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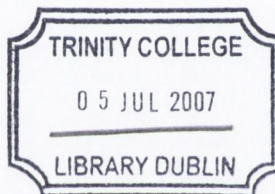
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**The Condition of Ascent:
Temperament, Perception and Transcendence
in the Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens**

Martin Dyar

**A Thesis submitted to the School of English,
Trinity College, Dublin,
in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

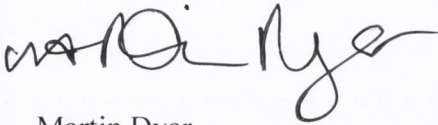
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Martin Dyar

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Shane O'Loan:
philosopher, archaeologist, comedian.

List of Abbreviations

- CP *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. 1954. Reprint, New York: Knopf, 1981.
- CPP *Collected Prose and Poetry*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: The Library of America, 1997.
- L *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. 1966. Reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- NA *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Imagination and Reality*. London: Faber and Faber, 1960.
- OP *Opus Posthumous*. Ed. Milton J. Bates. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

Summary

'Poetry', Wallace Stevens said, 'is the expression of the experience of poetry' (CPP904). This thesis explores the connection in Stevens' writing between 'the experience of poetry' and the poetic temperament. Stevens viewed himself as an authentic literary artist, a poet, as he said, born and not made (NA122), and as such, he theorised his life's work in terms of the possibility of extreme aesthetic goals and an extreme sense of aesthetic duty. The two concepts of aesthetic capacity and aesthetic obligation define the poetic temperament as it relates to the thematic patterns of Stevens' 'poems about poetry.' This thesis proposes Stevens' attestation of an aesthetic obligation as a key foothold in the critical debates that surround the poet's romanticist leaning. With regard to the concept of aesthetic capacity, this thesis identifies and examines, in the collections *Parts of World* (1942) and *Transport to Summer* (1947), the ways in which Stevens constructed a thematic sphere centred upon the notion of perceptual adeptness. In the late 1940s, he would increase the epistemological relevance of this focus upon 'the subtilization of appearance' and the related aesthetic powers of discernment, insight, and disclosure. In *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) and *The Rock* (1954), it is explained here, the tropes he had used for the depiction of an innate poetic condition of mental and sensory intensity, form the basis of (and the key means to interpret) the idiosyncratic visionary schemata that define his penultimate and final collections of poetry. Commonly, *Harmonium* (1923), Stevens' first collection, is said to contain the poet's full achievement. Against this view, by illustrating Stevens' development towards 'a new knowledge of reality' (CP534) and a nouminous 'centre of the imagination' in the later poetry, both the poet's oeuvre and the poetic temperament which is its primary subject are understood as a condition of ascent.

The first chapter treats of a selection of poems from the early to mid-1940s, including "Of Modern Poetry," "Prelude to Objects," "Esthetique du Mal," and "Asides on the Oboe." Against the view that Stevens capitulates at this time to a contemporary pressure against the imagination, the ways in which he inscribes an aggrandized conception of the poetic temperament into his work are explained. Included here is an extensive reading of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." It is argued that in that essay Stevens pursues an affirmation of nobility as an index of that which appears pejorative in the purer poetic enterprise, a mode

he is seen to embrace as a matter of the obligatory aesthetic-temperamental condition of 'the morality of the right sensation' (CPP679).

The second chapter focuses on Stevens' hyperbolizing of poetic perception in *Transport to Summer*. The figure of the poet-percipient is identified as a recurrent motif, and extensive readings of "Certain Phenomena of Sound," "The Pediment of Appearance," "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors" and "The Pastor Caballero" are presented. In these poems, the presence of several key tropes of the Stevensesan poetic temperament are examined, chief among them, verbal profundity, compulsion, rarefied feeling, susceptibility, and 'acute' vision. These features are explained as an extension of the tropes discussed in the first chapter.

The third chapter presents a close reading of the long poem, "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" from *The Auroras of Autumn*, along with considerations of "A Primitive Like an Orb," and "The Auroras of Autumn" from the same collection. It is argued here that "The Owl" represents Stevens' most concerted attempt at what he termed the realization of poetry. In the context of *The Auroras of Autumn* as a collection, the poem is read as an enactment of a sublime of poetic perception, the poet-percipient protagonist being identified as Stevens' most deliberate transcendentalist figuration. It is shown how the affirmation here of a metaphysical subject matter supports a direct lineage with his earlier explorations of the ideal temperament and perceptual capacity of 'the acutest poet.'

The fourth chapter focuses on *The Rock* and several poems that were uncollected at the time of Stevens' death in 1955. Close readings of "The Region November," "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," "The Planet on the Table," "Prologues to What is Possible" and "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" are presented here. Taking issue with the common conception of that collection as a text of philosophical negativity and aesthetic truncation, this chapter identifies Stevens' continued treatment of the transcendental potential of the poetic temperament in his last poems. Two examples of late thematic innovation are identified, namely, an organicist alignment of mind and nature, and the construction of a reformulated or transcendental selfhood involving a radical detachment from normative, ego-based definitions of poetry, epistemology and finitude.

In showing how the thematic nexus of temperament, perception and transcendence can yield a means of cogent and extensive paraphrase, and particularly in relation to poems that have been deemed challenging and even unreadable, this thesis arrives at an image of Stevens that is more grounded in ideas of affirmation, ontological speculation, passion, fulfilment,

proWess, and continued innovation, than is typical within Stevens criticism. In the introduction I address some of the shortcomings of the pervasive critical reliance on interpretive paradigms of limitation, duality, historical engagedness, and the repudiation of romanticism. These reading practices have served to establish a composite impression of Stevens as a sceptically-inclined writer, one more involved with irony, ambivalent allusion, the pressure of reality and the fallenness of representation than with what this thesis proposes as the truer substance of his work, namely, the confident, explorative expression of a vision of existence based on 'the experience of poetry.'

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Introduction

The Experience of Poetry

In this thesis I am contending that the concept of aesthetic power presents an indispensable point of departure for the project of interpreting the later poetry of Wallace Stevens. I want to explain the fact that Stevens wrote out of a self-conscious condition of advanced sensitivity, perception, and linguistic capacity, a condition he theorised as a natural and at times involuntary imaginative endowment. Out of this complex of traditional or authentic poet-hood, it will be seen, Stevens produced an untypical modernist corpus that tends primarily towards affirmation and transcendence. I will show that Stevens' writing from 1940 up to his death in 1955 exhibits a distinct progression which can be charted as a movement from an emphasis on the 'precious portents' (NA175) of aesthetic-perceptual adeptness, most apparent in the collections *Parts of a World* (1942) and *Transport to Summer* (1947), through to the apocalyptic vision of 'the essential poem at the center of things' (CP440) characteristic of *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) and *The Rock* (1954). As a means to identify and discuss the substance and interrelatedness of the individual poems which determine this development, I am proposing the thematic nexus of temperament, perception and transcendence.

Stevens viewed poetry as a kind of force, an innate 'pressure' which when mediated by the act of creating poetic texts could effect special experiences of acumen, disclosure and psychological transformation. 'The poetic view of life', he wrote, 'is larger than any of its poems (a larger thing than any poem)' (CPP912). In short, poetry bound Wallace Stevens to anagogic concerns. As such, and in this point he is perhaps most affiliated with romantic and transcendentalist thought, Stevens' poetry works against limitation. His *Collected Poems*, read sequentially, presents what I am calling a condition of ascent. Themes of natural aesthetic drive and sensory subtilization are seen to prompt later modes of ontological inquiry and a sincere courting of absolutes. It is this search for greater profundity of meaning that makes the

rubric of transcendence so apposite for our readings of the later work. I am not saying that Stevens resorted to religion as a matter of his belief in the religious function of the poet. Nor am I saying that he wished to repudiate reality as an entirely separable order of experience from his more mystical figurations. 'It is possible', he said, 'to establish aesthetics in the individual mind as immeasurably a greater thing than religion' (CPP906). Stevens was an artist of secular identity. However, when we more fully appreciate the ways that he constructs, for example, transitions from paradigms of duality to paradigms of non-duality and synthesis, or when we encounter the image of the biographical self reformulated to a secondary aspect of creative absorption in the 'beyond' of poetic realisation, producing such organicist attestations as 'his self and the sun were one' (CP532), we can come to understand the insufficiency of categories of normative reality and experience in the context of Stevens' concern for what he termed, with no small amount of exclusivity and empowerment, 'the experience of poetry' (CPP904).

In a study of Stevens published last year, pointedly titled *Things Merely Are*, Simon Critchley has concluded: 'Stevens' poetry fails.'¹ In this Critchley intends that the greater part of Stevens' work does not progress past a provisionality of vision, and that any romanticist elements in the poetry, burdened by a hubristic heritage, remain deliberately self-subverting. Therefore, when the poet employs sublimity, we are encouraged to expect a subtextual revision, a sense of the over-imaginative. It is often assumed that Stevens desired his readers to receive a form of failure from the reading experience, something like a sophisticated statement of culturally-shared impediment or disaffection. The modernist framework of the redress of tradition has been intensively applied in Stevens studies, with the result that a polarised conception of nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics commonly underpins the critical treatment of the range of intentions in the poetry. Over the past three decades, Stevens' oeuvre has become for many critics a prodigious means of engaging and clarifying the redundancy of romanticism. The assumed difficulty and evasiveness of Stevens' work, deemed a reaction against romanticist naivety, has resulted in his being placed in what is seen as an ongoing tradition of writing and interpretation where what Critchley calls 'the chronic atrophy of the self'² is played out within an inescapable climate of submission to experiential flux. There can be no such thing as an ontological foothold. There can be no whole. There can be no relatable experience of spirit. While these terms are sufficient for treatments of the

¹ Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, London: 2005, p. 87.

² *Ibid.*

wasteland, decreative tenor of a considerable amount of twentieth-century literature, the entrenched nature of the resultant critical formulae has without doubt led to preconceived and inaccurate reading habits. This is particularly so in relation to Stevens' work. It is not often expressed that the doctrine of aesthetic limitations is inapplicable to the work of certain artists. Within Stevens' writing, I propose, the theory of the poetic temperament presents an important contradiction of this negative bias. For his deliberate concern with the realisation of his own artistic capacities, and for the ways his efforts in this direction are present in his work at a thematic level, particularly the challenging later poetry, his peak, Stevens cannot be fully understood outside the terms of an idealist poetics. Stevens the artist, it is possible to argue, is un-modern, which, for the level of genuine transcendental exploration in his later work, is the same as saying that he is perennial. Even as he seems to inform or define it, I want to show in the chapters which follow, he ultimately writes apart from our era of scepticisms, truncations and provisionality.

Judith Butler sums up the critical lineage of these times when she writes of what she sees as the inevitable theme of the stifling of the romantic by the pressure of historical contingencies in twentieth-century literature:

In twentieth-century reflections on history and metaphysics, Hegel's romantic postulation of a dialectical unity of opposites has come to seem irreconcilable with the assertion of human finitude, the ineluctability of temporal experience, the hermeneutical fusion of cultural horizons, and the refutation of language as a closed system of signs, and yet, true to its own logic of inversion, the dialectic re-emerges within the confines of twentieth-century thought, deprived of the possibility of synthesis, of systematic closure, and of the claim to ontological truth. As a persistent wish, the structure of a metaphysical longing, the dialectic survives as that precise metaphysical possibility that can no longer be realised.³

Relatedly, Mary Arensberg has argued that Stevens' poetry sustains the encroaching 'truth' of modern reality: an abysmal failure of belonging. The modern American sublime, she maintains, is a wholly reflexive genre employed to point up the untenable ideological basis of the identification of the self with the natural world: 'The sublime questor in Stevens knows that the self's gesture to expand its egotism over "the expanse of nature" is a fable of freedom based on the predication of an absent self.'⁴ The supposition is that Stevens had no alternative,

³ Judith Butler, "The Nothing That Is: Wallace Stevens' Hegelian Affinities." In Bainard Cowen, ed., *Theorising American Literature: Hegel, the Sign, and History*, Baton Rouge: 1991, p. 269.

⁴ Mary Arensberg, "Stevens Auroral Fantasy", in Mary Arensberg, ed., *The American Sublime*, New York: 1986, p. 162.

no means to a larger vision of existence that could vanquish or transcend such a troubled 'knowledge' of presence. Forty years ago, J. Hillis Miller, the critic primarily seen as having 'ushered the theories of Derrida into the American intellectual scene',⁵ formulated the burden of dualism, the philosophical stance typically accepted as the key to Stevens' status as a post-romantic writer. Romanticism, for all its post-Christian rhetoric, is seen as the faith which precedes the final death of the gods:

After the death of the gods and the discovery of nothingness Stevens is left in a world made of two elements: subject and object, mind and matter, imagination and reality. Imagination is the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world with which imagination carries on its endless intercourse ... At the beginning Stevens is already as far as he goes.⁶

Frank Lentricchia takes a similar stance when he writes:

Stevens is a humble poet who believed that though the imagination is all we have, neither it nor its creations will suffice for long. We can create 'permanent' orders with the imagination if we wish, he would say (and he did), but we must see the order so created as an imposition of the will, momentary self-delusion, and not a discovery of something far more deeply interfused.⁷

With the advent of postmodernist studies, a form of critical consensus on Stevens has grown out of this familiar set of confines. From the late seventies through the mid-eighties, deconstructionism, with its desire to proceed 'from and at the limit of the text',⁸ roundly championed Stevens. More recently, pragmatist studies, a school of thought which for its respect of binaries and its emphasis on a reduced scope of representation and the 'eschewal of metaphysical arguments',⁹ sustains the emphases of the deconstructionist era, has begun to dominate critical discourse. Richard Poirier, Margaret Dickie, Thomas C. Grey, Anca Rosu, Patricia Rae, and Johnathan Levin, have each produced a pragmatist study of Stevens in the 1990s.¹⁰

⁵ Melita Schaum, *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*, Tuscaloosa: 1988, p. 159.

⁶ J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being." In Roy Harvey Pearce, ed., *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, Baltimore: 1965, pgs. 145-146.

⁷ Frank Lentricchia, "Wallace Stevens: The Ironic Eye," in Irvin Ehrenpreis, ed., *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, Middlesex: 1972, p. 288.

⁸ Rodolphe Gasche, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*, Cambridge: 1994, p. 28.

⁹ Patricia Rae, *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound and Stevens*, Lewisburg: 1998, p. 11.

¹⁰ Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, London: 1992; Margaret Dickie, *Lyric Contingencies, Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens*, Philadelphia: 1991; Thomas C. Grey, *The Wallace Stevens Case: Law and the Practice of Poetry*, Cambridge: 1991; Anca Rosu, *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens*, Tuscaloosa: 1995; Johnathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism*, Durham: 1999.

In *Shifting Ground*, Bonnie Costello reads modern American poetry as a literature to be identified almost entirely by its proposal of an anti-Emersonian aesthetic. Emerson, in this view, stands as an icon of hubris and imperialism, and transcendentalist literature is appraised as an expansionist ideology only. Thereby, Stevens' poetry, and more recently the work of A. R. Ammons, Amy Clampitt, and Mark Strand, Costello argues, foregrounds the truncated aesthetic as a matter of an authenticity of modern vision. By 'resisting Emerson's summons to the encompassing All'¹¹ these poets seek to report an experience of process which affirms an attitude of finding an experience of the whole to be either elusive or irrelevant. It is within this frame of thinking that B. J. Leggett assesses Stevens as a poet of 'shifting interests', a poet of 'unparaphrasable figures', without a central concern, employing disjunction to defy his reader's intellectual needs, and this as a matter of an oblique didacticism which works to propound the 'metaphysical possibility that can no longer be realised.'¹² Helen Regueiro has portrayed Stevens in a similar mode, but she has found less knowingness and less functionality in his putative failures, so that what she diagnoses as the ultimate thwarting by reality of the poet's gravitation towards synthesis leads to a serious disappointment of the imagination itself: 'The poet stands blind in front of a reality he cannot reach or recreate.'¹³ Paul Bové, writing on the cusp of deconstructionism, disbelieving all expressive stability, has cast Stevens in a more dynamic mode of limitation, arguing that he 'actively employs the telos-oriented quest metaphor against itself not merely to show that there is no center but to test in fiction various poetic and personal myths and metaphors with no firm point of reference.'¹⁴

Beverly Maeder has revived this statement of a programmatic nihilism in her *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*. Arguing for the presence of a set of 'strategies' and 'tactics' which 'prevent Stevens' poems from coalescing into stable statements', and claiming that 'the material body of language' itself 'prevents a stable apprehension of hypothetical landscapes, narratives, arguments or ideas', Maeder proposes an almost total suspension of meaning and subject matter as cogent concerns in the project of reading and interpreting Stevens.¹⁵ Similarly, Bart Eeckhout has recently announced: 'The poetry of Wallace Stevens is full of limits.' For Eeckhout, these limits radiate into the reading experience, encompassing the reader's approach, so that 'both the poetry and the critical

¹¹ Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry*, Cambridge: 2003, p. 8.

¹² B. J. Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory*, Chapel Hill: 1987, p. 7.

¹³ Helen Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens*, Ithaca: 1976, p. 190.

¹⁴ Paul Bové, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*, New York: 1980, p. 187.

¹⁵ Beverly Maeder, *Wallace Stevens Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*, New York: 1999, p. 5.

interpretations of Wallace Stevens promise to extend our appreciation - conceptually as well as aesthetically - of the intrinsic finitude of our human condition.’¹⁶ Eeckhout, like Maeder, presents a detailed arsenal of negative poetic strategies in Stevens’ work, subtle fatalistic systems which, he says, mock and deflate the desire for the ideal and the expanded: ‘Few have so variously and unpredictably tapped the delimiting effects of titles, the slippery connections enabled by syntax, or the manifold opportunities for registering shifts and discontinuities.’¹⁷

While there is much to value in Eeckhout’s and Maeder’s teasing through the mechanics of Stevens’ verbiage, I suggest that, in the interest of advancing our interpretations, we curb the broader capitulation to a problematics of paraphrase and meaning. It seems that the famous difficulty of Stevens’ poetry has in part encouraged this kind of critical tack. The thematic substance of Stevens’ work can be elusive and demanding, but it is surely not absent. A. Walton Litz, commenting on Stevens’ difficulty, which he says he incorporates as a theme in his undergraduate courses when teaching the poetry, has advised: ‘With Stevens —unlike Pound and Eliot— there are no seminal allusions, no essential glosses. One must read and reread the poetry until the way of thinking and saying becomes familiar and liberates us.’¹⁸ Taking Stevens as his own glossary, through my explanation of the centrality of the idea of the poetic temperament, I will be explaining that the difficulty of the poetry, the aesthetic intricacy and ancillary interpretive challenge, more often forms a part of the portrayal of the poet-percipient as an agent of cognitive intensity. In later poem titles such as “Certain Phenomena of Sound” and “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors,” for example, the immediate ambivalence does not enact a rhetorical occlusion of paraphrase. Rather, it represents a field of experiential subtlety as it relates to the temperamental capacity of the protagonists of both poems. In the latter, the conceptual terms of thinking between versions of metaphors implies a definite setting and subject matter. As discrete indices of interiority, these terms invoke a form of meditative profusion and mastery which underlies the broader thematic of the subjective quest for poetic-philosophical disclosure. In both these examples, as so often in Stevens’ poetry, the surface difficulty and putative call to limitation actually invites a visualised appreciation of the experience of poetry as Stevens understood it. As he would say in his lecture “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”:

¹⁶ Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, London: 2002, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ A. Walton Litz, “‘Compass and Curriculum’: Teaching Stevens Among the Moderns,” in John Serio and B.J. Leggett, eds., *Teaching Wallace Stevens: Practical Essays*, Knoxville: 1994, p. 237.

What we have under observation is the creative process, the personality of the poet, his individuality, as an element in the creative process; and by process of the personality we mean, to select what may seem to be a curious particular, the incidence of the nervous sensitiveness of the poet in the act of creating the poem and, generally speaking, the physical and mental factors that condition him as an individual. (NA48)

We can identify, I intend to show, a great amount of Stevens' thinking about the determining 'nervous sensitiveness' of his own poetic sensibility, and, further, by using this subject as a means of moving beyond the critical impasse of limitation theory, we can produce extensive readings of the many poems for which we still possess no definitive criticism.

The twentieth century has seen a major reduction in ideas of the exceptionality of the literary artist. We are now at a major sceptical distance from the tradition of awed speculation about the organic genius of Shakespeare and from the romantic figures of the enthusiastic and inspired poet. The original resonance of Shelley's unacknowledged legislator, the agent of divinity favoured by the likes of Novalis and the Schlegels, Wordsworth's self-renovating seer, and Emerson's vatic eyeball, has been seriously undermined by the judgement of hubris. Albert Gelpi, in the introduction to his *A Coherent Splendor*, with little sense of contention, signals his distance from such relics:

I have no naïve illusions about the psychological and moral superiority of poets, but their power of articulation invests poetry with the special psychological and moral function: psychological in that it brings us to fuller, deeper consciousness of ourselves and our private and social lives, moral because that comprehension can then inform the discriminations and choices by which we sustain and determine our lives, individually and collectively.¹⁹

These are the terms of an ethically attentive criticism, a democratic diffidence with regard to artistic process. Gelpi's reservations may be personal but they are not unconventional. M. L. Rosenthal is more deferent to the traditional idea of the poet, but expects of modern poetry scarcely more than Gelpi: 'The poet, by bringing the problems of life into his aesthetic orbit, transforms them and reveals far more about our whole contemporary meaning than we ever thought possible.'²⁰ Stevens, I will be explaining, was far more aggrandizing in his formulations of the power and function of the individual poet than our own conventions dispose us to accept, such as when he wrote to his Italian translator Renato Poggioli in 1954, explaining the term 'monster' as it appears in "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

¹⁹ Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetry Renaissance, 1910-1950*, Cambridge: 1987, p. 8.

²⁰ M. L. Rosenthal, *Modern Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, London: 1960, p. 3.

Monster = nature, which I desire to reduce, master, subjugate, acquire complete control over and use freely for my own purpose, as poet. I want, as poet, to be that in nature which constitutes nature's very self. I want to be nature in the form of a man, with all the resources of nature = I want to be the lion in the lute; and then when I am, I want to face my parent and be his true part. I want to face nature the way two lions face one another – the lion in the lute facing the lion locked in stone. I want, as a man of the imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. I want man's imagination to be completely adequate in the face of nature. (L790)

My examination of the centrality of the poetic temperament to Stevens' oeuvre presents a new direction for Stevens criticism, one that is deliberately more permissive of Stevens' inescapable vauntedness. Few critics have noted his deep concern for a psychology of invention in the poetry, prose and correspondence, and none have discussed it extensively. It is more common for Stevens' statements about temperamental capacity to be brought together with ideas of the imagination, as one part of a dichotomous relation with reality, so that the image of the inner capacity becomes something of a foil, an indulgent extreme in an oscillation between realms of fact and fiction, between a keen imagist empiricism and an experimental but ultimately unassertive romantic-symbolist speculation. Margaret Dickie broaches the deeper significance of the subject of the imagination in Stevens when she observes: 'Stevens did not share Eliot's interest in tradition, Pound's devotion to history, and Williams' concern for an American idiom and soil; but he, alone among the modernists, had a theory of the imagination.'²¹ Roy Harvey Pearce is close to my main concerns when he maintains that Stevens' 'spirit is his sensibility', that 'the poet's sole ground of being is himself.'²² But a bias towards reduction is apparent even in this evocation of aesthetic immanence, and Pearce ultimately draws his idea of individual capacity in Stevens into a thesis of limitation, a negative realisation of artistic power which sees 'the desire for transcendence supplanted by the more appropriate desire for containment.'²³ Gelpi describes Stevens' 'temper' as 'epicurean', distinct from Williams the 'dionysian',²⁴ but he does not see such factors of creative 'personality' to be a serious contingency in Stevens' work, and does not grant them a thematic presence, arguing instead for Stevens' freedom within the modernist

²¹ Margaret Dickie, "Teaching the New Stevens," in *Teaching Wallace Stevens: Practical Essays*, p. 284.

²² Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Princeton: 1961, p. 377.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

²⁴ Alfred Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendour: The American Poetry Renaissance, 1910-1950*, p. 77.

alternatives to a discontinued romanticism, wherein ‘the efficacy of intuition’²⁵ is severely doubted.

What I have been calling the doctrine of limitations, it should be noted, is largely inhospitable to thinking on the poetic temperament. When Stevens discusses a discrete inner ‘life apart from politics’, a ‘radiant and productive atmosphere’ (NA57) of artistic fulfilment, it seems we possess no current set of critical terms to meet him face on. When he appears, as he does so often, more rhapsodic than pragmatic about his interest in creative intensity, our criticism is more likely to downplay his enthusiasm. The theory of the poetic temperament involved in the following quote, with its sense of a fateful actualisation of ontological possibility, represents the presence of a sophisticated and aggrandizing attitude to literary creativity in Stevens’ work that is poorly served by readings which emphasise the poet’s scepticism. Stevens, we need to accept, permitted himself a radical aspiration:

... The experience of the poet is of no less degree than the experience of the mystic 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 so that the truth will 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. (NA50-51)

The concept of historical contingency is an inadequate means of assessing the relevance to Stevens’ oeuvre of this thinking on the special ‘nervous sensitiveness’ of the individual artist. That very assessment, which I am pursuing in this thesis, will perhaps need to accommodate Carlos Baker’s remark: ‘The gradual or quick and unexpected collocation and eventual miscibility of disparate ideas and images in the formation of a poem is impossible to explain.’²⁶ This is close to Stevens’ own contention that intuitional values are impossible to justify. And yet Stevens, as Baker says, was locked in a ‘benign obsession’²⁷ with originality. This obsession permeates the writing in the form of meditations on the vagaries of poetic experience. The actual formation of the poem may be impossible to explain, but we do possess

²⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁶ Carlos Baker, *The Echoing Green: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Phenomena of Transference in Poetry*, Princeton: 1984, p. 283.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 279.

the invaluable foothold of Stevens' own fascination with the subjective facts of the formative process, his experience of the 'inner position' (CPP834) of poetry. The critical authority of the thematic explanations based on contingencies of social and historical influence undermines what Stevens himself understood to be the subtler, truer contingency of his work, namely, his own profound literary ability. Frank Lentricchia's reading of Stevens is a case in point. For Lentricchia, as a polemical exponent of New Historicism, the idea of Stevens as an overweight, unhappily married capitalist, provides the most cogent index of the poet's creativity: 'Capitalism and poetry are not opposites but symbiotic complements, the basis in Stevens of an integrated life.'²⁸ The supposedly motivating ennui of Stevens' 'burgherdom'²⁹ is therefore the closest Lentricchia comes to a consideration of the poetic temperament: 'It Must Give Pleasure is the title of the final section of Notes. It must give pleasure because little else does.'³⁰ Speculating on the misery of Stevens' marriage, Lentricchia writes:

They go upstairs long before dark to separate bedrooms they'd chosen years before – Elsie to do God knows what, he never tells us, he to watch the flashing of fireflies in their mating game, to feel excitement that he can't share except with his interior lover, his own creative impulse, whose power to bring him 'vivid transparence' he defines as the power of peace itself: poetry, Stevens' ultimate mating game, a game best played with one player in the game, a last resort but also a best resort because in this game reliance on another is not possible.³¹

The blunt appropriation here of the terms of what Stevens' himself expressed as his natural and obligatory devotion to poetry, the subsequent reduction of it to the deprecatory concept of a lonely 'impulse', and the translation of a key symbol for the poetic temperament (the interior paramour) into an unconscious surrogacy of companionship, illustrate the potential for serious reductiveness within the New Historicist approach. In Arensberg's historicist reading, the interior paramour is also seen as a negative symbol. Unrelated to any idea of artistic capacity, it appears as a despondently contrived 'fiction for otherness.'³² Marjorie Perloff has read Stevens in a similar way to Lentricchia, finding the dearth of contemporary subjects during the

²⁸ Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens*, Madison: 1988, p. 227.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

³² Mary Arensberg, "White Mythology and the American Sublime: Stevens' Auroral Fantasy," p. 153.

1940s as unconscionable evidence of what she sees as Stevens' corrupt adherence to the historical occlusionism of metaphor.³³

More recent historicist studies by James Longenbach³⁴ and Alan Filreis³⁵ have sought to read Stevens in less aestheticist, less disparaging terms. Both these critics argue that Stevens was not such a detached poet, that his poems are born of the texture of quotidian affairs and that they are replete with images and voices of political engagement. The central drive of such readings seems to be to sanitize Stevens of his reputation for aestheticism, obscurity, coldness, and even of an inappropriate transcendental element. Where Critchley argues that things merely are, 'in their mereness, in their plainness and remoteness from us', in the sober and ethical factuality of direct sense experience, thereby negating the 'juvenile over-reachings of the will',³⁶ Filreis and Longenbach seem to argue that things are *merely* political, that Stevens' poetry, its genesis, themes, philosophy, imagery and tone, are all explicable with reference to contingencies of socio-historical fact. In these terms Stevens is implicitly defended from the likes of Lentricchia and Perloff and their theories of elitism.

Helen Vendler joins this trend, perhaps less concerned with the impact of complete historicism than with the implication of readings by the likes of Mark Halliday, Christian Wiman and Robin Gail Schulze,³⁷ who have found Stevens a questionable poet on the basis of his apparent lack of concern with interpersonal or emotional human discourse. Halliday has written:

Stevens' poetry largely tries to ignore or deny all aspects of life that center on or are inseparable from interpersonal relations. I doubt that this can be said of any great poet before Stevens.³⁸

And Wiman:

If Wallace Stevens is a master influence in fifty years, if the best poets of America look to him as an avatar of integrity and accomplishment, if their subjects are his subjects, their passions and stances ones by which we recognise him, then the break between poetry and American culture will be

³³ Marjorie Perloff, "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," in Albert Gelpi, ed., *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, Cambridge: 1985, pp. 41-64.

³⁴ James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, Oxford: 1991.

³⁵ Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism*, New York: 1994.

³⁶ Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, p. 88.

³⁷ Robin Gail Schulze, *The Web of Friendship: Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens*. Ann Arbor: 1995.

³⁸ Mark Halliday, *Stevens and the Interpersonal*, Princeton: 1991, p.3.

complete, poets will have made their final retreat from the world in which ordinary men and women live.³⁹

Deliberately meeting such indictments of ‘the queer ghost of Wallace Stevens’,⁴⁰ Vendler has proposed that we read Stevens as a poet of everyday human emotion, that his writing is determined by universals of desire. The reader must apply, she cautions, a ‘personal calibration, ratification and substitution’ meeting the poetry as a form of ‘algebraic statement into which each reader can substitute his own values for x and y.’⁴¹ In the chapters which follow, I am more permissive of Stevens’ commitment to abstraction, primarily because I see it as being largely underpinned by his thinking on extremes of poetic sensibility. In the *Adagia*, we find: ‘One has a sensibility range beyond which nothing really exists for one. In each this is different’ (CPP902). Vendler’s universalising approach, it seems to me, leaves no room for an assessment of Stevens’ thinking on the exceptionality of artistic temperament. She arrives at a conclusion not entirely dissimilar to Filreis and Longenabach, namely, that we need not question Stevens for his habit of conjuring untimely scapes of apotheosis: he is one of us after all. This version of anti-transcendentalism is more directly voiced in Vendler’s influential theory of ‘qualified assertions,’ where she assents to George Bornstein and his ‘provisional romanticism’, a thesis which sees Stevens’ ‘new romanticism’ as ‘the radical provisionalising of the representation of imaginative mental action in high romantic lyrics.’⁴² Bornstein has seminally argued that Stevens might resemble Coleridge or Whitman, but that his seeming replication of their monadism, their unbridled euphonies, entails a rhetoric of revision, whereby he persistently sets his sights lower than his predecessors, thus affirming, and indeed cautioning, that things more often merely are.

In order to move closer to the as yet elusive goal of substantially paraphrasing the later poetry, it is necessary for us to accept Stevens as a poet concerned with the conveying of visionary structures. In arguing here for the legitimacy of the idea of Stevens as an idealist poet, I am joining and attempting to bolster the unconventional critical tack of Harold Bloom and Joseph Carroll. But I want to go further than these critics. I intend more detailed and more defensible readings. I want to show that it is possible for us to ascertain and then to apply the substance of Stevens’ own sense of confidence with regard to the achievement of visionary

³⁹ Christian Wiman, “Position Paper: Wallace Stevens,” *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Fall 2004, p. 240.

⁴⁰ John Bayley, cited in Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire*, Cambridge: 1986, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² George Bornstein, “Provisional Romanticism in ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,’” *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Spring 1977, p. 17.

structures in poetry. Carroll's *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*⁴³ and Bloom's *The Poems of Our Climate*⁴⁴ are both excellent points of access for a reading of idealist concerns in Stevens' work. Carroll's study of Stevens is superior to Bloom's. It is less confined by thinking on indebtedness and allusion, incorporating the more subtle exegetical concepts of affinity and parallel themes. Notably, Carroll's book is almost never cited by other critics.⁴⁵ Bloom is regularly quoted, but this relates primarily, it seems to me, to the evocativeness of his style. The lyricism that accompanies Bloom's often dramatic judgements has leant interpretive thrust to many firmly anti-idealist critics, who do not otherwise assent to his image of a high romantic Stevens.

Neither Bloom nor Carroll has identified the thematic structure that relates to the poetic temperament. And neither questions the category of 'poet' as it relates to Stevens' theory of poetry. In both, although it is intrinsically affirmed, Stevens' consummate artistry is unremarked. Although, as Melita Schaum has said of Bloom's argument against the 'deconstructive reduction of rhetoric to the untranscendable negative moment of aporia',⁴⁶ 'the writer's ability to recuperate rhetorical power and significance'⁴⁷ remains implicit. Bloom primarily explores Stevens as a simply defined visionary poet working within the hallowed (and within Bloom's framework oppressively influential) lineage of Milton, Blake and Whitman, with Emerson as the key conduit of what the critic terms an American Orphism. Carroll, although he mentions Stevens' 'creative drive,' seeks solely the element of meta-theological concern and the thematic evolution which leads to its most intense poetic manifestation.

While conceding the untimely aspect of his own romanticist criticism, Bloom has complained of the lack of recognition of Stevens' tendency towards 'god-man' figurations. I embrace several of Bloom's insights, but remain cognizant of their ideological component, functioning as they do as part of his conservative views of canonicity. Frank Kermode has said of *The Poems of Our Climate*: 'Its libertine discursiveness and allusiveness are partly a way of emphasising the commentator's presence.'⁴⁸ An amount of Bloom's zeal for Stevens' romanticism is unrelated to Stevens' work. Carroll, more subtly, and more relevantly, has

⁴³ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, Baton Rouge: 1985.

⁴⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, New York: 1977.

⁴⁵ John Serio's annotated bibliography of Stevens criticism unfairly describes it as a conventional approach. *Wallace Stevens: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*, Pittsburgh: 1994, p. 340.

⁴⁶ Melita Schaum, *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*, p. 134.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135

⁴⁸ Cited by Schaum, *ibid.*, p. 136.

pointed up a tendency within treatments of Stevens' philosophical bent to miss the poet's espousal of various frameworks of idealism, transcendentalism and also versions of naturalism and materialism. Such structures, Carroll claims, represent 'primary modes of being' for Stevens, as distinct from a strictly intellectual or neutral use of these ideas in an exercise of relativistic aesthetic oscillation. In this, he is closest to my thinking on the thematic of artistic subjectivity in Stevens. In somewhat polemical resistance of predominant critical thinking, Carroll has written:

Stevens' poetry subsists within a genuinely philosophical atmosphere, that is, an atmosphere in which metaphysical perspective crucially influences the quality of experience. The dualistic and transcendental paradigms are not for Stevens merely hypotheses propounded for the sake of their dialectical potential; they are primary modes of being. While they are susceptible to modification and elaboration, Stevens responds to them, at any given moment, with the kind of immediacy with which he responds to the weather For those who can, however guardedly entertain the hypotheses that the world contains a latent principle of spiritual fulfilment, Stevens' work may well seem to define the basic range of spiritual experience that is still open to us.⁴⁹

This account represents the most direct attestation of Stevens as a poet of nineteenth-century literary values. I am less inclined towards Carroll's theological conclusions than I am to his intensive explication of Stevens' quest for an absolute, a neo-platonic ground causing and containing all differentiation. I also concur with his treatment of Stevens' later poetic development. In 1987 Carroll could identify himself and Roy Harvey Pearce as the sole proponents of the idea of aesthetic progression in Stevens' later work. At this stage, perhaps only Lee M. Jenkins might be added to that number.⁵⁰ Vendler's assessment of Stevens' first collection, *Harmonium* (1923), has been more pervasive: 'All of Stevens is in it, and not in embryo either.'⁵¹ Carroll's work is also a valuable touchstone for my efforts to examine Stevens' thinking on aesthetic intensity as it relates to the possibility of a noumenological probing of reality.

As something of a school of thought unto themselves within Stevens criticism, it is interesting to observe the closest parallel between Bloom's and Carroll's studies. Both men see "The Owl and the Sarcophagus" as Stevens' peak achievement, his most intense and most rewarding venture of poetry as divination. Conversely, those critics, the majority, who have

⁴⁹ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰ Lee M. Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, Brighton: 2000.

⁵¹ Helen Vendler, "The Sausage Maker," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Wallace Stevens: Modern Critical Views*, New York: 1985, p. 15.

read Stevens within a general framework of limitation, have had little, nothing, or nothing good to say about "The Owl." The poem's deeply rhapsodic tone and its almost normative handling of an otherworldly apotheosis seem to resist the critical paradigms which are based upon the necessity of a critique of romanticism. In this light, I take "The Owl" as the focus of my third chapter, pursuing an argument for the poem's proper status within Stevens' oeuvre. The critical controversy and relative orphan-hood of "The Owl" can stand as a kind of exposure of the limits of limitation as an interpretive apparatus for Stevens' poetry. I will be arguing here for the poem's supremacy in Stevens' canon. Not alone for its beauty, philosophical profundity and aesthetic integration, but also for its complex rhetoric and significance as culmination. Stevens, I will show, arrived at "The Owl" within a career-long progression of thought centring upon the subjective experiential facts of his own poet-hood. "The Owl" has an essential narrative structure, and its flourished characters, their actions and their attributes, are all explicable within the terms of preceding poems and prose comments by Stevens. Within the thematic nexus of temperament, perception and transcendence, "The Owl" stands as the dialectic actualisation of the transcendental potential of the other two postulates. It will be seen that the poem can be explicated with considerable detail and fluency in these terms, thereby providing a means beyond the long-established critical impasse of that important text.

In the first chapter, I show how Stevens' concern with the theory of the poetic temperament in the first half of the 1940s results in the poet's ultimate neglecting of what Jacqueline Vaught Brogan has termed 'the needs of modern poetry.'⁵² Focussing on the collection *Parts of a World*, I identify Stevens' treatment of pejorative conceptions of poetry, particularly notions of detachment, escapism, pure poetry, and the arcane 'nobility'. I explain how he interrogated these figures as aspects of his own artistic project, seeking deliberately to revise their negative meaning within contemporary discourse. I read the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" as a central example of Stevens' salvaging of outmoded aesthetics during this phase of his career. Taking poems such as the famous "Of Modern Poetry" and "Esthetique du Mal," the neglected "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," "Prelude to Objects," and "Asides on the Oboe," I identify the way in which Stevens consistently juxtaposes his thinking on the need for a permissive audience and a respect for the subjective capacities of the individual artist with his commentary on the cultural shift from

⁵² Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language*, Princeton: 1986, p. ix.

nineteenth- to twentieth-century aesthetics. The latter concern, I show, entails considerably more equivocation than is commonly accepted. Arguing that Stevens can be seen to affirm the aesthetic space of a seeming romantic indulgence, I conclude that ideas of artistic vindication and aggrandizement form a key subtext in Stevens' poetry of the early 1940s. I also identify *Parts of a World* as the point where Stevens begins to modify the renowned dichotomy between imagination and reality, which had characterised his more 'decreative' exploration of the sublime in the comparatively more participatory *Ideas of Order* (1936). I argue that with *Parts of a World* Stevens began to express the epistemological validity of the imagination as a means of developing a subtler understanding of existence, and that this endeavour was inseparably linked to his professed experience of the valency of the poetic temperament.

In the second chapter I read Stevens' next collection, *Transport to Summer*, as a natural progression of the aesthetic theory of *Parts of a World*. Having defended the profundity and the licence of his purer poetic project on the basis of the indispensable element of poetic individuality, and having rhetorically resisted the pressure of a social role for the poet, Stevens would depart almost completely from the discourse of the anti-poetic, and its prompting of a radical apologetics, concerning himself instead with the application of the poetic temperament as a means of the subtilization of appearance. The many poems which present narratives of perceptual power in this collection, it will be seen, create a basis for the imagery and the tonal range of the directly transcendental climate of poetic realisations which defines Stevens' next collection, *The Auroras of Autumn*. In examining what I term the theme of perceptual advancement in "Certain Phenomena of Sound," "The Pediment of Appearance," "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors," and "The Pastor Cabellero," I argue for the presence of a number of tropes that relate to the theory of the Stevensesan poetic temperament, chief among them, artistic compulsion, verbal profundity, rarefied feeling, susceptibility, and 'acute' vision. I also consider in this chapter several examples of Stevens' hyperbolising of poetic perception in *Harmonium* (1923). Poems such as "The Snow Man," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," I propose are not fully served within the commonly applied heuristic terms of irony, pastiche, philosophic denudation and a relenting to particulars over teleological possibility. By explicating these poems as evidence of Stevens' early concern with the perceptual and transcendental implications of the poetic temperament, I extend my discussion of his overall

development, and argue for a greater level of affirmation within the poet's first collection than is typically granted by his critics.

In the fourth chapter I apply the findings of the preceding chapters, arguing that Stevens' final collection, for the continuity it displays with the poetry of the 1940s, and in particular the modulations it makes upon the thematic of temperament, perception and transcendence, is a significantly more affirmative collection than has hitherto been recognised. I pursue three strands of argument. Firstly, I propose that the personal and professional context of *The Rock*'s production are such that we must come to recognise the inherent difficulty in seeking a strictly representative element in the collection. It is not tenable, I suggest, that Stevens offered *The Rock* as a deliberate counter-thesis to the romantic-aesthetic precedents of his own poetry. I look here at the poet's relationship with Knopf, the sense of Stevens' attitude to his own work in the 1950s as revealed in the extant correspondence of the time, and the significance of his equivocal attitude to the prospect of the *Collected Poems*, within which *The Rock* was included as the semblance of a new collection. Secondly, I illustrate the level of continuity which exists between the visionary tendencies of *The Auroras of Autumn* and *Transport to Summer*, and *The Rock* itself. Exploring the poems "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," and "The Hermitage at the Center," in addition to several poems from the 1950s which were uncollected at the time of Stevens' death in 1955, I propose an account of *The Rock* based upon what will be seen as the substantial evidence of poetic development and confidence in Stevens' late writing. Thirdly, making clear that it is not my intention to utterly deny the presence of negative tonalities in Stevens' last poems, I will argue that no unequivocal or consistent morbid element can be held to be predominant. Taking "The Green Plant" and the first canto of "The Rock" as key examples, I demonstrate the extent to which several of the ostensibly darker poems entail an implicit and robust motif whereby Stevens can be seen to subvert and resolve his own expressions of unhappiness. Further, I identify the presence of what I term a rhetoric of transformation. In this, I show how many of Stevens' formulations of aesthetic struggle are part of a representation of the poet-percipient's continuing and ennobled departure from rationally codified experience into modes of transcendental selfhood. Particularly in poems such as "Prologues to What is Possible," and "Two Illustrations that the World is What you Make of It," there exists, I explain, a subtly stylized right-of-passage mode which involves a narrative of mental-spiritual ascent, and this

is opposed to a more ostensibly irredeemable expression, on Stevens' part, of disoriented struggle and ineffectuality.

Chapter One

The Acutest Poet on the Changing Stage: Stevens' Defence of Aberrations

1: Confidence and Peculiarity

During the 1930s, Stevens made several serious efforts to demonstrate his distance from imaginative indulgence, from a seeming detachment and autotelism. With "Farewell to Florida," for example, positioned as it was as the opener in the second Knopf edition of *Ideas of Order*, he sought to dramatise a relinquishing of the green and fecundating south of the imagination in favour of a municipal north, a north of dark crowds and praxis, a conscionable north, antithetical to the hermetic. In that poem, although the female essence of the south is described in luxuriant imagery, Stevens constructs his renunciation of detachment by deeming the lotus-eater's life to be intolerable.

I hated the weathery yawl from which the pools
Disclosed the sea floor and the wilderness
Of waving weeds. I hated the vivid blooms
Curled over the shadowless hut, the rust and bones,
The trees like bones and the leaves half sand, half sun. (CP118)

The tropical mind of the south, Stevens says, 'had bound me round.' But the newly chastened and socially responsive poet claims to be possessed by an enthusiasm for a harsher reality, a sternness and an engagement represented in 'the slime of men in crowds' and synonymous, within the terms of the poem's seeming renunciation of transcendence, with a kind of freedom from pure poetry.

To be free again, to return to the violent mind
That is their mind, these men, and that will bind
Me round, carry me, misty deck, carry me
To the cold, go on, high ship, go on, plunge on. (CP118)

We can identify something of the same motivation in the poem “Mozart 1935,” also from *Ideas of Order*, where the didactic speaker counsels the ephebe-pianist against the risks associated with the emotive and dream-like qualities of his art. The indignant masses, appalled by his conceited reality, may ‘throw stones upon the roof’ (CP131). The pianist must come to ‘play the present’ or else endure the ignominy that results from non-engagement. The uneasily juxtaposed images of ‘while you practice arpeggios,’ and ‘they carry down the stairs a body in rags,’ point towards the checking, or at least the questioning, of an insulated lyricism. The phrase ‘be seated at the piano’ occurs three times, coming in the closing line as the Shelleyan ‘be seated, thou.’ In this way the poem can be said to situate itself apprehensively in advance of poetic utterance, making its appeal to, if not quite fully conducting, a more inclusive poetics. In between this motifical invitation to play, the task of musical composition or performance is steadily problematised, most pointedly in the deeming of Mozart’s music as a form of cultural naivety. An attitude of symphonic creation is not applicable to a 1930s malaise.

We may return to Mozart.
He was young, and we, we are old. (CP132)

The pianist is encouraged here to meet the ethical challenge of this condition of contemporary agedness, of burdened historicity. And, as in “Farewell to Florida,” the apposite tonality for such engagement is not the youthful, summer consciousness of the south. Rather the artist is directed to assume the musical equivalent of contemporary destitution.

Be thou that wintry sound
As of the great wind howling. (CP132)

In a similar manner, and perhaps most famously, “Owl’s Clover” (1936) and “The Man With the Blue Guitar” (1937), while neither in their doctrinal content can be said to abandon poetry, both acknowledge something of a discourse of poetic curtailment, and at the very least a discourse of exchange between imagination and reality. These gestures of accountability, notwithstanding the extent to which they also involve equivocal and esoteric elements, present a desire for broader acceptance on Stevens’ part. They explicitly acknowledge a normative sociological and ethical context. The fine veneers, the Francophile postures, and the sexualizing exoticism of *Harmonium* (1923) are largely withheld in this period, and this,

together with what Michel Benamou¹ has identified as a more cubist quality in the writing, can be said to represent in the Stevens of pure poetry an ostensible embracing of the challenge that is made by the discursive and the communal.

We might readily expect this seeming caution to have continued into the poet's writing of the war-torn 1940s. And indeed many critics, taking the valediction of "Farewell to Florida" as something irrevocable, have read Stevens' 1942 collection, *Parts of a World*, as expounding a determined reality-aesthetic, and at the very least a suspicion of metaphor.² Disagreeing with this approach, it is my concern here to explore the extent to which Stevens after 1940 pursued an increased claim to artistic freedom. In the lectures of *The Necessary Angel*, and in much of the poetry of the early 1940s, Stevens can be seen to view poetry as remaining distinctly separate from ethics, from politics, from normative rationality and indeed from whatever in contemporary experience might diminish the special vantage point of his poetic individuality. This individuality, and the preservation of its claim to an often 'ecstatic freedom,' I will be explaining, circumscribe what were for Stevens the grandly conceived possibilities of the poetic temperament.

Parts of a World is related to *Harmonium* by virtue of Stevens' renewed interest in imaginative fecundity in the later collection. But now the interest in the terms of the imagination has been particularized, extending the subject of poetry to include Stevens' theories of the unique psychology and potential of its living 'mechanism,' the poet as individual. Certain poems of the early 1940s such as "Of Modern Poetry," "Man and Bottle" and "Esthetique du Mal" have commonly functioned as the basis for theories of explicit aesthetic caution in Stevens, and theories of his presumed revisions and repudiations of romanticism. Ostensibly, it is expected that the artistic mind will, in Stevens' own wording, 'content the reason concerning war,' that, so to speak, the sequestered pianist will incorporate the quotidian and the funerary into his recital, and this in grounded artistic efforts which destroy the outmoded 'romantic tenements / Of rose and ice' (CP238). This well-accepted expression of concern for a relevant and contemporaneously oriented poetry is in some respects reiterated between the two poems, "Man and Bottle" and "Of Modern Poetry" in the seemingly ethical need of 'what will suffice', and the poems, printed together in the sequence

¹ Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination*, Princeton: 1972, p. 103.

² Eleanor Cook centres her reading of *Parts of a World* on the idea of a poetry 'against synecdoche.' *Poetry, Wordplay and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, Princeton: 1988, p. 157. And Helen Vendler, on the same collection, has written of a 'repudiation of metaphor.' *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, Cambridge: 1969, p. 147.

of *Parts of a World*, share this cautioning phrase. The injunctive echoing of ‘play the present’ from “Mozart, 1935” might easily dominate any thematic consideration of these poems.

And yet Stevens enacted no true fettering of the imaginative. Neither did he come close to a chastening of his grand theories of the profundity and possibility that surround the poetic temperament. “Of Modern Poetry,” I will be explaining here, entails an essential equivocation with regard to its consolidating premise of meeting the age. Ultimately the poem undercuts its assumed participation and surface sense of a conforming citizenship, and this in favour of the affirmation of a poetic heroism and, further, the representation of an idealized and yet subordinated audience, a gathering which assembles in order to gain a precious insight and invigoration from the central poet. The critically unremarked figuration of the ideal audience is evident also in “Prelude to Objects” where the capacity of the Stevensian poet is represented in the rhetorical fact of the audience’s inability to engage or access a satisfactory reality. Abased, faithful, and ideally receptive to poetry, convinced as it is of Stevens’ notion of the religious function of the poet, the supplicating audience announces to its versifying oracle, ‘We are conceived in your conceits’ (CP195). Similarly, I will be explaining the ways in which the two poems “Esthetique du Mal” and “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,” pursue elaborate preservations of the poet’s individuality. While both incorporate a sense of historical contingency and a *de facto* suspension of pre-modern literary models, a sustained bias towards aesthetic aggrandizement can be seen to predominate in both poems.

