit [sic] in general would no longer find it necessary to justify its effects. Spring itself always comes so near to justifying not only itself but everything.  
(L, 593)

The dreary facts of life that disturbed Stevens' freedom to enjoy his wife's flowers included (judging from occasional remarks in other letters) such things as the Cold War and the Truman Administration. A letter to a London editor the following year suggests the sort of thing Stevens meant by "Wirklichkeit": "Yesterday . . . was a holiday, a day full of autumn calm in the sense of pleasure in being alive. But that of course is not the real thing. The real thing is politics: not only here but with you as well" (L, 650). Again, Stevens seems almost apologetic for his "sense of pleasure in being alive." But no one who has read much of Stevens can believe that for him the "real

thing" was "politics." The statement has a ring of false politeness, as if Stevens is saying what he thinks he ought to say rather than what he honestly feels. There is no question that for him "a day full of autumn calm" was much closer to being "the real thing," if only because it was something he actually experienced instead of something he read about in the newspapers. (As he put it in a letter to Thomas McGreevy, "I am . . . more moved by the first sounds of the birds on my street than by the death of a thousand penguins in Antarctica" [L, 632].)

During this whole period of persistent boredom with life Stevens was attempting to develop on a more systematic basis his capacity to find justification in privileged moments of happiness--moments of heightened awareness of the familiar reality around him. This was his way of fighting back against ennui without rejecting reality. He explained his idea to Mrs. Church in a letter of June 1948. He had been reading Jean Wahl's The Philosopher's Way, "a recapitulation of philosophy as a whole."

These large views of things, like photographs of lakes and mountains from the terraces of chateaux, are a form of intellectual tourism. What one wants is much less vast. And it turns out to be (for me, during these last few days) a question of my relation to things about me. . . .

Gide, in his Journal, speaks of redemption of the spirit by work, in this present time of skepticism. Only to work is nonsense in a period of nihilism. Why work? Keeping a journal, however dense the nihilism may be, helps one. And thinking about the nature of our relation to what one sees out of the window, for example, may some day disclose a force capable of destroying nihilism. My mind is as full of this at the moment as of anything except unassorted drivel. (L, 601-2)

These tentative remarks appear to be the germ of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which Stevens wrote during the following spring.

Stevens' letter includes a discussion of the parallels between poetry and painting. He praises Pissarro and Bonnard for doing in painting what he would like to do in poetry: "These men attach one to real things: closely, actually, without the interventions or excitements of metaphor." And if the Impressionists "attach one to real things," perhaps the Cubists were doing the same thing on a more radical level:

One wonders sometimes whether this is not exactly what the whole effort of modern art has been about: the attachment to real things. When people were painting cubist pictures, were they not attempting to get at not the invisible but the visible? They assumed that back of the peculiar reality that we see, there lay a more prismatic one of many facets. Apparently deviating from reality they were trying to fix it; and so on, through their successors.

At this point Stevens' thought turns to the difficulty of attaining this attachment to reality, particularly for the poet:

While one thinks about poetry as one thinks about painting, the momentum toward abstraction exerts a greater force on the poet than on the painter. I imagine that the tendency of all thinking is toward the abstract and perhaps I am merely saying that the abstractions of the poet are abstracter than the abstractions of the painter.

Stevens' own tendency toward the abstract is well illustrated in the foregoing passages: beginning with comments on two particular painters, he moves on to generalize about the course of modern art as a whole and from there to "the tendency of all thinking." The last sentence approaches self-parody; like a passage out of Gertrude Stein, it nearly destroys the meaning of its own words through repetition ("I am merely

saying that the abstractions of the poet are abstracter than the abstractions of the painter"). But Stevens is alert enough to realize what is happening. Abruptly he seems to grow weary of this increasingly arcane discourse, and just as in the October 15 letter to Mrs. Church quoted earlier, he turns back to the concrete:

Anyhow, that does not have to be settled this morning.  
It is enough right now to say that after a month of  
rain my wife's roses look piercingly bright. I went  
out alone last evening to look at them and while piercing  
was the word, it was, after all, a very slight sensation  
on which to make so much depend.

(The last phrase sounds like an unconscious allusion to Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow"; conscious or unconscious, the meaning seems much the same.)