Stevens held the idea of the poet as a figure defined by ineluctable qualities of peculiarity, eccentricity and abnormality. These interrelated qualities were drawn from his sense of his own position in relation to imposed standards of reality and truth, standards he viewed as largely established by the pressure of the anti-poetic in human affairs, and against which he proposed the sanctioning of an aggrandized artistic subjectivity. In 1935, he wrote to Robert Lane Latimer:

You will find occasional references in my poetry to the normal. With me how to write of the normal is a problem which I have long since given up trying to solve, because I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little off the normal. The worst part of this aberration is that I am convinced it is not an aberration. (L287)

The term ‘aberration’ here represents Stevens’ constant awareness of the ways his poetry might be received, or indeed dismissed. We might recall again here the stones pelting the roof of the rehearsing pianist. It also represents his acknowledgement of the forbidding aspect of

abstraction and the difficulties most early readers encountered in their efforts to extract a meaning from his poems. The concept of an aberrational aesthetic, an approach to poetic meaning which deviates essentially from accepted or normative discourse and standards of rationality, ultimately rejecting a social duty for the poet, and the elaboration of this practice in terms of a distinction between normal and abnormal, are expressed in the above quotation in terms of an assured non-participation. The defence of the aesthetic of the abnormal is made worse, Stevens says, in a tone of mock-culpability, by the serious conviction which accompanies the aesthetic itself, the conviction that the abnormal and, by extension, the constellating tropes of the subjective, the noble, the peculiar, the irrational, the romantic, are integral to the experience of poetry as he knew it. Here, the aberrational as a brand of artistic indulgence, the poet as hermetic and therefore pariah, comprise pejorative judgments which Stevens locates beyond the terms of his own writing. The mouthpiece of detraction is invoked and then dismissed in the above quote as he expresses the redundancy, in terms of his own credo, of any conformist or otherwise proscriptive aesthetic criteria. To Henry Church, in 1939, he would write with reference to a possible translation of the *Harmonium* poem "Fabliau of Florida":

I am in the long run, interested in pure poetry. No doubt from the Marxian point of view this sort thing is incredible, but pure poetry is rather older and tougher than Marx and will remain so. My own way out toward the future involves a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet, who will somehow have to assist the painter, etc. (any artist, to tell the truth) in restoring to the imagination what it is losing at a catastrophic pace, and in supporting what it has gained It is not the sense of a poem of that kind that counts, because it does not really have a great deal of sense; it is the feeling of the words and the reaction and the images that the words create. (L341)

Discussing "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" with Leonard C. van Geysel in 1945, Stevens was still apt to theorise the manner in which a suspension of the discursive need not entail a complete absence of a communicative element:

The point of that poem is not its meaning. When people think of poems as integrations, they are thinking usually of integration of ideas: that is to say, of what they mean. However, a poem must have a peculiarity, as if it were the momentarily complete idiom of that which prompts it, even if that which prompts it is the vaguest emotion. This character seems to be one of the consequences of concentration. I should like to undertake the job of establishing the place of concentration in this sort of thing. (L500)

The idea of a momentarily complete idiom evokes the strong sense of licence that Stevens held with regard to ambiguity. Against the customary semantic habits of a reader, Stevens appears willing to privilege the rarefied, almost random articulation of poetic subjectivity, a proud and delicate refining of language in the scarcely governable cognition of the poetic act. The ‘vaguest emotion’ may yield the most indecipherable writing, and yet the fruition will be possessed of the redeeming quality of ‘integration’. Numerous poems of the 1940s extend this proud complex of the aberrational as being an aspect of the more potent, and, we can say, more Stevensean modes of poetry. In the ninth canto of “It Must Change”, Stevens writes:

The poem goes from the poet’s gibberish to
The gibberish of the vulgate and back again. (CP396)

The poet’s gibberish here expresses the sense of the aberrational mode of pure poetry, the ambiguous and spiritual striving of ‘the imagination’s Latin’ (CP397). The poem seeks to dignify this language use, ‘a speech only a little of the tongue,’ by casting the poet as actively engaged in the pursuit of the realization of the potential of such ‘peculiar’ speech modes. In the same poem, Stevens has the pejorative, or Marxian voice, ask the question: ‘Does the poet / Evade us, as in a senseless element?’ (CP396). In order to apply it to what I have been saying about the concept of aberration in Stevens, we might paraphrase this question in the following forms: Can we permit the evasion of participation? Can we validate the Stevensean poet in his claim to a senseless meaning, the meaning inherent in one’s subjective ‘reaction’ to his peculiar words, and the scarcely tangible meanings of vaguest emotion? Shall we brand him escapist and be done with it? In 1942, Stevens wrote: ‘The truth is that the social obligation so closely urged is a phase of the pressure of reality which a poet (in the absence of dramatic poets) is bound to resist or evade today’ (NA28). Canto Nine of “It Must Change” responds to the question of evasion with the following:

Evade, this hot, dependent orator,
The spokesman at our bluntest barriers,
Exponent by a form of speech, the speaker

Of a speech only a little of the tongue?
It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks.
He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general,
To compound the imagination’s Latin with

The lingua franca et jocundissima. (CP397)

A subtle system of apologetics is at play here. The voice which has posited the doubt with regard to the poet's evasion, the likely escapism of his hermetic proclivities, has thereafter developed its stance within a carefully compounded semantic space in order to express that which redeems the poet in his peculiarity. The poet conducts his work on the vanguard of human experience, 'our bluntest barriers,' and thereby against the limitation of the familiar through a stultifying preordination by the real. In addition, the serious dignity of the artist is proposed. As 'exponent', the poet earns further increments of exoneration from the pejorative, being as he is a vocational specialist representative of special capacities and tasks. We can identify in these lines Stevens' substituting in the place of participation a poetic activity which privileges the unreal, the imaginative and the peculiar, but which also works upon reality, disclosing it out of the general and the anti-poetic, and by compounding it in poetic vision, arriving at a truer, if in normative terms unreal, reality. He speaks of this proud process in the 1944 essay "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" when he theorizes 'an approach to being by way of the imagination' and encourages his audience 'to think of the possibility that poetry is only reality after all, and that poetic truth is a factual truth, seen, it may be, by those whose range in the perception of fact—that is, whose sensibility—is greater than our own.' (NA59). Quite contrary to common critical representations, no consistently problematic duality between imagination and reality exists for Stevens. And the relation only becomes particularly dichotomous when he seeks to resist the dismissal of poetry as a valid system of experience and truth. In the Adagia, he writes,

To "subtilize experience" = to apprehend the complexity of the world, to perceive the intricacy of appearance. (CPP914)

This example reveals some measure of Stevens' sense of freedom from a problematic of imaginative writing. To subtilize experience is in one sense to make a poetic representation, but notably here this implies no falsification of reality, no corruption of the real by abstraction. To subtilize, according to this adage, is to perceive and, in actuality, to 'apprehend' and to know more intensely. It stands as a mode of contact with true reality in the true sub-structural intricacy of its appearances. Subtilization, in this form functions as an epistemologically sound experience of reality as a realm discrete and profound in its own extra-poetic essence. As the poet wrote in 1947:

Metaphor has its aspect of the ideal. This aspect of it cannot be dismissed merely because we think that we have long since outlived the ideal. The truth is that we are constantly outliving it and yet the ideal itself remains alive with an enormous life. (NA81-82)

We can recognize that the theory of metaphor which emerges from such a confidence is one which includes no consistent anxiety about the evasiveness of poetic language. My primary concern in the remainder of this chapter is to begin to explain the extent to which the theory of this form of vision, its related manifestations in the idea of linguistic aberration, and the poet's effort to defend these concerns against the pejorative, also involve Stevens' idea of the temperamental capacity of the poet.

In "The Creations of Sound" (1946), Stevens maintained the concern for the potency of abnormal speech. T.S. Eliot, as the character X, appears here in reprehensible guise. His poems are burdened by 'understanding', their musical aspect too much a thing of deliberation and imposed exactitude. They are, it might be said, not incredible enough, and their ultimate deficiency inheres in their failure to participate in the radical Stevensean freedom, purity and peculiarity of poetic speech. '[T]here are words / Better without an author, without a poet' (CP310), Stevens offers antagonistically. Meaning, there is an apparatus and an experience of poetic meaning which cannot be schematized through the terms of a standard expectation of the poem. Stevens would sooner disrupt the authorial paradigm in the name of restoring to the imagination that which he believes it has so catastrophically lost to such pervading forces as Eliotic accuracy and 'Marxian' utilitarianism.

The esteem and nobility of purer poetic conception, in this representative instance, will not foster in the reader, as it is claimed disparagingly that Eliot's poems do, a sense of the visible as a standard and unalterable iteration of reality. Stevens adjudges that X's poems sustain, quite regrettably, a familiar world. They function without peculiarity, and without anything like a radical emotionality, and therefore, as over-clarifications of sense experience, they fail to access the deeper capacities of the imagination. Stevens' critique of Eliot seems to involve something of his exasperation at the end of "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," a poem which explores the embattled euphonies of modern poetic freedom, where the hero is the Stevensean poet, 'the eccentric', the aberrational 'solitary figure'. 'How', he asks with rhetorical bemusement, 'did we come to think that autumn / was the veritable season, that familiar / Man was the veritable man?' (CP280-81). Autumn is employed here as a metaphor for attitudes of aesthetic reduction. As the communally known down-turning of summer

plenitude, it exists against the philosophical licence of the ‘savagest diamonds’ and ‘azure-doubled crimsons’, the affirmatively transcending iconography of the Florida mind. Autumn also represents a force which sustains the pejorative, inhospitable as it is to the loose metaphysicality, the erratic freedoms and intensely subjective practice of the Stevensean poet. Analogously, Eliot’s poems represent a culture of the denotative over the connotative, an ascetic and consolidating anti-romanticism in an austere and provocative hegemony that Stevens could not desist from inveighing. “The Creations of Sound” complains of Eliot’s poems:

They do not make the visible a little hard

To see nor, reverberating, eke out the mind

On peculiar horns, themselves eked out

By the spontaneous particulars of sound. (CP311)

A superior aesthetic to Eliot’s is posited here, a Stevensean aesthetic of peculiarity, by which capacity for probing and abstraction, an eking out of the mind by an abnormal sensitivity, the poet, departing from fact and normative representation, might come to an esoteric accord with the auditory.³ ‘The spontaneous particulars of sound’ here represent Stevens’ appeal to the revelatory and wishfully non-contingent elements of the artist’s experience in the perceptual-poetic act of consummating his freedom. The semantic attenuation and subtlety entailed in the text of peculiarity, the suggestive, reverberant and therefore more powerful poem, possessed as it might be of a semantic resonance within ambiguity, establishes the peculiar as an index of both poetic empowerment and higher meaning. The ‘peculiar horns’ further the invocation of a poetic sensitivity, suggesting a set of antennae, and thereby a susceptible, even vulnerable, and more acutely engaged phenomenology. Poetic feeling then, is pursued and affirmed over anything that might conceivably be associated with strict or received meaning. Stevens would ask in the 1948 lecture, “Effects of Analogy”: ‘What is the poet’s subject?’ (CPP716). And he proposed a definite answer: ‘It is his sense of the world.’ The embattled Stevensean pianist, we might say, now in the 1940s, once seated, is being encouraged to play more freely,

³ In 1933, in “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,” Eliot had said: ‘A poet may borrow a philosophy or he may do without one. It is when he philosophises upon his own poetic insight that he is apt to go wrong.’ Avowedly philosophical, Stevens was also centrally concerned with the poetic temperament as an object of belief in itself. The importance of the distinction between the two poets, in the context of Eliot’s critique of romanticism, is well discussed by Lucy Beckett: ‘What if poetic insight seems to a poet to be the one means left to him of constructing what will suffice? He is in ‘error’ says Eliot, detaching himself with distaste from the conscientious struggles of a century and a half.’ Cited in Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens*, Cambridge: 1974, p. 4.

deviating from the present, confident in his capricious arpeggios, in the contentious musical matter of his subjectivity. If, as Stevens had said in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," poetry is 'a process of the personality of the poet' then such a fact must remain an unassailable aspect of the yield of poetry itself.

To say that it is a process of the personality does not mean that it involves the poet as subject The statement that the process does not involve the poet as subject, to the extent to which that is true, precludes direct egotism. On the other hand, without indirect egotism there can be no poetry. (NA45-46)

Through the early 1940s Stevens was steadily growing accustomed to the pejorative, drawing its tropes into a system of increased vindication and aggrandizement, in a subtle and elaborate subversion of the anti-poetic. Towards the end of his career he could enumerate the facets of the aberrational in a manner which served to exalt the use of poetry as 'an instrument of the will' (CPP835). 'The love and the thought of the poet', he said in his acceptance speech for the gold medal from the Poetry Society of America, as 'the locale of the genius of poetry', often appears

Untutored and seemingly incapable of being tutored, insensible to custom and law, marginal and grotesque, without a past, the creation of unfathomable chance. (CPP832)

Stevens had long deliberated over the interactions of imagination and reality. And as we have seen, a considerable proportion of his pronouncements in the thirties had deferred in some measure to the credible and the anti-poetic. But into the 1940s his allegiance was clearly with the source of poetry, the poet as individual, the thematic of his psychology and personality appearing in the poems in gestures of aggrandizement and tendentious preservation against the pejorative and the pressure of an encroaching real. In the above quotation, the terms 'grotesque' and 'marginal', the romantic anti-positivism inherent in the sense of an untutorable and anarchic artistic impulse, all serve to enact a denunciation of the pejorative in a gesture which figures vocational pride and artistic intensity as inherent terms of the poet's resistance of a normatively conceived reality. By 1946, the distinction was quite complete:

The role of the poet may be fixed by contrasting it to that of the politician. The poet absorbs the general life: the public life. The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is individual. The politician is general. It is the personal in the poet that is the origin of his poetry, it follows that the first phase of his problem is himself. This does not mean that he is a private figure. On the

other hand it does mean that he must not allow himself to be absorbed as the politician is absorbed. He must remain individual. As individual he must remain free. The politician expects everyone to be absorbed as he himself is absorbed. This expectation is part of the sabotage of the individual. (L526)

Such remarks emblemise the increased invective against the anti-poetic, and the increased affirmation of the valency of the individual poetic temperament as Stevens expressed it from *Parts of A World* onwards. In this context, Eliot represented one type of poetic fettering, and in “The Creations of Sound” he is implicated in the wide-ranging catastrophe of the hegemony of received actuality. This deeply held suspicion of realism, and the poetic capacity it threatens characterize the dual thematic of poetic freedom and the pejorative in *Parts of A World*. Before I explore some examples of Stevens’ defence of the aberrational in that collection, I want to discuss “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1942), examining there the presence of the themes of the anti-rational, the anti-political, and the manner in which Stevens sought to ‘reconcile’ his audience to the outmoded concept of nobility. Stevens would work to retain the arcane quality of nobility for reasons that were integral to his concern for a radical creative freedom and power. If he could in some defensible way re-validate the strange and the fine and the histrionic, the work of art which tended more to imagination than reality, then he might also, by dint of that theoretical foothold, construct a defence of the new romantic poet, the Stevensesan poet whose rarefied aesthetics and grand sense of artistic individuality were ultimately at odds with ‘the pressure of reality’ at the beginning of the 1940s.

2: The Pressure of the Scarcely Tenable

In 1934, in his preface to William Carlos Williams’ *Collected Poems 1921-1931*, Stevens had portrayed his fellow poet balancing his own ‘romantic’ and ‘sentimental’ tendencies, the individual ‘demand’ of his spirit, with the ‘anti-poetic’. The preface is personal in tone, intended as much to be instructive to Williams as to the reader of the book itself. It also contains much of the concerns that would permeate Stevens’ prose writing to the end of his career. When he writes,

Sentiment has such an abhorrent name that one hesitates. But if what vitalizes Williams has an abhorrent name, its obviously generative function in his case may help to change its reputation. (CPP769)

we can identify the sense of a resistance to the pejorative conception of poetry, and to the rhetorical hesitation that it inspires. Stevens was concerned passionately to change the negative reputation of what he viewed as the ineluctably romantic aspect of poetry. He was handling, he knew, something abhorrent and old-fashioned, something uncommonly affirmative and rhapsodic and emotive, something perhaps elitist or escapist, something which for its perennial element was scarcely reconcilable to the contemporary, but which was also inescapably part of his worldview. The ‘marginal’ and the ‘grotesque’, as such, were to be defended:

All poets are, to some extent, romantic poets What, then, is a romantic poet now-a-days? He happens to be one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life there would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider’s Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet Cars; he is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper. (CPP770)

The poet might insist that life is intolerable in the ivory tower, much as the north-bound rhapsodist of “Farewell to Florida” had insisted that the urban slime was more propitious to his heart, and yet Stevens knew this very insistence to be prompted by the sense of an accusation of detachment, a charge of escapism and social irrelevance. The sketching here of the romantic and even of the sentimental as integral aspects of poetry, and the attempt to dignify the putative shades of indulgence and detachment that they involve: ‘Something of the unreal is necessary to fecundate the real; something of the sentimental is necessary to fecundate the anti-poetic’, foreshadows Stevens’ undertaking in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” to arrive at a re-invigorated reputation for the concept of nobility. As the angel in the title of the essay collection in which the “The Noble Rider” was later included was a ‘necessary’ apostrophizing of the real, so too, the more pejorative aspects of poetry are treated by Stevens to a tendentious revision in the name of poetic freedom.

The essay opens with a consideration of Plato’s representation of the soul as a charioteer traversing the heavens. Significantly, what Stevens terms ‘our diffidence’⁴ interposes itself in the tenuous experience of our being convinced by Plato’s pure poetry.

⁴ This term appears in the *Harmonium* poem, “The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad,” suggesting that it had something of a tropic significance for Stevens. The speaker of that poem projects a relenting of the pressure of the ‘malady of the quotidian’, in the hope that the winter of poetry might ‘penetrate / Through all its purples to the final slate’. If such an access of euphony were possible, ‘one might in turn become less diffident,’ (CP96). I consider this poem at length in the fourth chapter.

We recognize, even if we cannot realize, the feelings of the robust poet clearly and fluently noting the images in his mind and by means of his robustness, clearness and fluency communicating much more than the images themselves. Yet we do not yield. We cannot. We do not feel free. (NA5)

This excerpt contains the terms of an impediment to poetic euphony and the validity of the unreal, but also the terms of a more affirmative consideration of poetic power. It is the first instance in *The Necessary Angel* of Stevens' articulating his sense of the poet as a powerfully endowed agent, possessed of vigorous insights and linguistic power. The suggestive adjectives, 'robustness', 'clearness' and 'fluency', propose an aggrandized capacity and serve to establish the elevated sense of the poet's expressions as 'communicating much more than the images themselves.' In remarks such as this we are in the territory of Stevens' theorizing of the ideal poet, the superlatively capable 'genius' of 'virile youth' in whose 'abnormal' and 'extreme' 'ranges of sensibility' a 'radiant and productive atmosphere'⁵ of creation and insight abides. We can refer again to the *Adagia*:

Perhaps there is a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet. (CPP906)

Such a hyperbolized image of the realisation of poetry, celebrating as it does an advanced poetic perceptual ability as well as what might be manifested textually, characterizes most tangibly the visionary poetics of *The Auroras of Autumn*. I refer to it now as a means of contextualising the import of Stevens' defence of nobility in 1942, and to indicate the theoretical direction of his claim for the function of the poetic imagination, and the meaning of his resistance to that which might curtail or marginalize it. Before he fully articulated his sense of the ideal, we can say, Stevens worked to create a legitimate space for idealism.

Stevens' claim in "The Noble Rider" to share with his reader the inability to 'yield' is only a rhetorical admission. It permits him an opportunity to anatomize the aberrational, finding in his stock adversaries, the contemporary, the historical, the realistic, and the demotic, a tendentiously redressable zeitgeist of the anti-poetic. Plato's mythical horses, as icons of nobility, burdened though they might be by antiquity and the unconvincing element of the 'rustic', and approximating for that something 'repulsive' (we can recall here again the synonymous term 'grotesque'), facilitate Stevens' interrogation of the spontaneous stifling of

⁵ Stevens repeats the phrase 'radiant and productive atmosphere' four times in the essay, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet." He qualifies it in the third use as the characteristic which is 'his life' (CPP682).

the professed impulse to be borne aloft by the poetic experience of the unreal. In this way, the essay works towards an undercutting and a revision of pejorative conceptions of poetry. For Stevens, nobility is synonymous with the imagination itself, but imagination distorted by historical displacement, viewed disparagingly in a preceding incarnation. And yet, he argues, there is a perennial aspect to it, a unity in all imaginative activity, which once recognized might lead us to a reconciliation with the famously redundant grandeur of certain artistic modes. This, I propose, is the main thrust of the essay. Here is the conclusion:

As a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same. Possibly this description of it as a force will do more than anything else I can have said about it to reconcile you to it. It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (NA36)

Throughout "The Noble Rider", as with the idea of sentiment in Stevens' Williams preface, nobility functions as an 'abhorrent name.' We are, as he says, diffident about it, and unconvinced, and therefore our experience never exceeds the limited grade of what is explained as merely a form of recognition of the noble element. It never attains, he attests, the more essential aesthetic level of participation. 'We understand it rather than participate in it.' When nobility is understood as a 'symbol' or 'alter ego' of the imagination, any defence of it against that which has given it an aberrational status, namely, the pressure of a 'colossal' reality, becomes a hesitating gesture.

Stevens draws the idea of reconciliation from Kierkegaard, whom he quotes at the beginning of the essay, and the rhetorical import of the essay can be seen to pursue thematically a rectification of the outmoded aspect of poetry as represented by the idea of a reflex of diffidence or non-assent to poetic heightenings of reality. Stevens represents this negativity as an active and culturally symptomatic facet within the milieu which he shares with his audience-readership. Kierkegaard had remarked on the troubled relation of poetry to the real world, complaining of the way that poetic loftiness can exacerbate the pain of a spiritually tempestuous existence. The utopian element might only add to suffering:

A great deal has been said about poetry reconciling one with existence; rather it might be said that it arouses one against existence; for poetry is unjust to

men . . . it has only use for the elect, but that is a poor sort of reconciliation.
(NA17)

Assuming the challenge of a defence of poetry in similarly embattled circumstances, Stevens deems 'the pressure of reality' to be the primary impediment to reconciliation here.

By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation. The definition ought to be exact, and as it is, may be merely pretentious. But when one is trying to think of a whole generation and of a world at war, and trying at the same time to see what is happening to the imagination, particularly if one believes that that is what matters most, the plainest statement of what is happening can appear to be an affectation. (NA20)

We can add the feeling of pretension and 'affectation' here to the corpus of reflex admissions which Stevens incorporates in his exoneration of poetry from the pejorative. It is a term and an experience drawn from his sense of the pressure of reality, which in its natural indictment of artistic 'contemplation', renders aberrational what Stevens himself would more readily wish to be understood as plain or unreactionary considerations of the sphere of imaginative activity. Against this pressure he moves to construct the terms of the inviolable integrity of the poetically invested unreal. In the paragraph which follows the above excerpt, Stevens repeats the term pretentious, subtly inverting its status as a charge against his defence of poetry:

For more than ten years now, there has been an extraordinary pressure of news – let us say news incomparably more pretentious than any description of it, news, at first, of the collapse of our system, or, call it, of life; then of news of a new world, but of a new world so uncertain that one did not know anything whatever of its nature, and does not now . . . And for more than ten years, the consciousness of the world has concentrated on events which make the ordinary movement of life seem to be the movement of people in the intervals of a storm . . . The war is only a part of a war-like whole. (NA20-21)

It is in such an unremitting climate that 'we remember that the soul no longer exists' (CPP654). If Stevens had admitted that his own remarks in their seeming generalizations and implicit exaltation of aesthetics over reality had been open to the charge of pretentiousness, he here retaliates with an increased anti-positivism, finding only distortion and the disruption of poetic possibility in the media-driven sense of global alarm. Because of his own aesthetic agenda, he can only bemoan the anti-contemplative engagements of consciousness in the war-like whole of an amorphous and insistent quotidian experience, a setting where, he knows all

too well, the refined unrealities, the apostrophizing and the momentarily complete idioms of his art can presume little or no quarter.

As "The Noble Rider" progresses, a tension is established between the unreal as the outmoded and unusable aspect of an imbalanced art, represented in such examples of engorged nobility as Plato's chariot, and Verrocchio's statue of Bartolommeo Colleoni, and, on the other hand, a disgruntled and generalizing critique of reality as the composite and inferior adversary of the imagination. In the former mode, Stevens pursues the notion of 'mental states' in order to interrogate and destabilize the cultural reasons for our inability to participate in the flourished grandeur of these images.

We may assume that in the history of Plato's figure there have been incessant changes of response; that these changes have been psychological changes, and that our own diffidence is simply one more state of mind due to such a change. (NA6)

This idea embodies a characteristic optimism which pervades Stevens' later prose writing with respect to the possibility of establishing a sanction for the new romantic. As an exponent of pure poetry, or at the very least, of pure poetics, he lives in the hope that the politically and socially fixated Marxians might not incite his readers to cast stones, that the entrenched paradigms of antipoetic reality, as part of the psychological structure of aesthetic permissibility, might not successfully preclude the peculiarity and aberration that characterise the work towards a transcendentalist realization of poetry. Simultaneously, in the latter mode, he permits himself a stance of liberal and at times histrionic scorn against the sustaining sources of our inability to 'yield' ourselves to the purer manifestations of the imagination. Risks abounded, at stake was the very tenability of Stevens' own poetic endeavour. In our recoiling from the 'uncommon panache' and the difficult magnificence of Verrocchio's statue, or the 'gorgeous nonsense' of Plato, and in our returning to the norms of the contemporary climate, there exists the unfortunate risk that,

we may derive so much satisfaction from the restoration of reality as to become wholly prejudiced against the imagination. (CPP647-648)

The outmoded aspect of nobility, we should recognize, represented for Stevens the pejorative views of poetry as he felt them encroaching and inveighing his own poetic project. The restoration of reality and the related psychological terms of the pleasure of the reinstatement of

an accustomed and reduced aesthetic field, involve here a norm of artistic impediment against which, insofar as he was obligated to authenticity, Stevens felt he had to campaign.

3 : Toward the Poetics of Affirmative Detachment

For Stevens, against the ‘pressure of reality’, there existed the special interior pressure of poetic activity. This interior pressure, insofar as it involves for the individual poet the vital processes of his own personality, could function in a certain respect as a source of poetry. In a 1949 letter to Paule Vidal, he praised the authenticity of the paintings of Tal Coat, and the appeal of what he deemed to be a ‘display of imaginative force: an effort to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist’s own vitality’ (L655). This notion of attainment circumscribes many of Stevens’ poetic explorations of the artist’s ability to probe through empirical appearance and into what might be considered more essential grades of reality. As late as *The Rock* (1951), in “The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain”, he was concerned to explore the notion of a subjective progress through aesthetic intensity, a system of emotive trials and modulations, through schemes of ‘rightnesses’ and ‘inexactnesses’, moving to increasing visionary capacity by the vitality of the artistic self.

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the truth towards which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home. (CP512)

This late and somewhat understated poem represents a privileged and long-formed artistic persona, as do many of the *Rock* poems, whose subtling capacity and ultimate aims are built upon a set of tropes which concern Stevens’ theory of the poetic temperament and his belief in the visionary capability of the artist. Stevens’ use of the term ‘vitality’ in his letter to Vidal reflects his ideal of the artist possessed of a form of creative autonomy by dint of an innate capacity. And as I have been showing, this recurrent concern underpins Stevens’ many

denunciations of politics and realism as being antipathetic to poetic feeling. To the charges of excess, solipsism, absolutism and ‘gaudiness’, Stevens, convinced of the poetic temperament as a deterministic condition, and as an ultimate means to greater human insights, could reply:

The poet records his experience as poet in subjects and words which are part of that experience. He knows that nothing but the truth of that experience means anything to him or to anyone else. Experiment in respect to subjects and words is the effort on his part to record the truth of that experience. (L589)

Within this ‘experience as poet’ an unquestionable validity is presumed. The poet himself in the above formulation becomes a locus of stance and subject matter, and, through innate sensitivity and linguistic capacity, the truth of the experience is attained and transmuted into an available, if challenging, poetry. We find the same idea in “The Noble Rider”:

The poet has his own meaning for reality, and the painter has, and the musician has; and besides what it means to the intelligence and to the senses, it means something to everyone, so to speak The subject matter of poetry is not that ‘collection of solid static objects extended in space’ but the life that is led in the scene it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. (NA25)

Conscious of the possible pejorative implication of such ideas, Stevens strove to vindicate himself in the later poetry by schematizing the suggestive modes of vision available within an embracing of his own ‘experience as poet’, while at the same time embedding a defensive rhetoric of the value, even the applicability, of poetic insight. It is to the evidence for this tension of affirmation and qualification in the poems written between 1940 and 1945 that I now turn.

“Someone Puts a Pineapple Together”, a poem which has received very little critical attention, exemplifies Stevens concern with the poet’s power to at once render and disclose reality.⁶ Among the poems that precede *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), it stands closest to a full depiction of ‘the acutest poet’, illustrating as it does a mode of vision which seems at once to create and reveal. “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” was published as the second part of “Three Academic Pieces” and it aims to defend the daringly speculative thesis proposed in the preceding prose section, that ‘poetry is part of the structure of reality’ (NA81).

⁶ In his recent biography of Stevens, Tony Sharpe has dismissed the poem outright. *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life*, London: 2000, p. 180.

A poetic metaphor is —that is to say, a metaphor poetic in a sense more specific than the sense in which poetry and metaphor are one— appears to be poetry at its source. It is. At least it is poetry at one of its sources although not necessarily one of its most fecundating. But the steps to this particular abstraction, the *gradus ad Metaphorum* in respect to the general sense in which poetry and metaphor are one, are, like the ascent to any of the abstractions that interest us importantly, an ascent through illusion which gathers round us more closely and thickly, as we might expect it to, the more we penetrate it.

In the fewest possible words since, as between resemblances, one is always a little more nearly perfect than another and since, from this, it is easy for perfectionism of a sort to evolve, it is not too extravagant to think of resemblances and of the repetitions of resemblances as a source of the ideal. This aspect of it cannot be dismissed merely because we think that we have long since outlived the ideal. The truth is that we are constantly outliving it and yet the ideal itself remains alive with an enormous life. (NA81-82)

These words, fittingly, precede Stevens' elaborate playing out of the scrutiny of a pineapple, casting it as a locus of essential and ideal meditations, and illustrating the creative ability of the Stevensesan poet-percipient to attain by aesthetic intensity a mode of essence in the object. Constant throughout is an appeal to the validity of the poet-percipient's subjective, metaphorising response to reality, and the function of the poetic temperament as a force of subtilization.

O juvenes, O filii, he contemplates
A wholly artificial nature, in which
The profusion of metaphor has been increased.

It is something on a table that he sees,
The root of a form, as of this fruit, a fund,
The angel at the center of this rind. (NA83)

The first verse establishes the interior setting, and proposes a poetic complex in a state of intensity. The vivid and yet attenuated notion of profuse metaphor encapsulates the fecundity of the protagonist's imagination as it enacts its ascent towards an essential abstraction. The second verse establishes an affirmative relation between ontology and indeterminacy. This strange and empowered state of visibility, circumscribed as it is by the special capacity of the percipient, is portrayed as the apprehension of a subtle presence. Initially the enigmatic and yet limited category of a 'something' proposes the more portentous scope of the mode of sight of the poem's protagonist. The pineapple of the title has not yet materialized and instead we are introduced to an abstraction, a pineapple wed to an

impression, and thereby perceived as an elusive, and scarcely present, quasi-object. From this partial status a steady increasing of portent is effected, the visionary 'root of a form' leading to the aggrandized 'angel at the center of this rind.' While 'rind' in some way balances the metaphysical bias of the images, reiterating the sense of an actual fruit instead of the more spectral sense of an ultimate fruit, the predominant tone of these lines and of the ensuing verses is one of trans-phenomenal exuberance.

This husk of Cuba, tufted emerald,
Himself, may be, the irreducible X
At the bottom of imagined artifice,

Its inhabitant and elect expositor.
It is as if there were three planets: the sun,
The moon and the imagination, or, say,

Day, night and man and his endless effigies.
If he sees an object on a table, much like
A jar of shoots of an infant country, green

And bright, or like a venerable urn,
Which, from the ash within it, fortifies
A green that is the ash of what green is,

He sees it in this tangent of himself.
And in this tangent it becomes a thing
Of weight, on which the weightless rests: from which

The ephemeras of the tangent swarm, the chance
Concourse of planetary originals,
Yet, as it seems, of human residence. (NA83-84)

Here, Stevens theorises the mode of seeing that has prompted the profusion of metaphor. The contiguity of the planetary and the human in the final verse bolsters the image of the 'three planets: the sun, the moon and the imagination', serving thereby to incorporate a 'celestial mode'(CP480) and to invoke the transcendentalist remit of poetry as Stevens viewed it. The concentrated peculiarity of the simile beginning, 'much like / A jar of shoots of an infant country', involves a dense evocation of the temperament at work, with the intense sense of connotation and suggestivity that is seen in the initial object bespeaking the subtilizing fecundity of the imaginative capacity of the protagonist. The 'profusion' here suggests something of a challenge, a call to decoding, to interpretation, in order that the improbable parallax might be met. And yet the spontaneous versioning of the visual, its transmogrification

into a plurality of meaning, into a 'swarm' of quick 'ephemera', pursues an affirmation of 'the act of the mind', specifically the poetic mind, dramatised in a state of keen engagement with the 'radiant and productive atmosphere' of its appetent meditations.

The poem implicitly proposes mental and sensory profusion as the basis of an artistic prowess. The 'jar of shoots' simile is doubled, the poet's proud acquaintance with near-ineffability manifested in the syntactically sharp substitution of one frame of representation for another: 'Green / and bright, or like a venerable urn, / Which, from the ash within it, fortifies / a green that is the ash of what green is.' The shift from the 'infant country' to the 'urn' retains the enigmatic 'green'. The suggestive venerability of the urn includes a possible Keatsian note, but also a more general appeal to the inherent piety of the protracted act of gazing upon the fruit, the steady pursuit of greater meaning being bolstered by the tributary thematic of human finitude. The contrapuntal play of ash and green, the deceased and the verdant, establishes an intonation of the vitality that is operative in this context. The resonant ash 'fortifies / a green that is the ash of what green is.' In this line an enigmatic interdependence of matter is proposed. The ash, in a state of incongruous potency, strengthens the status of one of many possible appearances of green. By representing the influence of the ash as it acts upon green at a sub-phenomenological level, and by drawing this abstract process towards a quantification of an absolute green, 'the ash of what green is', Stevens effects a proud illustration of the ranging sensibility of his ideal poet. Privy to the constituent forces of reality and of perception, the protagonist appears as an empowered locus of revelatory readings of reality, and this by virtue of being incorporated himself into elemental process. Thus, the vatic 'tangent of himself' becomes an absolute lens, the means of Stevensesan clairvoyance.

The tangent of the poet's self, the poetic reasoning that issues from his meditation and by which he represents the sense of profusion, the 'swarm' of essential meaning beyond the empirical surface of things, effects a mode of becoming in that which is perceived, whether it be a commonplace fruit, or a 'jar', or a more philosophically resonant 'urn'. We are reminded here of two other poems. The later "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," where the word 'becomes' is repeated almost tautologically in the first four stanzas, as the powerful activity of George Santayana's temperament transforms and sanctifies the reality that surrounds him in his Roman convent bedroom (CP508). Similarly, in "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers", from *Parts of a World*, a poem which reads like a lesser theorizing of the ideas of "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," the protagonist is presented as being possessed of the kind of

aesthetic susceptibility that prompts Stevens to write of a process of change and revelation as the object is abstracted into the personality of the artist. It is noteworthy here that the term ‘became’ occurs four times.

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, then 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. (CP246-47)

Stevens here affirms what he termed in his essay “About One of Marianne Moore’s Poems”, ‘the achievement of an individual reality’ (CPP703). The meditative tension and subtlety of the details inherent in the altering of the impressions from formlessness (rendered intimately experiential here by the adjectives ‘crude’ and ‘jealous’) to form, bespeaks an intensely aesthetic cast of mind. From ‘central, essential red’ to the more normative palpability of ‘dusky pears’, as perhaps between urn and pineapple, a spectrum of poetic sensibility is evoked. Stevens, as so often in his poetry, works to dignify the artistic capacity that might attain the forms of intimate phenomenology and disclosure that make ‘profounder reconciling’ and ‘affirmation free from doubt’ the appropriate figurations of its achievements.

Part Two of “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” proposes a set of encroaching conditions in which the modern artist must function. We return here to what I have identified as the special rhetorical device of “The Noble Rider.” A proscriptive milieu is invoked. But Stevens exhibits no resultant grounding of his aesthetic on the basis of the involved tenets he cites. Rather, what is foregrounded is his protagonist’s ability to respond to and negotiate a realm of acute abstraction, a profound mental and sensorial agility, in short, the Stevensesan ‘virility’ of the poet, or, as he paraphrased that term in his 1944 lecture, ‘that special

illumination, special abundance and severity of abundance, virtue in the midst of indulgence, and order in disorder that is involved in the idea of virility.’ (CPP685).

The first verse establishes, quite reflexively we shall see, an injunctive and cautioning mood:

He must say nothing of the fruit that is
Not true, nor think it, less. He must defy
The metaphor that murders metaphor. (NA84)

The defiance of the second line will be, we might assume, a form of obedience, a capitulation to an external pressure to be precise, which finally for Stevens is tantamount to a curtailment of poetic feeling. By virtue of this tension, Part Two conducts a dual rhetoric. On a surface level, Stevens appears to depart from an outmoded romantic licence and poetic conventionality, substituting a modern, more accountable, approximately imagist concern for clarity and the fettering of metaphor. Here, the poet-protagonist is cast as the embodiment of change within the literary tradition. However, in the poem’s recounting of an ostensible curtailment of euphuism and the process of an anti-decadent righting of aesthetics, an equivocating appeal to imaginative freedom and power is maintained. By the end of the canto, the poet does not appear at all reformed from a possible solipsism or any presumed profligacy of metaphor. This telling contradiction serves to align Part Two of “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” with “Of Modern Poetry” from *Parts of a World*. Lines 20 to 30 of “Pineapple” Part Two read:

.... There had been an age
When a pineapple on the table was enough,

Without the forfeit scholar coming in,
Without his enlargings and pale arondissements,
Without the furious roar in his capital.

Green had those days its own implacable sting.
But now a habit of truth had formed
To protect him in privacy, in which

The scholar, captious, told him what he could
Of there, where the truth was not the respect of one,
But always of many things (NA85)

“Of Modern Poetry” is similar in its ambiguous sense of the adjustment made by the perennial poet to modern circumstances. To the Stevensean protagonist, striving to comprehend and to articulate the modern aspect of his experience, the literary past seems to appear to be a place of innocence, of mimetically employed imagery and attitudes, of monolithic truth, and comforting teleology. “Of Modern Poetry” begins:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
 What will suffice. It has not always had
 To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
 Was in the script.
 Then the theatre was changed
 To something else. Its past was a souvenir. (CP239)

From here the poem continues with what might easily be interpreted as a grounding of the dithyrambic tendency, an ethically motivated sobering-up of the symbolist by the harsh light of the quotidian:

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
 It has to face the men of the time and to meet
 The women of the time. It has to think about war
 And it has to find what will suffice. It has
 To construct a new stage (CP240)

At a surface level these lines appear as nothing short of a capitulation to the contemporaneous. Their metrical blandness and stark enjambments assist the invocation of what we might call an anti-aberrational poetic.⁷ And yet Stevens does not fulfil here a fettering of abstraction. Instead he extends from this acknowledgment of a new era of aesthetic responsibility, a renewed role for the poet and the ancillary value of his continued imaginative freedom. The lines that immediately follow the above quote depart starkly from the injunctive mode, the punctuation altering from the persistent use of the delimiting period to the more lyrically inclined and metrically permissive comma, thus signalling a veering from the declarative to the improvisatory. A marked tonal adjustment inheres in this shift and the poem’s new emphasis is further evinced in an increased metaphoric mode.

... It has to be on that stage
 And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
 With meditation, speak words that in the ear,

⁷ Glen MacLeod reads ‘Of Modern Poetry’ as an explicit part of what he sees as Stevens’ war poetry. *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, New Haven: 1993, pp. 100-101. Beverly Maeder has written of what she identifies as the poem’s didacticism. *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*, p. 68.

In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise. (CP240)

In the section of the poem that precedes this, the ten lines of poetry entail eight sentences which Stevens concludes by the use of a period. The fourteen lines of poetry in the above quote are comprised of only two sentences, and, further, they are characterized by a decreased level of certainty, less descriptive pointedness, and a general tendency to abstraction. Such contrasts I propose are essential to any careful understanding of Stevens' post-romanticism. The concept of the 'insatiable actor' proposes a less governable aesthetic paradigm than that which is sketched in the poem's opening. Bespeaking a complex hunger and desire, the cognitive basis of the actor-poet's pronouncements is cast as subject to the irrational experimentality of the poetic temperament. That the actor in "Of Modern Poetry" becomes the hermeticized 'metaphysician in the dark' advances the departure from a stable and consolidating language use.⁸ It seems undoubtable that the forms of poetic utterance to be transmitted from the new stage will not forgo the legacy of the grandiose and the profound which, it has been implied, might characterize the accountable gestures of divestment in the face of the contemporaneous. The men and women of the time, as icons of a radical poetic applicability and relevance, as the terms of a socialized ballast for the vessel of poetic voyaging, are given little more than lip-service in "Of Modern Poetry," their assumed centrality being modified and subverted in the poem's equivocating rhetoric of conformity. Foregrounded instead are the poet's prophetic mastery of the sonic realm of meaning and

⁸ James Baird has taken a negative view of this image, interpreting the term 'in the dark' as a figure of aesthetic or epistemological impediment or benightedness. I am more inclined to view it as an image of irrational release, with the darkness functioning as a portentous palate for the projected syntheses of the affirmatively cast metaphysician. It seems most unlikely that Stevens would have wished to debunk so unequivocally the figure of the philosopher, and particularly given that the image recurs throughout his work in relation to what is viewed as the erudite, boldly subjective, susceptible, and ontologically daring office of poetry. Such interpretations as Baird's often assume the idea that Stevens was engaged in a polemical de-romanticizing of his own oeuvre, and thus a poem like 'Of Modern Poetry' is said to attest, in Baird's terms, 'the irrelevance of the past.' *The Dome and the Rock*, Baltimore: 1968, p. 274.

meaning-creation and the grand poetic susceptibility that is its primary context. The slowed, meditatively enunciated words approximate a subtle device of incantation, the means of higher awareness, comprising an effectively prayer-like gravitation towards an actualized abstraction. The pivotal rephrasing in the words, ‘in the ear, / In the delicatest ear of the mind,’ makes a distinct appeal to subjective intensity, as the normative denotation of ear and hearing is supplanted by a metaphoric ear of the mind, a core of the auditory faculty, something perhaps of a supra-auditory engagement with the human experience of sound. And this towards a confident apotheosis of the idea of the high pitch of artistic perception, brought still further by the maximizing projection of the term ‘delicatest.’⁹ As Stevens’ descriptions continue, the activity of the poet-percipient is rendered into both its generative aspect and its reception. ‘An invisible audience’ receives the ‘vatic lines’ (CPP365) of poetry, finding in that act of participation nothing of a realistic duality of poet and audience. So valid and adept and personal is the hymn-like scripting of the new stage, that the audience encounters ‘not the play,’ but itself, its own inner nature. In an idealized reception, an emotive unity resounds in the theatre, with the actor as the heroic locus facilitating powerful aesthetic transfiguration and satisfaction, and all of this by virtue of his innate and exaggerated capacity.

The twanging of the wiry string involves a bathetic note which differs in its sublimating order from the ‘delicatest ear’. However, it does not establish an overbearing tonal challenge to the confident role of the poet-percipient as celebrated in the preceding lines. The wiry string is very much the special instrument of the Stevensesan acutest poet, a form of belated lyre, conduit as it is of uncommonly rich reverberations, modes of elevated understanding and aesthetic pleasure: ‘a wiry string that gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly / Containing the mind.’ The appeal to totality here, and to the fulfilment and resolution of the agitated modern mind is further indication of Stevens’ ultimate resisting of a curtailed aesthetic.

This empowered functioning of the poet-percipient, with the audience incorporated as a passive beneficiary, recalls an aspect of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” where the readership, or more generally the audience, appeals to the poet, in whose capacity they place a traditionally deferential trust, for ‘A tune beyond us, yet ourselves’ (CP165). The ‘us’ inheres

⁹ Stevens makes regular use of the superlative, commonly pushing his adjectives to an ideal order. This tendency serves to invoke various conceptions of aesthetic intensity and poetic realisation. Notable examples include, ‘remotest’ (CP381), ‘utmost’ (CP374), ‘vividest repose’ (CP375), ‘extremest book’ (CP380), ‘moodiest’ (CP377), ‘crispest diamond’ (CP492), ‘lightest look’ (CP497), ‘acutest’ (CP129), ‘vaguest’ (CPP527), and ‘bluest’ (CP101).

in the generalized aesthetic-spiritual myopia and impediment of the anti-poetic condition, and the modified 'beyond' is an expression of the perennial need of a supreme fiction, as Stevens saw it, a god-form, a need for a higher humanism, poetry as 'the successor of the invisible.' In "Blue Guitar" Stevens had also palliated the concern with aesthetic excess by a plea to the imaginative fecundity of the poetic temperament, in this case the blue guitar itself. Part of the poem's argument can be read as the following: if the hero-figure, the acutest poet, appears as a misrepresentation, then the ideal response is not the irate preclusion of late-symbolist modes such as indeterminacy, ambiguity or aggrandizement. Rather, the poet proposes a fuller acceptance of the blue guitar, understood as the 'individuality'¹⁰ of the poetic artist, and of the value of the poetry it prompts. What emerges is an effort to preserve any seeming aesthetic indulgence, emblemized here as the 'serenade', from obsolescence, and from the ubiquitous slur of the pejorative.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.

If to serenade almost to man
Is to miss, by that, things as they are,

Say that it is the serenade
Of a man that plays a blue guitar. (CP165-66)

Thus Stevens attempts a guiding of his detractors, his less subsumed audience-members, through the theoretical intricacies of their own lack of assent to his imaginative liberty.

As late as the poem "Large Red Man Reading," from *The Auroras of Autumn*, such proselytizing is manifested in the function of the poet as mediator between the audience-members exiled in a dissociated metaphysic and the physical world as magnified through the 'purple tabulae' of the poem. The impoverished audience, it is claimed, 'had lacked' what the poet gives to them in "Large Red Man Reading." The form of renewal that is promised from the 'vatic' recitations of this later incarnation of the 'insatiable actor', recalls "Of Modern Poetry," and yet contains none of the earlier poem's sense of a proscriptive milieu. Stevens'

¹⁰ The statement by Stevens on the dust jacket of the 1937 Knopf edition of *The Man with the Blue Guitar* contains the following: 'This group [Blue Guitar] deals with the incessant conjunctions between things as they are and things imagined. Although the blue guitar is a symbol of the imagination, it is used most often simply as a reference to the individuality of the poet, meaning by the poet any man of imagination' (CPP998).

later poetry as shall be seen in the third and fourth chapters came increasingly to enact a suspension, as Joseph Carroll has termed it, of ‘all sense of the problematic’,¹¹ and particularly in poems such as “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” “A Primitive Like an Orb” and “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.” The later Stevens’ allows his poetic percipients their portentous power and their profound faith in poetry as a transcendent system of disclosure. And so, the red reader is privy to and capable of transmitting,

The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines. (CP423)

As is the case with “Of Modern Poetry,” the sketching of the poet who meets the new reality of the modern in Part Two of “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” is not, as we might have expected from the surface ethicizing tonalities of the poem, a politically cogent figure at home in a discursive treatment of realistic situations. Rather, he persists, qua Stevensian poet-percipient, in an abstracting mode of experience, with a sense of himself as capable in abnormal and subtilizing ways. It becomes clear that the domains of eccentricity and imaginative freedom have not been relinquished in Stevens’ tendentious modernist mediation of ‘embattled circumstances’¹²:

He seeks as image a second of the self,
 Made subtle by truth’s most jealous subtlety,
 Like the true light of the truest sun, the true

Power in the waving of the wand of the moon,
 Whose shining is the intelligence of our sleep.
 He seeks an image certain as meaning is

To sound, sound’s substance and executant,
 The particular tingle in a proclamation
 That makes it say the little thing it says,

Below the prerogative jumble. The fruit so seen
 As a part of the nature that he contemplates
 Is fertile with more than changes of the light

On the table or in the colors of the room.
 Its propagations are more erudite,
 Like precious scholia jotted down in the dark. (NA84)

¹¹ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, p. 118.

¹² Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, p. 101.

The 'particular tingle in a proclamation' here recalls Stevens' emphasis on the instinctual basis of poetic speech, and also upon the profound linguistic sensitivity inherent to the poetic temperament. We can compare here "The Pastor Caballero" from *Transport to Summer*, a poem which represents the intensity of a descriptive gesture within the subjectivity of its protagonist. The inspired 'vital ambience' of poetic creation in that poem, although it is deemed to be 'nameless', 'creates an affectionate name, // Derived from adjectives of deepest mine'¹³ (CP379). "The Noble Rider" offers a further means to contextualise Stevens' representation of the linguistic capacity of the ideal poetic artist:

I do not know of anything that will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry and that has suffered less. The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. (NA32)

Finalities, perfections, unalterable vibrations, are part of Stevens' sense of the superlative realization of poetry. And the theme of the infusion of such qualities into language by virtue of a temperamental capacity in the ideal artist, the acutest poet, recurs throughout Stevens' later poetry. In "Blue Guitar", Stevens had permitted himself the 'rhapsodic' account of poetic intensity in the lines, 'The heraldic center of the world // of blue, blue sleek with a hundred chins, / The amorist adjective aflame' (CP172). He would explain these lines fifteen years later to Renato Poggioli. Commenting directly on section XIII of "Blue Guitar" he wrote,

The amorist adjective means blue as a word metamorphosed into blue as a reality.

The poem deals with the intensity of the imagination unmodified by contacts with reality, if such a thing is possible. Intensity becomes something incandescent . . . the poem has to do with pure imagination. (L785)

'The amorist adjective aflame', by uniting a sense of love and passion with a linguistic figure, emblemizes Stevens' equation of artistic intensity with 'an affair of the whole being', an interplay of creative zeal and emotion and the governing 'need of his nature' to court and to

¹³ We can note here again the use of the superlative form. The special adjectives seem to function as proud figurations of a temperamentally endowed verbal resource. The 'deepest mine,' as the source of the adjective, bespeaks a typical Stevensian profundity of descriptive power. I consider 'The Pastor Caballero' at length in the second chapter.

satisfy his sense of artistic possibility. The closing lines of “Poem With Rhythms” from *Parts of World* invoke a similar complex:

... The mind
 turns to its own figurations and declares,
 “*This image, this love, I compose myself
 Of these. In these I come forth outwardly.
 In these I wear a vital cleanliness,
 Not as in air, bright-blue resembling air,
 But as in the powerful mirror of my wish and will.*” (CP246)

The sonorous ardour here contains a sense of gratitude, a hailing of the emotional and epistemological crux of poetry by the modern poet. The synonymy of ‘this image, this love’ is resonant with the complex that I have identified in “The Pastor Caballero,” “The Man With The Blue Guitar” and “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together.” ‘The radiant and productive atmosphere’ of poetic creation is part of Stevens’ sense of the yield of his prostrating himself to his task, to his vocation, to the ‘inner position’ of the psychological ‘paramour’ (CP524) of his ‘experience as poet’. In *Materia Poetica XXV* he asserts:

In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas, the images and the rhythms
 with all your capacity to love anything at all. (CPP918)

And, in the epigraph to *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), in supplicatory mood, he invokes the source of his poetry when he writes:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
 Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
 Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
 In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
 Equal in living changingness to the light
 In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
 For a moment in the central of our being,
 The vivid transparence that you bring is peace. (CPP329)

It is clear that the experience of poetry prompted for Stevens both a rhetoric of devotion and a rhetoric of consummation. The creative modes of concentration he employed in his writing process led to a sense of intensity and adeptness which he often expressed rhapsodically as a form of encounter with a lustrous and almost supernatural presence. “The Owl in the Sarcophagus”, and the late poem, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” can be read as examples of the same theme, namely, the substitution of metaphysical archetypes and abstract

embodiments for the emotive contexts of poetic insight and creation. "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" can also be read with such examples in mind. The forms of truth that are sought by the protagonist in Part Two are synonymous with a radiant cast of awareness, a style of beholding and a style of cognition that evince an uncommon attention to subtlety. The cumulative simile,

Like the true light of the truest sun, the true
Power in the waving of the wand of the moon,
Whose shining is the intelligence of our sleep. (CPP694)

recalls the famous opening lines of the "It Must be Abstract" section of *Notes* where the junior poet is bidden towards the Shangri-la of apperceptions, a seizing of the sun in his mind, cleansed of evasion, at once poetically invigorated and 'true'.

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it. (CPP329)

Analogously, in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," 'true light', 'truest sun', 'true power', together, modulate a context of referential falsity, a problematics of signification which necessitates a superlative capacity, a transcending of language itself. And yet the trajectory of the simile re-enlists imagination, serving to re-mystify and re-validate putative forms of evasion. Unwilling to dispense with feeling, with subjectivity, with the nervous appetencies and irrational pretexts of his poetry, Stevens, almost contradictorily, sustains the appeal of abstraction. The 'shining' of the 'wand' which proves the 'intelligence' of human sleep, further, makes a concerted appeal to the subconscious as a perennial artistic basis of relation with reality. 'Knowledge as feeling', the instinctual, for Stevens, remain sacrosanct conditions of poetry, and, coupled with the poet's capacity to see and to employ sight and feeling, by dint of his expansive 'abnormal' sensibility, they offer a means for the attainment of forms of 'true' experience. However subjective, these aspects of 'the whole being' can never, as a

matter of 'conscience', be renounced. One loves and goes 'back to one's ancient mother . . . out of a suasion not to be denied' (CPP660).¹⁴

The development of the 'truest sun' simile implicitly validates an esoteric conception. Its discursive diction, its matter-of-fact extension of illogical premises, the appeal to magic, to alchemy, to what George Lensing has termed a 'profane mysticism'¹⁵ of the mind in subtle concord with the elements, establish an increasingly more rarefied and idealistic thematic. The poem continues:

He seeks an image certain as meaning is

To sound, sound's substance and executant,
The particular tingle in a proclamation
That makes it say the little thing it says,

Below the prerogative jumble. (CPP694)

We can observe here Stevens' aligning of truth with the poetic capacity to feel. 'The particular tingle in a proclamation' bespeaks a proud attunement with language. I have identified several corollaries to this facet for Stevens' anatomizing of the poetic temperament in other poems. In this example, that the tingle is designated as a 'particular' sensation suggests a multiplicity of more general tingling, a busy receptivity within the mind or 'mechanism' of the poet, the same agent whose confident probing of sense experience in the preceding line deems him the initiate of such profound levels of reality as that which is said to comprise 'sound's substance'. The substantiality of sound, conceivably, approximates a marrow of sentience itself, a mode of noumenological awareness. Such hyperbole occurs throughout Stevens' poetry, although rarely has it been commented upon. However, it serves the central function of aggrandizing the Stevensesan protagonist, the poet-percipient, and, further, as I am concerned to establish in this thesis, it functions as the primary theoretical basis for Stevens' writing into reality his transcendently inclined experience of poetry.

The 'jealous subtlety' of the fifth line reminds us of the jealous formlessness of "Woman Looking at A Vase of Flowers," and we can with some confidence view it as a trope

¹⁴ These references involve what in chapter three I will be identifying as the trope of obligation in Stevens theory of the poetic temperament. It will be particularly pivotal to my interpretation of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus", where I treat of the significance, in the context of a theory of trans-phenomenal poetics, the pivotal lines: 'These forms are visible to the eye that needs, / Needs out of the whole necessity of sight' (CPP371).

¹⁵ George Lensing, "'Credences of Summer': Wallace Stevens' Secular Mysticism," *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Spring 1977, p. 4.

of Stevens' theory of aesthetic intensity. Stevens often permits himself the anthropomorphic conceit of investing inanimate objects with forms of consciousness and will. In several poems, this serves at least two purposes; as a means of suggesting sentience as a universal spiritual principal,¹⁶ and thereby approximating a meditation on forms of immanence, and the ideal of a reciprocity of mind and matter; and secondly, as a means of representing what he termed, paraphrasing Henri Focillon, a 'technical destiny'. In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" Stevens wrote of certain *a priori* conditions of the individual artistic temperament, speculating the sense of a deep appositeness in certain themes and forms, seasons, and types of weather (CPP672):

If a man's nerves shrink from loud sounds, they are quite likely to shrink from strong colours and he will be found preferring a drizzle in Venice to a hard rain in Hartford. (NA48)

In late poems such as the uncollected "The Region November" and "Prologues to What is Possible" from *The Rock*, the protagonists are depicted as intuiting a mode of intention operative in the external world. In reflexively theological mode the protagonist of "The Region November" encounters 'a revelation not yet intended', thereby positing a governing principle which orchestrates the increasing levels of insight and aesthetic-ontological progress. The notion is extended in the at once supra-divine and material: 'critic of god, the world / and human nature, pensively seated / On the waste throne of its own wilderness' (CPP473). In "Prologues to What is Possible", a similar figuration is used, with the protagonist's negotiation of abstraction effecting a dissociation of his identity while at the same time purifying his sense of contact with a principle of meditation:

The object with which he was compared
Was beyond his recognizing. By this he knew that likeness of him extended
Only a little way, and not beyond, unless between himself
And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended to be recognized,
The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses
On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep. (CPP438)

'Enclosures of hypotheses' here illustrates something of the protagonist's aggrandized 'experience as poet', where the mental or imaginative constructs appear uncannily experiential, almost physical, and the fateful reverie, the journey to insight and profundity via the imaginative liberty of a summertime lassitude, permits an experience of encounter as

¹⁶ The idea of sentience as a spiritual principle forms the basis of Carroll's *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*.

opposed to a merely imaginative rendering. Stevens here proposes a projection of the mind beyond its normative limits, prompting the representation of a near-concrete beyond and a providential principle of both the topography of that beyond and the act of a transporting meditation, its attainment by the poet. In this way the potency that is apprehended as external to the poet is tendentially gathered into the solipsism-exonerating trope of intention.

In a related mode of visionary aspiration, the earlier protagonist of “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” evinces the capacity of what might be termed the Stevensean initiate. He ‘contemplates’ a particular nature, a nature which is known in terms of both a fertility of light, and of something which exceeds such a quality. The contemplated light exists in a generative state, its ‘propagations’ prompting a perpetual musing or mystification.

...The fruit so seen
As a part of the nature that he contemplates
Is fertile with more than changes of the light

On the table or in the colors of the room.
Its propagations are more erudite,
Like precious scholia jotted down in the dark. (CPP694)

‘The fruit so seen’ attributes the affirmative fecundity and flux to the essential nature of the pineapple, but also, and more significantly, to the style of poetic vision that permits the fluid identity to remain in a state of captivating resonance. By virtue of the special beholding that is the dominant subject of the poem, an affirmed erudition is incorporated, a source of high meaning which prompts the representation of what might be the poem’s very impetus in the words, ‘precious scholia jotted down in the dark.’ The idea of jotting here, though in some sense inflective of a bathetic image of the writer, maintains the theme of creative intensity in the sense of a vigorous engagement with subconscious or with fleeting insight. To jot, it might be said, is to compete with the current of poet vision, to store ‘precious’ inchoate feeling and acumen for a later fashioning in the artwork proper. Simultaneously, ‘the dark’ can be said to propose a mode of instinctual and experimental articulation, with a mediation of the invisible and the unsayable emerging as the cognitive vanguard of the Stevensean poet’s quest for truth and integration.

The final six verses of Part Two of “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” purport to reflect upon the peculiarity of the poet-percipient as defined by the anatomization of his capacity and his needs in the preceding verses.

Did not the age that bore him bear him among
Its infiltrations? There had been an age
When a pineapple on the table was enough,

Without the forfeit scholar coming in,
Without his enlargings and pale arondissements,
Without the furious roar in his capital.

Green had, those days, its own implacable sting.
But now a habit of the truth had formed
To protect him in a privacy, in which

The scholar, captious, told him what he could
Of there, where the truth was not the respect of one,
But always of many things. He had not to be told

Of the incredible subjects of poetry.
He was willing they should remain incredible,
Because the incredible, also, has its truth,

Its tuft of emerald that is real, for all
Its invitation to false metaphor.
The incredible gave him a purpose to believe. (CPP695)

The pejorative sense of the incredible is active here, and we might recall again Stevens' treatment of Eliot in "The Creations of Sound." The import of the above is that the assumed untenability of some poetic fictions should not deter the value of their inner meaning, the value of their hermeticised structure. 'For all its invitation to false metaphor', that is, for all the typical denunciation of Stevensian pure poetry, for all the 'current cant about escapism' and the pervasive aesthetic reservations of the proscriptive 'lovers of reality', the Stevensian poet retains 'the incredible', for it is to be understood finally as the heroic surface of the absolute realm of his poetic possibilities.

Returning to the poetry of the collection *Parts of a World*, with a view to extending my comments on "Of Modern Poetry" and "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," I want to consider now some further examples of Stevens' construction of the permissive audience. "Asides on the Oboe" and "Prelude to Objects" both attempt to create a theoretical basis for the ideal function and capacity of the Stevensian poet, and both contain a subtle rhetoric of resistance to pejorative conceptions of poetry. "Prelude to Objects" concludes with the following lines:

Poet, patting more nonsense foamed
 From the sea, conceive for the courts
 Of these academies, the diviner health
 Disclosed in common forms. Set up
 The rugged black, the image. Design
 The touch. Fix quiet. Take the place
 Of parents, lewdest of ancestors.
 We are conceived in your conceits. (CP195)

A particular density of allusion pertains to these lines. The framing premise is an entirely forgiving audience represented in the act of making an earnest plea to the Stevensesan poet. It is an audience willing to embrace the poet's eccentricity, his innate propensity for the aberrations of both the abnormal and the ideal, an audience possessed of a vital need for the profundity of the poet's work. The plea reveals that the poet's role is that of an exalted panacea for the anti-poetic in life, the dulling malaise of the quotidian as Stevens saw it. The audience claims obsequiously that its own identity is incomplete without the poet's rendering of language. 'We are conceived in your conceits', is the climax of the overall supplicating thrust of the stanza. Such is the appetite of the audience that even the contradictory qualities of the poet are to be enlisted in the imaginative righting of the academies. The bidding of 'more nonsense' resists the indicting charge of obscurantism and indulgence, of being '[i]nfected by unreality' (CPP583). It implies a sanctioning of ambiguity in poetry. Stevens can be identified here salving his sense of the typical rejection of the more hieratic forms of representation in his own writing. In a 1940 letter to Hi Simons, he complained in note form of what he imagined as the instant disrepute of the more completely imaginative ideas in the poems of "Owl's Clover."

These things are glittering nonsense (gaudiness gaped at: O = oh! Or an open mouth or blank eye) to the people of Machine. (L371)

The suggestion of the sea as generative source, from where the conceptions are to be 'foamed,' involves a much more conducive cultural atmosphere. The iconic birth of Venus, via Boticelli and through to the Pre-raphaelites and Pater, is here exonerated of any would-be de-politicised detachment, an explicit redressing of the very reservation he had articulated through a socialist mouthpiece in the fourth section of "Owl's Clover":

The workers do not rise, as Venus rose,
 Out of a violet sea. (CPP582)

The *Harmonium* poem “Le Monocole de Mon Oncle” is also echoed here:

The sea of spuming thought foists up again
The radiant bubble that she was. (CP13)

The image of the sea also suggests the most Francophile of Stevens’ *Harmonium* poems, “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” that sonorous, chromatic poem of morphing parasols and chocolate; arguably his most delectate effort. The sea often serves as synecdoche for Stevens’ sense of the luxuriance and the pejorative romance of spuming thought and sensation. The term ‘foists’ in the above quoted line, for example, indicates a cautious and ironising gesture on Stevens’ part. And yet, for the ideally unsceptical audience of “Prelude to Objects,” the sea is quite openly welcomed as part of the indispensable apparatus of poetry. Indeed, the ‘nonsense’ of the waves is to be the salvation of the ineffectual academies, presented here, as so often in Stevens’ poetry, as the impoverished and lamentable bastions of the excessively sensible.¹⁷

This is a Stevensesan audience fortuitously immune to the pejorative conceptions of poetry and to what in “The Noble Rider” were inveighed as the ‘common cant’ and ‘chatter about escapism’ (CPP662). Unperturbed by the foaming nonsense, and sympathetic enough to the poet not to request he eschew his imaginative reservoir, the audience, akin to the grateful spectres of “Large Red Man Reading,” come to the poet in a state of lack, that he might provide that essential yield, the music and the insight, the prophetic rendering and disclosure and intensification of reality; in short, the forms of truth which they cannot hope to attain without him, the ‘diviner health’ of poetry made amenable.

The second half of the stanza effects a distinct aggrandizement of the poet-percipient, reflecting a tendentious faith in his capacities. The injunctive verb forms, ‘set up,’ ‘design,’ and ‘fix,’ evoke a specialized labour, a surgical deftness of poetic feeling and craft, thus bestowing a socially invested mode of validity on the poet. To ‘set up the rugged black, the image’, the poet must possess the traditionally understood competence of literary skill. The wording here involves a connotation of literary esteem which inheres in the idea of the particular quality of poetic imagery. But the more abstruse ‘rugged black’ extends the typical literary sense of the image. What is requested here, it seems, is an incorporation of the elements, of an imposing earthiness. In short, a subtilizing poetry of uncommon intensity. If the poet is equipped to set up such realities, and make them available to his audience, then,

¹⁷ Perhaps most memorably, Stevens quips at the conclusion of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*: “They will get it straight someday at the Sorbonne / We shall return at twilight from the lecture / Pleased that the irrational is rational,” (CP406).

within the terms of the “Prelude to Objects”, he will have earned the heroic stature that this verse seeks to afford him. Further, he will deserve the self-worth of a physical office, a manual engagement, busily setting up, designing, and fixing, in valuable and validated gestures of subtle responsiveness to the needs of his audience. Such integral and participatory tasks will ultimately bring him closer to a reconciled mode of citizenship, a role largely denied to Stevens by the anti-idealism and anti-romantic socialism of his harshest critics. Here was a writer endeavouring to repress the awareness, as he said, that a ‘considerable number of people must feel very sceptical of all poets’ (CPP668).

We can read these lines with greater deduction if we accept that the audience’s implicit expectations reflect the poet’s sense of his own ability to meet the task at hand, in this instance to augment by subtilization the unfulfilled life of realism. The invitation to ‘design the touch’ locates the poet as minister of the neural pathways of the audience response. The connotation of artifice in ‘design’ carries into the experience of the tactile an appeal to the strong and pleasurable feelings that Stevens typically associated with poetry: ‘The pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation’ (NA58). The role of designer establishes a further sense of validity and practicality. A physicalized sanctioning of the habit of poetic abstraction is achieved through the conflation of the idea of the poet as architect to the idea of the poet as mediator of reality and sensation, thereby serving to balance the divergent tendency in each perspective: the pragmatic and empirical as against the contemplative and metaphoric. We can note that this assumed resolution appeals to an ultimate functionality of poetry. The request, ‘fix quiet’, embodies at least one aspect of this resolution and we are reminded of the acoustic potency of the Stevensean poet as cast in “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together.” The poet, as one understood to be capable of traversing the very substance of sound, befits the image here of a master of silence. In the figure of one who might ‘fix’, that is, handle, render, repair, or conduct the ‘quiet’, Stevens invokes an artist whose adept probing of sensory experience invites the suggestion of an omnipotent musicality, the creative and prophetic mastery of the most precise and exalted poetic effects. We might recall the masterful attainment by the ‘acutest poet’ of finalities, perfections and unalterable vibrations in verbal music, cited previously from “The Noble Rider.” Undoubtedly, in the establishment of an audience that might acquiesce so reverently to such a deeply subjective valency, we are given the fantastical

readership, the 'elite' that Stevens speculated as performing that role which cannot be fulfilled in the poet's isolation.

That elite, if it responds, not out of complaisance, but because the poet has quickened it, because he has educed from it that for which it was searching in itself and in the life around it and which it had not quite found, will thereafter do for the poet what he cannot do for himself, that is to say, receive his poetry. (NA29)

It is without doubt a 'quickened' and fixated audience we find in "Prelude", an audience hungry and susceptible and forgiving, willing ultimately to capitulate only to the poet and his work:

Take the place
Of parents, lewdest of ancestors.
We are conceived in your conceits. (CP195)

These concluding lines seem to attempt to conflate a sense of sexuality, fecundity and licence, with the idea of the higher forms of understanding Stevens deemed to be available in poetry. To be conceived in conceits, in one sense, is to experience a conceptual genesis in literature, the histrionic sense of orphic deeds. The term 'conceits' also gathers together the idea of poetic tropes and the perceived conceitedness inherent in the poet who indulges his own temperament, living by the aforementioned term 'indirect egotism.' In "The Noble Rider" we find the following aggrandizement:

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. (CPP662)

In the conclusion to "Preludes," the 'we' of the audience is subordinated to the poet as esteemed, parental, fateful addressee. 'Lewdest of ancestors' also bids the licence of the poet who wishes to write by 'the morality of the right sensation' (CPP679). Lewdness here incorporates a sense of imaginative freedom with ribaldry, and the connotations of iconoclasm and a meaningful profanity resonate in the word-choice. We might recall here also "A High Toned Old Christian Woman" from *Harmonium*, where Stevens sets up the anti-orthodoxy of the poetic fiction as a tauntingly Dionysian rebuttal to the shrillness of the old woman's piety.

In that poem, the poet's key subversion of her haughtiness and dogmatism is an assumed philosophical parity of poetic and religious experience:¹⁸

Thus, our bawdiness
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones. (CP59)

A similar ontologically inclined profanity characterizes the appeal to the role of the lewd ancestor in "Prelude to Objects." Two years after this poem was written, paraphrasing the penultimate section of "Owl's Clover" for Hi Simons, Stevens wrote:

What represented art now represents the artist that made the work, or, rather, the attributes of the artist, the progenitor of a race (Exceeding sex, he touched another race. Exceeding sex means surpassing it, having progeny by the spirit). The artist, that is to say, the man of imagination, thus becomes the ethereal compounder, pater patriae, the patriarch wearing the diamond crown of crowns, that is: the crown of life ... (L372)

The poet, bidden to the full performance of his tasks, into that 'moment of exaltation that the poet experiences when he writes a poem that completely accomplishes his purpose' (NA53), the same figure proceeding prophetically as 'his own master, to those violences that are the maturity of his desires' (NA63-64) will simultaneously access a fundamental human reality. Tellingly, Stevens adumbrates this imminent revelation in the portentous mode of a quasi-Freudian ungovernability of the artistic spirit. For Stevens, to be 'conceived in conceits' may also be to know the psychological benefit involved in his famously understated account of one of the purposes of poetry, namely, help at living one's life. 'The extreme poet', Stevens wrote in the same letter to Simons, 'will produce a poem equivalent to the idea of God.' That is to say, he will produce a profound fiction which will assume supremacy over the traditionally conceived underpinnings of reality. In later chapters, I will be exploring the extent to which Stevens attempted an actualization of such speculative gusto. For the purposes of the present chapter, it is sufficient to remark that before 1945, in the context of his meditating the tension between the contemporary and the subjective-artistic, Stevens' had not yet made a concerted effort to usurp the god-conception by poetry. Instead we see him vying for the attention of the conflicted souls of his readers. What he attempted predominantly at this stage was the creation

¹⁸ In the following chapters I show how Stevens' stance here evolved in the later work into a concern for what Jung termed 'that greater territory of the self which lies beyond the segment of Christian morality ... that wholeness of nature and spirit in which conflicts and contradictions are resolved.' *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London: 1995, p. 345.

of a proud and prodigious definition of the capacity of the poet, that he might be regarded, beyond the insistent discourse of the pejorative, at once as a capable, indispensable and autonomous mediator of life by the imagination.

“Asides on the Oboe” can be read as an extension of the ideas that I have been identifying in “Prelude to Objects.” The famous opening sets up the tensions of the religious function of poetry, proposing a problematic affirmation, an assent to a higher reality as disclosed in poetry in the fictional yet apposite ‘clairvoyance’ of the acutest poet. The problematic inheres in a tentativeness with regard to absolutes, and a sustaining of reality by the provisional, the interminable prologue. The poem commences with a voice almost impatient in tone, projecting an exasperated attitude at the caution, or the diffidence, as “The Noble Rider” would have it, which the premise of the poem establishes rhetorically in the reader.

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. (CP250)

The dismissive imperative here is extended as the poem develops to a critique of the stance that would curtail poetic euphony, and the construction of the ‘major’ or ‘central’ man. The poem will apply the virility of the ideal poet to the subject of war and attempt to defend the tenability of this individual aesthetic response in the face of the charge of being un-ethically detached. We are again in the rhetorical territory of the aberrational and the pejorative. The poem’s development is established by a casting in contrast the evocation of outmoded mythology with the hyperbolized figure of the Stevensean poet-percipient. The euphuism and mystical fictionalizing of the poet, it is implied, are not subject to the obsolescence and granulation that is the fate of other forms of mythology.

The obsolete fiction of the wide river in
An empty land; the gods that Boucher killed;
And the metal heroes that time granulates—
The philosopher’s man alone still walks in dew,
Still by the sea-side mutters milky lines
Concerning an immaculate imagery.
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 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. (CP250)

The argument here can be located within the logical link between ‘If you say’ of line seven, and the counterstatement in line nine beginning, ‘there is still.’ It may be summed up as follows. With whatever extent of certitude the reader, or the addressee, might wish to subscribe to a philosophy of human limitation, to a grave and post-romantic materialism which argues the delusion and the inefficacy of the imagination, there exists an abiding contradiction, a robust charge of fallaciousness against the realist. If it is deemed that man should not assume the status of a god (here we might paraphrase Stevens’ own previously discussed notion of clairvoyance as an example of such higher humanistic aspiration) and if the claims of height and nakedness, viewed as symbolic evidence of the natural endowments of imaginative subjectivity,¹⁹ are not enough to dissuade the sense of man as an agent benighted by the evasiveness of his own efforts to know and to articulate the world, still there remains, regardless of such comprehensive proto-deconstructionist reservations, the allure of the grand abstraction of the acutest poet.

It behoves us, Stevens argues, to relent to the lustrous figurations, to the advanced humanity of the ‘extreme poet’, being as he is one of those exemplars ‘who exceed us in nature as they do in speech’ (NA49) for ‘in his poems’ ultimately ‘we find peace’ (CP251). In addition to the controversial elitism of these ideas, this enigmatic ‘impossible possible philosopher’s man,’ enacts a constellation of several pejorative conceptions of poetry. That he ‘still walks in dew’ and that he ‘dewily cries’ prompts us to refer to “The Man on the Dump,” also from *Parts of a World*, where Stevens considers the traditional modes of poetic affirmation, with a particular sense of the sentimental aspects of the pastoral. “The Dump” is the belated, problematic and yet still lyrically inclined, palate of accrued poeticisms as experienced by the modern artist. The dew represents the instinct for affirmation as it is checked by diffidence and the sense of excess, with the dump itself representing something of what Stevens termed in “The Noble Rider”, ‘a cemetery of nobilities’ (NA35).

The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green
 Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea

¹⁹ Carroll has explained Stevens’ use of the trope nakedness in epistemological-visionary terms as ‘unmediated contact with the natural world.’ *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, p. 132.

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. (CP202)

Further, by virtue of the fact that the grand function of the ‘philosopher’s man’ is dependent on his being ‘the man who has had time to think enough,’ he echoes Stevens’ concern with the iconically damning notion of the ivory tower. Stevens’ defended the idea of sequestered artistry in his prose, inveighing against those he deemed ‘intellectual constables’, privying instead a necessary isolation as the dignified condition of the meditative process of writing poetry. ‘Escapsim has a pejorative sense, which it cannot be supposed that I include in the sense in which I use the word’ (NA30-31).

The third part of “Asides On the Oboe,” explores the instant tension of poetry and the discourse of war. In the subject of war Stevens encountered much of the difficulty described in a 1940 letter to Hi Simons. Reflecting on the challenge of embracing a social reality in the writing of “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens invoked ‘the difficulty of imposing the imagination on those who do not share it.’ (L369) The proselytizing voice of “Asides on the Oboe” seems preoccupied with the pursuit of a doctrinal pronouncement that might vanquish all argument against the anti-diffidence of the poetic worldview. It is with this sense of earnestness that the poem in its third and final section seeks to exonerate the life of the ideal by juxtaposing it with the pressing tragedy of war, thereby gesturing towards a finally valid defensibility for the imagination.

The result may well be tenuous, and as poetry perhaps the strategy was ill-advised, but the effort is important for a full understanding of Stevens’ delineation and defence of what he was expressing in his writing of the early 1940s as the natural qualities and aberrations of the poetic temperament. It will be seen that a more intricate and suggestive re-writing of this device occurs in the sixth canto of “Esthetique du Mal.”

One year, death and war prevented the jasmine scent
And the jasmine islands were bloody martyrdoms.
How was it then with the central man? Did we
Find peace? We found the sum of men. We found,
If we found the central evil, the central good.
We buried the fallen without jasmine crowns.
There was nothing he did not suffer, no, nor we. (CP251)

The jasmine scent establishes a pejorative image, a suggestion of dream and detachment inhering in the idea of the exotic plant and its derivatives. Analogous to the idea of nobility, insofar as it emblematises an imposing aesthetic, we can read a compounding in the jasmine of the rhapsodic tea drinker of “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (CP65) together with the suggestion of a delicate window dressing, site perhaps of the exquisite reveries of a bourgeois and gourmet lawyer, even an occupant of the ivory tower, or indeed a connoisseur of imported Asian art, each of these implications a refracted definition of the author.

‘Death and war’, of course, immediately problematise the reposefulness and pleasure of this fragrant apparatus of meditation. The very prevention of poetry is enforced in the graphic counterpoint of the jasmine islands as ‘bloody martyrdoms.’ The jasmine forms then an implicit index of ‘the sublime / from which we shrink’ (CP314). But notably, Stevens does not grant stability to this contradiction of the imagination by contemporaneous tragedy. Instead, he begins to dissuade the reader from the undermining of the jasmine philosophy by commencing an interrogative tack. ‘How was it with the central man? Did we find peace?’ These questions provoke the possibility of a level of deception in any confident negating of the poet’s explorations by the exigent factuality of war. The relegation of jasmine as an inappropriate distraction from the funerary gravitas of military conflict is then subtly countered. Good, it is professed, coexists with evil, and thereby an enduring savour of heroism abides, an open affirmation which the poem proposes as the ground of an inclusiveness, which is then furthered into a tolerance for the life of the aesthetic. ‘There was nothing he did not suffer, no, nor we.’ This statement posits a significant doubt as to whether the imaginative subject, the central man, the poet, had indeed been initiated through the communalizing rite of suffering, but the syntax effects a repudiation of this unfavourable implication. The ‘he’ and the ‘we’, from the acknowledgment of a preceding irreconcilability, are edged back to the quasi-familial solidarity of pain in life. From this somewhat tenuous foothold the final stanza of “Asides on the Oboe” embarks on a less apologetic vindication of the seemingly fiendish jasmine-poet.

It was not as if the jasmine ever returned.
But we and the diamond globe at last were one.
We had always been partly one. It was as we came
To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard
Him chanting for those buried in their blood,
In the jasmine haunted forests, that we knew
The glass man, without external reference. (CP251)

Where the preceding verses had cited the luxuriant proclivity of the poetic imagination as the basis of an unconscionable inaccuracy and detachment in the poet, the above lines qualify the purging of that proclivity by the resonant fact of the endurance of a set of indispensable poetic truths. Thereby, the verse recounts a progression in the mind of the aggrieved and suspicious war-time audience as it comes to a new knowledge of the power and the validity of the imagination. The early opposition then between jasmine understood as the floral, the lotus-eating, the precious, the disengaged, and its converse in the political, the embattled, the conscientious, the national, has become, by virtue of Stevens' subtle dialectic, less sorely dichotomous.

The poem's 'we' appropriates the rhetorical inclusiveness of the preceding verse, and the 'but' of line two resounds with a tendentious gesture of revision on Stevens' part. Grateful reconciliation to the power of poetry then is the predominant theme of this stanza. Framed in a past tense that suspends equivocation by virtue of describing a definite course of action, an action completed and therefore not hypothetical, we, the readership, and more specifically Stevens' own 1940s readership, are bidden to recall our own capacity to be nourished and enlightened, and finally to be incorporated into an absolute by the fateful luminosity and music that the poet might come to embody. We were 'wholly one' by virtue of our relenting to an augmented perception of the poet, the diamond globe, the living parable of the impossible-possible man. In seeing him and hearing him, we appreciate the previously doubted concord that abides between his artistically charged words and the often macabre ethical challenge of the quotidian. The poem, in what might seem something of a gesture of theodicy, has manoeuvred past the severe image of 'bloody martyrdoms', and into the markedly more permissive space of an elegiac propitiuousness, a theoretically wrought context wherein the poet is accepted as 'chanting for those buried in their blood.' Indeed, by employing the arcane term 'chanting', with its implication of a distinctly pre-modernist sense of sanctity, Stevens attempts to assimilate a more perennial mode of poetry. It is notable that the central contrast has not entirely been evaded, and yet an undoubtedly more amenable interplay of imagination and reality has been affected.

"Asides on the Oboe" is a poem of delicately poised literary awareness. Stevens remains in command of the aesthetic heft of his romantic tonalities. The sense of a 'ploughmen, peacocks, doves' device (L367), as he phrased it, is not overbearing, presented as it is with a dual attitude of the emblematic and the emotive, and with a modicum of inflected

humour. In “*Esthetique du Mal*” Stevens was to appeal on behalf of his embattled aesthete to a sense of judiciousness. Standing above self-delusion, ‘he had studied the nostalgias’ (CP321). Similarly, the jasmine seeks to affirm the idea of a rich, earnest and authentic poetry, in addition to its aspect of the untenable. However, in the poem’s concluding by an appeal to the ultimate humanity of poetic creation, we are left with a characteristic sense of a Stevensean bias towards the transcendental, a staunch affirmation of poetic feeling and possibility, which finally departs from the exigent realism of ‘a time of severely practical requirements’ (L501).²⁰

By locating within the audience itself the hyperbolic character of the central man, in all of his apostrophic transparency and all of the ideal fluency of his visionary forms, indeed, in his essentially exaggerated metaphoricity, Stevens strikes a radical note of exaltation. Logically, in order to arrive at a knowledge of the glass man ‘without external reference,’ we must become as him, so that internally we mark his identity and his power, and thereby participate in his profounder human essence, the breadth and portent of his imagination, his voice and his mind. And, of course, along with this ideal embrace must occur, and herein lies the pivotal agenda of Stevens’ wartime aesthetic as I read it, a dissolution of any social circumscription of the artist that would reject such mystical license and exaltation.

“*Esthetique du Mal*” in its treatment of a quotidian pressure, even of a global malaise, is similarly resistant to any curtailment of the life of poetry. The poem concludes with a vision of an ultra-physical world, a providential earth lustrously disclosed and subtilized by the acutest poet, who in the final canto appears as ‘the adventurer in humanity.’ As the poem develops, it is clear that this prophetic rendering of the world will supersede all other philosophical efforts. The fifteen cantos range through multifarious inflections, pronouncing and denouncing an array of alternatives to the challenge: does suffering invalidate the life of poetry? Moving through realism and through the more orthodox and totalizing forms of metaphysics, Stevens even skirts the suspension of traditional literary exaltation, only to effect an ultimate re-assimilation of the romantic sublime in the comprehensive affirmation of the imagination’s ‘yes’ as against the realist’s proscriptive ‘no’, the latter synonymous in the final canto with a credo of ‘despair.’ The aberrational aesthetic in this sense becomes synonymous with affirmation in a troubled world.

²⁰ ‘At a time of severely practical requirements,’ Stevens wrote to Hi Simons in 1940, ‘the world of the imagination looks like something distorted. A man who spouts apostrophes looks like a volcano’ (L501).

In the sixth canto Stevens stages an elaborate comparison between the life of poetry and the life of reason. The sun, as embodiment of the authoritative lucidity of the normal worldview, and hence, contextually, a representation of the consolidating discourse of citizenship, stands in contrast to the insatiable eccentricity of the 'big bird,' an at once quaint and virile synecdoche for the poet. The sun is characterized by its dominance, and yet also, subversively, by a portrayal of hubris and ineffectuality. The first seven lines of the poem recount his earnest and yet botched philosophies. He is prone to skewed, unharmonious conclusions and his habits are overly scientific and reductive.

The sun, in clownish yellow, but not a clown,
Brings the day to perfection and then fails. He dwells
In a consummate prime, yet still desires
A further consummation. For the lunar month
He makes the tenderest research, intent
On a transmutation which, when seen, appears
To be askew. And space is filled with his
Rejected years ... (CP318)

By being denied the role of clown, a status to which he apparently aspires in his use of clownish colour, the sun is dismissed from the authentic freedom of the eccentric within poetry, the various philosophical good of the carnival-esque, the ribald and the playful. In a sisyphusian frustration, his cyclic perfections 'fail,' and the depth of his flawedness is invoked in the discord between his ideal habitat and the 'consummate prime' which remains shy of fulfilment. Thus he endures an interminably frustrated desire. In the name of imagination he rises to a concerted participation, and yet his paradigmatic rigor and brusqueness hamper any true visionary accessing of the poetic. They are too much the efforts of adherence to a received formula. Overly 'intent' on an alchemical practice, he can only scupper the pretence of his own feigned mysticism, and his 'transmutation', his affected appeal to cognitive power and insight, must misrepresent the truth. The finally anti-poetic disappointment of the rational is figured in the image of a distorting fruition, his pseudo-imaginative work when observed 'appears to be askew.' Patently then, the figure of the sun invites our prejudice, the mood of indictment further accentuated in the line, 'Space is filled with his rejected years.' The next ten lines consider the bird as the temperamental antithesis to the sun:

... A big bird pecks at him
For food. The big bird's boney appetite
Is as insatiable as the sun's. The bird
Rose from an imperfection of its own

To feed on the yellow bloom of the yellow fruit
Dropped down from turquoise leaves. In the landscape of
The sun, its grossest appetite becomes less gross,
Yet, when corrected, has its curious lapses,
Its glitters, its divinations of serene
Indulgence out of all celestial sight. (CP318)

In the movement of this canto a further illustration of the sun's identity is its failure to assimilate the bird. Contending autonomously in his diminutive stature against the sun's enormity, the bird, the truer, more authentically yellow clown, matches the sun in hunger, that is, in the integrity of its eccentric needs. The bird represents then, we might say, the poet as ambivalent citizen exemplifying his own imaginative freedom in the face of the normalizing call to crisis literature. The declaration of an equal measure in the extent of their insatiability, and the ensuing statement to the effect that the bird is to follow the special determinism of his own discrete origins, serve to establish a distinctive liberty for the poet-bird, a sanctioning of a seeming deviance through a separate morality of aesthetic experience, 'the morality of the right sensation.' The bird's peculiarity and even his vulnerability, it is claimed, are not contingent facets. From here the bird proves a recalcitrant agent. It is the 'landscape', that is to say, the dominion of the sun, from whose conventions the bird deviates and into which he cannot allow himself to be absorbed. As Stevens in reactionary mode liked to emphasise, the poet 'must not allow himself to be absorbed as the politician is absorbed' (L526).

We can paraphrase the bird's gross appetite as his proclivity/need for subtilization and for seemingly pure or disengaged or otherwise aberrational poetry. That it becomes only momentarily 'less gross' enacts a rejection of the possibility of being assimilated to the life of the sun-paradigm. Propriety and a brief normalization are the implicitly mocked values of such a capitulation. Immediately, this surrender of the eccentric is revealed as untenable. 'When corrected', that is, when held in the pre-conceived codifications of normative perception and speech, the imagination 'has its curious lapses'. It has its innately aberrational and recursive tendency to its true nature, the implacably gross, the pejorative, the gaudy, the eccentric, the visionary and the mystical: 'Its glitters, its divinations of serene / Indulgence out of all celestial sight' (CP318). Analogously, in the eighth canto of "Esthetique du Mal," the death of Satan along with the ancillary imaginative host of 'many blue phenomena', the rich superstitious underpinning of an erstwhile literary tradition, did not extinguish the root of the fiction. Because 'the death of Satan was a tragedy for the imagination,' a reinstatement of the

epical and the metaphysical is seen as an inevitable instance. In the progress of a 'new romanticism', Satan, as an icon of the mythic needs of the poetic mind, is not invalidated. Ultimately, perhaps diabolically, the poetic force evolves and abides, and in this way it is apparent that the 'negation was eccentric' (CP319).

In the concluding stanza of Canto Six, the sun becomes a still more definite figuration of the anti-poetic. He is 'the country wherever he is.' Within the import of the poem, as was seen with Eliot in "The Creations of Sound," he has become damnably veritable. The bird, in a tendentiously sustained contrast, embodies a transcendental, that is to say, a poetic or susceptible relationship to the ground, remaining allegiant to interiority in the manner of its gravitation to the experience of perfections of artifice in the extended range of the sublimely contemplative 'grassman's mind'.

The sun is the country wherever he is. The bird
In the brightest landscape downwardly revolves
Disdaining each astringent ripening,
Evading the point of redness, not content
To repose in an hour or season or long era
Of the country colors crowding against it
Since the yellow grassman's mind is still immense,
Still promises perfections cast away. (CP318)

In the ninth canto of the poem, Stevens explores his sense of the impoverishment inherent in capitulating to a disavowal of poetry and the poetic temperament. In this instance, the idea of the hegemony of 'the gaunt world of reason' (NA57) prompts a lament for the poetic temperament itself.

... Effendi, he
That has lost the folly of the moon becomes
The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty.
To lose sensibility, to see what one sees,
As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,
To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone,
As if the paradise of meaning ceased
To be paradise, it is this to be destitute. (CP320)

The affirmative folly of the moon here recalls the inverted pejoratives of nonsense and eccentricity earlier explored. The possible loss of that nourishing folly, as with the hypothetical repudiations of nonsense and eccentricity, establishes a rhetorical schema of critique against the infringement of imaginative insight by such a compounded manifestation of rationality as the discourse of war. 'The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty' is the

unenviable reason, perched in its mock-regal seat at the crown of human experience.²¹ The heavy alliteration of this line promotes a bumptious musicality, a staccato that sits awry within the prosodic tact of the greater strophe, serving thereby to satirize the mental life of rigid purity. Further, connotatively, from the idea of a monarchical reason, a sense of tyranny is extended, with the nightmare realm of the poetic sensibility's denudation prompting a meditation on the precious function of the imagination. Stevens conceives a destitute form of sight, a strictly reasonable, diffident, and anti-miraculous seeing. The impassioned and qualifying 'as if' establishes an emphasis upon the idea of what fine subtlety is being squandered by the rule of pure reason by virtue of the standardization of language and vision. For Stevens, there is a 'miraculous thrift', a portentous wiliness, and a quick capacity for resemblance and connectivity in the poetic mind. It is the same mind that feels itself native to a multitudinously acoustic experience of the world, the sense of a musical hearing here counter-pointed to the affectively bitter exile of 'one meaning alone.' The ultimate affirmation of the poetic view in these lines comes in the appeal to a totalizing pleasure, an appositeness of the human spirit, inherent in the freedom of the credo of a moon-minded folly and creation, the idea of a 'paradise of meaning.'

The ninth canto of "Esthetique du Mal" progresses from the rhetorical infernality of the anti-poetic towards an appeal to the new romantic.

.... Yet we require
 Another chant, an incantation, as in
 Another and later genesis, music
 That buffets the shapes of its possible halcyon
 Against the haggardie . . . A loud large water
 Bubbles up in the night and drowns the crickets' sound.
 It is a declaration, a primitive ecstasy,
 Truth's favors sonorously exhibited. (CP321)

The halcyon, by way of the ancient image of the poet-bird orphically placating the elements, gathers the use of music and incantation as emblems of a renaissance of spiritual attunement together with the motifical presence of sensibility, hearing and vision. This effects a narrowing of the general human context down to a more specific meditation on poetic value, fortitude and prowess. If we acknowledge that 'we need another chant, an incantation', then we must,

²¹ Lucy Beckett has written: 'The word poverty was a favourite of Stevens's. He used it like this, and often with a denser load of connotation, to evoke the condition of modern man, without certainty, without truths acceptable as authoritative, without anything but himself and his planet to make something of that will satisfy his need for belief and for significance.' *Wallace Stevens*, p. 21.

the logic of the poem runs, simultaneously accept the contingency of our happiness upon poetry. For only through the unifying harmony and insights of poetry, the synthesis of innocence and understanding that the poet brings, can our harried, post-Christian experience of the relation between mind and world expect to attain its much-needed augmentation. The markedly dignifying thrust of this premise, expressing as it does a vital religious role for the artist who will assume the office of mediator between humanity and its environment, will be seen to permeate much of Stevens' poetry of the later 1940s.

The fifteenth canto, the final canto of the poem, can also be said to foreshadow "Large Red Man Reading" with its image of an uber-earth, an experience of acute poetic-sensory attunement. In this instance, the magnification and disclosure of the truer reality is achieved in part through the poignancy of the perspective of the dead. From their post-corporeal poverty, the 'non-physical people' pine to savour the rich material profundity of the fields in sunlight. The poverty of the single meaning of this constrictive paradise exalts the freedom of the earthly, and in turn serves to exalt the visionary experience of the earth as in itself a kind of poem, a poetically beheld and known and felt location. The ultimate beatitude consists in that 'we feel' this world, and yet Stevens of course is concerned with a higher grade and a broader scope of feeling than is humanly typical. It is for this reason that the deceased figures become emblematic of the inhabitants of the gaunt world of reason. The conviction of their morbidity becomes their exile.

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel. The adventurer
In humanity has not conceived of a race
Completely physical in a physical world.
The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals
Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat,
The rotund emotions, paradise unknown.
This is the thesis scrivined in delight,
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale. (CP325-26)

The 'delight' of these ideas is the high poetic optimism involved in the conception of poetry as a grand and as yet unconsummated project. This potential for the accessing of an unknown living paradise of meaning, identity and awareness, tantalizes the speaker and arouses an

emotive projection of possibilities. A ‘sprawling’ array of ‘metaphysicals’ establishes the proximity of a sublime apperception, a poetic achievement whose attainment will vindicate all the sonority of a religion of poetry. The idea of a complete and completely realized physicality inverts the rhapsody associated with a traditional beyond and locates it in the present, in the mortal. And yet, quite tellingly, this ultimate accessing will not be achieved without the fateful music and abstractions of poetry, the vessel of the supreme fiction, the god-substitute, the ‘great poem of the earth’ itself.

Within this mode of poetic realization, Stevens dispatches a final slight to the argument against poetry from the perspective of human suffering. Far too portentous, too spiritually valid, it seems, are the experiences of poetry, to be relinquished or dissuaded by the materialist account of evil. The concluding lines of “*Esthetique du Mal*” in this way strive to maintain a space for an enraptured view of feeling and sense experience.

One might have thought of sight, but who could think
 Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?
 Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,
 But the dark italics it could not propound.
 And out of what one sees and hears and out
 Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
 So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
 As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
 With the metaphysical changes that occur,
 Merely in living as and where we live. (CP326)

The counterarguments for such definitive affirmation are present in the manner in which the syntax establishes a sub-textual interlocutor. Sight alone, the speaker attests defensively, might not permit of the rhapsodic, or even of the remarkable. However, that does not defeat ‘the thesis scrivined in delight’, the ‘reverberating’ insight. Rather, it remains to acknowledge the profundity of the experience of sight, of what is seen, the wondrous plurality of existence, and this through an invigorated phenomenology of the poetic temperament. It becomes apparent that the first concession to the negating interlocutor is a rhetorical gesture. In allowing that sight may have been thought of, that it may have been somehow conceived or prompted by humanity, the speaker effects an erroneous de-mystification. And from this point the poem advances in a concerted rebuttal of the normalizing view. The phrases, ‘for all the ill it sees’, and ‘for all the evil sound’, announce a rejection of the fact of human suffering in terms of its efficacy as an argument against the value of the imagination. The near demotic phrase, ‘who could have thought’ sustains further the rhetorical ensnaring of the counter-argument, while

appealing to an ostensibly extra-human conception of sensory experience. ‘The dark italics’ of the imagination could never have been propounded, never contrived or domesticated by the mind in an unfeeling state, and their profundity abides beyond any ethically aggrieved circumscription of them by the faculty of reason. Expressing a whelmed consideration of the perennial integrity, freedom, and mystique of sense experience, an almost luxuriating awareness of subtlety and plenitude denies the nugatory thrust of the anti-poetic in the line, ‘So many selves, so many sensuous worlds.’

In this chapter, the idea of an aberrational aesthetic has functioned as a heuristic apparatus for my explication of Stevens’ handling of the tension between historical engagement and an ontologically-aspirant imaginative activity. It has been seen that his anti-positivism runs deeper than is commonly accepted. His allegiance to poetic subjectivity and his confidence in poetic possibility have defined the poet’s entrenched resistance to the ethicization of his art and the related equivocation in his treatment of the contemporary in his writings from the first half of the 1940s. One result of these emphases has been the delineation of a more theoretically confident while less ethically inclined wartime writer than is typically portrayed in Stevens scholarship. By arguing for the presence in the writing of such concepts as anti-diffidence, the reflexively aberrational and pejorative, and the ideal audience, I have sought to reveal an overarching thematic of subversion and redress, whereby Stevens, in tackling the pressure of a realistic-socialized framework, can be seen to affirm the aesthetic space of a seeming romantic indulgence. It has been seen, in this regard, that the lecture “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” stands as a particularly valuable source for analyses of Stevens’ radical apologetics. Having established the substance of Stevens’ proclivity towards an aggrandized anatomization of the temperamental capacity of the poet-percipient, I turn in the next chapter to the collection which followed *Parts of A World*, to the explicit evolution of the thematic of the poetic temperament we find there, and specifically to the later collection’s elaborate exploration of sense perception at the extreme theoretical and experiential ranges of Stevensesan sensibility.

Chapter Two

Notes Towards Clairvoyance: *Transport to Summer* and the Theme of Advanced Perception

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. (L434)

An aesthetic integration is a reality. (NA95)

Transport to Summer stands as an essential precursor to the metaphysically obsessed poetry that Stevens began to write soon after this collection was published in 1947. This is so most particularly for the ways that it elaborates the preoccupation with poetic power and poetic possibility which, as has been seen in the first chapter, were among the most telling aspects of the poet's ambivalence towards contemporaneous and communally mediated reality. A theoretically entrenched concern for aesthetic-philosophical heroism is still very much in evidence in this collection, and it is my concern now to identify and explore the types of conviction contained in a representative selection of the poems in order to mark the development, through the later 1940s, of Stevens' unique mode of transcendentalism. I have selected several poems which are typically less read by Stevens' critics. This decision relates in part to my effort to show the way in which the temperament-perception-transcendence nexus provides an effective means of opening up the ostensibly more obscure work in Stevens' *Collected Poems*. I pay particular attention here to "Certain Phenomena of Sound," "The Pastor Caballero," "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors" and "The Pediment of Appearance," identifying the shared theme of perceptual advancement in each. It is my intention also to identify the manner in which these poems can be said to foreshadow the more orotund and consummatory writings towards which their author would gravitate within a matter of a few years. At several points I make comparisons with poems from *Harmonium*,

and I do this in an effort to redress what I see as an unfortunate reductive tendency in some prominent readings of Stevens' first collection. I will be arguing here for the manner in which key early texts such as "The Snow Man," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" can be read as entailing the seeds for the mature aesthetic of temperament, perception and transcendence that this thesis proposes as indispensable to an understanding of the later work.

1: Parasols, Hats, and Other Portals

The very title of the poem "Certain Phenomena of Sound" enacts a sense of the poetic questing which the body of the poem portrays. We meet here again Stevens' notion of a mindset so attuned to the meditative life and substance of its own experience that it appears primed to apprehend an improbable subtlety. The phrase 'phenomena of sound' implies a deep resonance, a difficult sense of primary and secondary acoustics, and a deep hearing in terms of the act of distinguishing multiple, not to say obscure, aspects of the 'sound' that is said to be heard. The term 'certain' attests further the efficacy of the Stevensean poet-percipient as he dwells in the probing dream of his interrogation of consciousness. The title implies that many phenomena of sound have been intuited, undoubtedly the representational boon of the grandly susceptible temperament which encounters them. Additionally, these attenuated micro-impressions have been taken to an even subtler order, graded and separated, and 'certain' components of them have been chosen as the final subject of the poem. "The Motive for Metaphor," another poem from *Transport to Summer*, placed directly after "Certain Phenomena of Sound" in the collection's sequence, sustains these intrinsic claims to a profundity of perception. Discoursing a special form of equilibrium in the individual artist's relation to the natural world, the speaker, in a mode both consoling and praiseful, says:

... you were happy in Spring,
 With the half colors of quarter-things,
 The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds. (CP288)

This appeal to a kind of surgery of abstraction involves Stevens' construction of a rhetoric of mastery which appears throughout his final two collections of poetry. Such poems we should realise are the poet's tendentious portraits of the adept, the temperamentally equipped

percipient engaged in the extension of the mind and the senses in an effort to know more fully the world of appearances. Stevens, at this stage, would make possible the sumptuous events of beholding that will characterise his later long poems, and, to do this, he sought concertedly to inscribe the profound reality of the praetor-human percipient, the lived capacity of the heroic knower. Moreover, it is from this serious complex of aspiration that the dialectic tension between the anti-poetic and the poetic master is sustained in Stevens' later work.

In the second canto of "Certain Phenomena of Sound," the poet exhorts his epebe-reader: 'We must prepare to hear the Roamer's / Story' (CP286). The implication is that an impoverished state must be transcended. The work-a-day or normative condition of sensory obstruction receives a familiar Stevensesan inveighing here in favour of the deeply suggestive orchestra of the wilderness, the 'prolific narrative' of the inhuman Redwood trees. The trees function as heralds of an imminent anti-domestic revelation, an engulfing of the quaint comfort of the garden by the primordial landscape. They are the symbol of the mind's liberation into a superior, ontologically ranging poetry. The special emotional and epistemological slant of this experience 'makes music seem / To be a nature, a place in which itself // Is that which produces everything else' (CP287). 'We must prepare', Stevens insists pedagogically, because of this portentous availability of revelation and the possible goal of a greater meeting of the cosmos by the aesthetic. Through the efforts of poetry we must work to slough our sensible poverties, as they are known in "Esthetique du Mal." Stevens' ultimately Wordsworthian goal is to earn the subjective apocalypse of a relation to the sublime nature of the physical world, and thereby a greater knowledge of the mind's properties in that perennial relation.

"Certain Phenomena of Sound" reads in its three successively intensifying cantos as an illustration of the attainment of such a higher experience of the poetic mind, leading finally to an image of prophetic sight as attained in the poet-percipient's sexualised meditation of language. Canto One seems less adventurous in comparison, modulating as it does, in its role as a commencement of poetry, a preparatory act of the mind, and something, at least at a surface level, of a more quotidian atmosphere.

The cricket in the telephone is still.
A geranium withers on the window-sill.

Cat's milk is dry in the saucer. Sunday song
Comes from the beating of the locust's wings,

That do not beat by pain, but calendar,
Nor meditate the world as it goes round.

Someone has left for a ride in a balloon.
Or in a bubble examines the bubble of air.

The room is emptier than nothingness.
Yet the spider spins in the left shoe under the bed—

And old John Rocket dozes on his pillow.
It is safe to sleep to a sound that time brings back. (CP286)

This somewhat fragmented evocation of a mood of repose, at first reading, yields little more than the odd substance of a languid empiricism. However, the apparent surface stability of reference can also be seen to convey a mode of significant complication. But for the alignment of the cricket with the two other insects mentioned in the poem, the opening couplet might stand as little more than a figure of drab domesticity. However, spider and locust deliberately bolster the suggestion of the peculiarly powerful state of mind which is at play. They remain the insignia of the poem's special effort to see, and to document awareness, beyond the common boundary of perception. When we grant the curious effect of the image of the cricket in the telephone, an inhabitant somehow of language or speech, as perhaps a cryptic node or blind-spot within the experience of utterance, we can come to a better impression of the poem's drift away from normative cognition, from rational confidence, and into the estranging zone of the dark providence of nature.

In a similarly affective characterisation, the locust is affirmed as a pagan icon, substituting the Sabbath's orthodoxy for a less human, less tangible, and therefore, in Stevens' provisional staging of a transcendent manoeuvre, a more poetically resonant credo. The insect music, it is stated, is not a function of pain, that is, it is not subject to a deduction of mortality based upon corporeal delimitation. And for this reason the speaker elevates its strains above the normative mode. 'Calendar' is the superior predicate of the insect's beating wings, indication of the locust's freedom from the philosophical inhibition that in Stevens' mundo is synonymous with official Sunday observances. Calendar offers an alternative condition of feeling, an opposite of distress. For its juxtaposition with pain, we can recall Stevens' efforts of aestheticist reconciliation with regard to wartime suffering, and his complex of an ineluctable detachment as discussed in the first chapter. In this light the calendar proposes a route of imaginative confidence, the wings beating in profound acquaintance with the arcane

rhythm of seasonal change. A further liberty and resonance is imputed to the locust insofar as it manages, as a condition of its being, to defy the terms of temporality. The locust is not bewitched by the quotidian. In this regard, it functions as a symbol for the mind of Stevens' ideal poet, a refreshing foil and amulet against the anti-poetic. It lives, as is said in another *Transport to Summer* poem, "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," by the coveted 'sense without sense of time' (CP350).¹ The locust is a creature embodying an aesthetic good, counter-orthodoxically free in its own meditations from any imposed circumscription by the Sisyphusian contingency of the revolving planet.