Stevens' preoccupation from 1948 on with "the nature of our relation to what one sees out of the window" was a renewal of the interest in "the normal" which he had expressed in the early 1940s. It reflected his capacity for pleasure in the reassuring repetitions of the seasons and the routine events of his daily life. He would write to Thomas McGreevy of the early autumn as "the most moving part of our calendar" ("Nothing could be lovelier than these cold nights and the warm days that follow.") (L, 619); a year later (September 1949), responding with the same fresh emotion, he would tell McGreevy, "Over here summer is coming to an end and one is never able to tell which touches us most deeply: the end of an old season or the beginning of a new one" (L, 647). The "routine of to and fro between the office and home" might grow monotonous, but he could still write to Barbara

Church that it was "pleasant at home: lots of books, a certain amount of leisure, the warmth of one's family, bed at nine, getting up at six" (L, 769). He enjoyed the contrast between the "activity and interest of the office" and the "sense of permanence and calm and continuity" which he found when he came home in the evening (L, 787). A visit to New York was invigorating, but what he enjoyed most about it was simply doing matter-of-fact errands: shopping for pajamas, looking for a Paris magazine, visiting a baker and a fruit dealer, getting a haircut; in short, as he told Rodríguez Feo, "An ordinary day like that does more for me than an extraordinary day: the bread of life is better than any soufflé" (L, 740-41). (For Tom McGreevy's benefit he liked to add that one of his motives for visiting New York was to see a few good-looking girls.)

Stevens' preoccupation with the commonplace features of life was also a reflection of his sense of what was lacking in his own life. Stevens and his wife had always guarded their privacy jealously; according to Holly Stevens, they rarely had visitors to their house and their social life was almost nil. Yet in old age Stevens seemed to grow increasingly conscious of "the immense need . . . of people for other people, a thing [he told Barbara Church in 1952] that has been in my thoughts for a long time" (L, 759). On another occasion he quoted approvingly Valery's words, "il faut se nourrir d'amitié," and confessed to Mrs. Church, "Personally, I nourish myself on books, nature, this and that, music--so rarely on the good friendships of men and women" (L, 795). In this regard, Stevens was deeply impressed by the example of Marianne Moore, whom he came to know well during the

1950s through parties at Barbara Church's home in New York as well as literary gatherings. In letters to Mrs. Church and others, he spoke repeatedly of Miss Moore as "fond of people," "a woman of natural goodness, sympathy, [and] consideration for others. . . . Her willingness to make friends charms me, perhaps in part because I feel to-day like an assassin." He told Mrs. Church, "What is more important than anything she says is her friendship. How good she is as compared to most literary people! None of the egotism and nerves." To Marianne Moore herself he wrote an apologetic note after a party at which he had drunk too much and gotten into "rather a chaotic state": "Your note tells me, in effect, that you have no grudge. The web of friendship between poets is the most delicate thing in the world--and the most precious. Your note does me immense good." (L, 715, 734, 771, 772).

His friendship with Marianne Moore, as with Barbara (and earlier Henry) Church, was especially precious to Stevens because he had few such close relationships. People who did not know him well often found him intimidating and haughty (see, for example, Winfield Townley Scott's account of serving on the National Book Awards committee with Stevens in "a dirty hand").<sup>1</sup> But his apparent aloofness on the rare occasions when he had to face a lot of unfamiliar people was in fact caused by his painful shyness. Perhaps his most revealing remark was made to Mrs. Church: "I am always surprised when people are friendly" (L, 864).

Stevens' friendships with people like Barbara Church and Marianne Moore were a humanizing influence, helping him to feel less isolated from the world of people and events. So was the affection he felt for his daughter and his grandson Peter, who lived nearby in Hartford.

After the break-up of Holly's marriage he saw them frequently, and took pride in telling how "Peter sat on my lap while I told him stories about animals, particularly one about an elephant with two trunks, one tenor, one bass" (L, 744).

Stevens' desire for something "much less vast" than "these large views of things" did not apply only to his own surroundings. He enjoyed corresponding with people in Cuba, or Ireland, or Ceylon, because of the contact it gave him with far-off places, but he stressed that what he wanted most were the small details of ordinary life that would make a foreign land seem real to him. For example, he described his impression of Ireland, gleaned from Thomas McGreevy's letters, as follows:

. . . Dublin and the whole place [Ireland] look to my eye like the pages of a novel--not one of those frightful continental novels in ten volumes, all psychology and no fresh air, but a novel full of the smell of ale and horses and noisy with people living in flats, playing the piano, and telephoning and with the sound of drunks in the street at night. Perhaps it is only that I want so badly to read such a novel that I say this sort of thing. No doubt, the feeling is a reaction against the vacuum of summer. (L, 609)

If Ireland is "like the pages of a novel," it must be a novel in the school of naturalism, one which reports on life realistically.