The spider too seems positioned in the poem to counter the impoverishment of the stolidly empirical. The three lines which precede the words, 'yet the spider spins', establish conflated tones of loss and absence. A mere 'someone', a faceless entity, has departed, the dull note of that leave-taking being furthered by the issue of the subject's anonymity. The more jaunty conception of a ride in a balloon is rendered first in hesitation and then changed to an image of vagueness or suspension. It may not have been a ride in a balloon, and instead we are told that this someone may have been imprisoned in a world of drifting spheres, as an unknowable un-knower, an emblem of opacities. And, thirdly in this short series of atmosphere delineation, we are told that 'the room was emptier than nothingness.' The most obvious effect of these images together is the creation of a scheme of impediment or delay, a suggestion of the imagination arrested. But, as I have been saying, the converse signification of the insects is also at play in this poem. And the gravitas of the three lines in question is modified quite emphatically by the affirmatively inclined and pivotal 'Yet'. Someone has left, someone is profoundly adrift, there is no superlative that befits the serious vacancy of this room as it is now seen and felt, for it prompts a state of bereavement 'emptier than nothingness'; and yet a spider spins in the left show under the bed. The value of the locust and the cricket are here carried forward, serving to bolster the canto's proposed conception of a diminutive life-form operative as a haven of poetic meditation. The concluding couplet also partakes of this contrary affirmation of life, however minor, however obliquely espied and savoured. We are offered the homely enthusiasm of old John Rocket asleep on his pillow, in Stevens' mundo the perennially salving image of the dreamer, exemplar of creative entrancement. We are then encouraged, against any imagery of fatalism, that 'it is safe to sleep to a sound that time brings back.' Pursuing a reversal of the earlier negativity, both these lines

¹ We also find in that poem the corresponding line: 'The night-flies acknowledge these planets, // predestined to this night, this noise and the place / Of summer', (CP349).

propose a sense of sanctuary for the mind, and a telling foothold of optimism with regard to poetry's resilience in an era or atmosphere not conducive to artistic elevation.

It is useful for us to probe a little the underlying logic of the line, 'The room is emptier than nothingness.' A cursory reading of these words is likely to ascertain an exaggerated yet uncomplicated negativity in the analogy, something of a candid and philosophically inflected image of desolation or abandonment. We should however also question the experiential terms which might be said to underlie the speaker's impression of the empty room. An aggrandizing note is entailed in the suggestion of a mind which might be acquainted with nothingness. We might ask what, aside from an equivocal melancholy, defines the perspective of the speaker in order that the choice of phrasing might be said to involve descriptive coherence or lyrical apposition. One less obvious answer might be that a certain poetic-ontological power and a certain profound tendency to metaphysical terms is implicit in the use of the concept of nothingness as an analogy in the enunciation of a present state. Not only is it claimed within the semantic structure of this line that nothingness is a knowable state of mind and world, or, to bear out fully its logical import, that nothingness, non-presence, un-worlded-ness, is an aspect of being, a condition or substance available to perception or feeling; but, further, it is also claimed that the putative qualities of nothingness are susceptible to variation, to greater and lesser intensities of absence or emptiness. For a room to be classed as emptier than nothingness, particularly in the context of other lines which, when read directly, propose a mood of disenchantment, is reasonably affective, reasonably communicative. However, Stevens invokes in addition a far greater attenuation of insights here. In Canto One of "Certain Phenomena of Sound" we are presented again with the involved capacities of the ranging Stevensesan temperament, an image of the mind lunging beyond the mind, challenging all reasonable limitations, and appealing proudly, if in relative understatement, to what we might term a state of transcendental initiation. The ensuing cantos of the poem progressively fulfil this prideful evocation.

The poetic impulse in Canto One, then, is drawn through a scheme of muted challenges, emerging successfully, with the reader gaining the composite impression of the predominance of vision over depression. Canto Two incorporates this affirmation and advances significantly its terms. The somewhat sonorous import of this section relies on the imagery of sacrament. Three characters are involved: the priestly and pedagogic speaker, his student Naaman, and the Godot-like imminence of the Redwood Roamer. The speaker

instructs the ephebe in the preparation of what Harold Bloom has usefully described as a ‘visionary food.’² The Redwood Roamer, it is expected, on returning from his portentous odyssey in the primordial forests, will deliver a great boon, an extreme knowledge of nature. This knowledge will be experienced in turn as a superlative music by the ears of those who, because of their poetic susceptibility, are fit to hear and to understand it. No typical listening will suffice, and the speaker cautions his student that the preparation of the mango and the wine and the arrangement of this strategic meal in the alchemically oriented ‘thickest shade of the garden’ are the carefully prescribed terms of the attainment of a special style of perceptual readiness. On the significance of this process, we can draw some useful concepts from Joseph Campbell who, in a Jungian discussion of the archetypal figure of the mother as it relates to the religious underpinnings of the folk tale, has written of a ‘pedagogical utilisation’ of imagery. This is certainly a common mode for Stevens, and Campbell’s elaboration of this notion is also relevant for a reading of “Certain Phenomena of Sound.” He speaks of ‘the purging, balancing, and initiation of the mind into the nature of the visible world.’³ The nature of the visible world in Campbell’s thinking is the truer world as it is intuited and represented by the mystic or the artist or, more generally, the hero. It abides in one sense beneath, as ‘the reality of the deep,’ the immanent substructure and essence of being, and the legendary inheritance of the questing mind that seeks greater relation with the apparent or normative world.⁴ The following is the full text of Canto Two of “Certain Phenomena of Sound”:

So you’re home again, Redwood Roamer, and ready
To feast ... Slice the mango, Naaman, and dress it

With white wine, sugar and lime juice. Then bring it,
After we’ve drunk the Moselle, to the thickest shade

Of the garden. We must prepare to hear the Roamer’s
Story ... the sound of that slick sonata,

Finding its way from the house, makes music seem
To be a nature, a place in which itself

Is that which produces everything else, in which
The Roamer is a voice taller than the redwoods,

² Harold Bloom, *The Poems of our Climate*, p. 205.

³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, London: 1993, p. 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228

Engaged in the most prolific narrative,
A sound producing the things that are spoken. (CP287)

The somewhat matter-of-fact aggrandizement of these lines serves to depict another of Stevens' transcendently initiated personae. The Roamer's epiphanous 'story' is fore-known. He is, as the speaker announces, 'home again.' The poem then moves briskly from expectation to a form of pre-emptive description, hailing the pervasive melody and its tremendous spiritual value, and establishing thereby a sense of imminent threshold. While the subject is predominantly a sense of potential, there is a good amount of the revelatory here too. The 'slick sonata' prompts something of a perceptual event and a deepened intuition of the arboreal vista. The music is presented as a conscious force in itself. It is depicted anthropomorphically 'finding its way from the house.' It corresponds, we can assume, with the speech of the Redwood Roamer, and indeed the two seem conflated in the speaker's contemplation. In intensifying lyricism, the qualities of a transcendental vehicle are imputed to the music. It becomes a means, we might say, reflecting on the title of the collection in question, of transport to a more elemental reading of the summer, and the resonant inhuman text of its gardens, its trees. Music, felt or known as 'a nature', is also, in the line's development, synonymous with 'a place', a venue of visionary appreciation. And in this place, in this poetic mode (the resultant mystical state of the mango-rite, we should remember), music and nature, interchangeably form the divinity or genius of the garden: they are that 'place', that crux or locus or essence, 'that which produces everything else.' And further, pursuing the structure of the vision and the great episode of hearing that accompanies it, within that place, within that visionary circle, there passes the occurrence of the Roamer's prophesied testament.

Music heard elaborately, poetically we might say, in such aggrandized phenomenology, is the place of a poetic realisation of tree-life, 'in which / The Roamer is a voice taller than the redwoods, // Engaged in the most prolific narrative, / A sound producing the things that are spoken.' The repetition of the verb-form 'produce' in the canto's conclusion serves to emphasise the sense of the totalizing generative qualities that are being attributed to the music. In this process, the Redwood Roamer appears as a figure for Stevens' acutest poet. His linguistic powers seem unbounded, his spatialized, orphic pronouncements prompting the abstruse encomium 'a voice taller than the redwoods.'

It is useful for us to observe the tonal distance traversed by the poem at this point. A distinctly less hesitant, less hedging grade of mysticality is at play in these excerpts from Canto Two. In the first canto, the suggestive implications of the insects, of apostasy and meditation, together with the subconscious accessings implied by the motif of the sleep state, proposed a gentle affirmation, something of an understated hegemony of the lyrical. In comparison, Canto Two conceives a distinct threshold of apocalyptic insight. The narrative arc treats of the prospect of an attainable passage to an eco-mythic realm, a place replete with preternatural acoustics, wherein the somewhat ecstatic percipient seems equipped to engage with the very essence of being. As I have pointed out, the lynchpin of this exaggerated advancement inheres in Stevens' doctrinal statement of an augmented listening: 'We must prepare to hear.'

We can pursue a broader context here by identifying some precedents of this phrase in earlier poems by Stevens. A more famous injunction occurs in the considerably earlier 'The Snow Man':

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow; (CP9)

A serious critical oversight with regard to Stevens' aesthetics of perception surrounds the interpretive history of these lines. Many commentaries have appropriated this poem for theories of negativity and impediment in Stevens. Eleanor Cook makes efforts to distance the poem from Emerson's epiphanic mode:

If Emerson had a 'mind of winter' like Stevens' snow man, he would accept or enjoy his bare scene, and there would be nothing special in the place of his experience, or in himself for experiencing it there.⁵

Helen Vendler has written of a 'deadly repetition' in the tonal implications of the poem's syntax, and of an overall 'numb stoic endurance' that leads to a 'terrifying blank.'⁶ Similarly, Beverly Maeder reads a 'monotonous opaqueness,' seeing the wind as an occlusive presence in the poem.⁷ The idea of the mind of winter has, with very few exceptions, been taken as an

⁵ Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word War*, Princeton: 1988, p. 48.

⁶ Helen Vendler, "Stevens and Keats' 'To Autumn,'" in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, Princeton: 1980, p. 188; "Wallace Stevens" in *Voices and Visions: The Poet in America*, New York: 1987, p. 151; *Words Chosen out of Desire*, Cambridge: 1986, p. 49.

⁷ Beverly Maeder, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*, p. 103.

unequivocal figuration of sensible dormancy or entombment, an icy reflection of a dead or deadening world. As Eeckhout expresses it:

A frozen-over ‘mind of winter’ does not bespeak much affinity with Transcendentalism and does not seem to reach out to a divinely empowered universe.⁸

From the perspective of the temperament-perception-transcendence nexus, it proves more tenable to view ‘the mind of winter’ as an affirmative goal for the ephebe-poet. As with Canto Two of “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” “The Snow Man” is a poem about building towards a more epistemologically efficacious perception. To relent to or to attain the mind of winter need not imply an entering of sensory impotence or annihilation, and within the intertextual lineage of the phrasing it seems incorrect to presume that this is what Stevens is proposing. A mind of winter for Stevens, I would argue, suggests an artistic-spiritual condition, a mind whose normative remit and identity have been converted to the elemental processes of the season, the image entailing a purposefully hyperbolized identification between mind and ground. *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* provides us with another key example within this semantic lineage. In the first sequence of that poem, the basic visionary catechism for the ephebe-poet prescribes a heroically reductive altering of sight and mind:

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it. (CP380)

Without such vocational reconfigurings and augmentations, it is assumed, poetry, true poetry, cannot be attained. As readers of the Stevens corpus, it serves us well to apply such tropes of confidence and aspiration to early poems such as “The Snow Man.” Canto Two of “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” in its theorising of a preparatory attuning of the senses constructs the initiatory aspect of an increased perceptual poise. If the equivalent of the mind of winter in that poem is fulfilled, then the arboreal scape will be regarded differently, its abstract, melody-permeated, noumenal substructure being rendered amenable to the novitiate. The critical legacy of “The Snow Man,” however, causes it to be something of a contentious angle to suggest that this state of different regarding in the earlier poem is an affirmative one from Stevens’ perspective. I should state my different reading thus: “The Snow Man” is a poem about imaginative power and fulfilment. It is a utopian poem. It proposes an arrangement of

⁸ Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, p. 91.

advanced perceptual modes: how best to behold, how best to listen, and to think, in order that an absolute unified aspect of reality and mind might be disclosed.⁹

When “The Snow Man” announces, one must ‘have been cold a long time’, it seems incorrect to presume that a judgement is being passed, or that Stevens intends it that coldness, some abhorrent winter condition, has lead to the manner in which the trees and the ice and snow are being known. We might improvise this take on the famous phrasing into an analogous example with the following: Your skin is cold, therefore I deduce that you must have been out of doors a long time. This is the most typical sense in which the first line of ‘The Snow Man’ is interpreted. Alternatively, I am proposing that the ‘one must have been’ clause is better construed as meaning the following: one shall require to have a mind of winter, one shall require the ultimate value of the earth’s coldness. Thus implying: one must become acquainted with the winter themes, the winter essence, vital harshness, timeless portent, solar contingency, and overall planetary resonance of the season of winter. One must approach these winter-nesses with ‘the whole being’ if one would aspire (as one ought, Stevens believed) to the prestigious ontology of the nothingness vision.

If one’s mind can be said to have become truly of winter, to have been in some sense elementalized by winter, as opposed to merely resembling it or invoking it, we might come to the conceptualisation that winter can subsume the mind, meeting it half-way, so to speak, in the glistening field of its aspiration to a version of Romantic synthesis. Further, we might consider this uniquely graduated mind to have been gathered somehow into a psychology, a radical affinity, and this, within the loose denouement of “The Snow Man,” as a predicating complex of insight, a complex through which one might achieve the exalted beholding and listening that comprises the substance of the famously succinct apocalypse of the closing line. One must,

... have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

⁹Stevens wrote to Hi Simons: “I shall explain ‘The Snow Man’ as an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand and enjoy it’ (L464). We can get some sense of the connotations of sublimity within this understatement from considering that same concept as it appears in the essay “The Figure of the Youth as the Virile Poet”: The indirect purpose or, perhaps, it would be better to say, inverted effect of soliloquies in hell and of most of celestial poems and, in a general sense, of all music played on the terraces of the audiences of the moon, seems to be to produce an agreement with reality’ (NA57).

In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (CP10)

The predominant tone of these lines, I propose, inheres in Stevens' confidence in the artistic mind's confrontation of the elements, the trans-phenomenal lucidity in the characterisation: 'nothing himself.' The 'nothing that is not there and the nothing that is' involve a vision of the yield of the poetical de-alloying of world conceptions (the general 'any misery' which is necessarily renounced) by the temperamentally endowed poet-percipient, leading to a harshly figured yet grandly accomplished state of cognitive purity and apperception. The poem celebrates the poetic power that suspends the compulsive experiential data of the not-there, the imposed or misconstrued world. And it is this same power which manoeuvres the experiential locus of the snow-mind into its quasi-posthumous sense of presence, its dual spiritual gravitations of vacancy and attentiveness. The knowledge of nothingness as we have seen forms part of the sketch of the mature initiate in Canto One of "Certain Phenomena of Sound," and, analogously, it might be said that "The Snow Man" purports to exhibit an acute engagement with and mastery over certain phenomena of winter. In addition, the sense of 'the listener who listens', in its subtle tautology, supplies an incantatory inflection, while also incorporating a sense of contemplative tenacity in the concept of listening and listening.

If Stevens exhorts his audience in the late 1940s, 'we must prepare to hear', we should be certain that his forms of faith in the beatific acumen of the auditory faculty are part of a long held credo, one which we downplay in *Harmonium* at the risk of severe mis-readings. Other *Harmonium* poems such as "Thirteen Ways of Looking a Blackbird," and "Nomad Exquisite," have been subject to a problematic reductiveness of interpretation similar to that which I have identified in relation to "The Snow Man." The relative minimalism of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," for example, has largely been seen as 'an anti-systematic

and pluralistic manifesto',¹⁰ part of a diffident exercise by Stevens in post-romantic curtailment of vision. William Carlos Williams, early on, had the poem's premise of multiplicity indictable: 'Stevens seldom comes down on a statement of fact. It's always 'thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird,' which cannot but weaken any attack.'¹¹ What the standard critical approaches seem to have missed is the implicit appeal to a diversity of insight, to a sensory dexterity, as well as the idea of the artistic power involved in the subtle resource of being able to command thirteen methods of looking. In the sequence of *Harmonium*, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" occurs between two poems where the speaker makes much of the intensity of his interior world. Part One of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" announces:

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the selfsame sounds
On my spirit make a music, too. (CP89)

And "Nomad Exquisite," positioned after "Thirteen Ways," presents the faintly bemused self-descriptions of a character who feels himself to be attuned to a temperamental fire of mimetic and melodic ingenuity.

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green pine angering for life,

So, in me, come flinging
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames. (CP95)

Similarly, "Thirteen Ways" functions as the record of a speaker's rarefied responses to the event of his witnessing an aspect of the natural world, in this case the blackbird. Part One posits the centrality of the eye to the overall sequence and sets the tone for the rest of the poem's incorporation of an aggrandized perceptual capacity:

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird. (CP92)

¹⁰ Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, p. 138.

¹¹ William Carlos Williams, "Comment: Wallace Stevens," *Poetry*, January 1956, p. 235.

Some amount of the intended scope of the vision here is represented in the contained vista of the twenty mountains, with the casual compression implying the speaker's assumed experiential range. This impression is intensified in the deep suggestion of unity, as the eye of the blackbird becomes the centrifugal locus of the elemental scene. The appeal to an uncommon poise and inclusivity here, if we impute it to the concept of the extended range of the poetic temperament, readies us in some way for the claim in the next section which announces:

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds. (CP92)

This statement, quite obviously, plays upon the figure of speech, I was of two minds. The common denotation of a state of indecision lingers in the reading experience but it is ultimately transcended by the sense of an esoteric identification and expansion into the elemental, not to say archetypal, life forms of bird and tree. Further, the fact that the diction establishes a triple-mindedness as a previous experience, aligns the poem with the trope of initiation as previously discussed. Indeed, the implicit triplication of mental capacity proposed here can function as an index to other sections of the same poem. For example, the intriguing blend of bemusement and aesthetic empowerment contained in Section Five is replete with an appeal to a state of thoughtful precision and contemplative heightening:

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after. (CP93)

These lines implicitly propose a specialised palate of abilities, with the dominant idea being the seemingly unproblematic approach (an issue of preference as opposed to effort) to aesthetic complexity, an 'acute' accessing and savouring of indistinct and interstitial forms, the posited qualities of sound and silence. Section Eight repeats this mode with the following claim:

I know noble accents
And lucid inescapable rhythms. (CP94)

These examples of an early incorporation of the idea of a dual temperamental and perceptual intensity, even if they do not quite entail the commanding presence of a transcendental thematic, form the conceptual bedrock within Stevens' oeuvre for the involved aesthetic questing and self-aggrandizement of the late 1940s. Poems such as "The Snow Man," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Nomad Exquisite," represent the first outings of Stevens' later and more consistent philosophical concerns. In accepting their characters as prototypical versions of what I am identifying as the later poet-percipient protagonists, we come to a closer understanding of the development of Stevens' idealistic regard for the function of poetry.

In Part Three of "Certain Phenomena of Sound," the canto's speaker, the sonorous and ecstatic Semiramide, recounts an intense visionary episode. He addresses a woman, Eulalia, attesting that a particularly acute and efficacious manner of sight has granted him access to a subtle aspect of her being. A sophisticated essence of light, language and movement is described, wherein Semiramide claims to have encountered the luminous Eulalia unconsciously abiding. The first two lines of the canto offer an indication of the temperamental underpinnings of the artistic event in question. The speaker says that he 'lounged on the hospital porch' (CP287) when the sense of Eulalia's noumenological location was disclosed to him. This detail pointedly aligns the episode in question to the qualities associated with the sleep state throughout Stevens' oeuvre. The languid, convalescent mind, by virtue both of the suspension of practicalities and the comfort suggested by its incapacity, is primed to make a fortuitous departure from less poetic experiences. It is a mind that is positioned to exemplify honoured potentialities of meditation, dream, unconscious insight, transcendence and, of course, poetry. Within the scheme of "Certain Phenomena of Sound" itself, the sleep image links the sketch of Semiramide back to Old John Rocket's empiricism-renouncing slumber in Part One, and forward in *Transport to Summer* to the enthusiastic figuration of 'vividest repose' (CP375) in the poem "Credences of Summer." "The Red Fern," also from *Transport to Summer*, is related by the sibylline assurance of its concluding lines:

Until sight wakens the sleepy eye
And pierces the physical fix of things. (CP365)

The recounted vision we are told took place 'on the east,' and the syntactical and geographical obliqueness here serves to extend the thematic of insight. A sense of elemental

and planetary relation is inflected in the unusual phrasing, with the iconic image of direction invoking an expansive cognitive embrace or gaze, and in turn an increased experiential remit for the poet-percipient whose image gains further augmentation in the sense of annexing an ultimate horizon. Similarly, an earlier poem, “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” from *Parts of a World*, a text too often read as a ‘caricature of idealism,’¹² employs the compass points as part of an invocation of the mind in a state of perceptual empowerment. That poem progresses from the stasis and sensible impediment of ‘the difficulty to think’ into the sublimity of the poet as a force that encompasses the horizon, his consciousness engorged by primordial freedom to the extent that his head becomes ‘like a carving in space,’ ‘a self that fills the four corners of night.’ Here, the initially challenged poet has attained a mind of night, a state of affirmative emptiness and lucidity where the welcome condition, ‘there is nothing to think of,’ heralds an encounter with an external consciousness:

It comes of itself;
And east rushes west and west rushes down,
No matter ... (CP209)

Here, the sensory apocalypse is communicated in the sublime confusion and interchange of polarities, leading forward to a scheme of metaphysical access, emblematised specifically in the above excerpt by the double statement: ‘no matter.’ Matter has been relegated by the mind’s absolute transition, its ascension through the challenge of the unknown. This movement is a good, and the intensity of the transformation, the diction in one sense attests, should not prompt anxiety. The rushing and sundering should not be allowed to dissipate the more purposeful theme of cosmic union. There is, now, no such referent as *matter*. However, this condition should not be allowed, as it were, to *matter* in the face of the greater meaning which in “The Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” becomes the espousal of outer space by the dreaming mind. From this earlier text these connotations of aggrandizement are suitably imported to a reading of *Transport to Summer*.

¹² Daniel Fuchs, *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens*, London: 1963, p. 103. With characteristic rhetoric, Harold Bloom has asked of Emerson: “How can you hope to teach us to purify our selves and lives, without teaching us some, any mode of purgation? How can you urge us to daimonic expansion, from the Soul to the Oversoul, without becoming what Stevens so bitingly calls ‘The Rabbit as King of the Ghosts,’ a grant of consciousness utterly devoid of any being whatsoever?” *Figures of Capable Imagination*, New York: 1976, p. 57. I feel cautious towards such assessments of this poem, given that, however vaunted, it contains so much of the substance of Stevens’ own enduring idealism.

In "Certain Phenomena of Sound," 'on the east' also involves an appeal to an oriental schema, to an idealised iconography of spiritual practice and consummation. Further, we might grant relevance to the cosmological fact of the sun's rising in the east. To be *on* the east, in some sense implies a condition of having entered a visualised involvement with natural illumination. The mind astride the east, astride the bright cleft of the nocturnal and the diurnal, might well consider itself transformed in an impetus of promethean inspiration. In addition, the parasol out of which Semiramide attests his vision to have been emanating, is said to be a thing 'which I had found, against / The sun.' If we apply my previous interpretations of 'on the east' here, we might decode this syntactical curiosity as involving a radical incorporation of elemental process into sense experience. To pursue the logic of these lines, if Semiramide is deemed to have 'found' the mystical apparatus of the parasol, we must, at least in some provisional way, come to view him as a character deeming himself as being privy to trans-corporeal experience. In effective praeter-human guise, his strolls in the hospital grounds include a strolling to the sun, in the transcendental vicinity of which he might find such a remarkable object as a discarded parasol. While addressing this latent tinge of apotheosis, we can recall the manner in which Stevens handled the concept of an experiential nothingness in Part One of this poem. Similarly here, in accord with the poet-percipient's broadened sensibility, the sun becomes the subject of an improbable tangibility, the figure of an experience at once mythic and immediate. Semiramide then, in his routine of solar intimacy, proves a kind of triumphal Icarus beyond fate and annihilation, with the sun being divested of its ferocity and in turn being harnessed and localised by the heroic adequacy of the poet-percipient.

What is the status of the sun in "Certain Phenomena of Sound" after such comments? We can look on the level of wordplay for one answer if we include some references from the later poem "The Bouquet." In that poem, Stevens defends his credo of abstraction as the necessary practice of the authentic and temperamentally defined artist. Empowered by 'a growth of the reality of the eye', the poet is to be fully granted his proclivity for sublime figurations. As an exalted native of the beyond, he is deemed to be 'entering home' when he commands 'things transfixed, transpierced and well perceived.' This posited ground of revelation is a 'place of meta-men and para-things, / And yet still men though meta-men, still things / Though para-things' (CP449). These lines represent a key formulation of Stevens' argument for the epistemological validity of real things that have been abstracted into the

‘personality’ of the poet, there to be elevated and changed in a greater disclosure, ‘grown venerable in the unreal’ as it is stated in “Credences of Summer.” The qualifications ‘still men’ and ‘still things’ in the above are possessed of an urgency and defensiveness of tone. Stevens as ever is keen to survive the brand of the surreal or the Arcadian. Rather, he would ascribe to the mechanisms of metaphor and abstraction a precious quotient of truth and authentic experience.

The prefixes ‘meta-’ and ‘para-’ here denote the affirmatively altering nature of the poetic act as Stevens preferred to conceive it. The power to perform profound mental gestures of ‘subtilization’ and to conduct a ‘prodigious search of appearance’ characterises the meta-men, Stevens’ indomitable aesthetic clergy of questers, that same estranged, clairvoyant elite ‘for whom / The world has turned to the several speeds of glass,’ as it is said in “The Bouquet” (CP449). In this last phrasing, the meta-men are aligned with the over-arching recurrence of temperament-depiction in Stevens’ poetry. The ‘for whom’ recalls numerous other visionary characters: ‘those for whom a square room is a fire’, the same cohort who knew ‘the feelings of inhuman depths’ in Parochial Theme (CP191). Also, the artistic ‘animal’ of “A Dishes of Peaches in Russia” ‘for whom / The bells of the chapel pullulate sounds at / Heart.’ (CP224). Also recalled is the percipient whose mind knew a phantasmagoric essence of green: ‘him that sees, beyond the astronomers, / the topaz rabbit and the emerald cat’ from “The Candle a Saint” (CP223); and ‘those for whom green speaks’ who appear in the later “Repetitions of a Young Captain” (CP309). Semiramide’s narrative can be located within such recurring tropes of meta-realistic authority. Arguably, the sun, as it is known in “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” with its peculiar facilitation of the event of the protagonist’s ‘seeing’ Eulalia, is the figure of a predominantly interior relation, a yielding to metaphor creation. And yet, for all that height of subjectivity, it is deemed to be no less a form of disclosure, no less an epistemological achievement.

A significant cue for such a deduction lies in the idea of a meta-solarity, a dreamed notion of the sun, as Semiramide depicts it. The parasol then becomes a spliced denotation, nodding to the Latin root, and reading in turn as *para-sol*. Stevens might well have drawn pleasure from devising, or indeed stumbling upon, this involved congruency of conceptions. A parasol then, within the poet’s mundo, could just as well be the sun met in the prophetic fullness of the imagination. Semiramide recounts an experiential locus which occurs in the ‘interior of a parasol.’ This interior, applying the wordplay, becomes the centre or vital

essence of an abstraction, an emanation of the ‘central mind’ (CP524), whose suggested circumference provides a potent mimesis of the ostensibly contemplated orb. In addition, the literal figure of the parasol can be said to survive its immediately uncertain status as an index of gentility or preoccupied sophistication, since the intertextual basis leads us in several ways to an argument for the parasol as a philosophically weighted image of the advancement of sensoriality in poetic experience.

The sun-umbrella, then, properly transposed into the poet’s personality, becomes a form of the faithful temperamental artistic ability, the immanence of the abstraction functioning as a visionary ‘luminous companion’ (OP126), the emotive ‘interior paramour’ (CP524), a poetic device and access of feeling that effects a creative passage from sun as empirical object to sun as poetic disclosure, the latter reality at once superseding and revealing the former. ‘An aesthetic integration,’ Stevens said, ‘is a reality’ (NA95).

Eulalia is in one sense an object of endearment for Semiramide, the categorizations ‘sister and nun’ inscribing something of an attitude of filial and pious gratitude. An inhabitant of the parasol, she walks ‘white, / Gold-shined by sun,’ and her submerged and elusive qualities here recall other poems where Stevens addresses a female muse. In the *Harmonium* poem “To the One of Fictive Music,” where poetry is characterised as the pursuit of a synthesis that will augment the senses and thereby rectify ‘the birth that separates us from the sea,’ the ‘one,’ the goddess of elemental unities, is named variously ‘sister and mother and diviner love.’ She abides not in the surfaces of things, but in the hallowed recesses of experience and intuition, the subtilized realm of Stevensesan poetry. And therefore she is known only to the few adept questers who attain her audience by the intensity of their meditations. As a presence she is unobtrusive. Scarcely available to the mind, she avoids normative discourse:

... No thread
Of cloudy silver sprinkles on your gown
Its venom of renown (CP87)

In the later poem “Madame La Fleurie,” from *The Rock*, Stevens presents a more oppressive queen of his imagination. She is figured as a ‘waiting parent’ within the earth. When he wishes to consult her, or when he is summoned, it is the proudly hermetic coordinate of ‘beneath a dew’ (CP507) to which he turns. The parasol presents another such interstitial location for the muse. Eulalia too, as the scarcely visible woman in the hidden vignette of the

parasol, embodies a special knowledge of the penumbral. She will never, we can assume, approach the anti-poetic ignominy of 'renown.' That is, she will not be commonly perceived. As Madame La Fleurie was said to reside 'beneath a dew,' Eulalia resides only within the parasol.

It is important to notice that while these poems affirm abstractions and divinities, and while their mood is supplicatory and also in some sense humble, they are only partly characterised by a prayerful abasement. A more emboldened doctrine of transcendence is also present. Stevens' implicit statement in "To the One of Fictive Music" and "Madame La Fleurie," to the extent that they depict events of secret access, is one of an elitist initiation to the beyond of poetry. The presumption that underpins these revelatory forays is the poet-percipient's possessing of a grander faculty, a deeper compliment of insight. In this regard, it can be argued that Eulalia's glory is not quiet her own. In the progression of Part Three of "Certain Phenomena of Sound," it is not correct to say that she is an unequivocal object of praise. Close analysis of the language reveals that her presence is strictly predicated by Semiramide's ability to conjure her, and the second half of the canto emphasises increasingly the speaker's self-affirming efforts in the psychic labour of the vision. In Canto Two, the question was posed, how might the Redwood Roamer be heard? The answer was given in the sanctifying gestures that were drawn from the injunction 'we must prepare to hear.' Canto Three re-enacts this paradigm by asking implicitly the question, how might a solar vision of the woman Eulalia be possible? And the answer in this case involves full deferral to the powers of the poet-percipient. The following lines commence a treatment by Semiramide of his own role in the disclosure of Eulalia:

So seeing, I beheld you walking, white,
Gold-shined by sun, perceiving as I saw
That of that light Eulalia was the name. (CP287)

The verbs that denote sight in these lines are somewhat congested, proposing a multiplicity of sensory categories. The acts of seeing and beholding, it can be noted, are brought together in the first line as distinct positions on a scale of perceptual intensity. This mode increases with the coupling of 'perceiving as I saw.' This second formulation attributes to Semiramide something akin to the triple-mindedness I have identified in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." As the third line in the above excerpt returns to the ostensible subject of the vision, the luminescent Eulalia, the notion of the force of divination that reveals her remains

uppermost. The special anatomization involved in the alloy of light and name neglects the idea of deference to an essence, and dwells instead upon the more enthusing facts of how 'I saw' and that 'I beheld.' This deviation accelerates in the ensuing lines with a more orotund identification of the poet himself as the proud site of what Stevens considered as the immanence of poetic abstraction (L434).

Then I, Semiramide, dark-syllabled,
Contrasting our two names, considered speech.
You were created of your name, the word
Is that of which you were the personage.
There is no life except in the word of it.
I write Semiramide and in the script
I am and have a being and play a part.
You are that white Eulalia of the name. (CP287)

We might paraphrase the above in the following way: In a deft series of mental shifts, I directed my meditations from the hub of the vision to the reality of language and enunciation as it circumscribed our presence together in the elucidated wheel. In these lines it occurs that the initial astonishment at the fact of the overwhelming encounter, the vision of Eulalia as the hallowed, symbolic 'sister and nun,' is transferred by an increase in the rhetoric of mastery into an astonishment at the speaker's own cognitive power at the centre of the abstraction. Any myth of filial piety or communion from earlier in the canto becomes expunged at this stage as Eulalia assumes a passive role in the narrative of Semiramide's devotion to poetry within himself. The particularly sonorous 'I, Semirmide' enacts the centring of the visionary episode, and the attribute of being dark-syllabled foregrounds both the notion of poetry as a verbal schema, and the Romantic notion of a broodiness of nature in the poetic artist. From here, the claims of having seen, having considered and of having contrasted, announce specific feats of further poetic penetration into the mystery of the vision in the parasol.

Restrictively, Eulalia is denied substance outside the linguistic frame. That is, she is deemed inferior to the fascinations of resonance posited within the obligatory temperament. The act of 'contrasting our two names' occurs as an intellectual exercise, implying a sense of masterful juxtaposition which extends, through the theoretic route of a subtly ascertained difference, into a meditation on the poetic medium, 'speech'. The tone at this point becomes pedagogic. The consideration of speech yields another insight, an expounding of which is directed at the increasingly passive Eulalia. She is told that her existence in the vision was an aspect of the verbal intensity that characterises the subjectivity of the poet-percipient. The

curious tautology in the lines, ‘You were created of your name, the word / Is that of which you were the personage’ sustains the forcefulness and reduction that is occurring in the poem’s denouement. Ultimately, Eulalia’s status as apparition is rendered secondary to the source of the apparition itself, her claim to apotheosis becoming muted and even somewhat disqualified by the predominating narrative of Semiramide’s own perceptual excellence. By the poem’s conclusion, the thematic of a sibylline distinction has been fully converted from an aggrandizement of the seen to an aggrandizement of the seer.

Eulalia, as is the case with the portentous hiker in “Chocorua to its Neighbour,” is a form only ‘physical if the eye is quick enough’ (CP301). Throughout this collection of poetry that very quickness of the eye remains the coveted prize of Stevens’ poetry. Only in the remaining work after *Transport to Summer* was Stevens extensively concerned with the visibility itself, the noumenological essences, the project of realisation. From things ‘[h]ard to perceive and harder still touch’ (CP301), he was to turn, we shall see, to modes of total disclosure and the poetic-spiritual arrival of attaining an experiential beyond.

“The Pastor Caballero” is another example of Stevens’ intense depiction of the poetic temperament as it relates to perception advancement. From the outset we are aware that the protagonist is a member of Stevens’ subtilizing elite. He proves an exaggerated ‘observer’ engaged in a mastery of visual scrutiny and aesthetic response. The poem’s progression is based around the influence that a piece of haberdashery has upon the poet-percipient’s efforts to attain a visionary poetic structure. In the first line, the hat is introduced in a portentous condition of ‘importance.’

The importance of its hat to a form becomes
More definite. The sweeping brim of the hat
Makes of the form Most Merciful Capitan,

If the observer says so: grandiloquent
Locution of a hand in a rhapsody.
Its line moves quickly with the genius

Of its improvisation until, at length,
It enfolds the head in a vital ambience,
A vital, linear ambience (CP379)

The status of the hat as an object of meditation, it seems, precedes the moment of the poem. As readers, we come in at an instance of advancement. The previously analyzed

concept of becoming appears again here in the communication of a scheme of progress through a growing intensity of observation and creative reaction, and the meditation that is being depicted comprises a steady honing and embellishment of this importance. Dramatising several interdependent shifts of conception and feeling, Stevens' protagonist appears in a state of deep fixation, brooding 'at length' upon the object before him. There is a distinct connection between this image of an extended immersion in the 'poetic thinking' and the previously mentioned comment Stevens made in a letter to Leonard C. van Geysel. Some of the 'peculiarity' of 'the Most Merciful Capitan' might also be clarified by the following, written in May 1945:

A poem must have a peculiarity, as if it were the momentarily complete idiom of that which prompts it, even if that which prompts it is the vaguest emotion. This character seems to be one of the consequences of concentration. I should like to undertake the job of establishing the place of concentration in this sort of thing. (L500)

We find a further incorporation of these ideas in the line 'A bench was his catalepsy' in Canto Ten of "It Must Change" in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. Stevens was to paraphrase that line in a note for his favoured correspondent Hi Simons: 'The bench as catalepsy is a place of trance' (L435). In the fourth chapter, I will return to this concept of 'a place of trance' as it relates to the late poem "The Hermitage at the Center," where, as with the protagonist in Canto Ten of "It Must Change," and the figure of Lenin in another *Transport* poem, "Description Without Place," the poet-percipient conducts his routine of *aperçu* 'in the park.' In the first line of "The Pastor Caballero," Stevens states that the hat, by its aesthetic importance, its burgeoning resonance within the subjectivity of the percipient, is contributing to a more abstract 'form,' a corollary sense of the hat, something which serves to elevate it from a status of mere fact to a status of visionary degree. In the third verse, by virtue of this subtle state of interchange, the hat will become possessed of 'a flare in the sweeping brim.' At first, the importance 'becomes / more definite,' and the ensuing line performs this impression of graduation by specifying both the energy of that importance and its reputed effect upon the 'form': 'The sweeping brim of the hat / Makes of the form Most Merciful Capitan.' The notional form, then, is enlivened by the invigorating panache of the sweeping brim. We can assume that it is part of the potency and value of the hat to have instigated such a favourable metamorphosis in the form. Quite typically, this effect takes place as a result of the will of the observer, whose keen temperamental receptiveness remains the unifying contingency of the

poem. The 'form' has now been rendered more peculiar. Much as the parasol, once opened, had served to extend Semiramide's tendency to divination, the hat-form now functions as an encouraging source of metaphor and insight, being rendered as the 'Most Merciful Capitan,' a grandiose symbol, more generous, and more mercifully amenable to the synthesising tasks of Stevensean poetry.

At this point, the brim of the hat is scrutinised by the observer for further inspiration. Immediately it yields a framework of greater emotion and greater linguistic scope. It becomes a 'grandiloquent / Locution of a hand in a rhapsody.' The rhapsodic here relates to a deeper lyricism in the poem's development. As an index of artistic impunity and release, it inscribes a rationale and a tonal register for the ensuing figurations of ambience, evocation, affection, grace, and height. The brim of the hat has become something of a cognitive horizon. 'Its line' is a manifestation of brilliant spontaneity in the nervous attention of the observer. It is deemed that it 'moves quickly with the genius of its improvisation.' We can identify two of Stevens' theories here. Firstly, we have the idea of an extemporized emotion as the central influence of poetic composition. This concept was the criteria Stevens employed when passing comment on Whitman:

The élan of the essential Whitman is still deeply moving in the things in which he himself was deeply moved ... It is useless to treat everything in Whitman as of equal merit. A great deal of it exhibits little or none of his specific power. He seems often to have driven himself to write like himself. The good things, the superbly beautiful and moving things, are those that he wrote naturally, with an extemporaneous and irrepressible vehemence of emotion. (L870)¹³

The actualisation of the temperamental capacities of the poetic artist, for Stevens, is generally a matter of expressing something that it is 'not within the poet's power to suppress' (NA124). 'The genius of its improvisation' incorporates the irrational inner-circumstantial whelmedness of vague emotion, the indomitable inner occasion, and the obligatory 'need of his nature' which figures as the call of 'one's ancient mother,' the creatrix in the nerves whose alluring and subliminal purposes comprise, as a matter of authenticity, 'a suasion not to be denied.' The concept of a genius improvisation represents the unpredictable aesthetic licence, the quick expelling into poetic form of the substance of the artist's contact with the fecund promptings

¹³ Whitman appears in the *Ideas of Order* poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" in lines that suggest a related theoretic emphasis on interiority: 'In the far South the sun of autumn is passing / Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore. / He is singing and chanting the things that are part of him' (CP150).

of the interior paramour. In such aggrandized notions of birthing is a poem to be understood as the ‘cry of its occasion.’ Poetry, for Stevens, involved yielding to an inner power of abstraction, with the irrational energy typically leaving its signature upon the work. In these terms, the hat in “The Pastor Caballero” is ‘the momentarily complete idiom,’ the functional opaqueness and somehow arrested legibility of the creative power’s sudden harnessing.

Secondly, the quickness of the improvisation invokes Stevens’ concept of poetry as an evolutionary outstripping of reason. In the essay “Imagination as Value,” he wrote:

It may be that the imagination is a miracle of logic and that its exquisite divinations are calculations beyond analysis, as the calculations of reason are wholly within analysis. (NA154)

Two years later, in 1951, Stevens would still be fascinated by the evidence in his own concentrated thinking for ‘miraculous shortenings of mental processes’ (CPP802). In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce imputes a related mode of literary brilliance to the awakening mind of Stephen Dedalus:

His thinking was a dusk of doubt and self-mistrust, lit up at moments by the lightnings of intuition, but lightnings of so clear a splendour that in those moments the world perished about his feet as if it had been fire-consumed; and thereafter his tongue grew heavy and he met the eyes of others with unanswering eyes, for he felt that the spirit of beauty had folded him round like a mantle and that in reverie at least he had been acquainted with nobility.¹⁴

In the next movement of “The Pastor Caballero,” the swift genius of the hat’s brim, pulsing its lustrous improvisation, is treated to a significant delay by the mind of the observer. The brim of the hat is said to have been meditated ‘at length.’ To this special protraction, the evocative ‘place of concentration,’ is attributed the strange boon of the hat’s further expansion in resonance.

... at length,
It enfolds the head in a vital ambience,
A vital, linear ambience. (CP379)

The line of the brim is here transformed, although it retains something of its initial appearance, the ‘linear’ aspect. It is now also a ‘flare’ and an ‘ambience,’ a poetic agent suffusing the head in an ethereal vitality. The instance of the head being enfolded proposes a sense of apparition, with the emergence of the face promoting the impression of a suddenly illuminated beholding.

¹⁴ James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, London: 1985, p. 136.

The moment of enfolding establishes a new phenomenon for the observer. A superior abstraction has been devised, one whose affirmative quality is expressed in the double phrasing: 'A vital ambience, / a vital linear ambience.' The gently tautological aspect here can be said to serve two functions. Firstly, it sustains the allure and the potency of the phenomenon. Vitality is not in question, and perhaps the ambience is even characterised by lividness. Secondly, insofar as it might be said that the restatement of the term 'vital' in this context enacts a modicum of hesitation, a forking and a momentary arresting of the lyrical momentum, then we can impute to these lines something of a rhetorical appeal to ineffability. This occurs in the form of an implicit challenging of verbal apposition and competence by the greatness of the vision. And yet the observer, however mystical, does not become slowed here by any seriousness of humility. The unique sublime in question inspires no traditional terror, prompting instead an empowered acquaintance with subtlety, philosophic acumen, and the furtherance of artistic interiority.

... The flare

In the sweeping brim becomes the origin
Of a human evocation, so disclosed
That, nameless, it creates an affectionate name,

Derived from adjectives of deepest mine. (CP379)

These lines describe the approximate fruition of the poet-percipient's gazing upon the hat. The culminating flare is said to be within the brim, as a decoded aspect of its imaginatively attained substructure, a metaphysical conduit for the emotive Stevensesan process of becoming. 'A human evocation' has transpired from the potency of this aesthetic advancement, and the rarefied yield is said to pertain to a sense of primary cause or source, to an 'origin.' This involved anatomising of impressions within the vision is said to rely for its accessibility on the particular quality of its disclosure. 'So disclosed' is the ontological aura of the meditated hat that it summons a superlative verbal capacity from the poet-percipient in order that it might be articulated. This reading of the phrase 'so disclosed' relates largely to the following paraphrase: so very much disclosed and revealed. The term 'so' in this sense relates to an extreme amount. The adverbial function expresses a relation of degree. But we can also read it as expressing a relation of manner, as designating a particular type of disclosure, and the phrase can be alternatively paraphrased as: disclosed in this way. This

second reading recalls Part Three of "Certain Phenomena of Sound" when Semiramide declares, 'So seeing, I beheld you walking.' These related phrases can be said to characterise a visionary complex in their respective poems. They serve to delineate a perceptual stance and represent an effort to explain resultant schemata of mental penetration through difficult abstract structures.

The disclosure in "The Pastor Caballero" is further affirmed by the fact that its namelessness, the essence of its forbiddingly abstract form, should effect an at once paradoxical and profound verbal creation through the sensibility of the poet. The creation of an 'affectionate name' invokes Stevens' notion of an ardour of composition as discussed in the previous chapter. The affectionate name operates here as a response to the challenge of the depth of the vision, the image of endearment relating to the creative satisfaction of the observer as he feels himself to be fulfilling the sacred immanence of the poetic abstraction. In order to transcend the problematic of namelessness and the possible creative impasse that that implies, the percipient is driven to a plumbing of his temperamental resources, an act which is portrayed in the above lines as effortless, invoking yet another moment of ingenious improvisation. The quickened subjectivity portrayed in this transition is also responsible for the complex image of the derivation from 'the deepest mine' of adjectival articulation. The idea of an interior verbal mine celebrates the aesthetic efficiency of the observer as 'poetic mechanism.'¹⁵ An examination of the syntax of this line reveals that the derivation of the affectionate name is 'from' the adjectives of deepest mine. The adjectives, then, have already been extracted from the verbal mine, and exist in the mind of the observer as amenable figures for the conceptual alloy of the 'affectionate name.' This consideration serves to broaden the abstraction still further. Adhering to the logic of the line, we might conceive of a verbal response which relates to the most astute, the most brilliant of adjectives, to examples of 'acutest speech' (CP300). Accepting this, in light of the structure of the poem's perceptual event, we must also allow for a displacement, for the 'affectionate name' is merely derived from these superlatives. Its meaning and its actual verbal character are a thing of still greater attenuation.

¹⁵ In the essay, "A Collect of Philosophy," Stevens speaks of certain 'integrations' that unite the roles of the philosopher and the poet. 'These integrations, although different from each other, have something in common, such as, say, a characteristic of the depth or distance at which they have been found, a facture of the level or position of the mind or, if you like, of a level or position of the feelings, because in the excitement of bringing things about it is not always easy to say whether one is thinking or feeling or doing both at the same time' (CPP862). In the essay "Effects of Analogy," we find another relevant image in 'the feeling of one man communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verblality' (NA118).

How, we should ask, does the poem's speaker intend this special derivation to take place? I have said that the unifying contingency of "The Pastor Caballero" is the poetic-temperamental capacity of the observer. Again, this persistently aggrandized Stevensean category can furnish us with the fullest explanations for the figures of rapidity, power, astuteness, acumen, synthesis, and penetration that we find in this poem. When Semiramide announced his proud acts of consideration, juxtaposition and comparison, he was claiming the office of the Stevensean adept. The abstract properties that he held in his mind, within the broad and energised remit of his sensibility, were subject to his will. He was, before any genuine status as a supplicant to his muse Eulalia, an agent of poetic integrations. The protagonist of "The Pastor Caballero" exhibits the same powers. With improbable fluency, he is seen to wed his will to the possibilities of the metamorphic event of the hat, steadily engaging, sustaining and incorporating all of its rich apparitional offshoots.

2: All One Eye in the Forest

The title of the poem "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors" proposes a strategic difficulty of interpretation. The concept of the images of metaphors represents a further example of the proud attenuation of insight and mastery of poetic cognition that I have already identified in the title "Certain Phenomena of Sound." Here again, the terminological ground is the peculiar Stevensean sense of vivid connection and structure within verbal and sonic experience. That the title also emphasises the act of thinking serves to identify 'the images of metaphors' as a trope for the cognitive mediation of aesthetic profundity. In our reading, we can refer both the symbolism and the interpretive challenge of the poem to the concept of what Stevens termed 'the special thinking of poetry.' Logically, to think of a relation between the images of metaphors brings together the impression of several pluralities of potential. The 'relation' of the title, deemed as single, posits the act of selecting an abstract link between at least two undefined sets of abstraction. The idea of the intellectual meeting of such a challenge inscribes from the outset a thematic of deep poetic or meditative engagement. Stevens establishes here again the susceptible mind absorbed in the motions of its aesthetic-spiritual advancement. This is the reason that we find the protagonist in this poem, the fisherman, reflecting various tropes of sensory adeptness.

The fisherman inevitably stands for humanity in a state of evocative relation with the natural world. The figure partakes of a Yeatsian sense in that he is an ideal philosophic agent, a man of keenly spiritual simplicity.¹⁶ But in the intra-textual structure of *Transport to Summer*, we can also impute to the fisherman a sense of the hunter for a greater profundity of vision. As the young men wandering the woods in the poem “The Pediment of Appearance” hunt for an essential face of nature, ‘the essential ornament’ (CP361), so the fisherman, in his stalking of the Perkiomen river, pursues an apotheosis of the serenity and contemplation that the fishing permits. His eye and his breast are occupied by the dove of poetic potential. In another *Transport to Summer* poem, “The Dove in the Belly,” the dove appears as that secret Stevensesan vigor which prompts the need for poetry, the urgently desirous ‘inner position’ (CPP834) whose placation is synonymous with the realisation of poetry. These tropes of a physiology of poetry relate to each other specifically in Stevens’ theorising of acute artistic sensation. For the acutest poet, the drive to aesthetic integration is something of a bodily experience, or as Stevens said of the psychic engagement of ‘one’s last poems,’ ‘an affair of the whole being’ (OP248).

The opening lines of the poem establish a pastoral moment and immediately inflect it with the peculiar aesthetic theory of several other related poems in *Transport to Summer*.

The wood-doves are singing along the Perkiomen.
The bass lie deep, still afraid of the Indians.

In the one ear of the fisherman, who is all
One ear, the wood-doves are singing a single song. (CP356)

The singing doves are a source of poetry, and their essential benevolence and sanctity is proposed in the detached and elemental peace of ‘along the Perkiomen.’ As an aesthetic good, they partake of an ecological plenitude. They are the indispensable birds of artifice, perennial, inhuman, and beyond complication. They seem to relate to the imagery of imaginative sanction in Part Seven of “Credences of Summer,” where the canto’s visionary questers are depicted in an ideal freedom: “Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs, / Secure” (CP376). Stevens repeatedly stages his explications of pure poetry and the goal of the supreme fiction in wooded areas. Oak, Pine, and Redwood recur in the late poetry as part of a motifical archetype, a consistent ruralising and elemental iconography which functions as the deliberate

¹⁶ W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, London: 2001, p. 197.

subtextual means to divest the representation of ‘the act of the mind’ of any enduring municipal and rational biases.

If the opening scene in “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors” is perennial in tone, it is also somewhat a-temporal. As indices of the fisherman’s sense of promise, the meaning of his solitude, the bass figure both the poetic allure of the water’s depth, and a depth of poetic meditation. Elsewhere in *Transport to Summer*, mastery over and redefinition of time is related to poetic insight, part of what Joseph Carroll, invoking a line from “The Auroras of Autumn,” has termed the exploration of “a pure principle of sentient relation.”¹⁷ Stevens suggests that to live in a ‘sense without sense of time’ is to come close to a greater ‘knowledge of being’ (CP350). The fish are said to be ‘still afraid of the Indians,’ and by this detail they create a broader temporal scope. They arrange the past within the contemporary and thereby reformulate the condition of personal experience into a less finite, bio-centric referent. The emotive note of this re-presenting of earlier time, and indeed the implicit disestablishment of the binary of then and now, stimulates a thematic of increased poetic range and in the ensuing couplet Stevens gravitates to a vision of unity which serves to exalt the fisherman as the figure of poetic possibilities.