Turning to the Cuba of José Rodríguez Feo, he repudiates the literary metaphor, drawing a contrast between fiction and real life:

What I really like to have from you is not your tears on the death of Bernanos, say, but news about chickens raised on red peppers and homesick rhapsodies of the Sienese look of far away Havana [Rodríguez Feo was staying in the United States at the time] and news about people

I don't know, who are more fascinating to me than all the characters in all the novels of Spain, which I am unable to read. (L, 622)

In another letter to Rodríguez Feo Stevens again expresses his craving for the quotidian as antidote to the abstractions which occupied his attention so much of the time:

It gives me the greatest pleasure to hear from you and, as you know, to find things in your letter about your family and friends because these things really add something to life whereas most ideas don't, and most people want to write to me about ideas. (L, 736)

No doubt there is an element of sentimentality in Stevens' images of earthy Ireland and rustic Cuba; their charm lies partly in their distance. But my argument is not that Stevens was entirely successful in his efforts to wed himself to the commonplace, only that he felt the need for something to counter-balance his own admitted "metaphysical affinities"; his "passion for reality" was stronger than that of "the purely realistic mind" because it was a passion for what he did not wholly possess. The commonplace reality of "what one sees out of the window" is related, I think, to the "anti-poetic" that Stevens spoke of in connection with William Carlos Williams. Stevens had written in his 1934 preface to Williams' Collected Poems, "The anti-poetic is his spirit's cure. He needs it as a naked man needs shelter or as an animal needs salt. To a man with a sentimental side the anti-poetic is that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing" (OP, 255). Obviously Stevens was writing at least as much about himself as about Williams. For Stevens in the spring of 1949,

the anti-poetic truth was what one saw looking out the window of a hotel in New Haven.

As we have seen, Stevens was concerned about his tendency, and the tendency of modern art in general, toward abstraction; his lauding of the commonplace was an attempt to resist that tendency. But, just as his "metaphysical affinities" gave him a greater "passion for reality," so a period of abstraction in art (whether painting or poetry) might prepare the way for the discovery (or creation) of a "new reality"--which might well, for Stevens, be the old reality (i.e. the physical world) made new, seen freshly. In a letter to Rodríguez Feo of May 4, 1948, Stevens wrote:

I think that all this abstract painting that is going on nowadays is just so much frustration and evasion. Eventually it will lead to a new reality. When a thing has been blurred by the obscurity of metaphysics and eventually emerges from that blur, it has all the characteristics of a brilliantly clear day after a month of mist and rain. (L, 593)

Although Stevens added that "[n]o-one can predict what that new reality is going to be," he seems to identify it with the physical world, judging from a letter written the same day to another correspondent (Paule Vidal, his Parisian art dealer):

A painter finding his way through a period of abstract painting is likely to pick up a certain amount of the metaphysical vision of the day. As a matter of fact, the physical never seems newer than when it is emerging from the metaphysical. (L, 595)

Stevens' comparison of the new reality to "a brilliantly clear day after a month of mist and rain" may indeed be more literal than metaphorical.

During the spring and summer of 1949 Stevens wrote "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and "Things of August." Letters from the same period show how preoccupied he was with the necessity of making a closer approach to "everyday reality" in his poems. At the same time they reveal his awareness that his own temperament made such an approach formidably difficult. The combination of abstractness and fastidiousness in his mentality prevented him from the kind of immersion in "the dreadful sundry of the world" at which Williams was so adept. But it is the irreconcilable tension between need and fulfillment that gives Stevens' poems their character and power; neither escape into imagination nor reconciliation with reality gives Stevens a solution. If the wished-for accord with "the commonplace" had been more easily available to Stevens, he would have been more susceptible to the sentimentality which characterizes some of Williams' poetry and much of e.e. cummings'. That is the sentimentality which simply accepts and celebrates whatever is, which refuses to make discriminations. Stevens was unwilling to deny reality, yet unable wholly to accept it.

Stevens' letters also reveal his deep ambivalence about the very possibility of a genuine poetry of reality; he could not shake the belief that poetry must add to or transform reality, so that a totally successful poem of reality would cease to be poetry at all.

The demand for reality in poetry [he wrote to McGreevy in March 1949] brings one sooner or later to a point where it becomes almost impossible since a real poetry, that is to say, a poetry that is not poetical or that is not merely the notation of objects in themselves poetic is a poetry divested of poetry. (L, 631)

Or, as he put it in another letter, the result of such a demand might be "merely pages of description" (L, 643). Nonetheless, immediately after proposing to McGreevy the concept of "a poetry divested of poetry," Stevens added,

That is what I am trying to get at at the moment. Perhaps I am not young enough for it, or old enough, or should think about it only when Sagittarius is in jeopardy. The bare idea makes everything else seem false and verbose and even ugly.

(What Stevens was working on at the moment, of course, was "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.") As an example of the kind of outmoded poetic rhetoric that he found "false and verbose and even ugly," Stevens cited some lines of Baudelaire that McGreevy had quoted in a previous letter. ("Alas that such lovely things can become repulsive from any point of view.") What deprived Baudelaire's poems of interest for Stevens was, he wrote, that they "seem unrelated to anything actual or perhaps it is only that they are so unlike the actuality of this earliest spring weather in Hartford."

Stevens' purpose in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" was reiterated in an often-quoted remark to Bernard Heringman in May (while the poem was still in progress):

. . . here my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible

for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false. (L, 636)

In a passage such as this one the effort to get close to the commonplace appears as an act of renunciation, even asceticism. Stevens had praised the painter Courbet for precisely this reason: "He was an ascetic by virtue of all his rejections and also by virtue of his devotion to the real. . . . [H]is things are full of resistance to the false, the fraudulent" (L, 632). This is devotion to the real seen in a negative light. Yet the converse is also part of Stevens' "devotion to the real": reality not merely as the residuum left over when everything false has been expunged, but as the sensual abundance which fills and fulfills the mind. When in July 1948 he wrote to Barbara Church asking about her meeting with the Swiss painter René Auberjonois, he was thinking of the commonplace ("a posture, a piece of cloth, a tree") as a source of delight, not of ascetic renunciation:

I am really intensely interested to know what you found there if, finally, you went to his studio. Was it the "appauvrissement" of a theorist grown abstract with age, or was it the abundance (I suppose that that's the right word) of Giorgione, delighted with a posture, a piece of cloth, a tree. (L, 607-8)

The apparent inconsistency in Stevens' attitude can be resolved by assuming that renunciation of the false is a necessary prerequisite to renewed contact with the world's "abundance." The ultimate goal is a Wordsworthian marriage of self and world, but first one must strip away the layers of second-hand interpretation (religious, political, or esthetic) that intervene between us and the world of

immediate experience. Yet this theoretical resolution does not entirely rescue Stevens from the human predicament of a man desperately needing something which his own nature makes forever inaccessible to him. After sending off a group of short poems to Botteghe Oscure in July 1949, he admitted to Barbara Church that they did not provide the kind of satisfaction which he liked to get out of poetry.

. . . what one ought to find is normal life, insight into the commonplace, reconciliation with every-day reality. The things that it makes me happy to do are things of this sort. However, it is not possible to get away from one's own nature. (L, 643)

Notwithstanding the impossibility of getting away from one's own nature, Stevens goes on in the same letter to describe his intention of doing just that:

At the moment what I have in mind is a group of things which mean a good deal more than they sound like meaning: for instance, airing the house in the morning; the colors of sunlight on the side of the house; people in their familiar aspects. All this is difficult for me. . . . The trouble is that poetry is so largely a matter of transformation. To describe a cup of tea without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be. (L, 643)

Stevens had recently completed "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" at the time he wrote this letter. "An Ordinary Evening" had been an elaborate statement of Stevens' poetic goals at this stage of his life; it remained for him to try to achieve those goals ("insight into the commonplace, reconciliation with every-day reality") in the lyrics which would follow. Yet the short poems which he actually wrote

during the month following his letter to Mrs. Church (printed under the collective title "Things of August") are among his weaker productions and for the most part bear little taste of the commonplace reality which he had hoped to convey.

Since Stevens could never bring himself to write mere "pages of description," he never achieved the kind of "reconciliation with every-day reality" that he wished for. But in a number of his last poems, written during the 1950s, he conveyed his genuine affection for that reality more convincingly and movingly than in anything else he had written. These late lyrics contain some of Stevens' most personal and concrete statements of his need for the renewing power of contact with the world outside himself.

When Stevens' Selected Poems was published in England in 1952, he criticized it in language reminiscent of his earlier criticism of Baudelaire:

The book seemed rather slight and small to me--and unbelievably irrelevant to our actual world. It may be that all poetry has seemed like that at all times and always will. The close approach to reality has always been the supreme difficulty of any art: the communication of actuality, as [poetics?], has been not only impossible, but has never appeared to be worth while because it loses identity as the event passes. Nothing in the world is deader than yesterday's political (or realistic) poetry. Nevertheless the desire to combine the two things, poetry and reality, is a constant desire. (L, 760)

Of course, if by realistic poetry one means political (or topical) poetry, nothing could be farther from Stevens' temper. (His one serious attempt to write political poetry, Owl's Clover, was so unsuccessful that he left it out of the Collected Poems.) But "the

close approach to reality" meant much more than that to Stevens. It meant not the rejection of imagination but the rich fulfillment to be found in the human capacity for imaginative participation in the world outside the self. It was fundamentally a romantic ideal, harder for Stevens to sustain in the twentieth century than it had been for Wordsworth and Shelley in the early nineteenth century. But it was this "constant desire" to "combine the two things, poetry and reality," that is at the heart of Stevens' strongest and most humane achievements in his art.