The fisherman we are told is ‘all one ear.’ He has fulfilled, we can assume, something equivalent to the rites of preparation for hearing in the sylvan realm which were so important to the vision of the Redwood Roamer in “Certain Phenomena of Sound.” Within the fisherman’s ear, within its particular alchemical remit, the wood-doves are deemed to be singing a single song. In the opening couplet we might have assumed a sense of chatter and diversity in the bird song, the wilderness characterised by a hectic profusion of competitive life forms. But now the focus has become the harmonising subjectivity of the fisherman, and specifically his perceptual ability to gain a triumphant yield of non-duality from his experience.

The bass keep looking ahead, upstream, in one
Direction, shrinking from the spit and splash

Of waterish spears. The fisherman is all
One eye, in which the dove resembles the dove.

There is one dove, one bass, one fisherman. (CP356)

¹⁷ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, p. 8.

The language here repetitively affirms the notion of oneness. From the repetition of the term 'one ear', and its mutedly religious modification in the word 'all,' to the emphatic sibilance of 'singing a single song,' the thrust remains towards fusion, resolution and a becalmed congruence of mind and nature. The bass are also granted a role in this process. Unlikely percipients, they look, and they look in one direction, and in this way they augment the poetic vision. Reminiscent of the insects in "Certain Phenomena of Sound," they are something of a metaphysical entourage, complicit to the poem's dialectic arc. Upstream, against the flow of the water, is their one direction, and in this way their submerged gaze partakes of the artistic heroism of the poet who assails the difficult abstraction. The bass can also be read as contributing additional weight to the theory of the poetic temperament insofar as they are figures of capacity, of patience, of concentration and compulsion, and finally, figures of an elemental integrity. That they abide in the grip of their singular dream: sedulously, fastidiously (to use one of Stevens' favourite terms for artistic authenticity) hallucinating the erstwhile 'spit and splash of waterish spears,' makes them deserving of still further Stevensesan praise.

The fisherman is then changed from an exemplar of hearing, to an exemplar of sight. Notably, this transition in character does not alter the fixation on the quality of oneness. With his mind transformed into one ear, he was prone to unite the music of the Perkiomen birds, eliminating all distinguishing sound in preference for a schema of transcendent kinship. In the next formulation, perhaps now averted from music by virtue of the engorging predominance of the eye, the fisherman still accomplishes a harmonious impression. The dove, in the vivid world of the 'one eye,' 'resembles the dove.' The dove might be said to emanate the captivation of the poet-percipient here, and yet it causes no deviation or misrepresentation, no sense of corruption by simile. The fisherman's unreal song is 'secure,' and the idea of the dove resembling the dove enhances the sense of visionary disclosure, causing the image of the bird to resonate in its bucolic presence. An enclosing circle of seen and seer has led to the curt yet definitive optimism of the line, 'There is one dove, one bass, one fisherman.'

At this point, Stevens introduces a note of complication. The pristine trinity of dove, bass and fisherman, seems to become arrested by a fluctuation in the music.

There is one dove, one bass, one fisherman.
Yet coo becomes rou-coo, rou-coo. How close

To the unstated theme each variation comes ...
In that one ear it might strike perfectly:

State the disclosure. In that one eye the dove
Might spring to sight and yet remain a dove.

The fisherman might be the single man
In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still. (CP356-57)

Much could be made of the word 'yet' here.¹⁸ On such modifying turns many theories of impediment in Stevens' poetry have been proposed. However, no coherent anti-mythological tonality can be said to develop from the 'yet' and Stevens is not working here towards anything like a repudiation of the poem's initial Romantic impetus. The 'paradise of meaning' represented by the 'one dove, one bass, one fisherman' is not subverted. Instead it is repositioned in relation to a theme of potential access. That is to say that the protagonist is withdrawn subtly from the closure of his apotheosis, and this in order that the nobility and strength of his attainment of that apotheosis might be emphasised. Having commenced with a narrative fragment of consummation, the poem reverts to and concludes with a narrative of aspiration. It is within the terms of this latter paradigm that Stevens can most vividly cast the power of the poetic temperament, a condition whose valour is most apparent in the approach to the centre. His protagonist's heroism, it is suggested, is unfavourably lessened in vignettes of the imagination's completion in oneness. The dreaming towards non-duality, however, and the busily striving augmentation of the senses to this end, together present a more aesthetically alive vanguard of poem-making. In the concluding couplets of "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors," moving away from the exact imagery of fruition, Stevens focuses on imagery of the ascending, pregnant artistic mind and the inspiring proximity, as opposed to the presence and relative stasis, of the godly state of oneness.

In light of this approach, it proves significant that the 'yet' clause argues for a persistent condition of becoming. In this more favourable process of imaginative vigour, the 'theme,' the full disclosure of the supreme fiction, is 'unstated.' That is, it represents the divinity-substitute which should not be stated, lest, as Stevens often worried in his correspondence, the poetry of the idea be lost. The second part of the poem seems to argue that the supreme locus of imagination and world, the site of oneness, is known only, or is best known, in the perceptual empowerment of 'variation.' However, the Emersonian apparatus of 'one ear' is not here invalidated. In fact as the poem develops it is incorporated explicitly

¹⁸ Bart Eeckhout, writing about this poem as a 'humorous' renunciation of a 'premodern world dominated by a teleological impulse' has found in the fifth verse grounds for a complete 'break with reductive and totalising gestures.' *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, p. 257.

again for a rejuvenated scheme of spiritual expectation. This poem does not move from a toppled romanticism through to pragmatic and sceptical structures. When the momentarily problematic reductionism of the dove, bass and fisherman is broken open, the faculty which attained that absolute vision is freed to re-grasp a variation of the essential reality of the riverside. It is in the rarefied event of striking ‘perfectly’ upon ‘the one ear,’ the ‘all ear’ of the initiated poet, that Stevens chooses to locate the greatest level of affirmation. This potential is sustained, and with it the inherent temperamental capacity remains foremost, by virtue of a strategic renewing of the obscurity and the difficulty of the absolute. For Stevens, the ‘precious portents of our powers,’ our innate, temperamental urges toward supreme fiction in art, are deemed to have replaced the traditional teleology. The ability to create absolute meaning is the new religion, the new and tenable and ineluctable romanticism. In the context, there is more than a little awe in the identification of the portent of poetic power in the words: ‘How close // To the unstated theme each variation comes.’ This closeness relates specifically, we can be sure, to the descriptive adeptness, the acute verbal reflexes of the *bona fide* literary artist as celebrated throughout *Transport to Summer*.

The new framework of potential that appears in “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors” is sustained by the poem’s shift in tense. The first four couplets are written in the present tense, and thus, in a spirit of closure, they affirm an immediate occurrence. Alternatively, the concluding lines look to a future that is contingent upon a special repositioning of the subject. Such a theoretically cogent change appears restated in “Credences of Summer” in the lines:

It was difficult to sing in the face
Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
Or else avert the object. (CP376)

Stevens never truly capitulates to any such creative difficulty. And often the imagery of struggle functions as part of his rhetoric of mastery and the affirmative psychological intensity of his drive towards transcendence. As such, “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors” does not propose any failure of singing. The fisherman in a certain sense averts his face, or his grandiose eye, from the pure object of nature, and he does this with the intention that the narcissistic pool his gaze has created might recover a precious opacity, its water reforming a commencement of vision. And re-commence it does. Even the definitive moment of the ‘unstated’ seems over-written by the ensuing mention of the vatic enunciation

of the disclosure. Again we are returned to the notion of the verbal expert. The avenue from vision to statement appears again unblocked, a matter of course within the accomplished subjectivity of the poet-percipient. As Stevensian poet, the protagonist is primed, as is said of the virile youths in “The Pediment of Appearance,” to conceive ‘the phrases that follow the sight / Of this essential ornament’ (CP361).

All of this deep furtherance, we are told, *might* happen, the repeating of the term three times echoing the fevered confidence of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* in the line, ‘It is possible, possible, it must / Be possible’ (CP404). The poem’s primary resolution inheres in the re-statement of what it had seemed to amend in its middle part. The dove again is viewed as part of the interior process of becoming: ‘The fisherman might be the single man / In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still.’ The vivid moment of growing ‘still’ inscribes a superior perceptual state to the earlier finalised oneness. A more ‘blooded’ or terrestrial absolute is envisaged here. To ‘grow still’ we might say is an advanced category of realisation in comparison to the crystallised stillness of ‘one dove, one bass, one fisherman.’ The ennobled energies of insight and singularity remain operative in the latter formulation, the proud visionary process of disclosure still resonating within the framework of a protracted culmination.

I have already mentioned “The Dove in the Belly” as an important key to the metaphoric identity of the dove in “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors.” That poem concludes with the supplicatory appeal:

Deep dove, placate you in your hiddenness. (CP367)

This line constellates numerous aspects of Stevens’ theory of the poetic temperament. The quality of depth in the dove relates tonally to the depth of the bass in “Thinking of a Relation,” and also to the divisive issue of ‘our spiritual height and depth’ (NA34) which Stevens felt poetry should be employed to interrogate. The dove lying deep figures a sense of profundity of aesthetic activity in the mind of the acutest poet, a conception akin to the ‘adjectives of deepest mine’ from “The Pastor Caballero.” Granting this similarity, we might also recognise that the image of the psycho-linguistic mine tends more to a hermetic conception of poetry, while the dove figures a prophetic office for the poet, in the sense of the biblical herald or symbol of spiritual confidence. The need to placate the dove represents the compulsive element of literary creation as Stevens experienced it, expressed so pointedly in the phrase ‘a

suasion not to be denied.’ Although it has been more often taken by critics as an expression of artistic frustration and anti-teleological malaise, the line, ‘It can never be satisfied, the mind, never’ (CP247) is a related concept of poetic authenticity. It is more accurate, I propose, to recognise that the image of the dissatisfied mind pertains to a broader depiction in Stevens’ work of a lived aesthetic potency, and to a sense of a devout and interminable pursuit of the ultimate artwork. It is a matter of the vitality of the connection between the poet and his totalising muse, ‘the image at its source, / The abstract, the archaic queen,’ that the transmission is ‘never-ceasing’ (NA28). The idea of the placation of the interior dove of poetic creation, therefore, stands as a specific instance of Stevens’ thematising of the idea of a lived realisation of poetry.

The special poise involved in the conclusion of “Thinking of a Relation,” with the dove growing still, implies, then, a grade of artistic advancement. The dove, cast in a state of near-placation implies a serious honouring if not a completion of artistic potential. The call for placation is Stevens’ call for freedom from the dove’s crying, a meeting of the ‘need of his nature,’ and a call to the artistic triumph that would be commensurate with the silence or the stillness of the dove. Stevens was in some way beset by his own potential, and late in his life he was prone to wonder at how meagre his achievement seemed, being unable to fully reconcile the commitment he had given to his financial security. He was fretfully concerned with the possibility of truly actualising his literary potential, and to several correspondents he expressed the bemusement, frustration and regret of his ostensibly double life.

It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize. (CPP878)

The truth of course remains that Stevens’ literary achievement is astounding, among the most impacting of the last century, and yet we possess the evidence in his poetry and correspondence of a relentlessly dynamic impulse towards still greater art, or an art more personally gratifying to Wallace Stevens, the artist who felt, as a matter of what he expressed as conscience, and as a matter of the uniquely fecundating motivation of his individual temperament, that there was more for him to do. It is part then of the serious fascination of the progression in Stevens’ late work, that at the time of writing the poems that became *Transport to Summer*, his best work had arguably still to be written. Not until *The Auroras of Autumn*

(1950) does he concertedly aim for 'a poem that completely accomplishes his purpose' (NA53).

3: 'More Truly and More Strange'

For the fisherman wandering the banks of the Perkiomen, working his versions of a primordial circuit of water, fish, fowl and self, the true prize was the gratification of artistic longing, the boon of the stillness of the dove of aesthetic aspiration within him. This placation of vocational desire subordinates the naturalistic setting to the interior, mental or unreal world of the temperament. The fisherman seeks not an actual bass, or at least not a factual one, but the metaphysical quarry of advanced forms of listening and seeing, the perceptual adeptness of the 'single man' whose prowess will reconcile the disparity of phenomena that precedes the disclosure of the oneness vision. Until that moment he is something of an exile, a ruminant and disconsolate hunter of essential forms. In this, as I have said, he is kindred with the young men of "The Pediment of Appearance" who are depicted 'walking in the woods, / Hunting for the great ornament' (CP361). The idea of the pediment represents an ultimate point of access through the surface of appearances. Appearance for Stevens is that dormant, pre-poetic condition of reality which prompts a 'prodigious probing' (CPP821) by the subtle-tempered artist. Access through this fateful door, into the trans- or sub-phenomenal, is represented in "The Pediment of Appearance" by the image of a 'savage transparence,' and this is the poem's key synonym for the substance of the young men's questing. This particular phrasing aligns "The Pediment of Appearance" with the seventh section of "Credences of Summer," which contains a remarkable example of Stevens' theorising of the advancement of poetic vision. Again the process takes place amid trees, 'deep in the woods,' the elaborate moment of disclosure appealing here to the depth and 'hiddenness' of the forest as it relates to the depth and acute interiority of the visionary process. The artist 'of three minds' from "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is remembered in some way here as Stevens communicates an exaggeratedly bolstered consciousness grappling towards an ever-increasing fullness of vision.

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim

The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found. (CP376)

It is a 'hard prize' for which the young men of "The Pediment of Appearance" are searching, and yet a prize, a full finding of the pediment and a shirking of the tyranny of the normative surface, for which they are well equipped. Beginning with a sense of an indistinct form, they exhibit that transcending keenness of vision already discussed in relation to "The Pastor Caballero." Their character relates to the compliment Stevens paid to Marianne Moore when he said:

Miss Moore loves all animals, fierce or mild, ancient or Modern. When she observes them she is transported into the presence of a recognizable reality, because, as it happens, she has the faculty of digesting the 'harde yron' of appearance. (NA103)

The idea of that 'faculty' was never far from Stevens' mind throughout the 1940s.

They hunt for a form which by its form alone,
Without diamond-blazons or flashing or
Chains of circumstance,

By its form alone, by being right,
By being high, is the stone
For which they are looking:

The savage transparence. They go crying
The world is myself, life is myself,
Breathing as if they breathed themselves,

Full of their ugly lord,
Speaking the phrases that follow the sight
Of this essential ornament

In the woods, in this full-blown May,
The months of understanding. The pediment
Lifts up its heavy scowl before them. (CP361-62)

As the triumphal woodland troupe in the "Credences of Summer" excerpt are said to proclaim the meaning of the capture, so was the fisherman ready to 'state the disclosure,' and so here do the young men proclaim the meaning of their perceptual engagement with the 'essential ornament.' That the poem's narrative structure positions the ecstasy of their vocal reaction to the vision before the moment of disclosure itself serves to cast these men as further

exemplars of Stevensean initiation. They are well versed in the apposite chanting to the humble grail that they covet, and they speak ‘the phrases that follow the sight’ of it seemingly before that sight has been achieved. They are veteran questers then, men for whom the ‘savage transparence’ is a pre-empted glory. They are set to distinguish the curious lineaments of its height, its rightness, the elusive properties of divestment which relate to its being ‘without diamond-blazons or flashing or / Chains of circumstance.’ Once these qualities are separated from the visualised pediment the result is the portentous ‘form alone.’ In an earlier poem, “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” ‘the form on the pillow humming while one sleeps’ represents a potent modicum of Romantic inclination which survives historical negation and serves as an optimistic, speculative ‘yes’ on which ‘the future world depends.’ (CP247) Form for Stevens also relates to the category of variation. The ability to vary or suspend or interrogate form in the visionary experience recurs in many of the late poems as an important instrument of greater disclosure. Perhaps the most idealistic use of this version of the trope in *Transport to Summer* occurs in the poem “Chocorua to its Neighbour” where the articulate mountain sets up the visionary initiation synonymous with being ‘part of sky, / Of sea, large earth, large air.’ Such a sublime state of connectedness, Chocorua says, relates to the state of perceptual advancement, the clairvoyance that can ‘perceive men without reference to their form’ (CP296).

The young men of “The Pediment of Appearance” pursue a similar power. Passionately, they walk in ‘the months of understanding’, and in this they recall the early poem “Of the Surface of Things,” where perambulation is proposed as the key to imaginative access:¹⁹

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. (CP57)

¹⁹ Analysing a letter from Stevens to Elsie written in January 1909, Robert Rehder makes the following comment: ‘His description of himself as a solitary walker – ‘I always walked a great deal, mostly alone’ – is virtually a summation of his entire life outside of his office or study, where he worked mostly alone. This, together with accounts of some of those walks in his journal, suggests an intense, full and overflowing inner life that came to be so constituted that it could only be satisfied by poetry. *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, London: 1988, p. 4. Semiramide says suggestively to Eulalia in “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” ‘I beheld you walking’ (CP287). ‘I was the world in which I walked’ is a pivotal part of Hoon’s prophetic conclusion with regard to his own powers in “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (CP65). Rober Gilbert has commented in relation to Stevens, on the ‘excursion directed toward no practical goal but undertaken purely for the pleasures of movement, reflection, and aesthetic perception.’ *Walks in the World*, Princeton: 1991, p. 3. Bart Eeckhout and William Bevis have also commented on Stevens’ ‘peripatetic’ habits, the former mentioning ‘weekend rambles up to forty-two miles.’ *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, p. 59; *Mind of Winter*, Pittsburgh: 1988, pgs. 218-27.

The form of the pediment is considered 'essential' insofar as it corresponds to the idea of Stevensesan compulsion. It is, so to speak, the epistemological must-have. It is also essential in the other sense of that term because it is the core creative reality, 'the essential poem at the centre of things' (CP440) as it would be phrased in "A Primitive Like an Orb," that 'never-ceasing source' (NA28) which prompts the symbolic effort of the poem itself. The precious entrance which fills the young men with melodious prognostication circumscribes their special effort of looking. It is also responsible for their sense of being part of 'large earth.' Their cry of 'the world is myself, life is myself' can be said to figure a dual confidence. Firstly, it figures a spiritual extension out of the anthropocentric paradigm. The implicit innocence and euphony of the line relates to a radical identification between self and external world, an exuberant claiming of kinship with nature. The musical sense here relates to the mental extension within the concept of the self as an aspect of the earth. The mood associated with the breakthrough in awareness is increased by the incorporation of the breath motif, inflecting as it does a traditional meditative paradigm. It will be seen in the next chapter that the image of breathing protagonist serves a particular function in Stevens' portrayal of poetic realisation in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." In "The Pediment of Appearance," the inspiration for the variations of spiritual acumen is attributed to the process of seeking out and communing with the 'ugly' or primitive lord of the forest. A second aspect of the confidence entailed in the line 'the world is myself, life is myself' can be explicated if we look back for an inter-textual key to *Harmonium*.

"Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" is commonly read as a kind of mockery of nineteenth-century literary values. When it is not dismissed as a delusory affirmation of solipsistic detachment, the poem is often read as a playful or 'aristocratic' exercise in doctrinal extremity, an ironic atrophy of aesthetic stance.²⁰ Most predominant is the idea that the poem stands as Stevens' antithetical statement to the thesis of "The Snow Man," a kind of foil to that poem's renowned morbid reductionism, and the consequent idea that the Hoon figure is unrelated to

²⁰ James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, Oxford: 1991, p. 35. Robert Rehder finds the concluding lines of "Tea at The Palaz of Hoon" to be an expression of disconcerted 'otherness,' reading the category of 'strange' as enacting 'paradox' and 'ambivalence.' *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 64. Milton Bates notes that 'to the naturalistic mind, such solipsism may seem well-nigh preposterous.' *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*, p. 154. Frank Doggett has written of Hoon as an entirely solipsistic character divorced in Stevens' development from the more advanced 'single perception' of "Notes." *Stevens' Poetry of Thought*, Baltimore: 1966, p. 114. Alan Filreis has argued that, in terms of his later aesthetic, Stevens himself treated "Tea at The Palaz of Hoon" to stern 'revision' after *Harmonium*. *Modernism from Right to Left*, Cambridge: 1994, pgs. 217-218. Lentricchia reads "Hoon" as evidence that Stevens 'sometimes found solipsism comfortable.' "Wallace Stevens: The Ironic Eye," in Irvin Ehrenpreis, ed., *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, Middlesex: 1972, p. 281.

Stevens' later work.²¹ However, there also exists in the poem a more enduring frame of affirmation that can be said to survive whatever element of playful and orotund pastiche does not translate beyond the experimental wit of *Harmonium*. We can come to a more cogent appraisal of the poem's significance within Stevens' oeuvre, and a recognition of the broader metaphysical theory contained in the poem, if we suspend conventional critical anxieties for a de-politicised subjectivism. "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" is less a poem of brazen delectation than most critics have been willing to grant.

The title toys with the subliminal effeminacy, detachment and refinement associated with the poetic vocation. The image of the ceremonious tea-drinker, being overt, seeks to regulate an ethical tension, much as the image of the jasmine in "Asides on the Oboe" was seen to operate as a tendentious counterpoint to the discourse of war. Certainly Stevens evokes equivocation in the title of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," but in the fuller context of the poem this gesture by no means constitutes a withdrawal of his temperamental allegiance to the poem's romantic aesthetic. Indeed the poem's narrative tends towards an affirmation of subjectivity, and the precious and dreaming cast of mind that might be said to represent and promulgate the philosophy of the autotelic. The famous closing line offers the concept of a yield of insight that has been gained by virtue of a suspension of all hesitancy with regard to pejorative poetry. The purer poetic project and its attendant vaunted rhetoric and arcane opulence have proved something of a vehicle towards a deeper acquaintance of self, and enhanced identity. The solipsistic thrust of the account of the protagonist's ascent to this 'new knowledge of reality,' is exonerated in this way in the unequivocally grateful statement of the reward that follows the mystical passage through enriching metaphors of self.

Not less because in purple I descended
The western day through what you called
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

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:

²¹ Robin Gail Schulze has written: 'Stevens implies that no one mental state can satisfy for long. Hoon, for all his fiery fancy, will tire of his palace, cast off his protective images, and become the snow poet.' *Web of Friendship: Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens*, Ann Arbor: 1995, p. 290.

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (CP65)

Although the posited interlocutor is not directly invoked after the first verse, his presence and authority permeate the tone of the poem's remainder, serving to establish a silent suspicion of the purple visions and adornments with which the speaker delineates his own metamorphic subjectivity. The series of questions which comprises the second verse, entails as much of the accusatory as it does of the interrogative. The impetus is one of refutation directed towards the inveighing, anti-aestheticist challenge in the concept of 'the loneliest air,' a phrase which inscribes a muted yet pivotal inscription of scepticism with regard to aesthetic rapture and the pure poet's appeal to metaphysicality. In the second verse, the speaker rhetorically goads this scepticism, inviting a response to the portentous intimations of his own subtilized reality. The evocative identities of the ointment, the hymns, and the sea, it is expected, are beyond the representational poverty of the argumentative stance that has branded the imaginative activity of the speaker a defunct ascetic or solipsistic 'loneliest air.' The third verse pursues this persuasive tack by offering three self-sufficient answers to the preceding questions. 'Out of my mind the golden ointment rained' evolves the comparatively hesitant image of the sprinkled ointment of the second verse, privileging instead the representational confidence of a deluge. Similarly, the buzzing hymns of the second verse become 'the blowing hymns' of the third verse. And further, the yearning sense of susceptibility in the line 'the sea whose tide swept through me there' is transmuted to the expansive assertion of: 'I was the compass of that sea.'

The poem's conclusion advances from these theoretic footholds to propose a spirited affirmation of subjective process, with the determinant faculties of seeing, hearing and feeling being defined within the portentous power of the deliberately aggrandized speaker. The primary location of 'there I found myself' relates to the aesthetic-spiritual efficacy of the speaker's relenting to the providential dominion of his own temperament. The evocatively cryptic assertion of the closing phrase, 'more truly and more strange' recalls the conclusion of "The Ancient Mariner" and the idea of 'a sadder and a wiser man.' It also looks forward to Stevens' late piece, "The Poem that took the Place of the Mountain", where, on a promontory, the protagonist, attains a vantage 'where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea, / Recognize his unique and solitary home' (CP512). Each of these examples compresses a sense of culmination and achievement, and each privileges the idea of the interior of the artist being

altered by a challenging and wistful experience of solitude. The ‘essential ornament’ in “The Pediment of Appearance” written more than twenty years after “Tea at The Palaz of Hoon,” retains something of the Hoon paradigm as I have been explaining it. The coveted face of the ‘ugly lord,’ the elemental crux of the forest, represents, we can say, a complex of poetic arrival into further truth and mystical estrangement. This attainment too is predicated on an abstract procedure of self-reliance. ‘They go crying’ or asserting or affirming in song, ‘The world is myself, life is myself, / Breathing as if they breathed themselves.’ Continuing the comparison to Hoon, we might paraphrase these lines with the following: I was the woods in which I walked. My life made the breath that I breathed.

‘A man’s sense of the world,’ Stevens said, ‘involves his fate.’ His fate, quite plausibly, might be the transcendence of the limitations of normative reality and selfhood and the courting of an aesthetic-experiential substitute for the ‘idea of god’; but he cannot escape the innate identity, the ‘immanence’ of his temperament, and the concomitant set of proclivities and powers that define his life. As he says in “Description Without Place,” another *Transport To Summer* poem whose premise inscribes the theoretic focus on the internal source of poetry: the world occurs as an ineluctable ‘seeming-so.’ Any revelation of reality will involve an ‘aspect’ of the need and ability of the percipient. The ‘inner position’ holds, in a sense, the external world. For Stevens, the truth and strangeness of this insight would prove the key to a definitive exaltation.

Chapter Three

The Owl at the End of the Mind: *The Auroras of Autumn* and the Theme of an Experiential Beyond

So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.
An innocence of the earth and no false sign. (CP418)

Both speakers in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” and “The Auroras of Autumn” protest against the status of their visionary personages as mere ideas. The two poems share a carefully wrought insistence that their sublime figurations, the flourished ‘monsters of elegy’ (CP435) depicted throughout their congested cantos, are the yield of some kind of experience. The sky-serpent in its roiling nest, the decreeing father and mother enthroned together amid the putative roots of existence, and the lustrous, totalized personifications of peace and sleep, as part of a specialised epistemology which incorporates the key ideas of Stevens’ preceding books, are portrayed as actual things, amenable essences, gods that can be seen.

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is. (CP418)

Thus the rhetorical defence is reiterated in Canto Eight of “The Auroras of Autumn,” the liminal ‘almost’ not mitigating the thrust of the more salient ‘but.’ And in the earlier “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” in the first canto, almost as a theoretical bolstering of the serious affirmation of transcendental poetics that the greater part of the poem comprises, Stevens proposes:

These forms are visible to the eye that needs,
Needs out of the whole necessity of sight. (CP432)

Considering the firmness and the recurrence of such statements, notwithstanding their embeddedness, it is important for us to consider how Stevens believes (or how he expects his readers to grasp) that these fantastical forms are related to some kind of visibility. In this chapter I will concentrate on "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," the first of the major long poems written for *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), and a text which stands as the peak of the development of Stevens' romantic bias. Lucy Beckett, in her brief discussion of the poem, has proposed the opposite of my argument here. 'These figures' she has written,

are no more 'real' than Moneta; no mystical claim for their 'existence' is made. They are no more than the embodiment of things impossible to define in terms other than those the poem gives them, things that a man may hope to find confronting him at his death.¹

Joseph Riddel repeats this stance in *The Clairvoyant Eye*, arguing that the poem 'mocks the mythological imagination and the soothing personae it has created against mortality.'² My readings in this chapter suggest the reductive aspect of these and similar interpretations. I attempt to reposition such reservations within the thematic of poetic temperament and perception, emphasising the ancillary importance of Stevens' theme of attainability in relation to transcendental forms, a fact which, in the interest of substantial paraphrase (which Beckett has deemed impossible for this poem), necessitates a more open, less pejorative reading of mystical 'existence' in this context.

Regrettably, several prominent critics have dismissed "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as irrelevant to the appraisal of the Stevens canon. Most recently, Bart Eeckhout, with some vehemence, has deplored the poem as an example of Stevens' courting 'the autonomy of a world of words.' It is worth quoting more from Eeckhout's recent book, for the reason that it illustrates a by now almost conventional neglect of the poem in question. The following comment, it might be noted, is made with only a minor degree of contention. Eeckhout finds "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" one of Stevens' 'most artificial texts.' It is lessened further, he says, by

the sense of a poet trying his hand at a textual and verbal creation ex nihilo. "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," for all its incantatory elegiac power, consists almost entirely of a self-generated and self-generating rhetoric. It points up one of the limits of poetic composition itself, the boundary where technique turns into technology.³

¹ Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens*, p. 5.

² Joseph Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye*, Baton Rouge: 1965, p. 240.

³ Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, pp. 209-210.

Quite naturally, those critics more disposed to acknowledge and explore Stevens' romanticism have treated "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as a far more significant text.⁴ It is my intention in this chapter to treat the poem as a primary account of Stevens' idiosyncratic idealist thinking, and, further, to argue that it behoves Stevensesan scholarship to come to view this text as indispensable to any comprehensive reading of the poet's *oeuvre*. Extending my ideas from the first two chapters, I will consider how the visionary forms of *The Auroras of Autumn* relate to and differ from the visionary forms present in Stevens' earlier collections of poetry. In addition, I will attempt here an explication of how the forms function within the poem itself, reflecting on how what I explain as their elaborate individual qualities can be said to determine the structure and progression of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus."

What then is the substance of Stevens' prelude appeal to visibility in Canto One of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus"? Beginning to answer this question, we can refer to the concept of need and its status in preceding poems and prose pieces as a trope for individual artistic obligation. The 'need of his nature' and the 'suasion not to be denied' are a keen sub-textual presence in the two lines already quoted, serving to declare something of a consummatory sense of the ineluctable within Stevens' twin concerns of literary creativity and epistemological speculation. Recurrent with the lynchpin notion of the individual poetic temperament, as I have been saying, was Stevens' conviction that 'The need of the poet for poetry is a dynamic cause of the poetry that he writes' (OP229). The dramatic employment of the trope in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" figures 'need' as that which leads the poet-percipient to the visionary brink and then propels 'the mind beyond the mind' into an absolute comprehension of existence and death. The real relevance of need here is that it invokes Stevens' idea, as he stated it in "The Irrational Element in Poetry," that one writes 'because one is impelled to do so by personal sensibility' (OP227). The elaborate experiential beyond programmed in the poem is made possible, we can say, by the poet's special relenting to this need, his embracing of 'the whole necessity of sight,' a faithful answering of the 'instinct for heaven' and 'its counterpart: / the instinct for earth' (CP476). Without 'the eye that needs' (that compulsive, conscientious, dogged and somewhat haunted Stevensesan drive towards an

⁴ A. Walton Litz, tellingly, as a prominent arguer for themes of negativity and enervation in Stevens' later work, published nothing about the poem. Neither have Alan Filreis, Angus Cleghorn, Eleanor Cook, Lee M. Jenkins or James Longenbach, made any comment on "The Owl" in their historicist studies to date. I would argue that the marked absence of even a remotely polemic content in the poem, along with its often rhapsodic grade of idealistic affirmation, makes the critical doctrines of political engagement and aesthetic-philosophical limitation almost irrelevant as interpretive devices. Harold Bloom, in *The Poems of Our Climate* and Joseph Carroll, in *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction*, have both emphasised the importance of the poem.

actualisation of artistic temperament), we can assume, the poet would lack both competency and authenticity in the Stevensean sense. He would not be a true artist. "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" proposes the most superlatively 'true' representation of the acutest poet in a state of 'fulfilment,' immersed in the 'radiant and productive atmosphere' (CP67) of the realisation of his quest, and discovering the fullness of his poetic powers to be synonymous with 'a phase of metaphysics.'

The three poems "The Auroras of Autumn," "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" and "A Primitive Like an Orb," share the terms accomplishment and fulfilment. This fact reflects their related concern to present an actualisation of the schemata of intimation and possibility that have defined the theoretical development of the writing up to *The Auroras of Autumn*. In this mode, the protagonist of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" exists in a state of extreme empowerment which allows him to walk 'living among the forms of thought.' He is Stevens' explicit agent of the 'giant' sensory category, 'the ultimate intellect' (CP433), that fateful condition of a total disclosure of reality which reveals the highest 'knowledge of being' (CP350). The logic and narrative of the poem, I propose, is dedicated to a validation of the beatific world he is said to find within the 'azury centre of time' (CP425), the poet-percipient's accomplishment here representing an extreme elucidation of the earth in its essential, meta- or ultra-physical aspect.

The status of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as an embodiment of the 'supreme fiction' or god-substitute, is proposed by Stevens from the outset. The poem's action takes place, we are told in the first line, 'among the dead,' the speaker announcing provocatively that 'two forms move' in a state of vatic visibility for the owl-quester. This special 'motion' occurs 'there,' in the ultimate realm to which the protagonist's poetic apparatus has transported him. These 'two brothers' are distinguished in the opening canto by the function they perform in the afterlife. The divinity 'High sleep' is characterised in terms of his massive stature and the portentous height associated with his status as the embodiment of poetic absorption. He is said to placate the dead in their anxieties. He 'quiets them,' while his looming counterpart 'high peace / Upon whose shoulders even the heavens rest,' provides a structure for the iconic vastness of the afterlife. As a fantastical mainstay, his presence is something of the architecture of the two worlds in their unity, the image of an Atlas of peace proposing an idealised psychology and sensation, and serving to communicate an experience of providential noumenology. The second verse introduces a third form:

Two brothers. And a third form, she that says
Good-by in the darkness, speaking quietly there,
To those that cannot say good-by themselves. (CP431)

A similar form of ministering to that carried out by 'high sleep' is suggested here. As was the case with the central figure in the previously discussed "Large Red Man Reading," this female form provides a generous, liturgical consolation for the souls of the dead in their disembodied condition of speechless fear and darkness. She speaks quietly, thereby participating in the heavenly quietude of her male consort, and by this she attends the aggrieved sense of sundering that besets the ambivalent dead. In this process the breach between the two worlds is somewhat lessened. A sense of the inhumanity and otherworldliness of the noumenal realm persists and yet an unequivocal meeting of emotional need is also seen to pervade its 'deep atmosphere.'

These forms are visible to the eye that needs,
Needs out of the whole necessity of sight.
The third form speaks, because the ear repeats,

Without a voice, inventions of farewell.
These forms are not abortive figures, rocks,
Impenetrable symbols, motionless. They move

About the night. They live without our light,
In an element not the heaviness of time,
In which reality is prodigy.

There sleep the brother is the father, too,
And peace the cousin by a hundred names
And she that in the syllable between life

And death cries quickly, in a flash of voice,
Keep you, keep you, I am gone, oh keep you as
My memory, is the mother of us all,

The earthly mother and the mother of
The dead. Only the thought of those three
Is dark, thought of the forms of dark desire. (CP432)

This, the conclusion of the first canto, meets implicitly the argument for its own subversion by scepticism. The closing two lines seek to dissuade any morbid reception of the poem's subject. We can posit here a diffident interlocutor whose hesitation at the vast darkness has prompted the conciliatory tone of 'Only the thought of these three is dark.' The

phrase 'dark desire' increases this modality of assent, returning the line's emphasis as it does to the theoretic confidence of artistic interiority and 'need,' and to the sacred inner gravitas of the ancient mother's 'suasion.' Relatedly, the aforementioned 'These forms are visible to the eye that needs' is a candid addressing of the undeniably vaunted qualities delineated in the opening verses. These are not everyday revelations to the extent that 'the eye that needs out of the whole necessity of sight' is an exceptional artistic condition. However, their substance is of human relevance and their sublimity, Stevens is keen to attest, relates to an existential truth. The goddess is at once 'the mother of the dead' and the 'mother of the earth,' at once poetic image and a true or cogent consideration of being. The canto continues to push against the category of redundancy: 'these are not abortive figures,' 'impenetrable' and 'motionless.' Rather they are actualities, seen by a clairvoyant power of imaginative instinct, 'seen in insight' (CP451). 'They move / About the night,' apt to effect a state of exchange between the two worlds; their own, the atemporal world of 'the knowledge of being,' 'an element not the heaviness of time,' and the surface world, the immediately apparent reality of appearances, the earth in habitual 'man-locked' (CP497) perception, before it becomes, as a matter of impulsion, 'the earth, seen as inamorata' (CP484). The second world of visionary forms is the core of the known world of 'our light,' and from this holy and fecundating *beyond* our reality is said to issue. Here, the suggestive concept of 'reality as prodigy' bolsters the impression of the poet-percipient's heroic accessing of a sublime causation.

In the ninth line of canto one, the typical Stevensesan image of the ear relates the subtle tension of the transcendent interpenetration of the two worlds. The ear's repeating of its 'inventions of farewell,' in poignant, supplicating muteness and valediction, is said to be the reason that 'the third form speaks.' Within the poem's narrative structure, this detail affiliates the acutely listening and acutely aspiring poet to the dead in their irrevocable communion with the mother. In this moment of the quest he too has become one of those 'who cannot say good-by themselves.' It is suggested that for the duration of his vision he is one of the human dead, establishing thereby an orphic framework of heroic descent through mortality. Superlatively, his extreme range of sensibility allows him to be habituated in 'the syllable between life and death.' This particular image recalls the theme of verbal excellence as it was treated in *Transport to Summer*. The 'adjectives of deepest mine' from "The Pastor Caballero" are a corollary impression of the linguistic profundity of the poetic mechanism as it advances to fulfilment. A further poetic competence is invoked in the percipient's decoding of the

mother's keening strains 'keep you, keep you' from the abstrusely articulate luminescence of 'a flash of voice.' We are told that this synaesthetically gleaned pronouncement happens 'quickly,' thus suggesting a further competency in the visionary apparatus of the protagonist who keeps perceptual pace, *qua* acutest poet, with the fleeting and inverted audibility of the metaphysical mother. The earlier poem "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain" also resonates in the image of the 'flash of voice' recalling as it does the line 'glints of sound from the grass' (CP350).

The sequence in Canto One that leads to the revelation that the female divinity 'is the mother of us all' begins with two brief treatments of the other two male 'forms.' The poem at this point has begun a process of elaborate characterisation which continues to the fifth canto. Each of the characters introduced in the opening verses, the questing protagonist, the figures of high sleep, high peace and the mother, will be allotted a richly explicative canto: Cantos Two, Three, Four and Five respectively. Stevens explores individually their attributes and their function within the noumenal realm, and in addition, with respect to the three forms, their significance for the event of their being disclosed to the poet-percipient. This process of extension into more sumptuous grades of presence and potency is pre-figured in the movement of Canto One insofar as the descriptive basis of the opening three verses seems to be amended by the grander suggestions of the sixth verse.

There sleep the brother is the father, too,
And peace the cousin by a hundred names. (CP432)

This contradictory modulation of the filial theme, proposes the irrational power of the beyond of the 'central poem' (CP442) as Stevens conceives it. The concept of omnipotence is imported here as the portrayal of the forms' movements among the dead is extended to suggest a dramatic permeation of the realm itself. Within a rhetoric of metamorphosis, the identity of the forms is rendered more enigmatic here, serving at once to accuse and to mystify the human categories that would articulate them. The compacting of the normative metaphor of the family focuses the conception of 'reality as prodigy.' As in the similarly toned "A Primitive Like an Orb" from the same period, the poem seeks contact with a 'patron of origins.' Towards the supreme fiction as generative absolute, a 'parental magnitude' (CP443) is conceived. Such figurations pursue the maximised transcendence of what is described in the concluding canto of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as 'the pure perfections of parental space' (CP436).

Sleep, then, is at once the brother and the father. This idealising transition can be said to subsume its inherent paradox as part of the essentialising imagery of the absolute. Sleep is the cosmic sibling of peace. With awesome benevolence they work and revolve together in the radiant atmosphere of the central poem of the earth, entranced in their supernatural devotion to the dissociated experience of the newly dead, their eternal ministry being confirmed in the concept of brotherhood. And yet their gargantuan image is not amenable to fixity. They symbolise the entirety of being, and for this reason Stevens needs to sustain the breadth of their remit. The poem's 'high argument' requires the conundrum and the opacity of the boundless, and Stevens' setting up of roiling connections and identities proves one means to this evocation.

In a similar impetus of extension, peace is portrayed, in addition to his preliminary status as a brother to sleep and a pillar of creation, as a 'cousin by a hundred names.' In this, Stevens inscribes the elusive nature of the perennial absolute and the tendency of the spiritual crux to morph in religious-cultural variety. The inclusion of 'cousin' also provides a logical complication and enhancement of the scope of the individual divinity. It is part of the sleep-god's intended grandeur that he conjures the hundred names, to each of which he corresponds. That his position within the schema of kinship that Stevens employs to depict a populous afterworld is seen, in omniscient fashion, to range and circulate amid the roles and ancillary metaphysical locations of cosmic brother and cosmic cousin, directly contributes to this grandeur. Stevens may also be playing with the idea of a necessary ineffability here, in which case his own comment in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" provides a useful gloss:

I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixed (NA34).

The figural tendency towards emanation over solidity also recalls the concluding lines of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CP489)

The challenge in the unusual density of information with regard to the lineage and appearance of the figures in the 'perennial' zone feeds into the affirming rhetoric that I have already identified in connection with the repudiation of such concepts as 'abortive figures,' as

well as the specific artistic initiation and ‘need’ that is said to facilitate the visibility of the forms. A tendentious appropriation of realism pervades the very specificity of Stevens’ descriptive language in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” The close reader meets a subtle appeal to the tenability of the documentable ‘there’ of this luminous realm in the fastidiously qualifying manner of Stevens’ characterisation of the forms, and the very challenge of interpretation and analysis, we can say, begins with the poem’s carefully evolving mesh of putative accuracies.

Canto Two focuses specifically on the capacity of the visionary protagonist, the heroic owl-initiate who has achieved this lustrous ‘passage’ into the fantastical audience of sleep and peace.

There came a day, there was a day – one day
A man walked living among the forms of thought. (CP432)

The seemingly hedging style of the first line specifically incorporates Stevens’ own preceding poetic episodes where he looked forward in staccatos of optimism to a wondrous exaltation of perception and knowledge, an internal advent that would facilitate a trans-textual structure. The ultimate ‘affair / Of the possible’ (CP342) has arrived in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” ‘a change immenser than / A poet’s metaphors’ as it is stated in “Description Without Place” (CP341). Indeed, the third canto of that earlier poem provides us with an important precedent with which to interpret the claims made in Canto Two of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” It begins with an idealised image of a potency of artistic perception.

There are potential seemings, arrogant
To be, as on the youngest poet’s page,

Or in the dark musician, listening
to hear more brightly the contriving chords. (CP340)

From here, the third canto of “Description Without Place” proposes a more remarkable vision of the yield of poetic realisation. The thematic emphasis is upon a push from speculation to a spiritual arrival at the absolute comprehension of earthly existence. Poetry here is represented as an organic system of sanctification and insight that may serve to activate a final apotheosis of the human mind in its ascending state of terrestrial meditation.

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 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 seeds ripe, unpredictable fruit. (CP341)

In these lines, once the creative moment is said to exceed a provisionality of insight and representation and to touch the ontological ground of the supreme fiction, a state of final form comes into play and a fourfold fruit of revelation is projected. Of metaphor, as is said in the *Auroras of Autumn* poem "Things of August," the claim is made in the above excerpt that 'it habituates him to the invisible by its faculty of the exceptional' (CP493). The invisible reality 'not the heaviness of time' commences in perceptual terms when the immense potency of metaphor is maximally employed as a transport, a tool in the creation of a 'passage' to the realm of 'the forms of thought.' "Description Without Place," written two years before "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," predicts that such a possible apotheosis would involve firstly being's coming true. This notion inflects the protracted condition of yearning which characterises Stevens' hesitancy towards a 'final belief' as explored in the opening stanza of "Asides on the Oboe." The more lyrical and acquiescent idea of a processive being figures the condition of ascent towards the truth of the inner sanctum of creation and the experience of sublimity 'there' as it is later more fully depicted in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." Being, we might say, has come true for the owl-poet. His 'sense of the world' powerfully repudiates human finitude and casts upon the existential subjects of incarnation and consciousness an origin and fate suffused by eternal presence. Being, in this way, coming true, has not proved false, and the 'blazoned days' (CP383) of poetry are no mere consolation for a Hobbesian reality of brutal 'unsponsored' (CP70) exile and vulnerability, a place 'not our own and ... not ourselves' (CP383). Rather, they constitute the intimation of a sublimely providential

substructure to existence. "Description Without Place" looks forward to this radical disclosure with an absolute confidence in poetry as a procedure of enlightenment. It is expected that there will be 'a point in the fire of music,' a breakthrough or quickening of insight which prompts the mind into a grandly ranging apperception, that exemplary state of epistemological furtherance gathered in Stevens' trope of transparency, a state whose validity is protected in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in the following lines:

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
It is a visibility of thought,
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once. (CP488)

The phrase 'the fire of music' incorporates multiple connotations of artistic passion, potency, entrancement, performance and composition. The hallowed 'point' inscribes a crescendo of interiority which serves to exalt the psychological locus of the artwork, yielding to the poet an aggrandized perceptual vantage on his own existence: 'Dazzle,' or preliminary rapture and mystification, 'yields to clarity' and advanced vision. In this 'possible' clarity, a concept that is given its figural fruition in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," the notion of extreme poetic perception is central. 'Observing' will effect a completing, it will eradicate the problematics of contingency, plurality, duality, ineffability and hesitation. 'The world' in this mode of central poetry, 'shrinks to an immediate whole.' This immediacy is the resolution and accessibility of all previous 'hiddenness,' the access of truth synonymous with the emergence of 'the real ... from its crude compoundings' (CP404). Earlier, as was seen, in a less rhapsodic depiction of this same state, Stevens' fisherman had probed the natural world by the primed singularity of his one eye and one ear.

This very immediacy, redolent as it is of a philosophical and imaginative resolution 'that we do not need to understand,' as it is said in "Description Without Place," circumscribes the owl-poet's experience in the underworld of poetry. For him, in his blaze of music, the transcendently synthetic 'abysmal melody' of 'resemblance' which has conjured his 'whole being' and 'twanged him through and through,' drawing his harmonic temperament into a reverberant, corporeal inspiration, the world has certainly shrunk. Its vastness and its mystery no longer elude him. The conjectural marrow of the beyond has become an experiential boon. Stevens claims that his poet-percipient can walk 'living' amid the trans-phenomenal code of being, the absolute forms of thought, 'to see their lustre truly as it is.' Capitalising on that fateful, realising 'point' or pitch of compositions, the emotive apogee of his quest into the

abyss of poetry, he can also partake of the generative principle of reality as he has sensed it in its deep heart's core. Harmoniously, prodigiously, he partakes of the metaphysical reality.

There came a day, there was a day – one day
A man walked living among the forms of thought
To see their lustre truly as it is

And in harmonious prodigy to be,
A while, conceiving his passage as into a time
That of itself stood still, perennial,

Less time than place, less place than thought of place
And, if of substance, a likeness of the earth,
That by resemblance twanged him through and through,

Releasing an abysmal melody,
A meeting, an emerging in the light,
A dazzle of remembrance and of sight. (CP432-33)

In the progression of these lines, it is the state of 'harmonious prodigy' that is the most prominent figure for the sanctifying force which is deemed to have facilitated the radical conception of the passage into the a-temporal. Poetic harmony, as a psychic catalyst, has caused a grand crossing into a higher mode of existence. This corresponds to the psychic preparedness in the face of the structure of the 'purple-leaping element that forth / Would froth the whole heaven' portrayed in "Description Without Place." The explicitly prophetic event of the frothing forth of 'whole heaven' in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," expunging as it does the rhetoric of possibility, explains its profound individual instigation in Canto Two. The end of the fifth line isolates the suggestivity of 'a time', prompting the category of a variable time identity, an alternative temporal realm. This realm is said to have 'stood still,' and this quality, this aspect of the 'perennial,' pertains to its innate self-possession. The peculiar time that is discovered by the owl-quester is said to have been devoid of normative progression as a matter 'of itself.' The ideal 'place' in which sleep, peace and the mother are said to conduct their strange dominion, it seems, is free from the tyranny of the continuum. Throughout "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," such semantic nuances, in their argument for the idea of the beyond as discrete and autonomous, pointedly serve to extend the poem's careful rhetoric of actuality.

In the seventh line, the effort to cast the new temporal category as something which befits the power of the poet-percipient continues. The idea that it is less time than place, insofar it does not signal a complete deviation from the preceding attributes, casts the latter as

a provisional mode of conveying the special difficulty of the protagonist's attainment. The beyond is said to be a place, and yet, 'less place than thought of place.' In a short textual space Stevens has invoked and immediately suspended two major conceptual struts. Repeatedly he seeks to subsume the sense of the categories but to elude their definitions. By such connoting elusiveness, the abstraction in question remains vivid. It remains, in the reader's necessary shunting from the known to the opaque, at once part of the aimed-at beyond and part of the normative earth experience. The reading experience in this example necessarily enacts the theme of synthesis. Simultaneously, by virtue of the tendentiously constructed challenge of the diction, the pace and ingenuity of the mind of the character to whom this location is being ascribed remains prominent.

In the eighth line, Stevens toys with the eclipsing of the abstraction's claim to a terrestrial basis. The 'if of substance,' imports a brief equivocation, without precedent and in a mode not to be repeated in the remainder of the poem, which is devoted to a concerted singing of the experiential beyond. The equivocation, however, is immediately overwritten by the thematic of the poet-percipient in his mystical decoding of the truest earth. If the beyond was substantial, the statement develops, it was so in a condition which emanated a portentous quality of the earth, a planetary likeness which prompted the poet-percipient into still further singing and disclosure. Vision has graduated in this scarcely calculable substantiality, throwing open the abyss of absolute beholding and knowledge, in which the moment of prophetic accomplishment, an Aeolian ecstasy, possesses the protagonist, 'Releasing an abysmal melody, / A meeting, an emerging in the light, / A dazzle of remembrance and of sight.' This effusive equation of synonyms contains a significant amount of Stevens' theory with respect to the context of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." The abysmal melody or the crowning poem of the individual poet's temperamental enterprise, is also a meeting. The poem's involved portrayal of the owl-poet's encountering among the forms of thought the grand trinity of archetypes is this very meeting. The implicit logic, revealed in the run of synonymy is that the fulfilment of vision, the attaining of 'the great poem of the earth' through the extreme fruition of individual artistic ability, entails an exceedingly spiritual movement into higher knowledge of the heights and depths of mind and world, the coveted and invisible destiny of the metaphysical relation between man and nature. This sense of a 'meeting' of godliness in poetic realisation is also 'an emerging in the light.' The verb choice

here capitalises on the image of a dawning transfiguration and a sumptuously poised reaching towards the inner cell of the Moneta or Beatrice equivalent.

‘The light,’ as pared diction, conveys a preconception of illumination, a state the fourth and final synonym in this dense series modifies with the image of a suggestive alloy of light, memory and vision. It is part of the dynamic integrity of this verse that the reader is invited to transfer the qualities between the images in order that the cumulative image or aggregate impression might yield an individual imaginative reaction. Thus, the line’s structural logic encourages the statement that the abysmal melody is ‘a dazzle of remembrance and of sight’ and ‘an emerging in the light.’ It is also tenable to paraphrase that the melody is the transcendent force that has led to the epistemological breach of the dazzle. Stevens is also saying that the involved faculties of remembrance and sight, when ‘dazzled’ or rendered actively luminous by the quickening of great poetic energies, will equip the advanced and superlatively aesthetic percipient to behold and engage vistas of the boundless prismatic governance that abides beneath the immediate surface of being; that veritable source, to which humanity, throughout Stevens’ later writing, against all concepts of duality and finitude, is deemed to belong.