Stevens' long period of depression during the summer and fall of 1948 helps us understand the state of mind which prompted him to begin working on "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in March 1949. At a time when all his accustomed satisfactions in life seemed to have gone stale, when reality seemed to have become identical with monotony, the need for something to restore life's savor was acute. What was required, Stevens recognized, was not a change in his external circumstances but in his own attitude toward the things around him. Thus he became absorbed by the philosophical problem of sorting out the subjective and objective components of perception. Much of the poem is a debate over the relative importance of these two components. At times the subjective seems dominant ("Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves . . ."); at other times he extols the objective ("the object / At the exactest point at which it is itself"). On a discursive level, as an investigation of "the nature of our relation

to what one sees out of the window," the poem does at times suffer from the dryness and abstractness of which it has been accused.

What we must realize to appreciate the lyrical power of "An Ordinary Evening" is that Stevens' preoccupation with this epistemological question is no academic exercise, but an outgrowth of his deeply felt need for a freshening of his perception of the world. As he tells us in III, "The point of vision and desire are the same." Perception is an act of love, an antidote to "misery."

It is desire, set deep in the eye,  
Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene,  
In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall,

Always in emptiness that would be filled . . .  
(CP, 466-67)

When Stevens told Heringman that his purpose was to get as close as possible to "plain reality" in order to "purge oneself of anything false," he was telling half the truth. Such a purging would reduce us to the "eye's plain version," the "vulgate of experience" of section I. But this plain version is mere perception without affect-- "Words, lines, not meanings, not communications." This is the psychological condition that Stevens had described in the fall of 1948, when nothing satisfied him because everything seemed false; it is the condition from which he wanted to extricate himself. The answer was not to rest with the eye's plain version but to bring to it that "desire, set deep in the eye," which would transform it into a "recent imagining of reality." The reductive or decreative impulse in "An Ordinary Evening" is merely a prerequisite, a cleaning of the slate,

to prepare for a fresh rediscovery of the world. The purpose of the poem is not to compel us to accept "the total leaflessness" as final reality (as Helen Vendler claims), but to bring together the point of vision and desire.

The beautiful autumnal meditation of section XXX is one of Stevens' most eloquent descriptions of the decreative phase of this process, the cleansing of the doors of perception, the washing away of "something imagined." In this poem at least Stevens seems almost willing to accept the "barrenness" as a sufficient good in itself.

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.  
It is not part of what is absent, a halt  
For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.

It is a coming on and a coming forth.  
The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,  
Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks.

The glass of the air becomes an element--  
It was something imagined that has been washed away.  
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

(CP, 487-88)

Exposing, emerging, coming forth, returning, restoring--the rhetoric is entirely positive. The false fragrances and obscuring foliage of summer have been removed, permitting the true underlying form of things to stand revealed. The effect is invigorating, arousing.

But if this beautiful barrenness were allowed to persist, how quickly the appeal of its novelty would fade for Stevens; how soon he would recoil against its static, empty perfection. The true value of this "clearness" is shown in XXIV, where the destruction of an old "something imagined" (in this case, the "statue of Jove among the

boomy clouds") makes way for the creation of a new, fresh, incipient reality:

It took all day to quieten the sky  
And then to refill its emptiness again,

So that at the edge of afternoon, not over,  
Before the thought of evening had occurred  
Or the sound of Incomincia had been set,

There was a clearing, a readiness for first bells,  
An opening for outpouring, the hand was raised:  
There was a willingness not yet composed,

A knowing that something certain had been proposed,  
Which, without the statue, would be new,  
An escape from repetition, a happening

In space and the self, that touched them both at once  
And alike, a point of the sky or of the earth  
Or of a town poised at the horizon's dip.

(CP, 482-83)

A happening that touches both space and the self--a change in the external world because it is a change in our sense of that world--which provides "an escape from repetition": this is another way of saying a "recent imagining of reality." Section XXIV sets the stage for this happening but is vague about where it will take place. The primary theme of "Ordinary Evening" is that this escape from repetition must be found not in high and grand phenomena but in the close and familiar. Stevens' purpose is not to reduce himself permanently to "a plain sense of things" (as he calls it in another poem) but to achieve a heightened sense of plain things. In XXVI Stevens recalls the beauty of the earth "seen as inamorata" as it once rewarded him (in Harmonium days):

How facilely the purple blotches fell  
 On the walk, purple and blue, and red and gold,  
 Blooming and beaming and voluming colors out.  
 (CP, 484)

This was the beauty of sea and sky, of mountains and clouds. But now he has exchanged these youthful stimuli for the more astringent but more intimate consolations of the near:

But, here, the inamorata, without distance  
 And thereby lost, and naked or in rags,  
 Shrunken in the poverty of being close,

Touches, as one hand touches another hand,  
 Or as a voice that, speaking without form,  
 Gritting the ear, whispers humane repose.