Canto Three sustains Stevens’ dual effort to maintain a narrative mood and to validate the imaginative experience. The opening line renews the earlier rhetoric: ‘There he saw well the foldings in the height / Of sleep.’ The diction here stands as an example of Stevens almost straining in the incorporation of his doctrine of poetic perception. ‘There he saw well’ echoes the ‘there’ of Canto One and looks forward to the opening words of Canto Four. The curious ‘he saw well’ pushes the concern for substantiality as inscribed in the preceding canto, and commences the poem’s definitive descriptions of the appearance or apparitional detail of the three divinities. The majority of the poems in *Parts of a World* and *Transport to Summer*, I have been arguing, seem to seek some charged version of this seeing well. And this poem undeniably involves the idealistic formulation in “Credences of Summer” of an objective world rendered ‘fully apparent’ (CP376). Canto Three installs a sense of the progression of the quest. In the first canto of “The Owl,” the introductory depiction of sleep alluded to at least one function of his height. It was, as I said, the true breadth of the human mind, as a mode of cosmic succour to the newly dead. Now the owl-percipient, communing with this reality, arrives at that very inter-relation between the fact of the divinity and the fact of the ascending

human consciousness: 'Sleep realized / Was the ultimate intellect.' He stands beneath the enrobed vastness of the divinity and studies intensely its fatefully whelming pulchritude.

There he saw well the foldings in the height
Of sleep, the whiteness folded into less,
Like many robings, as moving masses are,

As a moving mountain is, moving through day
And night, colored from distances, central
Where luminous agitations come to rest,

In an ever-changing, calmest unity,
The unique composure, harshest streakings joined
In a vanishing-vanished violet that wraps round

The giant body the meanings of its folds,
The weaving and the crinkling and the vex. (CP433)

The visionary structure is here delineated with a consistent appeal to accuracy. The dense progression of simile employed to convey the image of the robings of the divinity entails an attempt to simultaneously capitalize and reduce the category of the marvellous. 'The whiteness folded into less,' for example, seems to attain its lyric status in the elision of the phrasing that would make it an overt simile. The noun 'whiteness' is not explained beyond its uncommon denotation of livid colour in the context, and the state of 'less' challenges any easy visualisation of the reduction of the ethereal fabric as it ranges in the vaulted drama of the vision. And yet in this elision there is an implication of matter-of-fact. A normalising frame occurs in the lack of clarity, particularly since that which precedes and follows this line partakes of the denotative momentum and relative textual fluency of the multiple simile. The contraction of the abstract in this way performs a construction of the indubitable within a reading experience that is vulnerable to stiflement by the sheer Miltonic scale of the poem's enterprise.

This subtle striving for the status of reality for the visionary forms is re-enforced in the similes that are commenced in lines three and four. 'Like many robings' is largely normative, ostensibly tangible. But after this, with only the frail stalling of a comma to work the transition, the more speculating clause 'as moving masses are' is introduced. These masses bolster the greatness and totalised scale of the three forms. And so within the strict context they are acceptable. However, the embeddedness of the lines hedges the eventuality of their reception and with a note of authorial apprehension and even tautology they pursue both a

moment of comparative illustration, that is, they fulfil the gesture of simile, and a moment of rejuvenation of the thesis of the existence of the visionary forms. The verb form of 'As moving masses are' (implying almost a statement of 'they are, they are') is undeniably redolent of the rhetorical impulse that places the hyper-locating term 'there' so strategically throughout "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." And we can read this as evidence of Stevens' more discursively inclined and sober, however subtle, treatment of his apocalyptic claim to 'final form.'

A similar inflection of real existence is imported in the follow-on simile: 'As a moving mountain is.' The robes, as abstractions, are to be understood in relation to other abstractions, scarcely less magical in their meanings, and yet tellingly couched in the semantic frame of credence and clarity that the simile form represents. The use of the image of the mountain restates the important concept of a reciprocation between the metaphysical and the physical in this poem at this stage in Stevens' writing. The supernatural robes are transferred as much as possible to the terminology and 'substance' of naturalism. The moving mountain is another sensational datum, a god-form conflated to and ratified by the imagery of a real or more apparent nature. It partakes of the trope of motion, which most commonly for Stevens represents the values of circulation and repetition.⁵ Motion, in this context, emblematises the pure thought forms drifting as heavenly bodies in broad-sketched opacities of invisible change. The mountain in Canto Three, within the simile which intends to elaborate the vision of the towering robes of the figure of sleep, possesses the befitting power of ethereality that Stevens requires to communicate his conception of the all-seeing, enrobed 'ultimate intellect.' It is 'colored from distances,' which attributes to it the quality of the pervasive. These colours are presumably the apparent forms of weathering accrued on the mountain's face from its perpetual odyssey 'through day / And night.' The idea of distances as a tangible, localised effect enacts Stevens' propensity in this collection for a resolution of disparities, a gathering

⁵ The word motion occurs 39 times in Stevens' *Collected Poems*. Some examples from *Harmonium* include the brief "Life is Motion" which considers a 'marriage / Of flesh and air' (CP83); "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician" which has the line 'the drifting of these curtains / Is full of long motions,' and 'all motion / Is beyond us, as the firmament, / Up-rising and down-falling, bares / The last largeness, bold to see' (CP62); "The Place of The Solitaires" which presents as in synonymous relation 'a place of perpetual undulation,' 'manifold continuation,' and 'the motion of thought' (CP60); and "To the One of Fictive Music" which views 'perfection' in 'motion' as the antidote to the 'imperfections' of fixed vision (CP87). In the *Transport to Summer* poem "A Word With José Rodríguez Feo," as a meeting of the injunction 'We must enter boldly that interior world / To pick up relaxations of the known,' Stevens inquires 'What not quite realized transit / Of ideas moves wrinkled in a motion like / The cry of an embryo?' (CP333-34).

into 'whole' experience a ranging phenomenology of time and place.⁶ The empowered moment of observation is played out in such phrasing, as the eye, marking the amenable wildness of the 'color,' is conveyed in its reflex of distinguishing and synthesising that which recedes, that which precedes, and that which occupies the foreground. Notably, Stevens does not conclude the simile of the mountain with a period. As a result its characteristics become spliced with the narrative of the robes. Without a clear reversion to the referent proper, it is possible, and indeed logical, to read the mountain as the main subject of the canto's remainder. This, however, is to pursue a disintegration of the poem's setting. The term 'central' at the end of the fourth line, and the 'folds' at the end of the ninth, offer sufficiently familiar coordinates for us to decide that Stevens has subsumed his mountain-vision simile into the statement of the original vision, namely, 'the foldings in the height of sleep.'

A corollary of the function of the word 'there' as I have been interpreting it, occurs in the structure of the sixth line which, in addition to the last word of the preceding line, reads: 'Central / Where luminous agitations come to rest.' The 'where' in this instance stages a moment of the protagonist's gaze focussing upon the hub of the vision of sleep. The 'luminous agitations', cohering into a kind of pregnant tranquillity of the centre, propose a sprawl of bright energies which surround that which is posited as 'emerging in the light.' Whiteness, light, and translucence predominate, and within this palate of 'the light-bound space of the mind,' as he calls it in the concluding canto, Stevens increases the innovation of his imagery to achieve a three-dimensionality within the scheme of oneness. Thus, the 'agitations' pluralize the brightness, and the state of rest to which they are said to come is a 'unique composure' and 'an ever-changing calmest unity.' The changing within the image of unity entails a superlative brushwork: 'harshes streakings joined / In a vanishing-vanished violet that wraps round / The giant body the meanings of it folds.' Here the fecund 'ever-changing' which prompted a freshened set of details within the potentially monochromatic field of resolution, is simultaneously aligned within the more cogent thematic of unity. The harshes streakings are said to be 'joined,' and so their dramatic contribution effects no dream-terminating rupture or dislocation. Similarly, the mystical agency of the violet is something which 'wraps round,' in a re-consolidating movement of enclosure and embrace. The term 'vanishing-vanished'

⁶ In "A Primitive Like an Orb" Stevens writes that 'the light' of the 'essential poem' is not 'a light apart.' And in the sixth canto of that poem, in a Wordsworthian rhetoric of what M. H. Abrams calls 'spousal verse,' the unifying 'mate of summer ... / Speaks, denouncing separate selves, both one' (CP441). *Natural Supernaturalism*, New York: 1973, p. 37.

isolates the visionary moment in the heightened protraction of its probing the activity of the light. The unusual hyphenation here seeks to conflate both the pathetic resonance of an imminent absence and the resounding emptiness of a complete absence. In this coinage, at least two factors are proposed. Firstly, the eye of the percipient has purportedly mastered the sequential contingency of the vision of the violet veil as it disappears before his enchanted eyes. Secondly, the colour in question is more than a colour. It involves an organic, participatory aspect of the apparition itself, and, in this regard, the conflated attributes of presence and absence are necessitated by the pursuit of a linguistic frame that will communicate the obscurity of an extra-sensory phenomena.

To a certain extent, it is by the special ministration of the violet energy that the body of sleep appears cloaked in 'the meanings' that its folds are said to communicate. This detail marks a further development in the visionary narrative. I have identified the development in the owl-percipient's quest from his noting of the positive effect of the height of sleep upon the dead, to the moment of seeing 'well' into the whelming folds of the robe of sleep. From here, in the fourth verse of Canto Three, towards the climax of 'sleep realised,' the poem's empowered gaze begins to apprehend a further portent in the form of the undulation of the divine fabric. 'The meanings of its folds' are deemed to comprise 'the weaving and the crinkling and the vex.' The first two synonyms here indicate the intense scrutiny of the gaze, and the ancillary depth of contemplation which gathers into the percipient's ken the subtler facets of the form in question. The 'vex' seems to return the reference to the 'luminous agitations' of the second verse, and the explicitly biblical simile of the ensuing line explains to some extent the function of the irrepressible vexing of light within the 'unique composure' of the divinity. The incessant motion of the robes is now seen as part of the vitality of the vision. For all its power of disclosure, it remains a necessary field of change:

As on water of an afternoon in the wind

After the wind has passed. Sleep realized
Was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect,
A diamond jubilation beyond the fire,

That gives its power to the wild-ringed eye.
Then he breathed deeply the deep atmosphere
Of sleep, the accomplished, the fulfilling air. (CP433)

The meanings of the folds, then, relate in some way to a figure of absolute creation, whether of poetry or of the earth itself or the point in which these two things can be said to overlap. The datum of water's movement 'after the wind has past' inscribes a third example of the poet-percipient's concern for the suggestivity of departure or a meditated non-existence. This figure is repeated in relation to the mother in the concluding line of Canto Five, where the quester dwells 'in the silence that follows her last word' (CP435). In the above excerpt, the line that reads, 'Sleep realized / Was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect' constitutes the least impressionistic phrasing of Canto Three. There is a strong sense here that Stevens is turning to the result of the encounter, to the pinnacle disclosure. How sleep appeared, how emotive and alluring was its stature and 'the serious folds of majesty' (CP442) that encircle it; these are the concerns of the first four stanzas. But in line thirteen the tone alters, and the declarative past tense verb at the beginning of the fourteenth line enacts an arresting of the programmatic mystery in favour of a definition. As if to seize the function of apotheosis, it is stated that the giant of 'sleep realised' 'was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect.' There is a renewed narrative tone to this line. We are being informed of what the vision of sleep in his robes meant at that time to the owl-percipient. The shift of tense in the middle of the line seeks to appropriate the meaning of this experience into a perennial figure. The 'ultimate intellect' manifested in the realm of realisation as whiteness conveys the human mind as it might be known in the fullness of its invisible heights and depths. In the occasion of the current poem, the individualised figure for the mind's greater nature, sleep realised, becomes that perennial aspect, leading in its role as symbolical transport to the heaven of heavens, 'a diamond jubilation beyond the fire.' This ultimate source of mind and being, by its system of aesthetic emanations, bids the fulfilment of '[t]he essential poem at the centre of things' (CP440), and in mystical complicity with the perceptual prowess and will-to-ascent of the questing poet, 'gives its power to the wild-ringed eye' of the protagonist, who is seen in turn to capitalise on this beneficent inclusion, and to journey still deeper into the sumptuous flames of sleep. Stevens would repeat this format in "A Primitive Like an Orb" where 'men, and earth and sky, inform / Each other by sharp informations' (CP441). As he said in his 1948 lecture "Imagination As Value": 'To regard the imagination as metaphysics is to regard it as part of life' (CPP728).

The canto closes with an image of the quester in the centre, breathing blissfully there in rhythmic aggrandizements of still further centrality: 'Then he breathed deeply the deep

atmosphere / Of sleep, the accomplished, the fulfilling air.’ In addition to enhancing Stevens’ pentameter line here, the repetitive ‘deep’ and ‘deeply,’ effect a mirrored relation between the subjective inner and (quasi-)objective outer reaches of the setting. In this way they can be said to bolster the idea of the consummation of the temperamental artistic capacity as a directly corresponding aspect of the revelation of the metaphysical vista, ‘as if the central poem became the earth’ (CP441).

The fourth canto of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” returns to the figure of peace. This section opens with the trope of verity. Again, pre-empting and seeking to solve any potential aporia in his reader, he restates the thematic of presence in the word ‘there.’ The passage was real, the discovery and the lustre were real. The alchemical giants were real and applicably meaningful.

There peace stood, the goldophin and fellow, estranged, estranged,
Hewn in their middle as the beam of leaves,
The prince of shither-shade and tinsel lights,

Stood flourishing the world. The brilliant height
And hollow of him by its brilliance calmed,
Its brightness burned the way good solace seethes. (CP434)

We find some continuation here of the briefer depictions of the first canto. By way of introduction we had been told that peace was the member of this immortal host ‘upon whose shoulders even the heavens rest.’ Now that mythic strength and stature is transferred to the characterising stalwartness of the repeatedly stated fact that he ‘stood.’ In the visionary progression his aspect here seems more exalted. From an initial mechanical supporting of the world, he is now seen to flourish it. This may mean that as an ultimate source or orb of poetic activity, he elaborates or beautifies or gives gayety to the world. It may also denote a more basic idea of the earth’s common power, with the flourishing to be understood as the proliferation of nature. Something perhaps of the fecundity of summer viewed in its unmanifest condition. This second impression is supported by the increased component of naturalistic imagery in this canto: horse, leaves, stones, flowers, bee, the summer. Whatever Stevens’ exact intended implication, the absolutism of the imagery is unmistakable, as is the intent of a laudatory attribution of beheld godliness to the figure of peace.

Peace now appears as an eternally redoubtable element of being. He is the godolphin, and for this reason, as Harold Bloom has said, he is 'prized as that Arabian horse is prized.'⁷ He is 'fellow,' preserver of serenities, the absolute companion for the soul in its crisis of crossing out of incarnation. He is, as befits an idealist's icon in an anti-teleological epoch, 'estranged, estranged.' This doubling I would suggest is intended to inflect a mode of lament. The high peace form can be related to what Stevens deemed in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" to be humanity's culturally maligned aspect of 'spiritual height and depth' (NA34). In the same lecture, he elaborated this concept with the following:

While I know how difficult it is to express it, nevertheless I am bound to give a sense of it. Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible. Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more quickly. There is a shame of disclosing it and in its definite presentations a horror of it. But there it is. The fact that it is there is what makes it possible to invite to the reading and writing of poetry men of intelligence and desire for life. (NA34)

There is something of a muted acknowledgement by the owl-poet, in his fabulous trial of seeking to annex the beyond of human-cosmic identity, that the truth and intensity of the form of peace cannot be married to the reason. Peace, the incandescent flourisher of creation, is said to be estranged, we might say, as a matter of his exile at the hands of a pervasive zeal of positivism within the quotidian. 'The weight of primary noon' as it is termed in "The Motive for Metaphor" (CP288), may well be the source of the estrangement in question.

Peace is a luminous creature. He is a 'beam of leaves,' and 'the prince of shither-shade and tinsel lights.' On this phrasing, Carroll offers: 'The word shither is a neologism, probably compounded from slither and shimmer.'⁸ Peace's height is seen to be 'brilliant', and, although hollow, this potentially disheartening quality is maintained in calmness by the agency of brilliance. This formulation of an interdependency or equilibrium of structural and phenomenal attributes, echoes the second line of the poem's opening verse, where it was said of high sleep that 'by his highness' he 'quiets' the trembling dead. In the later instance, the quality of brilliance is responsible for the calming of height and hollowness. It is as if the protagonist is praising something in the radiance of his vision that forestalls the realisation of terror at the inhuman scope of the vision itself. An idiosyncratic logic is established to clarify this specific gesture of affirmation towards the light: 'Its brightness burned the way good solace seethes.' Here 'good solace' is conceived as an equivalent energy to that which is

⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 288.

⁸ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, p. 230.

beheld. The seething of good solace is in itself a mystical category, relevant to the poem's drama only by virtue of its use in simile. However, the simile phrase, 'the way,' implies a sense of unquestioned familiarity. A reader might agree that good solace, as opposed to a solace that is troubling, does in fact seethe, and thereby use the comparative experience to come conceptually closer to the poem's depiction of a pillar of dynamic and benevolent brilliance in the after-world. However, this is to attempt to unite for the purposes of reasonable communicability one exceedingly imaginative category with another, and, as simile, this similarity does not function with any especial ease. Alternatively, we can accept the figure as more ornamental than strictly illustrative, as something of an intended poeticism, an aspect of the transcendent routine in the depiction of the protagonist's extended range of feeling. In this way the second category proposes another form of what I have been terming a transcendental initiation. The concept of 'good solace,' a seething or pulsating or conflagrating 'personage,' unless the reader can match the image with his own experience, soon appears in terms of a self-sanctioning conceptuality, as a figure in an anti-normative remit of idealised experience and expression. It is important for us to remember that much of Stevens' later writing pursues what he conceived as 'a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world' (NA145), and his narratives are persistently reported through the 'wild-ringed' lens of the aesthetic-philosophical stance formed within, in the Emersonian sense, 'god's closet.' The artist who comes to feel, as Stevens did, that 'a celestial mode is paramount' (CP480) and who claims to intuit and behold hosts of 'causes' and divinities, will almost inevitably bear the brand of the hermetic upon his efforts 'to satisfy the universal mind' (NA145). This consideration also relates to the ontological project of the alloy of imagination and reason. As Stevens said in "The Figure of the Youth as the Virile Poet":

... an idea that satisfies both the reason and the imagination, if it happened, for instance, to be an idea of God, would establish a divine beginning and end for us which, at the moment, the reason, singly, at best proposes and on which, at the moment, the imagination, singly, merely meditates It seems to be elementary, from this point of view, that the poet, in order to fulfill himself, must accomplish a poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination. (NA42)

The third stanza marks the protracted impression of brilliance and height as a moment of transition, something of a conclusive account of the phenomenology of blazing peace:

This was peace after death, the brother of sleep,
The inhuman brother so much like, so near,

Yet vested in a foreign absolute,

Adorned with cryptic stones and sliding shines,
An immaculate personage in nothingness,
With the whole spirit sparkling in its cloth,

Generations of the imagination piled
In the manner of its stitchings, of its thread,
In the weaving round the wonder of its need,

And the first flowers upon it, an alphabet
By which to spell out holy doom and end,
A bee for the remembering of happiness. (CP434)

The 'this' in the first line of this excerpt summons again a sense of exactitude and confidence, and the reiterations of the location of the vision, the imaginative and temporarily visited 'after death,' as well as the kinship relation between the divinities, together enact this poem's subtle rhetorical tendency towards a balancing of tautological specification. Sleep is now considered in his symbolic function. He is the inhuman brother, and thus possesses a partial humanity, a semblance to the manifest world below. This resemblance prompts a moment of pathos for the insufficiency of the link between the two worlds. Repeating the incantatory sadness of the canto's first line, 'estranged, estranged,' this verse meditates the fact of the failure of identification between heaven and earth, emphasising an almost morbidly unfulfilled degree of resemblance, 'so much like, so near / Yet vested in a foreign absolute.' Peace then becomes a figure for a form of metaphysical irreconcilability, but also, in the succeeding lines, for the heroic efforts of other poets, 'generations of the imagination,' who have aspired to knowledge and representation of a divine substructure in human reality. Here, we can assume, capitalising on the resonance of their related efforts to 'justify the ways of God to man,'⁹ Stevens invokes, among others, the colossal precedents of Milton, Spenser, Blake, Wordsworth, and Emerson.

The 'foreign absolute' is brought to cultural presence by the processes of adornment by the 'cryptic stones and sliding shines' of the visionary enterprise. 'Cryptic stones' relates to the image of meaningful folds from the preceding canto, communicating a precious activity of signification upon what logically should be an inert surface. Stevens here returns to the imagery of vast fabrics from the preceding canto, and to the vatic scrutiny that was said to penetrate through to the 'meanings of its folds.' A sumptuous governing of temporal

⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, London: 1989, p. 5 (Bk 1, l. 26.). Joseph Carroll has interpreted this image as a key to Stevens' habit of subconscious allusion to his precedents, the manner in which he wrote in a natural affiliation with romantic-idealist thought. *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, p. 7.

determinacy is conveyed in the protagonist's ability to encounter 'generations of the imagination.' The theme of enlightenment is extended here with evocations of a Jungian race memory and a figural externalising of the subconscious. In an earlier poem "Somnambulissima," Stevens portrays the 'separately dwelling' romantic 'scholar,' who 'as a man feeling everything' is temperamentally equipped to dispel the concept of the mortality of a flock of birds that he contemplates 'on an old shore.' Like the owl-percipient considering the accrued acumen of the recurrent centuries of literature, this protagonist observes 'the generations of the bird.' The poem represents the ineluctable life cycle of the diminutive creature amid the sea's ferocious cleansing of their coastal habitat. However, it subverts any true finality in the dead birds being 'washed away.' In the scholar's vision the infinite populations of deceased birds are seen to have a 'pervasive being': 'They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away.' There is an idealist's optimism in the symbol of 'the bird that never settles.' Because this archetypal bird is said to command a metaphysical legion of 'its generations that follow in their universe,' the ocean is preserved from becoming 'a geography of the dead.' The poem closes in a mode which recalls the final lines of "Nomad Exquisite" as discussed in the previous chapter. The time-subverting scholar is said, by virtue of the wealth of his solitude, almost as an imaginative exhumation, to have 'Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia, / Which, as a man feeling everything, were his' (CP304).

The owl-percipient, as an exemplar of the poetic temperament, as a 'man feeling everything,' and, assumedly, seeing everything too, reflects some of the capacity of the protagonist in "Somnambulisma." In the later poem, the ability to defy temporal restriction is lifted beyond the contemplative pleasure of discerning the harmony of natural process, and extended to address the spiritual goal of the 'universal mind' or 'the whole spirit' as he terms it in the twelfth line of Canto Four. Within the later mode of total disclosure, Stevens' protagonist beholds the equivalent and yet higher 'generations of the imagination piled,' as the 'cloth' of sleep was said to have been replete with folds. The experience of absolute human memory is promoted by several aspects of the sparkling cloth of peace. Firstly, it is said that the 'manner of its stitchings' are the source of the piles of the 'pervasive being' of the former poetic masters. Keeping in mind the root correspondence, via *texere*, between *text* and *weave*, we can recall that 'the weaving' of the robe of sleep was a key to the advanced absorption of that divinity's meaning. It is also the manner 'of its thread' which is said to circumscribe the noumenal poetic storehouse. And here we can note a direct shift in intensity of observation, as

the impression of the weaving becomes the surface or secondary characteristic, with the probing eye going beyond it to the primary datum of the thread itself. A third image is then introduced, a more abstract reversion to the sense of the lustrous whole. The generations of the imagination, it is said, are simultaneously located 'In the weaving round the wonder of its need.' This is the second of two mentions in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" of this aspect of Stevens' theory of the poetic temperament as I have re-constructed it. The wonder of its need easily becomes the wondrous need, and we should recall here the pivotal lines from the first canto, since the two are without doubt inseparable in Stevens' intentions in this poem:

These forms are visible to the eye that needs,
Needs out of the whole necessity of sight. (CP432)

The wonder of its need is the artistic compulsion that has facilitated this most portentous system of mythological visibilities. The wonder inheres in the fact that, as Carroll has said of this poem, 'subjective need creates an objective correlative.' We have seen that the owl-poet 'begins as a seeker after the forms of thought, and he then becomes the recipient of their force.'¹⁰ The poem's moment of marvelling, directed as it is towards its own inherent accomplishment, also addresses the religious vacuum, the explorer of which, with muted irony, acknowledges the ineluctable return of the new romantic. The mind must have its inherent grandeurs, the self must be permitted to pursue the disclosure where 'majesty is the mirror of the self' (CP405).

From the encompassing wonder of the need of the transcendent vision, Stevens' expands his imagery from stitching to elemental adornments. 'First flowers,' as exquisite figures for natural sanctity, are seen upon the cloth. In this 'radiant and productive atmosphere' they function as simple sources of eschatological meaning: 'an alphabet / By which to spell out holy doom and end.' As with the 'cryptic stones' and the meaningful folds, the flowers in their evocative simplicity advance the perceptual movement of the vision. Part of their benefit is to act as an emotive conduit for the psychic strength of the protagonist, augmenting the sense of the clustered artistic consciousness of the generations, and prompting a linguistic reflex through which that sublime understanding might be sustained in the mind. By this the flowers are aligned with the poetic experience of verbal power as previously discussed. As the resonating brim of the hat in "The Pastor Caballero," once subtilized by the

¹⁰ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens's Supreme Fiction*, p. 222.

empowered observer, was said to inspire a sense of access to ‘adjectives of deepest mine,’ so the primordial botanic detail in the immaculate gown of high peace stimulates a profound enunciation of the expansive sphere of human finitude. Through their providing an ‘alphabet,’ the ‘first flowers’ are deemed to enter and vivify the hypothesis of the ascent to an absolute ‘knowledge of being’ (CP350).

In the last image in this lengthy series of quasi-synonymous figures, the ‘first flowers,’ by association, prompt the visual of ‘a bee for the remembering of happiness.’ The continued *telos* of consolation and succour here is very much part of the aggrandized conception of the absolute memory. It is something of the central hive of the imagination that Stevens attests to attain here, and the bee proves a particularly unifying metaphor in this context. Traditionally, the bee has served as metaphor for the profundity of the cerebral processes of recall.¹¹ The connotations of endurance and of a tenacious accumulation and rigorous ordering, facilitates a field of metaphoric crossover where Stevens can extend his sense of an eternal spirit of memory. The bee creates a bridge back into happiness, a mimetically re-remembered experiential ‘innocence of the earth’ and, by extension, an innocence of the mind. We can identify here the implicit conflict which sometimes accompanied Stevens’ romantic viewpoint, insofar as he felt such tropes as ‘affirmation’ and ‘happiness’ to be at odds with the empirical scepticism which he expected, with good reason, to be the majority reaction to his enterprise of pure poetry.¹² Anti-poetic reality provided ‘too many mirrors for misery’ (CP420). Against this, the alternative of ‘an innocence of the earth’ represents the superior and more valid experience towards which the later poetry continually gravitates. In the concluding canto of “The Auroras of Autumn,” Stevens directly repudiates in several forms, what Howard Baker

¹¹ Mary Carruthers has written: “Bees and birds (which pre-modern natural history thought of as closely-related creatures, ‘flying things’) are also linked by persistent associations with memory and ordered recollection. Indeed there is a long-standing chain or, perhaps the better word, a texture of metaphor that likens the placement of memory-images in a trained memory to the honey-making of bees. Trained memory is also linked metaphorically to a library. And the chain is completed by a metaphoric connection of books in a library both to memory placed in orderly cells and to birds and bees in their celled coops and hives.” *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge: 1990, p. 36. And M. H. Abrams, exploring the history of thought on poetic genius and inspiration mentions a 1690 essay by William Temple which he says uses “the totally instinctive art of bees” as an analogy for “the natural, free, unlearned quality in poetic composition.” He cites the following: “The Truth is there is something in the Genius of poetry too Libertine to be confined to so many Rules; and whoever goes about to subject it to such Constraints loses both its Spirit and Grace, which are ever Native, and never learnt, even of the best Masters ... [Poets] must work up their Cells with Admirable Art, extract their honey with infinite labour, and sever it from the Wax with such Distinction and Choyce as belongs to none but themselves to perform or to judge.” *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 197.

¹² Joseph Riddel summarised the problematic of Stevens’ historical moment as follows: ‘In an age angrily secular, romantically anti-romantic, and resignedly naturalistic, [Stevens’] was a credence nowise popular or well-founded.’ *The Clairvoyant Eye*, p. 4.

has termed 'the emotion of despair.'¹³ The category of 'the remembering of happiness' that the sacred bee of "The Owl" inspires, is present here in the rhetorical dismissal of doctrinal alternatives to the poetic satisfaction of the beatific 'whole':

An unhappy people in a happy world—
Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference.
An unhappy people in an unhappy world—

Here are too many mirrors for misery.
A happy people in an unhappy world—
It cannot be. There's nothing there to roll

On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.
A happy people in a happy world—
Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.

Turn back to where we were when we began:
An unhappy people in a happy world.
Now, solemnize the secretive syllables.

Read to the congregation, for today
And for tomorrow, this extremity,
This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres,

Contriving balance to contrive a whole,
The vital, the never-failing genius,
Fulfilling his meditations, great and small. (CP420)

These lines enact an omnipotent narration out of the bind of unhappiness as it relates to the 'pressure' of the quotidian. At odds with the fragmented and unhappy view, are the poetic dispositions of a meditation of the whole, and the aesthetic 'extremity' of the 'spectre of the spheres.' We might recall here again the lines from "Esthetique du Mal": 'The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair.' And Stevens' response in 1946 to the question, 'What do you believe to be the major problem or problems facing the young writer in America today?':

This is a time for the highest poetry. We never understood the world less than we do now nor, as we understand it, liked it less. We never wanted to understand it more or needed to like it more. These are the intense compulsions that challenge the poet as the appreciatory creator of values and beliefs. (CPP814)

¹³ Howard Baker, "Wallace Stevens and Other Poets," excerpted in Irvin Ehrenpreis, ed., *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, Middlesex: 1972, pgs. 104-113.

Stevens exhorts his rabbi in to choose the *weltenschaung* which best appeases the inner musical bias of the imagination. Only something fit ‘to roll on the expressive tongue, the finding fang’ of the poetic temperament will suffice. The injunctions to ‘solemnize the secretive syllables’ and ‘read to the congregation ... this contrivance,’ are the underlying terms of the explicit aesthetic liberty of the transcendentalist schema of both “The Auroras of Autumn” and “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” The advice that Stevens offers to himself in this culminating phase of realisation and fulfilment, of which the two poems in question are the key documents, is to depart finally from all hedging and diffidence, to accept in a state of ‘release’ and mystical enlargement that ‘it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy’ (CPP477). The call is to enter the heroic poem, the sumptuously contrived discourse of the experiential beyond, and to render thereby the vatic substance of ‘[t]he full of fortune and the full of fate, / As if he lived all lives’ (CP420).

In this way, in the first canto of “The Auroras of Autumn,” the serpent becomes a metaphor for the ‘happiness’ that attends the central poem. The vision of the metaphysical creature whose ‘head is air’ is said to have been gained from a careful probing of the physical world, an advanced poetic seeing of the earth:

This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,
And the pines above and along and beside the sea. (CP411).

The zone of ‘formlessness’ and the ‘bodiless’ accompanies the natural world, as an aspect of its subtle being. Once the central poem has been attained, once the ‘lights’ of ‘lesser poems’ ‘finally attain a pole / In the midmost midnight,’ then a great resolution of the mind’s struggle with reality takes place (CP411). ‘Another nest’ is said to emerge, an adjustment of ‘the level or position of the mind’ (CPP862), leading closer to the monadic core of the bee-hive, the seat containing ‘the master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images,’ that poetic key which might still the ordeal of consciousness, the potent master at the coveted centre, as described in the first canto of “The Auroras of Autumn,” ‘[r]elentlessly in possession of happiness’ (CP411).

The concept of a final happiness is also present in two late uncollected poems, “Solitaire Under the Oaks” and “Of Mere Being.”¹⁴ The subject and language of “Of Mere

¹⁴ There is a striking overlap between this title and the text of a late Jung interview entitled ‘On Life After Death.’ Although Jung’s statements were made after Stevens’ death, there is a remarkable correspondence between the

Being” in particular is remarkably similar to the imagery of the climactic parts of “The Owl and the Sarcophagus,” suggesting a correspondent terminology between the two. I quote here the later poem in full:

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze décor,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down. (CPP476-477)

As the forms in the “Owl in the Sarcophagus,” symbols of human height and depth, are said to move about in incandescent structures, so the palm at the end of the mind, an ultimate testament to a transcendental human identity within the mind’s remit, however much of an ‘extremity,’ is said to rise ‘In the bronze decor.’ This realisation of ‘the bodiless’ is brought about by a poetic thrust at ‘the highest level of the cognitive.’ The last thought, also the furthest thought, almost represents the absolute vanguard of sensibility. However, for Stevens, as has been seen, there exists a means of extension beyond cognitive sight and into vision, when ‘the whole necessity of sight’ is conjured in a realisation of artistic-spiritual ‘need.’ We might recall Canon Aspirin’s ascent in Canto Six of “It Must Give Pleasure,” where that character’s power of imagination is seen as the will which seeks to traverse ‘a point // Beyond which thought could not progress as thought’ (CP403). In *The Rock* too Stevens plays with systematising such efforts of super-cognitive mentality. In “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” he speaks of ‘[t]he extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme / Of the unknown’ (CP508). And in “Prologues to What is Possible” the ascending protagonist ventures ‘beyond

two thinkers here: “Man has been robbed of transcendence by the short-sightedness of the super-intellectuals. Like them, he has fallen victim to unconsciousness. But man’s task is the exact opposite: to become conscious of the contents that press upward from the unconscious. Neither should he persist in his unconsciousness, nor remain identical with the unconscious elements of his being, thus evading his destiny, which is to create more and more consciousness. As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.” *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London: 1995, p. 358.

resemblance' intuiting there the peculiar substantiality of an unwordable 'beyond': 'The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses / On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep' (CP516).

In the third verse of "Of Mere Being," Stevens relates the idiosyncratic imagery of the first two verses to general human experience. The present tense changes and the poem claims to expound upon what 'you' feel when *you*, the reader, incorporated as an individual human percipient in the transcendental framework, come to the perennial vista 'at the end of the mind.' The special knowledge that is gained, 'that it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy,' is attributed to the detail of the two verbs which precede the third verse. The palm at the end of the mind 'rises,' and the bird in the palm 'sings.' Stevens' muted argument here is that these two noumenal events have prompted the transformative insight that the reason need not restrict the experiential scope of individual reality. As the bee in "The Owl and the Sarcophagus" was the functional icon of the hermetic breakthrough into a deeper recollection of collective or unified spiritual contentment, so the bird at the end of the mind prompts the awakened acceptance of the efficacy of the supreme fictional structure as a means of probing towards ultimate truth and innocence. In a similar fashion, "Solitaire Under the Oaks" affirms a moment of final release from what is deemed the persistence of fact.

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. (CPP473)

The affirmative 'oblivion of cards' here leads directly to the special knowledge of the sixth line, and to the happiness of the complete release. The image of the shirking of a negative consciousness relates directly to the ability of the owl-percipient to walk among the forms of thought, amid the pure principle of the self of death. Similarly, the pure principle of the inhuman song in "Of Mere Being" serves to subtilize the theme of death in that poem, and the resultant tone of optimism is furthered by the fact that the phenomenon of the wind is said to continue blowing 'at the edge of space,' as an index of the continuity, or the contiguity, of

heaven and earth. The bird, as is said of peace in the conclusion of Canto Four of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” is a ‘figure stationed at our end, always.’ Where peace is a figure ‘in brilliance, fatal, final,’ the bird of mere being is perched with ‘fire-fangled feathers.’ And as peace was ‘vested in a foreign absolute,’ so the bird is said to sing a ‘foreign song.’ In both poems, this foreignness, as the alien aspect of the mind in the full extent of its relation to being, figures a major reduction of the breach between the known and the unknown. Ultimately, Stevens suggests, the reconciliation of this gap in song or poetry will involve an expansive union of the human with the non-human aspects of existence.

Representing a more elaborate and more visual treatment of these ideas of the existential beyond, the concluding stanzas of Canto Four of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” sketch a function for the grand identity of the essence which populates ‘the end of the mind’:

Peace stood with our last blood adorned, last mind,
Damasked in the originals of green,
A thousand begettings of the broken bold.

This is that figure stationed at our end,
Always, in brilliance, fatal, final, formed
Out of our lives to keep us in our death,

To watch us in the summer of Cyclops
Underground, a king as candle by our beds
In a robe that is our glory as he guards. (CP434-35)

These verses are Stevens’ concluding treatment of the figure of peace in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” It is telling that he recommences the visualisation of the divinity with the verb ‘stood.’ This form is typically part of Stevens’ rhetoric of total disclosure. It is as if the state of invisibility, of non-disclosure, is thought synonymous with being buried, crouched or huddled. It was seen in “The Pediment of Appearance” that the moment of illumination for the seekers involved the ‘essential ornament’ of the forest raising ‘its heavy scowl before them.’ Similarly, in the second part of “Two Illustrations that the World is What You Make of It,” from *The Rock*, the protagonist is portrayed in the experience of a quickened moment of meditating a natural setting. The relevant lines here relate to what is described in *The Auroras of Autumn* poem, “The Beginning,” as ‘[t]he self of summer perfectly perceived’ (CP427):

He discovered the colors of the moon

In a single spruce, when, suddenly,
The tree stood dazzling in the air

And broke blue on him from the sun,
A bullioned blue, a blue abulge,

Like daylight, with time's bellishings,
And sensuous summer stood full-height. (CP514)

In Stevens' transcendentalist *mundo*, we can say, when the sought-after essence stands, then the greatest point of revelation is at hand. The theoretic route from dazzle to height is familiar at this stage of my discussion. Peace stands 'dazzling' throughout "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," but perhaps not until the concluding verses of the fourth canto does Stevens intend that the divinity has been known in its 'full height.' 'Our last blood' and our 'last mind' appear as aspects of the known presence of peace in the climax of the vision. It seems as if the 'generations of the imagination' have been magnified from their emanation in the meaning of the stitches into a more specific essence of perennial artistic efforts to extend the human mind beyond all limitation. Here, the accumulated work of the visionary artists represents a mustering of humanity against the conditions of life, an exaggerated employment of perception in the pursuit of absolute meaning. These efforts return in the gathered potency of 'a thousand begettings of the broken bold.' The image of figural profusion from the first canto, where peace was known as 'cousin by a hundred names,' is carried forward in this image, with the restated hyperbole contributing to the original characterisation. Peace, it seems, in its lustrous appearance as a being of 'iridescences' (CP478), inspires a vision of multiplicities. Further, his robe is said to be replete with 'the originals of green.' Green for Stevens is the colour of earthy rapture and the ideal impunity of the romantic urge. Here, in the dramatising of a genetic location of poetry, Stevens claims to observe the universal verdure that pertains to the quickening of the poetic mind into euphony and such creative states as 'the green flauntings of the hours of peace' (CP380).

In the penultimate verse of Canto Four, when Stevens reverts to the declarative mode with the phrasing: 'This is that figure stationed at our end,' we can mark an echo which occurs in the opening of the "The Auroras of Autumn": 'This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless' (CP411). He is pursuing here again the component of verity. The use of the possessive pronoun six times in the concluding three verses relates to this drive towards a robust credence for the poem's imaginative structures. The indubitable discourse of human physical vulnerability is invoked as a means of qualifying the figure of peace as an organic aspect of

experience. In this way, as in the final canto, it is understood as both 'pity made' (CP435) and part of 'death's own supremest images' (CP436). Peace becomes that which meets the human desire for solace through the passage of death. He is 'stationed' 'to keep us' and 'to watch us' as we meet the mythic moment of annihilation in the perennial 'underground' of the lair of the Cyclops. In these images, Stevens' apocalyptic leaning seems to recall something of the Book of Revelation:

Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died and behold I am
alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.¹⁵

In the terror and confusion of this threshold, the divinity of peace is the celestial guarantee of our own 'glory,' 'a king as candle by our beds.' The idea of the robe as human glory here casts a valuable signification backwards across the preceding two cantos, gathering forward the image of the 'generations of the imagination.'

In the fifth canto of "The Owl," Stevens gives a full treatment to the apparition of the mother of the dead. The opening line establishes two categories for the reality of the mother. Firstly, the perennial category is presented, the continuous tense of 'She that says / Good-by in the darkness.' In this category the idiosyncratic power of the owl-percipient's vision and the specific narrative of his temperamentally circumscribed experience among the forms of thought are not fore-grounded. Instead we are offered the idea of the mother as a reality of the beyond accessible to any human percipient. In the first line the grammar specifies the identity of 'she that says good-by,' before switching to the second category, the predominant one, namely, the over-arching narrative in the past tense which recounts how the mother is said to have appeared to the owl-percipient. By virtue of the fact that Stevens portrays her as the ideal of a psychological state, the characterisation of the mother differs markedly from the other two divinities. Peace and sleep were considered only for their powerful appearance and for their psychological effect upon the percipient. The mother, however, is possessed of her own 'self not symbol.' She also possesses a particular 'knowledge' that defines the passion she exhibits in her divine function of speaking to the dead. In this way, the full disclosure, the mother's expansion into visionary height for the owl-poet, is depicted as being continuous with the intensification of her own special internal state.

¹⁵ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Oxford: 1997, Revelation, 1: 17.

But she that says good-by losing in self
 The sense of self, rosed out of prestiges
 Of rose, stood tall in self not symbol, quick

And potent, an influence felt instead of seen.
 She spoke with backward gestures of her hand. (CP435)

Here, the selflessness of the role of the mother is affirmed in the image of the reformulated interiority. The ideal or heavenly consciousness imports the affirmative concept of the loss of the ego as it is understood in traditions of meditation, as, for example, the emphasis in certain aspects of Buddhist and Taoist thought on the diminishing of desire in order that the mind might come to resemble, and thereby enter, the un-manifest reality of the source of its being. The following illustrates something of the broader contextual relation here:

When one studies the self, really studies the self, one does not encounter an enduring substantial thing called the 'self.' What then, does one encounter? One encounters the myriad dharmas, the ten thousand things of the world and thereby forgets the self that one did not find. These myriad dharmas verify and confirm one's activity and this allows body-mind to drop off. When one's body-mind drops off, the notion of the body-mind of the other drops off as well. Dropping off body-mind (*Shinjin datsuraku*) allows the transparency of enlightenment to enter.¹⁶

In addition, the simultaneous loss and retention of selfhood recalls what I have identified as the concept of divestment in *Transport to Summer*. Perhaps the most closely related example is the phrase 'sense without sense of time' from "Late Hymn from the Myrrh Mountain" (CP349), which, as I have said, relates a mastery over temporal restriction as a means towards 'the knowledge of being.' It is clear in the development of the above lines from "The Owl" that the separation of the sense of self from the experience of self involves an augmentation of the equivalents of mental strength and spiritual alignment within the consciousness of the mother of the dead. She manages by virtue of the re-alignment of the normative self to

¹⁶ Joan Stambaugh, *The Formless Self*, New York: 1999, pp. 1-2. We find a related ideal in Emerson's transparent eyeball epiphany from the book *Nature* when he says that 'all mean egotism vanishes.' *The Portable Emerson*, London: 1982, p. 10. Stevens knew and heavily annotated Emerson's essay as Milton Bates tells us in "Stevens' books at the Huntington," *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Fall 1978, p. 48. Schopenhauer theorised a related notion/experience, a grade of immersed perception where the percipient is 'no longer individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; but he is pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge.' Quoted in Richard Adams, "Wallace Stevens and Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*," *Tulane Studies in English* 20, 1972, p. 137. William Bevis, considering the 'meditative state of consciousness' in relation to Stevens's poetry has listed the following as characteristic experiences: 'transience,' 'ineffability,' 'sensations of time and space changed or transcended,' 'sensations of self-loss – that is, absence of thought or feeling according to later reports, and minimal cortical activity as measured by machines during meditation.' *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation and Literature*, p. 12. See also Robert Aitken, "Stevens and Zen," *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Fall 1982, pp. 69-73.

transcend to a more vital or truer self, a 'self not symbol.'¹⁷ That this greater order of mind and presence is 'an influence felt instead of seen,' sets up a familiar demand to the perceptual abilities of the protagonist. The terms of this advanced feeling, and the ancillary circumscription of a graduated consciousness, recalls the fourth verse of "Chocorua to its Neighbour," and the effort of the speaking mountain in that poem to account for the iridescent hiker who traverses the sentient range as 'both substance and non-substance':

The feeling of him was the feel of day,
 And of a day as yet unseen, in which
 To see was to be. He was the figure in
 A poem for Liadoff, the self of selves:
 To think of him destroyed the body's form. (CP297)

What might it mean for the mother of the dead to have been 'rosed out of prestiges of rose'? The linguistic curiosity which employs rose as a verb and renders prestige into a plural referent relates, we can be certain, to Stevens' rhetorical structuring of the visionary moment. To have been 'rosed' at some level inflects the moment of rising in apparition, to be emerging upwards into the empowered ken of the owl-poet, almost by his bidding, from the revolving opacities and iridescences of the emergent locale of the beyond. There is also the more direct sense of having being rendered in the being of the flower. The condition of 'prestiges / Of rose' is said to precede the process of the mother being rosed. We might conceive the 'prestiges of rose' as representing the structural lustre of that which seems to produce or support the mother in her actively chromatic presence. The idea of the petals of the rose seems to re-enact the imagery of the folds of the fabric in the gowns of the two other divinities, with the analogous visual of a layering or palimpsestic structure contributing to the overall theme of an infinitely organic and sophisticated state of existence. The syntax also suggests that the primary referent is the 'prestiges' of the rose. In this light we might best suspend the natural image of the rose, and construct a symbolic aspect for the poetic value of the rose. The verbal challenge of 'prestiges' in this way asks us to conceive the poetic value as a physical category,

¹⁷ In 1935, Howard Baker argued that *Harmonium* is a book which explores Jungian 'outposts of consciousness.' For the uncommon level of acumen that this involves, he said, a majority of readers find the poems a challenge: 'They expected it to do things it had no intention of doing.' 'Poetry' being 'a liaison between the individual and his most complex experience' can represent 'a non-personal attitude.' 'One sees Stevens ... gliding over from the egotistic to the impersonal ... the poet's own wishes and needs ... transformed into a sympathy with the larger figures of his poetry; it is a kind of classical detachment in which there is no lessening of human feeling, the 'I' is simply enlarged.' In Irvin Ehrenpreis, ed., *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, p. 108. The idea of outposts of consciousness seems to mirror in some way Stevens' own idea of the extreme sensibility range as I am explaining it. I return to Baker's ideas in the conclusion.

as a visible array of abstractions, a multiply suggestive rosiness of aesthetic nobility. The prestige(s) of the rose, something perhaps of its cultural reverberation, seems in this instance to have been beheld by the owl-percipient as the cause of the particularly advanced rose quality that the mother of the dead is said to possess. In the movement of her losing 'in self / The sense of self,' she is said to attain an essence of the iconic flower. We can recognise that it is by the elevation of her own interior state into a semblance of 'the self of selves,' a holistic 'self of her / That speaks, denouncing separate selves' (CP441), that she appears in the redness of the rose. Her immediate environment, then, is seen to participate in her psychic increase, and in this way she fulfils Stevens' ideal of a mutual arrangement between poetry and nature.

Stevens' construction of the mother's relationship with the dead exhibits, it is clear, both consistent and inconsistent attributes. In the first canto she says 'Good-by in the darkness,' thereby modifying the visual aspect of the expression. She speaks 'quietly,' her whisper proposing both the sanctity of the environment and the alternative nature of the language function in the metaphysical realm, that dramatic realm within 'the syllable between life and death.' Later in the first canto, this whisper became 'a flash of voice,' effecting still greater distance from typical ideas of communication. As I have been saying, these challenges propose the inherent mystique of the higher world of 'the forms of thought,' but also the perceptual prowess of the owl-poet who is deemed to possess the temperamental competence, the visionary 'need,' which permits him access to the 'element not the heaviness of time.' In the fifth canto, the mother is still a figure of hieratic communication. It is said that 'She spoke with backward gestures of her hand.' This image re-inscribes the idea of the mother's waving goodbye, but it also serves to complicate the substance of her expression, casting it in enigmatic terms. The context here partakes of the preceding line, and 'the influence felt instead of seen' becomes the primary concern of the next four lines.

We should be concerned to ask how Stevens believes the mother is communicating with the dead among the forms of thought. I have been pursuing this question in order to construct something definitive from his several varied characterising impressions of her throughout the poem. My primary answer has been that the mother's mode of communication is necessarily obscure, suggestive, purely poetic, and unearthly in its basis, and that the challenge of her style relates directly to the idea of a radically intuitive apparatus, the habituation to the invisible that the transcendent protagonist is deemed to embody. These arguments can be furthered by a consideration of lines six to nine of Canto Five where Stevens

seems to address directly the substance of the mother's expression. The sixth line returns to the rhetoric of succour that had characterised the first canto. The mother appears now as an absolute source of consolation:

She held men closely with discovery,

Almost as speed discovers, in the way
Invisible change discovers what is changed,
In the way what was has ceased to be what is. (CP435)

In divine placation of their mortal terrors, the mother is seen to have 'held men close.' However, other than a traditional ministering of the soul, there seems to be a deeper gain in her embrace. The embrace of the mother involves the agency of 'discovery.' Discovery relates to the more common trope of disclosure, and the two comprise for Stevens the artistic terrain of integration and insight. Here, then, the mother becomes the ultimate muse, the cause of insight 'beyond artifice.' Stevens proposes three difficult similes in order to quantify the specific significance of discovery as it relates to the embrace of the mother. Firstly, it is proposed that the discovery relates 'almost,' or in some sense approximately, to the manner in which 'speed discovers.' The evocative aspect of this comparison may lie in the previously discussed Stevensesan concept of motion as a metaphysical quality. The function of these lines is to communicate the experience of the dead men (and the protagonist) in their incorporeal state, as they encounter a preternatural feminine force which palliates their minds by a discrete form of revelation. Keeping in mind that the putative insights of speed relate only partially to Stevens' primary image here, how can speed be said to effect discovery? Perhaps it is necessary for us to accept some emotive or sanctifying aspect to quick movement. Stevens, as we have seen, was continually engaged by the idea of poetic thinking as an accelerated function of being, an intellectual force outstripping the relatively slower capabilities of the reason. In 1936, in "Owl's Clover," he invoked the potent subconscious basis of art in the figure of the subman, 'quick / With a logic of transforming certitudes' (CPP587). Fittingly, the mother in her exalted condition of 'self not symbol' is described as an 'influence' upon the percipient that is 'quick / And potent.' Stevens may also intend certain connotations of speed in a more normative sense, say, in the experience of speeding as a passenger on a train. Some idea of exhilaration as an oblique category of revelation may well be significant in this context.

Without surrendering to a complete opacity here, it might also be relevant to remember the notion of initiation. I have argued that the thematic of the perceptual challenge recurrently involves Stevens' portrayal of the advanced percipient. As the category of nothingness was seen to be subject to habituation by the poetic temperament in "Certain Phenomena of Sound," so here we might identify a muted visionary construct where the idea of speed as an experience or a property in itself is deemed capable of attaining or catalysing discovery. The issue of clarity as it relates to the phrase 'as speed discovers,' might more fruitfully be addressed within the Emersonian discourse of non-impediment that is so much a part of Stevens' later work.¹⁸

The second simile in the series compounds what might best be interpreted as the canto's entrenched suggestion of heroism. The phrasing of the speed simile employs the matter-of-fact comparative 'as,' thereby enacting the depth of habituation to the invisible which is at play in the context. We can note that the more direct simile form of 'like' in this case would imply a significantly more overt sense of a lyrical bridge, while the modifying 'as' serves to downplay the fictional aspect of the imagery. The next line seems to advance this mode of a casual routinisation, with the syntax promoting an increased tone of familiarity. Maintaining the paraphrase, the lines thus far attest that the discovery gained by the dead men in the arms of the mother is somehow equivalent to the philosophical activity of speed. Now we are told that this process also pertains to 'the way invisible change discovers what is changed.' The sceptically-inclined reader cannot meet the appeal to likeness in this line. The attenuation proves too great, the abstraction far too fluent. Even more than the rhetorical verity inflected in 'as,' the term 'the way' appeals to an unquestionable status for the proposition. Without surrendering to complete opacity, we have, as readers, perhaps two alternatives here. We can embrace the logic of the line and match its transcendental category with something from our own imaginative experience (the syntax seems primed for this fully concurrent gesture), or we can relate the simile entirely to the narrative of the poet-percipient, accepting as part of the stimulation of the reading experience the vaunted category of the manner in which 'invisible change' might conduct itself, as an energy or a personage, in a mode of

¹⁸ I have drawn this notion from Emerson's essay "The Poet." 'Every touch should thrill. Every man should be so much an artist, that he could report in conversation what had befallen him. Yet, in our experience, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart.' *The Portable Emerson*, p. 243.

discovery. Whichever hermeneutic route we choose in this instance, it must be accepted that the language loses most of its significance when separated from the idealist framework.

The ninth line retains the use of the simile form 'the way,' and it can be seen to enact the same function as in the preceding image. For the purpose of the elaboration of the moment of insight in the mother's embrace, Stevens includes the apparently analogous category: 'the way what was has ceased to be what is.' The movement from existence into non-existence is the overt category here. In order to extract from this image what Stevens intends as a corollary sense of imaginative discovery, we should remind ourselves of the eschatological setting of the poem. "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," in its movement towards what, to borrow a phrase from Frank Kermode, might be called 'the comprehension of death,'¹⁹ proposes an explicit subversion of human finitude. In this light, the prospect of eternal endurance ultimately informs any pointed consideration of what has ceased to be. The idea of a higher perspective operates as the subtext of the line in question. There exists, Stevens seems to say, a form of insight into temporal order, an attitude of resonance and liminal meaning, which is apt to render abstract ideas of change as the indices of a progressive revelation. This very attitude is the subject of the fourth and fifth verses of Canto Five.

As if a misinterpretation had been voiced from the reader, Stevens commences the fourth verse with a dismissal of the idea that the appearance of the mother, or the radiance of her face, is to be considered the most cogent aspect of the experience of the disclosure-inspiring embrace. Instead, he returns to the mother's interior state. She is ideal, we are told, because of a condition of enlightenment. Almost tautologically, the mother's supreme epistemology is emphasised.

It was not her look but a knowledge that she had.
She was a self that knew, an inner thing,
Subtler than look's declaiming, although she moved

With a sad splendour, beyond artifice,
Impassioned by the knowledge that she had,
There on the edges of oblivion. (CP435)

Again we meet a return to the defiance of appearances. The eye that conducts itself at a perceptual level that is 'Subtler than look's declaiming' is primed to behold the sub-structural, the causal, the noumenal, and somehow, the most real. The mother embodies here the idea of

¹⁹ Frank Kermode, "Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut," in *Pieces of My Mind: Writings 1958-2002*, London: 2003, p. 151.

access to the most real state, representing as she does in these lines the apotheosis of poetic subjectivity. The curious sense of detachment contained in the term 'a self' looks forward to *The Rock* and to "The Planet on the Table" where Stevens, reflecting on the transcendentalist leaning of his writing career, and in phrasing that objectifies and in some sense estranges the creative self, announces:

His self and the sun were one
And his poems, although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun. (CP532)

The phrase 'a self' in Canto Five of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" also echoes the delicately modified phrasing of 'a knowledge' from the preceding line. The singular sense of these terms proposes a status of uniqueness as well as a precious, not quite fulfilled, sense of incommunicability. Both imply a deep epistemological relativity, and a simultaneous superiority of attainments within that various ground. The mother, in this way, appears 'impassioned by the knowledge that she had.' These important syntactical notes serve to continue the terms of expanded identity from the first verse. The positive disjunction of the mother's having lost 'in self / The sense of self,' remains within the suspension of normative identity that we find in 'a self that knew.' It seems, then, that the terms of noetical divestment and openness, as they appear in the first verse, with their implied mystical value of the egoless, remain in the characterisation of the fourth verse. Knowledge of or initiation into subtler reality predominates over the reformed and subtilised identity and the result is a casting of that identity almost entirely in terms of what is known. 'She was a self that knew,' meaning we might assume a self that was composed entirely of the function of insight. Further, the curt appellation of 'a self' seems of the same order of a 'personage in nothingness.' The categories of man, woman, person, and god, the stricter identities, are brought into a state of interplay here, as Stevens works to attain a higher perspective on the at once unifying and more expansive category of consciousness.

In the final verse of Canto Five, the mother is portrayed receding into the darkness that constitutes the end of the visionary episode. The poem's speaker, entering fully the role of the owl-percipient, appears to grasp at what has altered from a coherent, if scarcely tangible, vision of the mythic presence, into a set of spectral lineaments, each of which announces the imminent darkness of the mother's lapsing out of vision.

O exhalation, O fling without a sleeve
 And motion outward, reddened and resolved
 From sight, in the silence that follows her last word— (CP435)

The sudden invocatory zeal of, ‘O exhalation, O fling without a sleeve,’ seems to extend the impression of the mother’s ‘sad splendor’ ‘on the edges of oblivion’ from the previous verse. These intimations of the impermanence of the vision are realised in the closing verse, and yet the thematic of intensity is still at play.²⁰ The double saluting of the exhalation and the unrobed gesture both imply a potent gaze, the latter being reminiscent of the ‘tragic-gestured sea’ in “The Idea of Order at Key West”: ‘Like a body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves’ (CP128). The backward gestures of the mother’s hand, as the apparition now collapses, are seen as a brief ‘motion outward’ from the sleeveless inscrutable ‘fling’ that attends the aura of her partial presence. The rosey prestige of the first verse is now incorporated into the owl’s intensified scrutiny of the fading light. The remnants of ‘the mother of the living and the dead’ appear ‘reddened and resolved from sight.’ Quite dramatically, Stevens employs a dash to represent the renewed breach between the quotidian and the ideal that befits the poem’s conclusion, suspending the narrative with his formidable protagonist straining heroically to savour ‘the silence that follows her last word—’.

²⁰ Frank Doggett, theorising limitation in Stevens, has commented on an ‘advertence to annihilation’ in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” Arguing for the self as a key to experiential confinement, he says of the import of the sudden ‘fling without sleeve’ ending to this canto: “That moment ‘on the edges of oblivion’ when the energy of being is no more than a retinal image after the light is out, the very instant of death— this is the farthest he can go in conception.” *Stevens’ Poetry of Thought*, Baltimore: 1966, p. 11. Doggett has not provided a full reading of the poem, and his isolation of the conclusion indicates a neglect of the preceding visionary intensity of the poem proper. The affirmative weight of the concept of a temperamental poetic capacity is also absent from Doggett’s ideas.

Chapter Four

Final Magnifications: Affirmation in the Poetry of *The Rock*

It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize. (CPP878)

Poetry is the expression of the experience of poetry. (CPP904)

There exists a strong critical consensus that *The Rock* is characterised by a direct and confessional element that is without precedent in Stevens' oeuvre. This idea relates to themes of personal pain, remorse and fatigue, which are commonly said to underlie what has been viewed in Stevens' final writings as a mode of recantation with respect to the broader imaginative structures of *The Collected Poems*. Tony Sharpe, in a recent biographical study, has quantified the later corpus as having been written directly out of the condition of Stevens' own impending death.¹ Rob Wilson finds it a collection of 'austere, post-nuclear seeings.'² More extensively, Lee Jenkins has attested a preponderance of the 'doubtful backward glance' and a 'rueful and tentative'³ 'picture of decline,'⁴ involving irony and self-parody as aspects of an overarching 'palinode'⁵ that causes *The Rock* to function as something akin to a 'Derridean supplement.'⁶ These critics align themselves with a conventional view that has had other influential proponents in Frank Lentricchia, J. Hillis Miller, Helen Vendler, and A. Walton Litz. Frank Lentricchia has offered the following appraisal:

¹ Tony Sharpe, *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life*, Basingstoke: 2000, p. 111.

² Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*, Wisconsin: 1991, p. 177.

³ Lee Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, Brighton: 2000, p. 105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 115. Jenkins also reads Stevens as repudiating the 'major man' motif throughout *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*. The earlier work is present in the final, she argues, as nothing more than a consideration of 'erstwhile practices', p. 120.

In the poignant poems of *The Rock*, written in his last years, Stevens describes a reality so barren and boring that the confident voice of "Sunday Morning" sounds like whistling in the dark.⁷

In his seminal study, *Introspective Voyager*, Litz describes what he found to be, 'the observer's annihilated personality,' bemoaning the 'austerity and isolation' of *The Rock*, and pursuing a conclusive definition in the phrase, 'a poetry of exclusions.'⁸ The reader of the late poetry is almost inevitably corralled into accepting an image of Stevens in the last five years of his life as a poet of defeatist, or even defeated, sensibility. In the current chapter, I will be arguing that this blanket view of the poetry written after *The Auroras of Autumn* is misrepresentative of the actual nature of Stevens' final phase. *The Rock* and the related group of last poems that were uncollected at the time of Stevens' death in 1955, I am arguing, both for the continuity they display with the preceding work, and the involved modulations they make upon the thematic of temperament, perception and transcendence, comprise a significantly more affirmative corpus than has to date been appreciated. I intend in particular to question the opinion, often expressed, that Stevens in his last poems was performing something of a volte-face in relation to his life's work, a deliberate and enervated revision of his own preceding aesthetic gusto.

Many of the late poems do invoke states of conclusion. But this case is too easily overstated, and particularly if we neglect to consider the fact that *The Rock* has the status of a book only by default. It is more accurate to view it as the sheaf of work Stevens chose, not without a measure of haste and misgiving, as a bulwark against the unnerving prospect of his *Collected Poems* being allowed to constitute the epitaph of his writing career. What is commonly viewed as a form of disclaiming addendum to the imaginative expanse and speculative licence of the greater oeuvre, and thereby as an ordered, enunciating and sequentially premeditated text, we can begin to approach more accurately in the context of the harried exigency that characterises Stevens' own relationship to *The Rock* as a collection. The surface aesthetic curtailment in the closing thirty pages of the *Collected Poems*, the tendency towards shorter and at times more fragmentary poems (and this in itself, I will show, does not support a definitive appraisal of every late poem as being inclined towards dejection),

⁷ Frank Lentricchia, "Wallace Stevens: The Ironic Eye," in Irvin Ehrenpreis, ed., *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, p. 282.

⁸ A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager*, New York: 1972, p. 294. Charles Berger in *Forms of Farewell*, Madison: 1985, and Alan Filreis in *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties and Literary Radicalism*, New York: 1994, have put forward similar arguments.

I would suggest, signifies more so a circumstance of authorial abandon and distraction than it does any authorial intent to communicate what has seemed so indubitably to critics like Frank Lentricchia to be a state of creative decrepitude and philosophical nihilism.

A broader consideration of the compositional and editorial context of *The Rock* offers an illuminating slant on the last poems. Stevens' relationship with his publisher in the period 1950-1955 entailed a level of difficulty which was to influence both the composition and dissemination of his final work. The following are excerpted from Alfred Knopf's letters to Stevens:

I think you treat your publisher very badly. You come to New York, make speeches, receive medals and I read about it in the papers and hear about it from mutual friends. Why don't you let me know so we could meet?

I am told that you have taken to prose and that what you have written is not without importance and significance. And that some day you must put this prose together in a volume for us to publish. All of this sounds interesting and attractive and I hope that you will take me into your confidence one of these days.⁹

Peter Brazeau has noted that, some three years previous to these disgruntled remarks, Stevens had submitted copies of his lectures to Herbert Weinstock, his then editor at Knopf, who rejected them. The publisher, however, was eager to produce a collected edition of Stevens' poems, beginning plans as early as 1945. On this issue Stevens felt reluctant. At this time, he remarked upon what struck him as Knopf's 'acute sense of property' in respect of his writing.¹⁰ There was then disagreement over the title of the collected edition. Stevens, perhaps seeking to diminish the valedictory ramification of the book, and perhaps in some way responding to the more amenable aesthetic climate of the New Criticism, had suggestively chosen the title, *The Whole of Harmonium*. Knopf persuaded him otherwise. This, coupled with the fact of the unintended omission of the poem "The Course of a Particular" from *The Rock*, presents a further level of the obscuring tension that is part of Stevens' relation to his publisher in the closing years of his life. Further, Stevens' desire for the less terminal object of an American selected edition of his work was uncompromisingly dismissed by Knopf, partly on the grounds that Stevens' own choice was unrepresentative. Ironically, Stevens had originally wanted Marianne Moore to make the selection instead of himself. *The Necessary Angel*, when it came about, was another unfavourable initiative apparently incepted in New

⁹ Quoted in Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*. New York: 1983, p. 190.

¹⁰ Quoted in Tony Sharpe, *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life*, p. 149.

York without Stevens' volition, and a project to which he relented uncomfortably. In 1949, perhaps having internalised Weinstock's earlier judgments, Stevens expressed bemusement at Allen Tate's desire to publish "The Figure of the Youth as the Virile Poet."¹¹ Later, in January 1951, he wrote to a propositioning editor: 'I have no present intention of ever publishing a volume of prose' (L705). However, within two months of this, Alfred Knopf was restricting Stevens from negotiating any use of the essays with other publishers, so that in early March, Stevens wrote to Bernard Heringman, in an uncertain and vaguely cowed tone:

I shall want to look them over again before permitting their publication. The point is that Mr Knopf has already said in so many words that he does not want anyone to publish them. He seems to want to publish them ... [.] (L708)

Prestigious invitations, honorary degrees, and major prizes, such as the Bollingen and the National Book Award, were arriving concurrently, and yet so late in Stevens' own lifetime, and there is a sense of the poet as a newly garlanded Knopf commodity under pressure to conform to a commercial paradigm that was proving insensitive to his own more guarded sense of what his oeuvre might become. *The Rock* is born directly out of this equivocal setting. It is, arguably, a collection of poems, but it is not a book. And this distinction is essential to any full consideration of Stevens' last poems. It specifically relates to the body of critical argument that views *The Rock* as a deliberate 'sceptical coda' to the earlier work. Leaning more towards the category of a miscellany, it contains, conceivably, several sutured works in progress, including comments upon and notes towards other poems. Stevens conceded in correspondence that he was rushing shorter poems in order to fulfil 'minor promises' (L701) to journal and magazine editors, a somewhat fraught congeniality that surely problematises whatever integrity critics might wish the general corpus of the last poems to possess in terms of being a representative, book-statement of Stevens' precise aesthetic after 1950. In December 1950, he would discuss the fate of the now famous, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," in the following terms:

I send you a poem after all. I had originally intended to write a long poem on the subject of the present poem but got no farther than the statement that God and the imagination are one. The implications of this statement were to follow, and may still as I said in my note of December 5th. I have not particularly felt like going on with it since I started it. After writing to you I looked at the opening lines which I am now sending you and I thought that

¹¹ From Bernard Heringman's interview notes, quoted in Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, p. 200.

they might do, particularly since I very much wanted to send you something.
(L701)

I have been highlighting here a number of salient compositional and editorial details as a means of mitigating the sense of a narrative coherence which often accompanies the critical impression of *The Rock* as a text designed to redress Stevens' own preceding confidence. The idea of *The Rock* as a set of reduced explorations conducting a 'dwindled' and contrite dialogue with Stevens' earlier work has served to all but disqualify both the possibility of thematic innovation in *The Rock*, and the idea of any continued statement of temperamental, perceptual and transcendental intensity. My readings of individual poems in this chapter, pursuing just such a schema of affirmation, will work to expose the risk of misreading inherent in this view.

The short poem which begins the *Rock* sequence, "An Old Man Asleep," presents a condition of sensitivity in which the percipient is characterised as a confluence of 'The self and the earth' (CP501). Sleep for Stevens, as has been seen, provides the theoretic implication of ideal consciousness. In climactic fashion, for the quester in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," 'sleep realised was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect' (CP433). Relatedly, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," another poem from *The Rock*, explains much of its protagonist's visionary fluency by invoking his 'dozing in the depths of wakefulness' (CP509). The title-piece, "The Rock," concludes by positioning the trope of sleep at the apex of a densely schematised exposition of poetry as the means to an ultimate human experience:

... that which night illumines,
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (CP528)

Sleep, in these and numerous other instances, is synonymous with perceptual clarity, the normative denotation transferred by Stevens into an epistemological value, a kind of poetic vantage point replete with a special cast of knowledge and release. "An Old Man Asleep" enacts a diminutive episode of the Stevensesan mind assuaging the stress of its contents by the discrete apparatus of sleep.

The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping, now.
A dumb sense possesses them, in a kind of solemnity.

The self and the earth – your thoughts, your feelings,
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,
The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R. (CP501)

If this is not quite the illuminatory or hymnal ‘vivid sleep’ of the concluding image of “The Rock,” or the sleep-as-deity of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” it undoubtedly entails the terms of an advanced perceptual capacity. Some unique impulse, ‘a dumb sense,’ qualified as being solemn, has proved sufficient to subsume the mind’s agitatedly divisive contents. That it is a ‘sense,’ or an ideated sensory category, which affects the resolution is significant. A mode of seeing and an ancillary mode of understanding have led to a recasting of the initially problematic selfhood into elemental freedom. The final couplet figures the addressed self as an aspect of the earth. The succinct delineation of interiority has developed and, suddenly, by virtue of the poem’s special sense, and special definition of sleep, the details of the mind have become indistinguishable from the natural world. This process of unification entails a serious theoretic confidence, with obvious precedents in *The Auroras of Autumn*, most particularly the previously discussed “A Primitive Like an Orb.” As the first poem in *The Rock*, the tendency towards an aggrandizement of the poet-percipient is most significant. The latent concepts here of poetic advancement and the unfolding of an inner resource, it shall be seen, recur in numerous others of Stevens’ final poems. “An Old Man Asleep” can be read as a subtle prelude to the longer reflections on transcendental process contained in *The Rock*.

“An Old Man Asleep” is followed by “The Irish Cliffs of Moher.” In this poem the reader is offered the idea of a noumenal reality as the destination of poetic endeavour. A will towards realisation in terms of an epistemological uncertainty characterises the poem’s opening, and in this we can identify a version of that need which Stevens’ temperament so often accepts as its duty to address.

Who is my father in this world, in this house,
At the spirit’s base?

My father’s father, his father’s father, his –
Shadows like winds

Go back to a parent before thought, before speech,
At the head of the past. (CP501)

Here the poetic quest begins from a primary urge to quantify human identity in ontological terms. We can identify the poem's effort to enact a replacement of the god-conception, as the guise of a genealogical inquiry intensifies and elaborates, seeking to penetrate all origins, and so to arrive at a total assurance in the form of a fateful and supra-intellectual referent: "a parent before thought, before speech, / At the head of the past." Stevens' aspiration here recalls Hart Crane's famous defence of the element of purposeful obliqueness in his own work:

The entire construction of the poem is raised on the organic principle of a logic of metaphor, which antedates our so-called pure logic, and which is the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought extension.¹²

Presenting something of a minor echo of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," the image of the speaker's paternal lineage serves to establish a metaphysical host, a portentous array of moving shadows, whose sublime presence the poem's speaker, as exemplar of poetic perception, is equipped to intuit and understand.

They go to the cliffs of Moher rising out of the mist,
Above the real,

Rising out of present time and place, above
The wet, green grass.

This is not landscape, full of the somnambulations
Of poetry

¹² From a letter to Harriet Monroe, quoted in James Scully, ed., *Modern Poets on Poetry*, London: 1966, p. 170. As I have shown, the notion of 'a logic of metaphor,' was central to Stevens' efforts in the early 1940s to exonerate himself from the charge, levelled repeatedly throughout his career, of a wilful obscurity. In the context of Stevens' pursuit of a higher cognition and 'the right sensation' as decreed by the individual poetic temperament, what Crane posits here, and what he goes on to dignify as 'the more imponderable phenomena of psychic motives', can also serve to account for a necessary difficulty in the poetry of both men. What persists in the thinking of Crane and Stevens is a determined faith in themselves as poets by temperament, and therefore poets ineluctably, and, in addition, a faith in poetry as a vehicle towards a more particularized and more absolute relation to the source and the function of consciousness. The radical aesthetic of metaphor was employed by both Stevens and Crane because they deemed it indispensable to the accessing and expression of their individual poetic experiences. The persistent strangeness and difficulty of both men's poetry is not then anything like a form of linguistic indulgence, but a concerted and instinctually schematised enacting of uncommon experience by a necessarily uncommon arrangement of language. In his "General Aims and Theories," Crane wrote: 'It seems to me that a poet will accidentally define his time well enough simply by reacting honestly and to the full extent of his sensibilities to the states of passion, experience and rumination that fate forces on him, first hand.' *Ibid*, p. 162. Harold Bloom has been most unequivocal on what he sees as the transcendental bias of Crane, defining any Cranean criticism as High Romantic. Bloom's hyperbole is valuable when considering the kinship with Stevens, as the two poets undeniably share a Blakean concern for advanced perception and a purged and actualised sensibility, and both can be read as enacting what Bloom has termed 'the Nietzschean quest for the foremost place.' In Bloom's introduction to *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*. New York: 2001, p. xv.

And the sea. This is my father or, maybe,
it is as he was,

A likeness, one of the race of fathers: earth
And sea and air. (CP501-02)

At least three aspects of the diction in this excerpt suggest affirmative inter-textual links with other poems by Stevens. The image of the questing shadows in their pursuit of a revelatory location ‘rising out of present time and place,’ recalls the movement of the previously discussed “Of Mere Being” where ‘The palm at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought, rises / In the bronze decor’ (CPP476). “The Pediment of Appearance” from *Transport to Summer*, is also part of the motific lineage here. In that poem, as was seen, the pediment in the forest ‘[[]ifts up its heavy scowl before’ (CP362) the exasperated supplication of the band of questers. This example of rising, I have argued, also incorporates the trope of standing as it relates to Stevens’ construction of the apogee moment of disclosure. I mentioned that ‘sensuous summer stood full-height’ (CP514) by virtue of a culmination of sensory attunement in the protagonist of the *Rock* poem “Two Illustrations That the World is What You Make of It,” and that this figuration sustained the terms of the appearance of the divinity of peace in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” who, ‘as the beam of leaves,’ ‘Stood flourishing the world’ (CP434). In addition, the repeated declarative mode of ‘this is not’ and ‘this is,’ incorporates what I termed in relation to “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” a rhetoric of verity. Such wordings, resonant as they are of the indubitable and the immediate, seek to salve the problematic of the imagery’s attenuation, and to consolidate a mode of poetic experience and palpability, a careful phenomenological stability as it relates to the ‘bodiless’ (CP481) and noumenal structure of ‘the race of fathers.’ Thirdly, the concern for the transcendent efficacy of the instance of the ‘likeness’ in “The Irish Cliffs of Moher,” incorporates the passage in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” where the potency of ‘resemblance’ was essential to the inspired accessing of the augmented state of vision which ‘twanged him through and through.’ This prompting into visionary furtherance by the factor of ‘resemblance’ was deemed to circumscribe the profundity of chanting, ‘the abysmal melody’ of the poem itself. Further, in the *Rock* poem, “Prologues to What is Possible,” which I will presently discuss at length, it is the dialectic factors of a ‘likeness of him’ and ‘things beyond resemblance’ that facilitate a moment of advancement through to the noetic ground of ‘enclosures of hypotheses’ (CP516).

In the above excerpt, an acute meditation of the essential shadows has led to a source, and to the genealogical icon of the Irish coast, which Stevens preserves as a subtly meaningful abstraction. The poem adopts an almost identical denouement to that of “An Old Man Asleep,” in that the fundamentals of the seeking self emerge into an elemental arrangement: ‘one of the race of fathers: earth and sea and air.’ At the end of the poem, the image of the cliffs achieves a state of apotheosis by virtue of its being de-temporalised: ‘out of present time and place.’ In its status as the location of a much sought after truth, its symbolic quality intensifies, until it becomes an ultimate symbol of origins. Stevens claims grandly for the cliffs: ‘This is my father,’ a being composed of ‘earth and sea and air’. In his final collection, this is Stevens’ first major figuration of the rock itself, the primary, elemental base of being, the ultimate and largely ineffable concern. He has introduced, at this point, we might say, his final theory, where all questions of philosophy, poetry, and the fate of the human spirit will be seen to converge.

“The Planet on the Table” has been considered the most retrospective and valedictory of the *Rock* poems, and many critics have employed it for theories of resignation in readings of Stevens’ last poems.

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
They were of a remembered time
Or of something seen that he liked.

Other makings of the sun
Were waste and welter
And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and sun were one
And his poems although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part. (CP532-33)

Most readers have been struck by the low-key sentiment and ambivalence of pride that the term ‘glad’ seems to propose in the first line of this poem. And the somewhat taciturn

categories of ‘a remembered time,’ and ‘something that he liked,’ seem to support the impression of a disaffected identification of Stevens’ achievements here. However, beyond the mode of a ‘humble serenity,’¹³ a more significant key to the context and tone of this poem occurs in the third verse. We find a marked incorporation of Stevens’ own visionary precedents in the line, ‘His self and the sun were one.’ It has been seen that a marriage of the intellectual to the elemental, the self or the mind to the planet, or in this case, to the sun, forms an essential part of Stevens’ transcendentalist thinking. The subtle, lyrical, experiential route to the grand syntheses of the universal mind involves the breaching of the Cartesian impediment and the representation of an encompassing affinity with the outer world. The emphatic onenesses of *The Auroras of Autumn* recur in this poem in the union of self and sun.¹⁴ The thinking here, and hence the emotional register of the valedictory mode, involves a view of the activity of writing poetry as a drive towards knowledge and realisation which conforms to the functional gravitations of the natural world. In his 1949 lecture “Imagination as Value,” Stevens quoted the following from Ernst Cassirer: ‘The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is ever perfecting itself’ (CPP726). We find this theme in another *Rock* poem “One of the Inhabitants of the West,” where Stevens is concerned with the forms of artistic susceptibility that lead to an apperception of ‘the establishments of wind and light and cloud’:

Our divinations,
Mechanisms of angelic thought,
The means of prophecy,

Alert us most
At evening’s one star
And its pastoral text,

When the establishments
Of wind and light and cloud
Await an arrival,

A reader of the text,
A reader without a body,
Who reads quietly: (CP503)

¹³ Daniel Fuchs, *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens*, p. 167. Fuchs finds no consistent move towards aggrandizement in ‘The Planet on the Table,’ arguing: “Despite a sense of triumph, articulation itself is considered a form of poverty.”

¹⁴ Although it goes against her overall thesis, this image, Lee Jenkins has written, “may make us wonder if Stevens’ late Ariel is entirely unrelated, after all, to the ‘man-sun’ of the 1940s.” *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, p. 110.

Here, in a proud psychology of invention, the ultimate aesthetic-cognitive ‘mechanism’ leads to a prophetic relation between the poet-percipient and natural process. ‘Evening’s one star and its pastoral text’ comprise an esoteric summons into a poetic ministering of the earth, the astronomical insight revealing a level of sentience within the wind, a call to the subtle complicity and transaction of the poet-percipient. His self and the wind, we might say, were one. In “The Planet on the Table” the corresponding frankly stated result is both a validation of self as an authentic locus of natural expression, and a reduction of the experiential hegemony of the self by the fact of its being subsumed in the ‘planetary attitude’¹⁵ that grants the sun a will-to-poetry. The third verse of “The Planet on the Table,” we can say, abdicates in two ways the personhood of the poet in favour of a more exalted subject. Firstly, it finds the ‘makings’ (a curious epithet bespeaking the detachment that is necessitated by the effort to broach and vivify a renovated referent) or the poems which constitute the artefact of *The Collected Poems*, upon the table, to be attributable to an elemental source, a cause of the ‘makings’ inhering beyond the individual author. The poems themselves constitute, we can presume, as the title has it, a ‘planet on the table,’ and this as much by virtue of the common critical metaphor of the *mundus*, as by virtue of Stevens’ effort to harness what he understands as a latent planetary will-to-speculation, the symbiotic progress of insight between the earth and his own consciousness.

Secondly, the intrinsic detachment in the diction of the repeated ‘his self’ is worth analysing for what it implies about the special subjective condition that Stevens is attempting to discourse in this poem. We find in this curious formulation a subtext which imports Stevens’ concepts of the latent poetic resource and the augmentation of subjectivity by poetry, concepts which occur in several other key poems of *The Rock*. The self, it is suggested, is not the totality of the perceiving subject. The gesture of objectification of the self, together with the conflation of its artistic activity to a solar matrix, relegates the ‘self’ as the initiatory condition of vision to the status of an isolatable aspect rather than a determinant of experience. The implication of possession in ‘his self,’ in the phrasing’s subtly anatomising gesture, casts the self as something like an extricable lineament of experience. A superior, broader, less defined, more rarefied and more ranging subjectivity is thus established.

¹⁵ In April 1922, Hervey Allen, regarding Amy Lowell’s not granting Stevens’ “From the Journal of Crispin” first place in a poetry competition, wrote: “Thank you so much for handing this lovely thing in for the competition. There are very few poets writing now who glimpse the whole earth as the background for their hero’s ‘soul.’ I like your planetary attitude.” Quoted by Samuel French Morse, “Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater,” in Roy Harvey Pearce, ed, *The Act of the Mind*, Baltimore: 1965, p. 77.

The figure of Ariel further extends the aesthetic scope of this poem beyond its surface remit. The choice of the 'airy spirit' of *The Tempest* effects a bringing together of several aspects of Stevens' mature theories of the poetic temperament. Ariel is a deliberately aggrandizing and optimistic image choice. It invokes Shakespeare's final work, and thereby, an alignment of Stevens' own achievements with an illustrious lineage of artistic valediction. The effusive Ariel is liberated at the end of the play and this fact is relevant to the many commentaries on the theme of mortality in Stevens' final poems which have stressed the impossibility of any enduring anagogic sentiment or final synthesis. Prospero ultimately rewards the eagerness of his daemonic aide. Fulfilling his earlier commitment, 'Bravely, my diligence. Thou shalt be free',¹⁶ he offers the benedictory pardon:

... My Ariel, chick,
That is thy charge: then to the elements
Be free, and fare thou well!¹⁷

In a collection of poems written by a dying man, one of which contains the resonantly paradoxical title of "Prologues to What is Possible" it is surely legitimate to attribute to Ariel some role of heartening Stevens' eschatology. Neither is it a great stretch of the imagination to accept an intimation of a post-mortem progress in the promise of freedom that Shakespeare's valedictory spirit emblematises. Also, in terms of the question of Stevens' attraction to the image, perhaps more subtly, the character of Ariel can be said to represent the sophisticated metaphysical leaning of the poet-percipient. As spirit of air, Ariel supplies a condensed evocation of Stevens' long-held fascination with weather as an emotive phenomenology of artistic temperament. In several of Stevens' poems, the related imagery of moving air, the sky and wind, functions as a suggestively chaotic threshold for the poetic enacting of meditative crossings. We might recall here "The Wind Shifts" from *Harmonium*:

This is how the wind shifts:
Like the thoughts of an old human,
Who still thinks eagerly
And despairingly.
The wind shifts like this:
Like a human without illusions,
Who still feels irrational things within her. (CP83)

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest, The Complete Works*, eds., Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford: 1988, Act V, Sc. 1, l. 244, p. 1188.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 320-321, p.1189.

Or “The Comedian as the Letter C”:

Here, something in the rise and fall of wind
That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,
A sunken voice, both of remembering
And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain. (CP29)

And in “Parochial Theme” from *Parts of a World*, Stevens wrote:

The wind blows. In the wind, the voices
Have shapes that are not yet fully themselves,

Are sounds blown by a blower into shapes,
The blower squeezed to the thinnest *mi* of falsetto. (CP191)¹⁸

In the present chapter, in my analysis of “Two Illustrations That the World is What You Make of It,” it will be seen that Stevens returns to the aesthetic potential of the wind as congenial subject.

The image of Ariel can also be said to involve an incorporation of Stevens’ idea of creative compulsion. In *The Tempest*, the incorporeal Ariel performs most of his feats under duress. Bound to the service of Prospero, and previously to the witch Sycorax, he is largely a subservient character. Stevens’ identification capitalises on these implications, and it will be seen that other *Rock* poems sustain the theme of authentic poetry as ‘an act of conscience’ (CPP834), an unremitting ‘need of his nature,’ and most dramatically so in the poem “Madame La Fleurie,” where the drive to poetic fulfilments is seen as an interior oppression, a ‘mighty burden’ (CPP877).

After these remarks, what might we identify as the most indicative evidence of affirmation in “The Planet on the Table”? It seems clear that Stevens intends a broader theoretic remit in the title than is commonly deduced. Beyond the idea of “The Whole of Harmonium” as the metaphoric planet which sits upon the table, bidding retrospection, bidding the contemplation of epitaph, it seems that an appeal to the planetary quality of the writing is also operative. As part of the spiritual integrity of Stevens’ project, his treatment here of the realisation of poetry involves the extension of the mind beyond the Cartesian rampart of experience and into a more expansive identification of consciousness with a

¹⁸ See also “Domination of Black” (CP8), “The Snow Man” (CP9), “Ploughing on Sunday” (CP20), “Valley Candle” (CP51), “Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion” (CP88), “The Idea of Order at Key West” (CP129), “A Weak Mind in the Mountains” (CP212), “Montrachet-le-Jardin” (CP263), “Chocorua to its Neighbour” (CP299), “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” (CP397), “The Auroras of Autumn” (CP414).

beatitude of natural process, what he termed in 1951 'a vital engagement between man and his environment' (CPP833). We also meet a muted and yet central use of the paradigm of augmented subjectivity, but in order to discuss it fully we may need to construct an alternative narrative for the selfhood that Stevens conceives here.¹⁹ As a product of meditative advancement, the 'his self' indicates a breach with the normative condition of egotistic reflection. It seems to involve a theoretic bias towards what Stevens termed 'senses and necessities inoperative on the ordinary level of life' (CPP837). Acknowledging the protagonist's transcendence of the provisional condition of non-identification with natural process into a bio-centric holism which embraces the sun as literary motive, the seeming impersonality of the first, penultimate and final verses comes to appear more a part of a thematic of inspired humility and transmutation than any programmatic self-disparagement or morbid renunciation.

We might posit here the controlling idea of a depthless vision. Stevens in this mode beholds the infinite potential for poetic penetration, 'the incalculable expanse of the imagination as it reflects itself in us and around us' (CPP878), and the comparison to his own life's work leads to a calm reconciliation to the concept of partial illumination. The condition of ascent, tempered and increased by the proximity of death, inspires a mode of non-attachment: non-attachment to prestige, to books as personal creations or possessions, and non-attachment to a determinant selfhood. The concluding two verses conceive a still greater subject, another mode of realisation, the apparently unwritten 'great poem of the earth' (CPP730). In light of this mighty subject, the meaning of the planet itself, the poems already written appear as proud intimations of a greater structure. Their value then, in this radical aesthetic of surrender and non-attachment, is not the importance of their survival as literary artefacts in the custodial processes of fame and posterity: 'It was not important that they survive.' Rather, their value is the closeness they exhibit to the true source, the at once inaccessible and detectable sublimity of the total imaginative picture of existence, against

¹⁹ William Bevis, Joseph Carroll, and Howard Baker, have put forward arguments to the effect that the dominant modes of critical appraisal of poetry fail to meet the view of reality and selfhood found in Stevens' more meditative poetry. Bevis states: "The kind of detachment that colors some of Stevens's subjects, structures and syntax (colors them white) is simply foreign to our critical awareness and vocabulary." *Mind of Winter*, p. 6. In "Ecology and Man: A Viewpoint," Paul Shepherd has proposed the substitution of the term 'integrity' for 'self': "In one aspect the self is an arrangement of organs, feelings and thoughts —a 'me'— surrounded by a hard body boundary: skin, clothes, and insular habits. This idea needs no defense. It is conferred on us by the whole history of our civilization. Its virtue is verified by our affluence. The alternative is a self as a center of organization, constantly drawing on and influencing the surroundings, whose skin and behaviour are soft zones contacting the world instead of excluding it." In George Sessions, ed., *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, Boston: 1995, p. 132.

which vision the linguistic effort seems a thing of 'poverty.' Three redeeming attributes within this relatively impoverished state are listed in the concluding verses: 'lineament,' 'character' and 'affluence,' and all pertain to the planet of which the poems were 'part.' We can note here that although Stevens is modifying his claims to poetic realisation, he is simultaneously raising the stature of his vision. The subject has become what he called 'the greatness that lay beyond' (CPP878). The termination of poetry is employed as a rhetorical means of appealing beyond language to the statement of that which had informed the poetic project all along. A sumptuousness of ineffability, then, informs the rhetorically adjudged 'half-perceived' 'affluence' of the writing. It is in this same expansive valedictory mode that Stevens expressed in the acceptance speech for his second National Book Award, seven months before his death, the feeling that his achievement must stop short of consummating his deepest view of existence and the capacities of the poetic temperament. It is worth quoting substantially from this text as many phrases in it serve as a fitting gloss for the ideas I have been identifying in "The Planet on the Table."

The first thing that a poet should do as he comes out of his cavern is to put on the strength of his particular calling as a poet, to address himself to what Rilke called the mighty burden of poetry and to have the courage to say that, in his sense of things, the significance of poetry is second to none. We can never have great poetry unless we believe that poetry serves great ends. We must recognise this from the beginning so that it will effect everything that we do. Our belief in the greatness of poetry is a vital part of its greatness, an implicit part of the belief of others in its greatness. Now, at seventy-five, as I look back on the little that I have done and as I turn the pages of my own poems gathered together in a single volume, I have no choice except to paraphrase the old verse that says that it is not what I am, but what I aspired to be that comforts me. It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize.

Humble as my actual contribution to poetry may be and however modest my experience of poetry has been, I have learned through that contribution and by the aid of that experience of the greatness that lay beyond, the power over the mind that lies in the mind itself, the incalculable expanse of the imagination as it reflects itself in us and about us. This is the precious scope which every poet seeks to achieve as best he can.

Awards and honors have nothing to do with this. The role of awards and honors in the life of a poet is simply to remind him, in the midst of all his hopes for poetry, that he lives in the world of Darwin and not in the world of Plato. He does not accept them as a true satisfaction because there is no true satisfaction for the poet but poetry itself. (CPP877-878)

Taking Stevens at his word here, awards, honors and posterity meant very little.²⁰ What mattered was the subjective zone of consummation, the decreeing aspect of the individual temperament, which set the acute artistic standards and which, within the extreme terms of vocation and submission by which Stevens seems to have lived and wrote, lead the poet beyond the experiential paradigm of egotistic concern for material fruition and canonical endurance. ‘Publicity is definitely a thing that degrades one,’ (L711) he wrote to Bernetta Quinn. In “The Planet on the Table,” then, we might decide that the poem’s surface diffidence and the curious resonance of Stevens’ being apparently unenthused by his own achievement, involves no serious anti-romantic revision of the fantastic,²¹ but rather an inscription of the hegemony of the ‘precious scope’ that lies just beyond the poet-percipient’s mind and seems in this poem to condition and metamorphose that mind as a matter of a metaphysical summons to deeper initiation.

I will turn now to some examples of poems in *The Rock* which incorporate forms of negativity and impotence only to undermine that element which might be said to subvert the experience of imaginative insight and disclosure. “The Green Plant” opens with a seemingly definitive dejection. We should, however, be wary of employing this poem as part of a diagnosis of fatalism in Stevens’ last poems. A deliberately reflexive element is very much at play here and the potential for affirmative poetic perceptions remains a dominant concern at the poem’s close. Initially, an ostensible crisis of literary self-consciousness is described, and any effort of authentic poetic experience seems unsustainable. However, by the final verse, a vivid perceptual captivation has begun to re-instate the familiar ‘cure’ of the imagination.

Silence is a shape that has passed.
Otu-bre’s lion-roses have turned to paper
And the shadows of the trees
Are like wrecked umbrellas.

The effete vocabulary of summer
No longer says anything.
The brown at the bottom of red

²⁰ Discussing ‘Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,’ Joseph Carroll has written the following: “The sense of purpose in the world belongs not only to the individual mind but also to ‘the central mind,’ that is, to a universal spiritual presence. The meeting that this presence has arranged between itself and the mind of the poet consists simply of a momentary recognition. The poet’s recognition entails no ritual, no professions of doctrinal conformity, no commitments to a given form of behaviour, and no quasi-contractual obligations or rewards. The only reward is the achieved sense of cosmic unity that is a perfected order.” *Wallace Stevens Supreme Fiction*, pp. 31-32.

²¹ Lee Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, p. 114.

The orange far down in yellow,
 Are falsifications from a sun
 In a mirror, without heat,
 In a constant secondariness,
 A turning down towards finality– (CP506)

The first three verses here comprise a tendentious arrangement of aesthetic and philosophical impediment which has important precursors in “The Man on the Dump” from *Parts of a World*, and also the *Harmonium* poem, “The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad” whose title posits a related anxiety with respect to poetic affirmation. The treatment of an anti-poetic ‘malady of the quotidian’ unites these earlier poems to “The Green Plant.” And the tone of the introduction of the later poem shares its layered fatalistic complex with the famously worried expression from *Harmonium*: ‘I am too dumbly in my being pent’ (CP96). Putatively in these poems, experience has become hackneyed. ‘A constant secondariness’ dogs the poetic mind’s efforts to bear itself into a sense of the beyond through language, and it seems that no transcendent trajectory can be mustered against the resultant disaffection. Where “The Man on the Dump” expounds the exonerating re-establishment of a romantic mode of literary endeavour, “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad” is concerned to substantiate a poetic capacity that can penetrate the noumenal core of a forbiddingly factual world:

Perhaps, if winter once could penetrate
 Through all its purples to the final slate,
 Persisting bleakly in an icy haze,

 One might in turn become less diffident,
 Out of such mildew plucking neater mould
 And spouting new orations of the cold.
 One might. One might. But time will not relent. (CP96)

In these lines, time, as an unrelenting predicate of realism, is unfavourable to the mystical gravitations of the poetic temperament. Dylan Thomas’ “Fern Hill” presents a poetic complex akin to Stevens here. In that poem, the speaker explains his extreme lyrical facility in terms of a relenting of time. The fugal forms, ‘Time let me hail and climb,’ and ‘time let me play and ride’ recur and modulate throughout the poem, elaborating what is deemed the ‘mercy’ of the quotidian condition that it should permit the poet access to a phantasmagoric Eden of

farmland. By this concession, Thomas' speaker claims to partake of a sensuous zone of elementary and memorial imagery.

And I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
 About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,
 Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
 And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
 Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hill barked clear and cold,
 And the Sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.²²

The speaker of "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" exists in an ostensible state of submission to the temporal bind. There seems to be no possibility of a pageantry of natural process to rejuvenate him such as we find in "Fern Hill." In the second verse the wind is portrayed as being devoid of any Aeolian resonance:

The wind attendant on the solstices
 Blows on the shutters of the metropolises,
 Stirring no poet in his sleep ... (CP96)

Nonetheless, an intrinsic Thomas-like sense of prelapsarian impunity circumscribes the statement of his being entrapped by the quotidian condition. The poem's ultimate equivocation with regard to its thematic of limitation inheres in the pronouncing as impossible a poetic goal which is simultaneously delineated within the poem's argument. A fundamental engagement of the temperament with the season of winter, we are told, holds the promise of essential apprehendings of higher reality. 'The final slate' is the advanced yield to be had once the mind has managed to defy the perceptual bewitchments of the opaque and palimpsestic 'purples.'²³ Thereafter, 'new orations of the cold' will be the faithful poems of the transcendent mind of winter. The repeated 'one might' in the final line further undercuts the poem's superficially negative import, aligning the imagery with the broader theoretical context of poetic possibility. The initially impoverished context, we should recognise, derives its sense of predicament from the temperamental need of poetic fulfilment, without the persistence of which the bemoaned

²² Dylan Thomas, *Selected Poems*. London: 2000, p. 87.

²³ In "The Hedonist's Progress," Yvor Winters had the following to say about the aspiration in this poem: "The Poet has progressed in this poem to the point at which the intensity of emotion possible in actual human life has become insipid, and he conceives the possibility of ultimate satisfaction only in some impossible emotional finality of no matter what kind." In Ehrenpreis, ed., *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, p. 126.

aesthetic difficulty would seem an innocuous sort of grief. The pretext of constriction in “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” then, comes to represent an enduring aspiration.

“The Green Plant,” continuing these spliced juxtapositions of staidness and possibility, commences with a typifying quotidian predicament. The varied complaints of the first twelve lines, quoted above, are characterised by a strophic uniformity that stands in direct contrast to the prosodic extension of the final stanza. This formal deviation suggests, in its manner of a modifying addendum, or even an erratum note, a departure from and an essential re-writing of the preceding text. The signifying hinge here, quite obviously, is the word ‘except,’ which forms an intrinsic revision of the poems’ opening tone of despair. The green plant of the title is here introduced as a portentous phenomenon, serving to rupture the original ennui of referentiality. By its imposing of a ‘barbarous’ visual autonomy onto the normalised perceptual field, it stimulates a renewed consolation of poetic perception for the speaker. With its glare, it challenges and ultimately augments the perceptually jaded ‘look’ that has characterised the mind paradigmatically beset by the enervating ‘secondariness’ and ‘finality’ depicted in the first three stanzas. While we have been allowed by Stevens to feel and almost to embrace the desperate conviction of that outlook, the account of the impediment to aesthetic freshness is ultimately undermined. By the close of the poem, a rational fatalism has been usurped by an instinctual and non-rational vivification. Just as the suspension of inspiration has almost been confirmed, a suddenly redemptive contradiction appears:

Except that a green plant glares, as you look
At the legend of the maroon and olive forest,
Glares, outside of the legend, with the barbarous green
Of the harsh reality of which it is part. (CP506)

The glaring harshness of the green plant is a source of what Stevens terms in the final poem of the *Rock* sequence, ‘a new knowledge of reality’ (CP534). The barbaric, we can say, functions here as a poetically enriching quality. Resistant to static linguistic codification, the alarmingly autonomous foliage is beheld as both a transfigured and transfiguring sense datum, an urgent quiddity sufficient to an arresting of the bleakly discursive trajectory of the preceding account of perceptual belatedness. In its uniqueness, and in its momentous appearance, the plant becomes a constellated emblem of Stevens’ general poetic concerns: a hallowed ineffability, the imaginative fecundity of the earth, the rejuvenation of sight, the potent and noumenous nature of true reality. ‘Barbarous’ and ‘harsh’ are the adjectival subversions of anti-poetic

perception, directed here in an effort to approximate a uniquely poetic location beyond rationality, beyond even the non-realist mystique of 'legend.' The 'harsh reality' refers not to any realistic sense of human difficulty or to a sequence of events, but to an uncommon suggestiveness and palpability of fact. Harshness presents a counter-pointing threshold, a point where familiarity and rational confidence are eclipsed for the purposes of a more probing and authentic poetic sight. The phrase recalls the 'savage transparence' of "The Pediment of Appearance" which comprised, as was seen in that poem, the optimum of visionary disclosure, 'the stone / For which they are looking' (CP361). The argument of "The Green Plant," then, is close to the following: True reality, embodied in the green plant, refuses any literary versioning by the mind, and thus, by releasing the mind from its dependent relationship to a preconceived fixity, prompts a more unadulterated poetic and perceptual mode. Given the corpus of visionary experiment and indulgence that separates the two poems, we should not be surprised that the relenting and the penetration idealised in "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" have been granted in some respects at the end of "The Green Plant." Stevens had spent over thirty years in the intervening period theorising the possibilities of poetic perception, so much so that the departure from a problematic reality via the privileged emblem of the green plant strikes the close reader almost as something of a typical Stevensesan event.

The first canto of "The Rock" resembles the reflexive negativity of "The Green Plant," beginning as it does with a sense of helplessness which the poem's development subsequently retracts.

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

Regard the freedom of seventy years ago.
It is no longer air. The houses still stand,
Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
The lives we lived in the mind are at an end.
They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar

Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken
Were not and are not. It is not to be believed. (CP525)

The vividness of the desolation being described here in the opening verses of "The Rock" becomes transferred into a more optimistic mode of lyrical subtlety in the lines which follow.

It is as if, while writing in despondent mood, Stevens manages to exhume the imaginative energy that has made his erstwhile virility so worthy of lament. After the twelfth line, loss of youth is no longer the theme. An impetus of more affirmative imagination, in the provisional form of an expounded depression, seeks an abstract means of addressing its own tendency towards plenitude. In this way, the painfully objective consideration of agedness evolves quite suddenly into a sketching of the function and source of poetry. The remaining two cantos do not deviate from this concern. In the twelfth line, the preceding list of insubstantial memories coheres into an image of both personal and allegorical import, and this inchoate poetic quality manifests the first concrete simile of the poem. Demonstrably, Stevens' mood has altered. His treasured moment of resemblance has been sparked, and a more ambitious description ensues.

The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod
And another in a fantastic consciousness,
In a queer assertion of humanity:

A theorem proposed between the two—
Two figures in a nature of the sun,
In the sun's design of its own happiness,

As if nothingness contained a metier,
A vital assumption, an impermanence
In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight. The bloom and the musk
Were being alive, an incessant being alive,
A particular of being, that gross universe. (CP525-26)

Sun and gross universe appear here as familiar Stevensesan meditations, but also, within the terms of the individual poem, they are the distinct terms of his subversion of his own previously stated desolation. A past tense is employed up to the end of the canto, sustaining the paradigm of a recounted biographical subject, but by then the thematic emphasis has modulated towards a theorising of poetry as a perennial means towards augmented perception. Poetry, as the blooming foliage of ontological renewal, is rooted to a primary element, 'the high rock,' an enriched visionary locus related, we are told, to the suggestive 'birth of sight.' It

is as if sight, as primary poetic medium, was itself a distinct element, or even a life-form in its own right. The implicit aggrandizement of sight as poetic means is familiar. Bright sight, birth of sight, satisfaction; these terms comprise a symbolic constellation of Stevens' well-established troping of poetic insight, poetic temperamental desire, poetic acumen and illumination. Hereafter, the 'high rock' is to become the mystical hub in this horoscope of poetic iconographies, embodying variously, the source, cause, medium, predicament, and cure, of the poet-percipient's mind. In the remaining cantos of "The Rock," Stevens busily interprets the potential of the rock, establishing a predominantly spiritual tone, moving always towards an elusive expression of the rock of poetry as the infinite ground of the finite mind, a supreme apology for poetry.

In many of his last poems Stevens remained concerned with the emotional and poetic value of the experience of the ineffable. Much as the non-rational autonomy of the green plant became a source of perceptual replenishment, and the site of an epistemological event, so too in the uncollected poem, "The Region November," a vista of wind-swept trees wields a captivatingly inhuman content, prompting a confluence between the percipient and a force of near overwhelming perceptual freedom. The poem's title sets the theme of unique cognition by positing a subtle oxymoron. The month, as region, creates a modified definition of a temporal phase, extending the common denotation of the winter month, and creating a more suggestive predicate, something like a zone or a physical aspect of time as opposed to the more normative concept of a seasonal duration. In this way, from the outset, the poems' recounted events are circumscribed, and in some way explained, by the attenuated context of being simultaneously real and imagined. Further, the month, as synthetic sense datum, stands as a recognisable evidence of time's relenting. It is, like the properties of a 'final slate,' inseparable from its contextual ground, just as the poem's scape of beheld reality is inseparable from its subjective and subtilized image, its context within the poetic temperament. Much of the quality of the poem's tension is drawn from the sense of an imminent revelation.

It is hard to hear the north wind again,
And to watch the treetops as they sway.

They sway, deeply, and loudly, in an effort,
So much less than feeling, so much less than speech,

Saying and saying, the way things say
On the level of that which is not yet knowledge:

A revelation not yet intended.
It is like a critic of God, the world

And human nature, pensively seated
On the waste throne of his own wilderness.

Deeplier, deeplier, loudlier, loudlier,
The trees are swaying, swaying, swaying. (CPP472-473)

The meaning of these lines relates to that condition of speculative intensity proposed in the *Adagia* as 'a state of clairvoyant observation' (CPP906). A final accessibility or disclosure of the essence of reality is suspended, and yet its location, its imminence and its evocativeness are adumbrated by Stevens within the scheme of a vivid epistemological yearning. The acute poetic speaker, notwithstanding the withholding of the ultimate penetration, appears equipped to make the transition from his state of verging and ruminative awe, via the symbol of the swaying trees, to the posited beyond. The repeated phrases, 'swaying,' 'loudlier,' 'deeplier,' establish a sense of increasing sensory attunement to the life of the subject matter.