(CP, 484)

It is easy to love the earth at a distance, easy to seek God "in the rainy cloud" (475). To love the earth "in the poverty of being close" is harder; to both see and feel that which is close is "the difficulty of the visible" (474). To touch, and be touched by, what is close vanquishes "the poverty of being close"; it brings together vision and desire. At the end of XV, Professor Eucalyptus' search for God "in the object itself" (as in "the ramshackle spout in which / The rain falls with a ramshackle sound") is rewarded by a lifting of the weight of ennui: the heaviness that oppresses him (that oppressed Stevens) is lightened "By the hand of desire, faint, sensitive, the soft / Touch and trouble of the touch of the actual hand" (476).

Section XIII sums up as well as anything the positive, creative reunion with reality that Stevens is seeking in "An Ordinary Evening":

It is a fresh spiritual that he defines,  
 A coldness in a long, too-constant warmth,  
 A thing on the side of a house, not deep in a cloud,

A difficulty that we predicate:  
 The difficulty of the visible  
 To the nations of the clear invisible,

The actual landscape with its actual horns  
 Of baker and butcher blowing, as if to hear,  
 Hear hard, gets at an essential integrity.

(CP, 474-75)

The cryptic phrase "A thing on the side of a house" is perhaps explained by the letter quoted on page 231 in which Stevens says, "At the moment what I have in mind is a group of things which mean a good deal more than they sound like meaning: for instance, airing the house in the morning; the colors of sunlight on the side of the house; people in their familiar aspects." Then again it could be the rain-spout of Professor Eucalyptus, who sought God there rather than in "the rainy cloud." In any case, it is clearly something close, familiar, and mundane rather than remote and mysterious. Once again Stevens is telling us that the actual landscape, even so unpromising a landscape as that of New Haven viewed from a hotel window on a rainy night, can provide the basis for a "fresh spiritual"--this unpoetic reality has its own "integrity," and thus its own beauty, when seen through the eyes of desire.

The fundamental question that "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" poses is not, shall we turn to the real? (we must; we have no choice, nothing else can satisfy us any longer), but, in what spirit shall we turn to the real? In a grim, stoical determination to "purge [ourselves] of anything false"? Or in a cheerful recognition of that

"abundance" which Giorgione found in "a posture, a piece of cloth, a tree"? Certainly Stevens tries out different postures, emphases, and tones in the course of this long and complex poem. For me, the center of the poem is in sections VIII-X, which celebrate our desire for the real, for that tangible reality which is the only certain thing we have and yet a constantly changing hallucination, "a permanence composed of impermanence." Giving up the demand for something more than this reality, we free ourselves to grasp the richness which is available within it:

We seek  
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,  
  
Everything, the spirit's alchemicana  
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout  
And through included, not merely the visible,  
  
The solid, but the movable, the moment,  
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,  
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.  
(CP, 471-72)

This is not the poetry of impoverishment but of abundance--the abundance contained within each moment of our imperfect, time-bound lives.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" was the last long poem written before the publication of The Auroras of Autumn in early 1950. After spending August 1949 on the short pieces called "Things of August," Stevens intended to write one remaining long poem for The Auroras of Autumn, but this idea apparently became side-tracked. In fact, the final poem of The Auroras of Autumn turned out to be "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" (CP, 496-97). The Tal Coat painting which inspired this poem arrived from Paris on September 30; Stevens mailed the poem off

to Poetry London exactly two weeks later (L, 648-50). It seems an appropriate coda to "An Ordinary Evening." The "necessary angel of earth" signifies our power to discard our rigid mental constructs of the world in order to discover a fresh, original perception of reality: to "see the earth again, / Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set." When Sister M. Bernetta Quinn sent Stevens an article on the poem by one of her students at the College of St. Teresa, he replied,

Will you thank the writer for me and say that in Angel  
Surrounded by Paysans the angel is the angel of reality.  
This is clear only if the reader is of the idea that we  
live in a world of the imagination, in which reality and  
contact with it are the great blessings. For nine readers  
out of ten, the necessary angel will appear to be the  
angel of the imagination and for nine days out of ten  
that is true, although it is the tenth day that counts.  
(L, 753)

At the beginning of the 1940s, Stevens had distrusted the satisfactions of "the casual" because they seemed too easy; now he praised contact with reality as the great blessing because it is difficult. This is a reflection, I think, both of his awareness of his own tendency to live too much in abstraction and imagination, and of his increasing age, which dulled his responses to the physical world and made his hold on it seem more tenuous. This double alienation from reality made the moments when he felt most in contact with it his "great blessings." These are the moments which illuminate the best lyrics of Stevens' last years, from 1950 to 1955.

Some of these late poems depict a mood of exhaustion and pessimism ("The Plain Sense of Things," "Lebensweisheitspielerei," "Madame La

Fleurie," "The Course of a Particular"). But what is surprising is how many of them transcend the weariness of old age with a sense of discovery, the "new knowledge of reality" that brings with it a freshening of the spirit. The rhetoric of these lyrics is understated, the tone quiet and meditative; but they are emphatically not poems of detachment from the physical world and withdrawal into a solitary mental universe. Stevens' awareness of his own aging and mortality only deepens his affection and nostalgia for the world.

This affection is evident in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (CP, 508-11), Stevens' poetic response to Santayana's death which is also a kind of preparation for his own death. What I want to draw attention to is the way the philosopher, "on the threshold of heaven" and gazing forward into the unknown, continues simultaneously to look back at the world of objects, this world which is not less but more important to him because he is poised at its edge:

The newsboys' muttering  
Becomes another murmuring; the smell  
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled . . .

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,  
The candle as it evades the sight, these are  
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome . . .  
(CP, 508)

At the conclusion of the poem Stevens returns to these objects to suggest that our sense of ordinary, familiar things is heightened by our awareness of impending death:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,  
 With every visible thing enlarged and yet  
 No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,  
 The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,  
 The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice . . . (CP, 510)

It does not take imminent death, however, to kindle Stevens' sense of being reborn into the physical world. Out of several versions of this theme, let me trace four examples. In "Long and Sluggish Lines" an opening marked by weariness and dejection ("It makes so little difference, at so much more / Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before") is transformed into a mood of playfulness, hilarity almost, by the arrival of the first inklings of spring:

Could it be that yellow patch, the side  
 Of a house, that makes one think the house is laughing;

Or these--escent--issant pre-personae: first fly,  
 A comic infanta among the tragic drapings,

Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief,  
 The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?  
 (CP, 522)

Once again we meet that patch of sunlight on the side of the house, an image which seems to have become one of Stevens' emblems for whatever is near and familiar.

Another anecdote of juvenescence is "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside" (CP, 529-30), in which the sumac growing on the altar of the abandoned church "is like a new account of everything old." The church, despite its former success, is now old and decayed; it represents a dead view of the world, in contrast to the growing

plant which is "no sign of life but life, / Itself." The sumac is a  
 "chapel" which

spreads out

Its arches in its vivid element,  
 In the air of newness of that element,  
 In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness,  
 That which is always beginning because it is part  
 Of that which is always beginning, over and over.

The church represents organized religion, of course (is this poem a veiled gibe at Eliot?), but in a broader sense it signifies any stale, too-rigid interpretation of the world--one of those "stiff and stubborn, man-locked set[s]" which blinds us to the endless flux of the sensuous world as it changes and unfolds before our eyes. To breathe "the air of newness" is tantamount to being visited by the angel of reality.

Perhaps Stevens' best-known poem about the discovery of "a new knowledge of reality" is "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself"--a poem Stevens himself chose to emphasize by placing it at the end of his Collected Poems. It captures the frailness and tentativeness of the moment poised between winter and spring and also between night and day--a double beginning.

At the earliest ending of winter,  
 In March, a scrawny cry from outside  
 Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,  
 A bird's cry, at daylight or before,  
 In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,  
 No longer a battered panache above snow . . .  
 It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism  
 Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .  
 The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry--it was  
 A chorister whose c preceded the choir.  
 It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,  
 Still far away. It was like  
 A new knowledge of reality.

(CP, 534)

Typically, Stevens is more affected by the scrawny cry--which is only the tuning note before the full choir bursts into song--than he would be by the full strength of the sun. The poem is delicately balanced between assertion and qualification, confidence and evasion. The cry "seemed like a sound in his mind" (but was it really in his mind or outside?). "He knew that he heard it" (but what exactly was "it"?). The sun "would have been outside" (indeed--the sun "was coming from outside"). The cry "was like / A new knowledge of reality" (it might not really be). Perhaps the new knowledge is illusory--"reality" remains a problematic idea. But does it really matter? Perhaps the cry is not some ultimate reality--but neither is it a mere dream ("the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mâché"). The tone of the poem makes it clear that Stevens will embrace this new knowledge as if it represents reality. He has relinquished the fatal demand for certainty.

A closely related poem, which like "Not Ideas" turns on the Nietzschean concept of "as if," is "As You Leave the Room." Here the poet's troubled questioning of his own life is answered by a moment of sensuous pleasure, as he walks out into a fresh and unexpected

encounter with a new snowfall:

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,  
As a disbeliever in reality,

A countryman of all the bones in the world?  
Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

Part of a major reality, part of  
An appreciation of a reality

And thus an elevation, as if I left  
With something I could touch, touch every way.

And yet nothing has been changed except what is  
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.

(OP, 117)

In the immediacy of this moment ("Now, here"), Stevens' capacity to respond to the snow, to touch it and appreciate it, proves to him that he has not "lived a skeleton's life." Although a skeptic, a "disbeliever in reality," he has the imaginative capacity to suspend that disbelief and so to experience the snow as "part of a major reality."

But the poem's vision is double. The experience is genuine and genuinely rewarding, but the disbelief is still present, implicit in the words "a major reality" and "as if I left / With something I could touch." (In an early version of the poem, "First Warmth," Stevens had carelessly written "the major reality.") This undertone of doubt in the midst of belief prepares for the final couplet, with its inevitable descent from the "elevation." "Nothing has been changed except what is / Unreal," but also, as the enjambment suggests, "nothing has been changed except what is." For "what is" and "what is unreal" are identical: everything that exists can be considered

unreal because it exists only as it is known in the mind. But if all reality is reduced to a tautological equivalence with unreality, then we must live in a world of unreality. This illusory world, though we know it is illusory, is of necessity our only reality, and we must accept it as such. Thus, in the end, it is only "as if nothing had been changed at all." The change matters.

## Note to Chapter Six

1

Winfield Townley Scott, "a dirty hand" (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1969), pp. 38-40. See also Scott Donaldson, Poet in America: Winfield Townley Scott (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1972), pp. 248-53.

## Afterword

Every account that pretends to reveal the inner truth of a human being is in a sense the creation of a myth. My myth of Stevens is of a man often estranged from his own feelings whose essential purpose, in his life and in his art, was to restore himself to full participation in those feelings. My Stevens was a lyric poet first, a philosophical poet second. If feeling had come more easily to him, he might have been a slighter, more sentimental poet. Yet if feeling had been irrelevant to him, if he had been primarily concerned with ideas, he would have been no poet at all.

Stevens was the most reticent of men, but in some of the things he said about others he revealed a good deal about how he saw himself. I would like to conclude by quoting from his essay, "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean," published in the Summer 1948 issue of the Sewanee Review and reprinted in Opus Posthumous. The extent to which Stevens projected his own feelings into this description of Ransom should be obvious to anyone who has read this far:

One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that one loves, to which one is really and essentially native, to demand that it surrender, reveal, that in itself which one loves. This is a vital affair, not an affair of the heart (as it may be in one's first poems), but an affair of the whole being (as in one's last poems), a fundamental affair of life, or, rather, an affair of fundamental life; so that one's cry of O Jerusalem becomes little by little a cry to something a little nearer and nearer until at last one cries out to a living name, a living place, a living thing, and in crying out confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience. This is why trivial things often touch us intensely. It is why the sight of an old berry patch, a new growth in the woods

in the spring, the particular things on display at a farmers' market, as, for example, the trays of poor apples, the few boxes of black-eyed peas, the bags of dried corn, have an emotional power over us that for a moment is more than we can control.

There are men who are not content merely to acknowledge these emotions. There are men who must understand them, who isolate them in order to understand them. Once they understand them it may be said that they cease to be natives. They become outsiders. Yet it is certain that, at will, they become insiders again. In ceasing to be natives they have become insiders and outsiders at once. And where this happens to a man whose life is that of the thinker, the poet, the philosopher, the teacher, and in a broad generalized sense, the artist, while his activity may appear to be that of the outsider, the insider remains as the base of his character, the essential person, something fixed, the play of his thoughts, that on which he lavishes his sense of the prodigious and the legendary, the material of his imagination. (OP, 260-61)

In writing about Ransom's relationship to his native Tennessee, Stevens was also, I think, writing about his own relationship to the reality of the physical world and the life lived in it. Stevens recognized the feelings as the essence of poetry; but in the effort to analyze and explain poetry, to formulate a theory of poetry, he became an outsider to the world which inspired his feelings. That is why the moments of renewed contact with the world of the senses, and of renewed feeling for that world, are so important in Stevens' life and in his poetry: they demonstrate his capacity to become an insider again. My purpose throughout this study of Stevens has been to illuminate the "insider [that] remains as the base of his character, the essential person."

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## Vita

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