Elsewhere in *The Rock*, in "The River Of Rivers In Connecticut" Stevens writes, 'The steeple at Farmington / Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways' (CP533). In that poem, to which I will return, poetic sight is conflated with the disclosed nature of the river, with the result that figurations of luminosity and acumen transmute the impression of the surroundings. "The Region November" modulates a similar efficacy of visionary synthesis. Pulsing and beckoning, the sense data of the trees repose in an ideal quiddity. In their special urgency they partake of the poet-percipient's own bio-rhythmic state of meditation upon, and near-communion with, the overall setting of a wind-swept verdure. However, they are not conventionally apprehended, they are 'not yet knowledge,' which, as we might have come to expect, in the Stevensean context, grants them a superior status. The essential trees are distant, being unalloyed by thought and language. They are, idealistically, 'less than feeling,' 'less than speech.' 'As the reason destroys, the poet must create' (CPP905), Stevens had said, and the poet-percipient here, one-time 'master of the spruce,' *must* approach the a-linguistic life of the trees, equipped with his own propitious nature, his temperamentally irrational means. The trees in "The Region November" are part of a more intense 'level' or order of reality, in the mediation of which the distinctly poetic and intuitive grade of cognition comprises only a semblance of normative conceptuality and experience. This employment of a greater

'sensibility range' (CPP902) necessitates an advanced referential scope in the pursuit of which the poem's imagery, syntax and diction are uniquely cast. In this short process the poem's speaker is presented as another of Stevens' transcendental initiates. By the strikingly propositional phrasing, 'the way things say on the level of that which is not yet knowledge,' he is revealed to be operating from a perspective that at once antedates and looks forward to a sequence of visionary episodes. The compression and provocative understatement of the 'way', with its non-realist implication of a truism, presupposes an acceptance of a set of philosophical and poetic terms that markedly belie the casual diction. These terms, as has been seen, are substantiated most in Stevens' own poetic precedents, his expounding throughout the *Collected Poems* of an involved idealist credo.

It becomes apparent that the delayed accessing of ultimate reality is itself a form of disclosure, and in "The Region November," Stevens fashions a uniquely emotive urgency by the conjuring of a proximate revelation. The poem progresses from the sensorially unfavourable, 'It is hard to hear' 'and to watch,' towards a replenished and more imaginative context. By the end the lamented condition of perceptual arrest is not fully subverted, but a consolation is explicitly derived from the establishment of an ontological context. The interrogation of the phenomenological abyss of the swaying trees has prompted the aggrandizing simile of the supra-divine 'critic of god, the world, and human nature.' The mode again is casual, almost colloquial, and yet the terms involve an open, if muted, thematics of both omniscience and apocalypse. The speaker's philosophical awe at the inhuman quality of the trees is transferred by Stevens into the figure of a rival immanence, a sentient, elemental and regal locus, 'pensively seated on the waste throne of his own wilderness,' prompting a further incorporation of natural potency and greenness as poetic predicates.

A still further sublimation is achieved by the term 'intended,' a trope which we find in several of the last poems, including "Note on Moonlight" where 'purpose' is referenced five times (CP531). Similarly, in the previously mentioned "Prologues to What is Possible" a sense of beneficent orchestration is invoked as a possible aid to the poet-percipient's extreme questing into abstraction:

Between himself ...
 And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended to be recognized,
 The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses
 On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep. (CP516)

The scarcely intelligible ‘this and that’ are here explicitly ‘intended’ as a form of guidance to the acutely susceptible poet-percipient as he moves in speculative toil through his gnosis of visionary ascent. Stevens subtly elaborates the categorization by offering his readers the philosophically affirmative sign-post of the sleeping figures. ‘A revelation not yet intended’ suggests a similarly overseen and pre-destined sequence of disclosure. The trees, as was said of the wind in “One of the Inhabitants of the West” await the arrival of a reader, the industrious poet who, possessed by the vocational tenet that, as Stevens wrote in his *Adagia*, ‘the imagination is one of the forces of nature’ (CPP909), and prone to the clairvoyance that seeks a sublime beholding and cognition, affirms a symbiotic earthly process in the furtherance of artistic consciousness.

In “The Figure of the Youth as the Virile Poet,” Stevens discussed briefly Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art*. Several ideas from his comments there connect to the trope of ‘intention’ as I have been explaining it here. In the fourth section of that essay, he presents the following citation:

Yet it is commonly thought that the artist is independent of his work. In his chapter on ‘Forms In The Realm Of The Mind,’ M. Focillon speaks of a vocation of substances, or technical destiny to which there is a corresponding vocation of minds; that is to say, a certain order of forms corresponds to a certain order of minds Thus a vocation recognises its material by foresight, before experience. (NA48)

The second stanza of “Note on Moonlight” seems very much in line with this theory:

It is as if being was to be observed,
As if, among the possible purposes

Of what one sees, the purpose that comes first,
The surface, is the purpose to be seen. (CP531)

The concluding stanza of the same poem explores the divide between the theoretical pitfall of solipsism and the embracing of the agency of matter as a fact both within and independent of the poetic sphere.

The one moonlight, the various universe, intended
So much just to be seen – a purpose, empty
Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but a least a purpose,
Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain, for sure ... [.]

I have identified that rhetorical aspect of Stevens' essays where he signals his assent to the exaggerated forms of speculation in the philosophers he quotes, arguing that, based on a continuous awareness of the risks of sounding aesthetically excessive, he uses this mode as a means of representing the fundamentally romanticist underpinnings of his poetics. In the quote from "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens clearly appropriates a sense of the validity of Focillon as the exponent of a non-poetic system of thought. The stylistic prevarications of the final stanza of "Note on Moonlight" indicate the presence of a checked euphony which, nevertheless, by the foregrounding of an affirmative bias, displays the recurrent predicate of a visionary need, a tropic faith in poetic realization as an experience of universal intentionality. The significance of "The Region November," we can say, with its figuring of a processive intuition and engagement of a 'technical destiny' from the terms of the unique emotional pitch attained in the poet-percipient's viewing of the trees, inheres in the representation of a poetic sensibility, a unique order of mind, in Focillon's terms, which has ranged so extremely that it might detect the presence and activity of a pervading spirit of volition and pre-ordination in the natural world. The poem claims an engagement with a grade of reality so subtle that it prompts the enigmatic expression of 'a revelation not yet intended.'

In "On the Way to the Bus" and "The Hermitage at the Center," Stevens continues his exploration of the rarefied state of perception that we have seen in "The Region November." In "On the Way to the Bus," he employs the anti-poetic figure of the journalist in order to affirm a poetic engagement of reality. We are back to the potentiality of the winter mind again in this poem.²⁴ The opening line announces: 'A light snow, like frost, has fallen during the night' (CPP472). This basic imagery represents a challenge to vision, an ostensible encrusting of artistic possibilities. Tendentiously, Stevens allows a failure of vision to dominate in this poem, but he is not proposing a failure of poetry. The journalist becomes, in Crocean terms, the omega-percipient, the ineffectual polymath who squanders the subtler phenomenology by a 'wholesale over-determination' of his experience.²⁵ The journalist is Stevens' metaphor for the pressure of reality, that which naturally mistrusts and relegates the 'imaginative endowment' of the individual artist. In the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,"

²⁴ Bart Eeckhout has grouped this poem with other 'relatively neglected lyrics,' including "Man Carrying Thing," "Long and Sluggish Lines," and "As You Leave the Room," calling these poems 'rewrites' of "The Snow Man." *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, p. 99.

²⁵ T.J. Morris, "Stevens and Croce: Forms of Lyrical Intuition," *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Fall 2001, p. 240.

the newspaper is seen by Stevens as that aspect of culture which eclipses the 'unified content of consciousness' (NA16). In 1951, commenting on a thesis on his poetry which had been sent to him, he wrote to Bernard Heringman:

While it is an irrelevancy to say so, the understanding shown by Mr. Wagner, including his understanding of details, dissipates the idea of obscurity. I have always thought that to the right reader my poems were perfectly clear. A week or two ago when I was down for the National Book Award, one of the newspaper men asked me why it was that I did not write on the level of intelligence in the literal sense. I told him that when one wrote on a literal level one was not writing poetry. (L710)

It is this same unfortunate sense of the literal which characterises the journalist's ineffectuality in the task of vision in "On the Way to the Bus."

Gloomily, the journalist confronts

Transparent men in a translated world,
In which he feeds on a new known. (CPP472)

In their juxtaposition of imaginative possibility with the enervation of the newspaper, these lines construct the poem's mode of indictment. The gloominess represents here the absence of that irrational zeal and ardour of composition which was so central to Stevens' creative process. The act of confrontation too implies an absence of an attentive Stevensesan immersion in subtleties. In his own words, 'it dissipates the idea of obscurity.' The 'transparent men in a translated world' might easily be read as figures for the corruption of reality by realism that Stevens so often complained against, with both adjectives denoting an emphasis on the superficial and a deviation from grander, more aesthetically propitious feeling. But perhaps 'transparent' can never fully be a pejorative term in Stevens' trope-laden oeuvre. And we should be wary of dismissing the implication of an attainment of essential vision and contemplation here. In this light we might also recognise an elaboration of the gloom of the journalist to the effect that, in his heavy-handed confrontation of a latent noumenality, and by the insistence of his procrustean cognitive tack, he eschews the subtler potential of his own mind. The 'new known' is available, and yet by feeding upon it, by voraciously, that is, haphazardly and confrontationally, approaching it as news, the available 'elucidation' goes unconsummated. The next three verses of the poem outline the realm of sprawling metaphysicals (CP325) which coexists with the humdrum context of being on the way to the bus. What emerges from these lines is the affirmation of 'a way' to transcend the stock

rationality of winter negativity, a way of moving 'beyond journalism,' beyond the pressure of the anti-poetic, and into a strength of vision.

In a season, a climate of morning, of elucidation,
A refreshment of cold air, cold breath,

A perception of cold breath, more revealing than
A perception of sleep, more powerful

Than a power of sleep, a clearness emerging
From cold, slightly irised, slightly bedazzled,

But a perfection emerging from a new known,
An understanding beyond journalism,

A way of pronouncing the world inside of one's tongue
Under the wintry trees of the terrace. (CPP472)

Power, revelation, sleep, clarity, chromatic lustre; these are the facets of the winter morning when it is seen in the empowered 'understanding' of Stevensesan poetry. We should recall here the thematic systems of dazzle and clarity as they occur in "Description Without Place" and "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." The striking image of the tongue provides an appeal to esoteric competence, a reconciliation of the susceptibility and fine detachment of Stevens' lyrical proclivities with the truncating pressure of the season of realism. 'The tongue is an eye,' (CP907) Stevens wrote in the *Adagia*. And relatedly: 'One reads poetry with one's nerves.' Away from the seat of reason, away from received wording and codified sight, the subtilizing temperament extends its paradigm of sensible extremity to a suggestively unaccustomed physiological location. Further, it is notable that the succinct epiphany of finding 'a way' to meet and enunciate the world without having to forgo the experience of interiority, occurs beneath 'the wintry trees.' The prospect of illumination is inseparable from this image, establishing as it does an inter-textual link with the arboreal revelations of "Certain Phenomena of Sound," "Solitaire Under the Oaks" and "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly." The composure of the final couplet is Stevens' parting indictment of the journalist. There is also something undeniably sardonic in this statement of a superior subjectivity. It is almost as if Stevens were brandishing an example of the poetic mechanism maintaining a spirit of intuition and elucidation in the midst of a forbidding cultural climate which the journalist can only hope to consolidate.

Just as the commonplace of walking the route to the bus was said to conceal a bright substructure of profound impressions in “On the Way to the Bus,” so in “The Hermitage at the Center,” the symbol of the hermitage forms a locus of epiphany within the otherwise unremarkable scene of a public park. This poem charts a steadily intensified meditation upon a set of empirical details, initially by contrasting the subjective and objective environments and then causing them to be united. In this way Stevens presents yet another prophetic process in the mind of his clairvoyant observer.

The leaves on the macadam make a noise—
How soft the grass on which the desired
Reclines in the temperature of heaven—

Like tales that were told the day before yesterday—
Sleek in a natural nakedness,
She attends the tintinnabula—

And the wind sways like a great thing tottering—
Of birds called up by more than the sun,
Birds of more wit, that substitute—

Which suddenly is all dissolved and gone—
Their intelligible twittering
For unintelligible thought.

And yet this end and this beginning are one,
And one last look at the ducks is a look
At lucent children round her in a ring. (CP505-06)

The first lines of each of the five verses in this poem comprise a distinct narrative. Read together, they chart a bleakly normative account through to its delicate conflation with the visionary mode that is conducted through the indented second and third line sections. The conflation is deftly accentuated in the thirteenth line when the accustomed elliptical use of the dash at the end of the first lines of the four preceding stanzas is substituted for a comma. In this way, the sense of a distinct or separable couplet in the indented section becomes imbedded and the final stanza is cast as a unitary expression of three lines. The centre of the title is inhabited by a female form, a suggestive icon of oneness and natural harmony. The ideality of ‘the desired’ inheres variously in the sensual aspect of the grass upon which she lies, in the fact that she emanates a sense of beatitude, that she is naked without impropriety, and also in the fact that she ‘attends’ the music of the birds. It is significant that the presence and activity

of the latter are attributed to a powerful and yet indefinite will, characterised as being 'more than the sun.' The theme of natural orchestration borrows here the specialised sense of the sun that was seen in "The Planet on the Table." While it is named in order to rule it out as the direct ministering power of the bird's 'tintinabula,' the cosmological note inevitably contributes to the mood of aggrandizement, particularly in terms of the suggestion of warmth which is carried over from the third line. Heaven, in that line, is both the affirmative languorous warmth of the protagonist's trance, and the 'temperature' of the cloistered female essence that he has intuited in the recesses of visibility. The birds, responding to the para-solar summons, exhibit a further harmonious interfusion by being intrinsic to the renovating thought process which endeavours to engage their transcendental portent. In the fourth verse, by virtue of their 'wit,' they actively infuse the logic, the intelligibility of their 'twittering,' into the mediation of obscurity, the aesthetic resonance of 'unintelligible thought.' The result is the depiction of a subtly fused chain of causality, and we are reminded here again of Focillon's concept of technical destiny. If we elide the intervening narrative (and the syntax of the poem proposes that we do), we can read: 'Birds of more wit, that substitute their intelligible twittering for unintelligible thought.' This act of poetic ministering on the part of the birds directly prompts the advanced perceptual event in the final stanza. The transfiguring of the ducks into 'lucent children,' the speaker effectively says, has been willed by the presence of the birds and their propitious connection to the encircled muse.

In the final verse, the 'one last look' is pivotal. By its valedictory mode it advances a perceptual earnestness which contributes to the metamorphic impulse of the poem's denouement. The term 'lucent' proposes the ducks as creatures of light whose being involves both substance and insubstantiality. Seen to be permeated by the medium of sight itself, they now exist as ideal sense data, and, as befits ideas in a new knowledge of reality, their appearance holds the quality of elucidation. A similar denotative linkage explains the shift from ducks to children. With this transition from the creaturely to the utterly human, Stevens pursues an exaltation of the concept of creature. Perceptual innocence and sanctity are united in the figures of the children, as the Stevensian witness, ruminating upon his 'bench as catalepsy,' is propelled to aggrandizement by his reverence for the discrete reality towards which he feels a kind of emboldened insight. The closing vision also sustains the motif of centrality, as the circling children become the circumference of the erotic muse. And by the

end of the poem, the desired has come to represent the hallowed core of the imagination itself, the mystical hub of Stevens' aesthetic revolutions.

In "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," Stevens adumbrates a landscape that he is confident no reader will have seen. A polarity is established between the mystique which involves both the river and the pedagogical speaker on the one hand, and, on the other, the passive addressee's innocence with regard to the mythic body of water and the subtle processes of its attainment. This latter aspect modulates in the second half of the poem into a tutelary episode, where the speaker ceases his evocation of the gloom of the river's locale and speaks more in terms of potential access. The first three verses speak of the 'great river' as an entirely elusive legend. The descriptions partake of a folktale-like sensationalism and ambiguity, with the speaker adopting the role of a sagacious guide announcing a forbidden realm.

There is a great river this side of Stygia,
Before one comes to the first black cataracts
And trees that lack the intelligence of trees.

In that river, far this side of Stygia,
The mere flowing of the water is a gayety,
Flashing and flashing in the sun. On its banks,

No shadow walks. The river is fateful,
Like the last one. But there is no ferryman.
He could not bend against its propelling force. (CP533)

These, the first three verses of the poem, are negatively detailed. An unhappy history of previous travellers is suggested. We might picture Browning's Childe Harold negotiating a dubious hearsay of weird landmarks, seeking the unnerving particulars of 'Before one comes to the first black cataracts / And the trees that lack the intelligence of trees.' What seems important here is the threatening aspect of the river-quest. The ferryman, it is said, would fail to conduct his metaphysical trade, thereby creating for the reader a significant 'moment of suspicion.'²⁶ Further, no shadow, however daemonic, could survey the river's banks. It seems that the speaker's difficulty in conveying a clear visual of the great river partakes of this disruption of mythical lineaments. Charon and the Styx are both invoked and then retracted as

²⁶ Beverly Maeder, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*, p. 204.

insufficient images. The first statement of the river's location is amended in the fourth line from 'this side' to 'far this side of Stygia.' The change is slight, but the sense of obfuscation is sustained in the disqualification of Charon from the tableau, and, at a tonal level, this shift perpetuates the integral sense of the reader's inability to know the river. In this way, the enthusiasm of: 'the mere flowing of the water is a gayety, / Flashing and flashing in the sun' is not affective strictly speaking for its lyricism, but as a mode of description which promotes the covetable nature of the river of rivers.²⁷

The latter three verses of the poem are more optimistic. The mythic insurmountability and indeed the invisibility of the river become modified within a schema of partial circumscription, a movement which permits a more discursive account of the object of desire. The writing now tends more towards a rhetoric of attainment, and Stevens seems to prescribe a means by which his ephebe-reader can condition his own senses for the purpose of beholding the invisible river in all its sublimity.

It is not to be seen beneath the appearances
That tell of it. The steeple at Farmington
Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways.

It is the third commonness with light and air,
A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction . . .
Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing,

Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore
Of each of the senses; call it, again and again,
The river that flows nowhere, like a sea. (CP533)

The resistance or visionary belatedness that was seen in the 'constant secondariness' of "The Green Plant," is present here in what the speaker implicitly identifies as a perceptual ineffectuality in the reader. The reader, it is assumed, is restricted to the circumference of the essential perception of the river by the rationally entrenched beguilement of 'the appearances that tell of it.' Against this condition of impediment and non-centeredness, an abstruse instruction is offered, that the reader might approach a realisation of the river. Firstly, the reader's empiricism is dismissed. Appearances alone will not yield the marrow of the vision. In the next two lines the locality is established in a state of approximate disclosure. Haddam

²⁷ Maeder finds the term 'gayety' an example of 'intellectualised' distance from reality, and thus, at this point in the poem, she argues, 'the metaphorical possibilities of the river are as yet open.' Maeder's overall reading is opposed to my own. She sees the poem as a thematising of 'the cessation of ongoingness.' Of *The Rock* as a whole she writes: "The word-worlds of Stevens' poems of old age envisage within themselves the erasure of their occasion and their origin, the annihilation of their author." *Ibid.*, pp. 202-205.

and Farmington involve now what J. Hillis Miller has called the ‘presentness’ of an ‘evanescent’ participation in being.²⁸ The activities of glistening, shining and swaying, recall the whelming resonance of the trees in “The Region November,” and serve to stabilise the visionary ambition in contrast to the forbidding gestures of the earlier verses. Lines three and four are the most direct statements of the river’s essence in the poem. It is as if the prevaricative movement of the first three stanzas has prompted the question: What goal, what eventuality are we discussing here? Stevens duly puts forward a set of quazi-specifics. The flat statement of ‘The third commonness with light and air’ logically inscribes the category of the reality of the first and second commonnesses with light and air.²⁹ Perhaps it is intended that light and air are these two preceding commonnesses, in which case the river becomes a related element, something of the sky: unconfined, elemental, ethereally flowing, resonant of the Ariel-adept and his transparent, Emersonian poems. To assist our explication here, we can apply again the idea of the rhetoric of initiation. It is clear that this line proposes a challenge, and yet the abstraction is couched in discursive and almost matter-of-fact terms. This construct in Stevens’ poetry, as has been seen repeatedly, often serves to define the instance of the sublime widening of the remit of the poet-percipient’s awareness in terms of a habitual act, and this by an implicit thesis of artistic-temperamental function. Once we accept this signal from Stevens, we can perhaps better reconcile the affective experience of these details with our need to paraphrase them. The vauntedness and the challenge of these abstractions is often their most precise meaning. If the trinity of putative synonyms that comes next, ‘A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction,’ does not meet our readiness for full disclosure, it does not necessarily follow that these protean labels fail to engage the poem’s primary thematic concerns, chief of which in this instance, I would argue, is the theme of a deep habituation to the ineffable, to the central mind of being and its illustriously undetectable river.

The ellipsis that follows the term ‘local abstraction’ seems to support this interpretation. We might say that the compression of the thirteenth and fourteenth lines is discontinued. Pre-empting the reader’s suspension in metaphoric possibilities, Stevens turns to an increased pedagogic mode, gesturing more hopefully towards a clarification. If this

²⁸ J. Hillis Miller, “Wallace Stevens’ Poetry of Being,” in Frank Doggett, ed., *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*. Princeton: 1980, p. 159.

²⁹ Helen Vendler and Beverly Maeder have related this line to what Maeder terms ‘sense pleasure.’ Both critics see a connection to the epigraph of the *Harmonium* poem “Evening Without Angels,” which Stevens attributes to Mario Rossi: “The great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking” (CP136). *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire*, p. 76. *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language*, p. 240.

movement is not to be fulfilled in terms of a total disclosure, such as with the luminous, robed titans of sleep and peace from “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” then a solving of impediment will at least be enacted in terms of the related process of visionary ascent. The injunctive ‘Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing’ smacks of a rehearsal of the visionary, a resorting to shamanistic repetitions, to something of a faithful callisthenics of the aspiring mind’s eye. Desist yet again from fixity, the reader is urged. Practice the subtlest enunciation. And by thus pronouncing the unnameable, ‘inside of one’s tongue,’ as it was prescribed in “On the Way to the Bus,” in this specialised mode of conjuring the river of rivers, Stevens seems to promise that we will come closer to a divination of his Connecticut grail. In the closing stanza, the river approximates palpability. As long as we remain in the sensational moral of the chant, as long we are disposed to ‘call it, again and again,’ then perhaps we can earn a glimpse of true being, a fateful intuition of the paradoxical Styx such as the final verse proposes: a revelatory river,

Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore
Of each of the senses. (CP533)

In Canto One of “Two Illustrations That the World is What you Make of it,” Stevens depicts another of his non-descript figures of extraordinary sensibility achieving a state of emotive communion with the weather. At the close of the canto he qualifies the sensory intensities of his protagonist as relating to ‘a Sunday’s violent idleness.’ Idleness here reincorporates the trope of sleep, the familiar sense of an aesthetically potent languor and absorption. The putative violence of this idle meditation returns us to the ‘savage transparency’ of “The Pediment of Appearance” and to the ‘barbarous’ suchness of “The Green Plant.” The term also relates to concepts of poetic realisation. In “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” we find the image of a maturing author approaching the fruition of his labours and experiments. Here Stevens employs the idea of a temperamental ‘desire’ as an aspect of the poet’s obligation to succeed:

Having made an election, he will be faithful to the election he has made.
Having elected to exercise his power to the full and at its height, and having identified his power as the power of the imagination, he may begin its exercise by studying it in exercise and proceed little by little, as he becomes his own master, to those violences which are the maturity of his desires. (NA63-64)

Similarly, in the short prose piece, “John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean,” written for the *Sewanee Review* in 1948, Stevens discussed the intensity of an engagement with poetry, ‘an

affair of fundamental life' as it occurs 'in one's last poems,' as being 'like a ferocity toward a land that one loves' (CPP819-821). Six years earlier, he had written to his friend Henry Church: 'The belief in poetry is a magnificent fury or it is nothing at all' (L446). And in the first part of his "Two Prefaces," researched and written in tandem with the poetry of *The Rock* for an edition of Paul Valéry's *Dialogues*, a work that he appreciated most for what he found in it 'the parable of the artist,' Stevens quotes Valéry's purple account of the goddess Athitke: 'She breathes boundless energy, while she participates with all her being in the pure and immediate violence of extreme felicity' (CPP884). We can legitimately surmise that the *Dialogues*, which Stevens read so closely between 1953 and 1954, prompted a new interest in the synecdochical possibilities of the concept of an aesthetic violence. The other examples I have cited here help us to appreciate Stevens' idea of a vigorous realisation. Bearing these several related connotations in mind, we can now approach the first canto of "Two Illustrations" with a preliminary clarification of the meaning of the 'violent idleness' that is said to underpin the protagonist's perceptual achievements.

The poem begins with a provocative spatial anomaly, thereby announcing the presence of the quester's 'logic of metaphor.' In the opening lines, we also meet with a mood of truncation, something, in the manner of Stevens' reflexive negativity as already identified in "The Rock" and "The Green Plant." The greater part of the poem steadily revises this position:

The sky seemed so small that winter day,
A dirty light on a lifeless world,
Contracted like a withered stick. (CP513)

From the enigmatic condition of seeming in the first line, which recalls the experimental paradigm of "Description without Place," a dramatic 'probing of appearance' and a deepening poetic access ensues. The fluency of the sequence and its sense of empowered resolution constitute another example of Stevens' aggrandizement of poetic power. Commencing with two indices of poetic desire, 'sense' and 'knowledge,' the protagonist advances, almost without effort or volition, into a dramatic state of communion with the gusting sky. The second and third verses propose a partial explanation of the 'inner position' that facilitates this opportunity of vaulting at the sublime. A revision of the element of impediment from the first stanza has already begun in these lines:

It was not the shadow of cloud and cold,
But a sense of the distance of the sun –
The shadow of a sense of his own,

A knowledge that the actual day
Was so much less. (CP513)

The delicately qualified minutiae of these descriptions are the native sense data of the Stevensian percipient. Central here is the protagonist's stylised epistemology, his 'sense' of the elements. His ability to subtilize and probe, we can observe, has effected an inchoate gravitation towards a mode of greater disclosure. The structured seeming of the reality of the wind, possessed by the protagonist's prodigious gaze, results in an effusive play of both visible and invisible phenomena, an empowered beholding and decoding of the surface of the wind. As the poem progresses, this mode of sensibility proves sufficient for the accessing of a transcendent identity.

... Only the wind
seemed large and loud and high and strong.

And as he thought within the thought
Of the wind, not knowing that that thought
Was not his thought, nor anyone's,

The appropriate image of himself,
So formed, became himself and he breathed
The breath of another nature as his own,

But only its momentary breath,
Outside of and beyond the dirty light,
That never could be animal,

A nature still without a shape,
Except his own – perhaps, his own
In a Sunday's violent idleness. (CP513-14)

Relatedly, in "Two Prefaces," Stevens quotes from Valery's dialogue *Eupalinos*. Socrates is explaining to Phadreas what Stevens goes on to paraphrase as a 'source of reflections':

I was going I know not whither, overflowing with life, half-intoxicated by my youth. The air, deliciously rude and pure pressing against my face and limbs, confronted me –an impalpable hero that I must vanquish in order to advance. And this resistance, ever overcome, made of me, too, at every step an imaginary hero, victorious over the wind, and rich in energies that were ever reborn, ever equal to the power of the invisible adversary [.] That is just what youth is. I trod firmly the winding beach, beaten and hardened by the waves. All things around me were simple and pure: the sky, the sand, the water. (CPP880)

The effect of the percipient's own poetic mechanism, his own nature, in the above excerpt from "Two Illustrations," is a grade of aesthetic experience which, in the meditation of the 'invisible adversary' of the wind, serves, in the words of Hart Crane, to 'engross the total faculties of the spectator.'³⁰ As the heroic, imaginatively endowed spectator of the wind, Stevens' protagonist becomes assimilated into the spectacle itself. Sustained there by a discrete equilibrium of knowing and unknowing, the poem recounts his ascent through what amounts, in Valery's terms, to a vanquishment of psychic limitation. Perhaps what is most evidenced by the progression is the sense of an exquisite release and change. As the mind of the protagonist enters the momentous ineffability of the wind, an augmenting reformulation of his sense of self occurs:

The appropriate image of himself,
So formed, became himself and he breathed
The breath of another nature as his own. (CP513)

This new aptness of consciousness circumscribes the progress towards a form of sky-minded identity. The emphasis on breathing here, as was the case in "The Owl and the Sarcophagus," functions as an index both of higher cognition and creative centeredness. The protagonist's continual gravitation into primary awareness registers the basic corporeal activities of inhaling and exhaling as part of a meditated unity of presence. That the breath becomes the essential lineament of experience itself further serves the poem's theoretical movement towards a dramatic marriage of the poet-percipient, the breathing subject, with the breath of the contemplated sky, the wind as breathing object.

In the second canto of "Two Illustrations," Stevens sustains the treatment of 'the power to transform.' The opening and the conclusion of the canto reflect both the cognitive extremity that is involved and the notion that posterity may not contain the substance of the vision. These are the opening couplets:

He left half a shoulder and half a head
To recognise him in after time.

These marbles lay weathering in the grass
When the summer was over, when the change

³⁰ Hart Crane, "General Aims and Theories," in James Scully, ed., *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, p. 165.

Of summer and of the sun, the life
 Of summer and of the sun, were gone. (CP514)

Following a sequence of five couplets where, in a vatic beholding of 'sensuous summer,' the protagonist becoming 'master of the spruce,' the poem concludes with the following:

The master of the spruce, himself,
 Became transformed. But his mastery

Left only the fragments found in the grass,
 From his project, as finally magnified. (CP515)

I suggest that "The Planet on the Table" offers us the best means of interpreting these two sections of "Two Illustrations." As I said of that poem, Stevens can be read as communicating a sophisticated brand of humility which, in the face of the physical object of the *Collected Poems*, claims: 'It was not important that they survive.' I have argued that Stevens, at this stage of his career, had begun to look beyond literature, feeling more concerned with the personal and spiritual effects of 'the experience of poetry' (CPP904). The thought of the poems that he said he did not have the strength to write, and his long-cultivated relationship with a power within the mind over the mind itself, the enlightening 'paramour' of the poetic temperament actualised, were, at this stage, as he seems to say in "Two Illustrations," acting upon him transformatively. A mood of speculative detachment and reconciliation, in a time of real public success, was predominant for Stevens over any sense of triumph. In the above quote, the master, in an experience of continual ascent and increasing vision, appears separate from the literary manifestations of his mastery. The poems are, as fragments, mere intimations of an extra-literary whole, something intuitively broached by the ranging temperament which may well remain incommunicable. The recognition of 'after time' will come, Stevens seems to acknowledge. Critical acclaim, with its myopic generosity, will bear witness to the corpus. And yet the experiential transcendence of having unified himself with natural process, as a life in consort with 'the change of summer and the sun,' as in "Two Illustrations," or the Wordsworthian confidence of 'his self and the sun' and his poems being one, as in "The Planet on the Table," or indeed the various other extreme transformations of his poetic quest (most significant, perhaps the treatment of death as divination in "The Owl and the Sarcophagus"); these realisations, and the further scope they imply, appear now to their mystic author, at best, as fragments.

What, we might ask, is the substance of this judgement on Stevens' part? I think that it relates to his authenticity as a poet. For Stevens, the project of poetry pertains to a genuine advancing of the mind, to an experiential and utterly invested effort of belief and transformation. Poetry, in this way, is both a tool and a ground of potential mental furtherance, a means of habituation to the unknown. Perhaps we should not be surprised when, in some of Stevens' final work, the poem as text is deemed secondary to the true quotient of transformative acumen it helps to engender. In "Two Illustrations" we find:

He had said that everything possessed
the power to transform itself, or else,

And what meant more, to be transformed. (CP514)

"Prologues to What is Possible" can be read as an exploration of the experience of the transformation of subjectivity by poetry. It begins with the familiar meditative condition of Stevensesan susceptibility: 'There was an ease of the mind.'³¹ From this vantage point of epistemological readiness, the poem evolves a process of ascent through several modes of provisional selfhood, each formulation yielding to the next and higher position in the approach to an ultimate apperceptual structure. By employing a rhetoric of exertion to convey the condition of masterful transformation, Stevens bolsters the sense of the esoteric quality of each position on the ascent. In the second canto of the poem this mode leads to the evocative statement: 'The metaphor stirred his fear.' In the first verse of Canto One, an emphasis is placed upon the protagonist's empowered consciousness and the fluent momentum of the provisional selfhoods through which he ascends.

There was an ease of the mind that was like being alone in a boat at sea,
A boat carried forward by waves resembling the bright backs of rowers,
Gripping their oars, as if they were sure of the way to their destination,
Bending over and pulling themselves erect on the wooden handles,
Wet with water and sparkling in the one-ness of their motion. (CP515)

In these lines, in addition to the primary simile of the boat, which represents the central subject of interiority, the empowered 'ease' of the protagonist's mind, Stevens includes a

³¹ Relating this line to 'How easily the blown banners change to wings' from "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," Frank Kermode has written: 'Somehow it has become easy to find heaven in poverty's speech ... The voyager easily passes into the unfamiliar – into death – as if it were the known. I do not mean that for Stevens this step is always easy, only that there is a kind of comfortable grace in some of his accounts of the threshold, an absence of what might be called, after Heidegger, care.' "Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut," in *Pieces of My Mind: Writings 1958-2002*, p. 151.

second and then a third simile, establishing a tight sequence of modified abstractions. The hypothetical boat is carried forward by waves that bear a resemblance to the backs of rowers. The rowers in turn possess a figurative demeanour that evokes only a semblance of certainty, a pseudo-confidence with respect to their destination. Provisionality, then, is the key to these descriptions, conveying a process of transformation from one state of contemplative power to another. In the second verse, the boat, as the vessel of poetic perception, proves efficacious by virtue of its altered properties:

The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and being no longer heavy
Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin,
So that he that stood up in the boat leaning and looking before him
Did not pass like someone voyaging out of and beyond the familiar. (CP515)

At issue here is the protagonist's level of susceptibility, what Stevens would call the position of his mind. The modification of the boat, its transcendental design, its rendering into lustre and improbable buoyancy, relate to an initiative that precedes the current drama of transformation. This implied precedent of poetic effort, 'the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems' (CP442), as it is known in "A Primitive Like an Orb," facilitates the essentially vatic demeanour of the voyager, 'he that stood up in the boat.' As a figure of heroic poise, something like a beacon of imaginative onwardness, the voyager's true advancement is interior. He may not have passed 'like someone voyaging out of and beyond the familiar,' he may not have resembled Ulysses, but in fact, and the syntax urges this reading, such glorious intensity is precisely what was occurring for the protagonist.

This process is a departure from 'the familiar,' from the communal and the communicable, and yet, viewed symbolically, and staged as a voyage with a visible boat and an ocean to be epically traversed, it seems almost realistic, almost an historical action. The boat, as a prologue to the beyond that is possible for the poet, is something of a concession to the discursive requirements of the poem as textual object, and yet, such is Stevens' will to final transformations, no serious fidelity to this construct exists. It is expected, we are told late in the first canto, that the ultimate 'meaning,' the 'point of central arrival,' as he enters it, 'would shatter the boat and leave the oarsmen quiet' (CP516). In that 'center' of ultimate realisation that the poet approaches by the 'appointed sureness' of his temperamental obligation, the irrational linguistic vocation of being 'lured on by a syllable without any meaning,' a nonetheless faithful intimation of something 'behind the symbols' (CPP464), the

voyager, privileging one sense of the term *craft* for another, finds himself in the beyond that eclipses the provisional selfhood of the boat. In this higher condition, an intense detachment indicates the zeal of the onwardness in question. At the end of the first canto of “Prologues to What is Possible,” the thesis of possibility is fore-grounded, the boat is no more, even the paradigm of the voyage has been abandoned. The cold and passionate Ulysses stands ‘Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none’ (CP516).

The first verse of the second canto re-assumes the austerity of this transformation. The meta-voyage is now conducted in an inhuman realm where fear and anxiety are the initial symptoms of the intensified effort to annex the beyond. In order to stabilise this hyperbolic edifice of abstraction, some new postulate of identity is required, some improvised semblance of experience or familiarity. To this end, as the poem develops, Stevens’ protagonist negotiates the trusted foothold of resemblance. From a moment of hesitation where he worries that ‘likeness of / him extended / only a little way,’ implying the defeat of selfhood by the utterly unknowable, the protagonist benefits from the Stevensesan iconography of transcendental adeptness, hoisting himself by the aid of an incorporation of the imaginative greenness of summer, and the tool of speculative sleep. He is said then to attain

... The enclosures of hypotheses
On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep. (CP516)

At this point the mode of struggle is discontinued. The protagonist musters the composure to sing a sense of still further inner resources. ‘What self, for example, did he contain,’ Stevens asks with renewed aesthetic ambition, a self:

That had not yet been loosed,
Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,
As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased. (CP516-17)

These lines are a return to the credo of the temperament. The ‘hereditary lights’ are his innate ability to meet the tasks of speculation in ‘high poetry.’ Returned from a phase of extreme seeking, the ‘inner position’ is discovered anew, looking forward continually to the possibility of visionary advancement, to the ‘discovery’ of a profound self-reliance. The least intimation can trigger the welcome flood of aesthetic confidence. Even a ‘flick’ of light or change can rejuvenate the project, an inspiration that comes, as he says in the final lines of the poem,

The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the south,
The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,

Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes. (CP517)

Of all Stevens' last poems, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" returns most to the theme of the realisation of the poetic temperament as it was explored in "The Auroras of Autumn." In this poem, a putative eulogy for the philosopher George Santayana, we find so much of Stevens' own idiosyncratic thinking about his own experience of poetry, that it is tempting to dismiss any influence of an external occasion for the poem's composition. The primary subject of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" is an elaborate condition of sensitivity which meets the onset of death not with fear or with a sense of loss, but with the fullness of the poetic mechanism: a probing power of intuition, a heightened verbal capacity, the essential 'need' of continued questing, the empowered perceptual apparatus which allows the dying protagonist to read his surroundings as a field of continually meaningful possibility and 'reverberation.' And ultimately, an appeal to a broader scope of reality and mind, the transcendental bias which interprets mental activity in terms which look beyond symbolic representation. I will address now some of the numerous ways in which "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" can be seen to involve Stevens' own aesthetic precedents, and also to consider where the poem belongs in relation to the rest of *The Rock* and the terms in which I have been reading it in this chapter.

The poem begins with a sense of visionary process. It is telling that in the second and third verses the term 'beyond' occurs three times, and that in the first four verses the verb-form 'become' occurs four times. This 'majestic movement' of becoming, as it termed in the first verse, is attributed throughout the poem to the subject's ability to see grandly and to reconcile the perspective of earth with the perspective of heaven. The death context has prompted the cognitive vanguard of 'the threshold of heaven,' and, as fulfils Stevens' conception of the amoral autonomy of the poetic temperament, the first verse regards municipal Rome as a place of unorthodox epiphany.

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absoluton and an end- (CP508)

'The distances of space' conveys the enhanced proportionality of the ideal artistic gaze. The vision commands the process of the men's receding as a matter of the approach of death but

also a matter of the transfiguration of the quotidian scene. ‘The distances of space’ involves the subjective plenum of the broadening circumference of awareness. Thus the setting is replete with multitudinous location and potential. Within Santayana’s heightened grasp of reality, space is perceived as an element in itself, a somehow physical presence, which is known overtly as opposed to its normative status which would see space as a given. In this way, Stevens proposes the abstract in an experiential mode. The singing of the infinitely receding men communicates the imminent end of life and, from the special perspective of the poem, the resonance of release therein. The ‘unintelligible absolution’ recalls “The Hermitage at the Center,” where, as a matter of the poet-percipient’s progress towards disclosure, the birds in the park were seen to ‘substitute ... / Their intelligible twittering / For unintelligible thought.’ In one respect, then, the term unintelligible signifies for Stevens a release into the integrative capacities of instinct. ‘Unintelligible absolution’ also proposes a tendentious undercutting of the poem’s implicit pieties, and a tempering of the transcendental vision against a fully traditionally religious framework. This interpretation returns us to the previously mentioned *Harmonium* poem “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman.” The unintelligibility of the absolution retains that which might signify the exploratory and individual reality of humanism. The life of the imagination would sooner separate the dogmatic from the sacramental. Of that poem, Joseph Carroll has written:

The imputation that religious vision derives from a sublimated hedonistic aestheticism would, no doubt, ‘make widows wince,’ and Stevens amuses himself at the spectacle of their supposed perturbation. ‘But fictive things / Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.’³²

By mitigating the image of absolution with the unresolved opacities of imaginative questing, or indeed by implying a sense of garbled misguidance in the orthodox perspective, Stevens seems to seek for his poem a moment of immunity from the delusional religiosity of being one of the ‘windy citherns hankering for hymns’ (CP59) that he had mocked at the beginning of his career. And in ‘unintelligible absolution’ we can perhaps hear a reiteration from that same early poem: ‘Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame’ (CP59).

The second, third, and fourth verses, present a dense evocation of both the energy and substance of the poem’s visionary mode.

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.

³² Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, p. 56.

It is as if in a human dignity
 Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
 Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

How easily the blown banners change to wings . . .
 Things dark on the horizons of perception,
 Become accompaniments of fortune, but
 Of the fortunes of the spirit, beyond the eye,
 Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
 The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
 Of the unknown. The newsboy's muttering
 Becomes another murmuring; the smell
 Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled . . . (CP508)

In the second verse, the terms of 'the make of the mind,' 'human dignity' and 'perspective,' are synonymous explanations for the power that in the third verse prompts the exclamatory comment on the fluency of the mode of 'becoming': 'How easily the blown banners change to wings.' The mind in question has attained a synthesis of the two Romes, the physical and the metaphysical, and views the two in a flourished unity. It is implied that the transcendental parallelism is a form of knowledge that is attained as the human realisation of latent capacity. By communing with the abstract fullness of 'human dignity,' the perspective of the whole is disclosed, where men are not islands of mortality, but rather a 'part' of an invisible structure. Thus are men known as continuous and pervasive creatures of essence, 'in the inch and in the mile.' This conception of vision as a matter of dignity or a fundamental humanity realised, is complemented by a section of another of Stevens' final poems not included in *The Rock*. In "The Sail of Ulysses," Stevens explores the idea of knowledge as an aspect of being, and the possibility of a commensurate fulfilment of both. The epigraph to the poem contains the following pronouncement attributed to Ulysses, Stevens' 'symbol of the seeker': "*As I know, I am and have / The right to be*" (CPP462). This statement is the key to the rest of the poem where Ulysses is portrayed in a nocturnal condition of central selfhood, dreaming of a grand integration of mind and being. The second verse provides a useful gloss for "To an Old Philosopher in Rome":

There is a human loneliness;
 A part of space and a part of solitude,
 In which knowledge cannot be denied,
 In which nothing of knowledge fails,

The luminous companion, the hand,
 The fortifying arm, the profound
 Response, the completely answering voice,
 That which is more than anything else
 The right within us and about us,
 Joined, the triumphant vigor, felt,
 The inner direction on which we depend,
 That which keeps us the little that we are,
 The aid of greatness to be and the force. (CPP463)

This location within the mind, the humanistic-theosophical 'self of selves' which applies the vital force of existence to the project of epistemology, conceiving an organic and vitalistic symmetry of the two, translates easily into the terms of the apotheosis of the artist that we find in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome." There the perspective of a dignity, or fullest self-possession, is the axis of vision which matches the axis of things,³³ and thus produces the sumptuous, divinatory alliance of 'The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme / of the unknown.' On his deathbed, Santayana ponders his immediate environment through 'the completely answering voice' within him, and doing away with, as Carroll has said, 'all sense of the problematic,'³⁴ he achieves a grand synthetic structure that serves the need, and also presumably the right, for an expansive understanding of existence.

'The fortifying arm,' that vigorous intuitive state which ensures that 'nothing of knowledge fails' is present in the third verse of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," when the outermost circumference of human perception, with its unknowable darkness, is annexed within the motif of becoming. We might recall here another statement from Stevens' *Adagia*: 'One has a sensibility range beyond which nothing really exists for one. And in each this is different' (CPP902). Stevens extends this notion here to encompass the extension of the individual range as part of an influx of elucidation before death: 'Things dark on the horizons of perception, / Become accompaniments of fortune.' In this way, an antipodal aspect of being, the 'life beyond this present knowing, / A life lighter than this present splendour / ... Not to be reached but to be known' (CPP464), becomes amenable to the poet-percipient. The spirit, then, assumes the agency of the eye, drawing to it phenomena 'not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond.' It is both a 'fortune' of insight and a fortunate (in the sense of providential) process that 'accompanies' the rapture of the poet-percipient here. These concepts are the

³³ This is a phrase from Harold Bloom which he uses in a chapter entitled "The Native Strain: American Orphism," in *Figures of Capable Imagination*, New York: 1976.

³⁴ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, p. 118.

substance of the theme of the quickening of sensibility that underlies the remainder of the poem.

In the fifth and sixth verses, Stevens explores the specific activity of Santayana's gaze upon the empirical details of his bedroom in the convent. The rudimentary 'The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,' are viewed as part of an imminent breakthrough of vision. The sense of a prologue is employed again here, but on this occasion the possible in question is the more explicitly aggrandized 'the celestial possible.'

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,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.
Speak to your pillow as if it was yourself.
Be orator but with an accurate tongue
And without eloquence, O, half-asleep,
Of the pity that is the memorial of this room. (CP508-09)

Central here is the sense of the protagonist's languid sifting of powerful impressions. In this way the declining life-force is not construed as a reduction of aesthetic adeptness. On the contrary, Santayana remains the capable agent of transfigurations. He is, as is said in the final verse, 'an inquisitor of structures' capable of exquisite insights. Blending certain suggestive forms of blindness, where the candle becomes indistinct and the impression of bed and books wanes into 'a confusion,' with the unifying acumen that beholds the emanatory structure of the archetypal holy city, Santayana finds a specialised happiness and succour in the resonance of his abstracted bedroom.³⁵

³⁵ David LaGuardia, arguing for the theme of reduction in this poem as part of what he sees as Stevens' concern with 'pragmatic existence' in line with the philosophy of William James, reads the term 'confusion' as an index for an overall bleakness in 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome.' He says: "Himself growing smaller and smaller in the vicissitudes of living, the old philosopher has regressed to a mere 'shadow of shape / In a confusion on bed.' He is a pitiable remnant of man who for consolation must 'speak to [his] pillow as if it was [himself]' and who can locate the grandeur he deserves only 'In so much misery.' Nowhere else in his poetry does Stevens portray

Rome is contained in his mind as ‘A shape within the ancient circles of shapes.’ From this seemingly absolute image, a further hierarchical extension is made. The ancient circles of shapes are said to lie ‘beneath’ a greater shape, whose ‘shadow’ is said to loom above the scene. All of the details of the sixth verse involve this ultimate presence. As an aspect of this shadow’s eminence, the ‘confusion,’ the ‘portent’ on the chair, the ‘moving transparence on the nuns’ and the subtly tautological sense of ‘[a] light on the candle tearing against the wick,’ are all gravitating towards what soon becomes a ‘hovering excellence.’ The theme of ascent is contained most strikingly here in the assumed will of these inanimate and insubstantial forms ‘to escape / From fire and be part only of that which / Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.’ Stevens was to reiterate these lines in the conclusion of the fifth canto of “The Sail of Ulysses”:

Each man
Is an approach to the vigilance
In which the litter of truths becomes
A whole, the day on which the last star
Has been counted, the genealogy
Of gods and men destroyed, the right
To know established as the right to be.
The ancient symbols will be nothing then.
We shall have gone behind the symbols
To that which they symbolised, away
From the rumors of the speech-full domes
To the chatter that is then the true legend,
Like glitter ascended into fire. (CPP464)

We meet in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” the same process of a symbolic order being superseded by a greater access of sanctity, but in the *Rock* poem we get more of Stevens’ thinking on the individual basis of the final enlargement.³⁶ The injunction directly after the important term ‘celestial possible’ in the seventh verse, returns the poem’s emphasis on the mental and sensory apparatus that makes Santayana a worthy locus for Stevens’ apotheosis of

the heroic self in such absolutely diminutive circumstance.” *Advance on Chaos: The Sanctifying Imagination of Wallace Stevens*. London: 1983, p. 166.

³⁶ Charles Berger sees a strong distinction between “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” and “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.” Referring to the lines in the sixth verse of the later poem which begin ‘the light on the candle tearing’, he says: “The corresponding moment in “The Owl” is pitched in a higher rhetorical key, appropriate to the poetic quester nearing a state of identity with ultimate intellect; here, any possible identification is distanced by dependency upon the poetic trope, beautifully and exactly rendered, of the candle. This candle though will not be hypostasised into ‘a king as candle by our beds.’” *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Wisconsin: 1985, p. 136. My own explication of the presence of Stevens’ thinking on the poetic temperament in “To an Old Philosopher” reads these two poems as being closer together in tone and scope.

the poetic temperament. ‘Speak to your pillow as if it was yourself’ represents a concrete conflation of Stevens’ own discrete and long-held thinking about poetry with the biographical occasion of the death of Santayana, who at that time lay, as Stevens described it,

in the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent,
and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make
any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher.
(NA148)

The aesthetic component of poems such as “The Men that are Falling,” “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” “Chocorua to its Neighbour,” “The World as Meditation” and “The Well Dressed Man With a Beard,” are present in the reference to the abstract function of the pillow in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.” In “The Well Dressed Man,” the significance of this trope is most clearly summed up. In that poem, Stevens enumerates the triumphs of the imagination which meet with the negating force of contemporaneous reality. The retention of the least, the most subliminal aspect of romantic affirmation, he says, ‘even no greater than a cricket’s horn,’ may be sufficient to extend the tradition of high poetry. ‘After the final no there comes a yes’ (CP247) is the poem’s opening line. At the conclusion, romantic belief and affirmation, so prone in Stevens’ view to being ‘rejected,’ by virtue of their endurance in the individual poet, are conceived as a ‘honey in the heart, / Green in the body.’ This leads to a grand impression of poetic cogitation:

The form on the pillow humming while one sleeps,
The aureole above the humming house ... (CP247)

The seventh verse of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” exhorts Santayana to participate in this Stevensean rite of artistic authenticity and power. By engaging the intimate visionary potential of the pillow, as is also done by both Penelope in “The World as Meditation,” and the ambivalent wartime poet of “The Men that are Falling,” Santayana will remain the apposite embodiment of Stevens’ own poetic theory. ‘Half-asleep,’ he will have entered a trusted intellectual vantage point, from where the rich peculiarity of his verbal music will serve to edify his audience. Stevens moves in this direction by reacting to the image of Santayana engaged in ‘loftiest’ (CP510) speech with a sense of subservience and gratitude. The old relationship of the needy and susceptible audience to the oratorical and adept artist is reformed here, and he portrays the exchange of the understated help at living one’s life, which is the closest to a social function for poetry to which he ever came. The first four lines of the

eighth verse detail the ideal boon for the poetic readership. 'We' reap the 'illuminated large,' finding ourselves endowed with the scope of the poet-percipient's meditations, our own subjectivity being amplified, 'so that each of us / Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice / In yours.' That Santayana performs so powerfully this office is the reason he is addressed as 'master and commiserable man,' and Stevens now moves from the imagery of the benefit to the recipients of Santayana's creativity, back to the psychic profundity that underpins his artistic power. The line that follows the apostrophic 'master and commiserable man' reverts to a detailing of the meditative activity, the poet's 'sense of the world' which has prompted the supplicating mode.

So that we feel, in this illumined large,
The veritable small, so that each of us
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
In yours, master and commiserable man,
Intent on your particles of nether-do,

Your dozing in the depths of wakefulness,
In the warmth of your bed, at the edge of your chair, alive
Yet living in two worlds, impenitent
As to one, and, as to one, most penitent,
Impatient for the grandeur that you need. (CP509)

The familiar Stevensesan value of creative entrancement is present here in the word choice 'intent.' Santayana is granted here the 'indirect egotism' (NA46), the honourable solipsism of the vocational aspect of poetry. The tropic weight of impatience and need as aspects of an aesthetic grandeur that is pursued doggedly within a unique 'sense of the world', resonates with Stevens' determined reifying of the poetic temperament. At the close of his career, we can be sure, such concerns still provided the possibility of transcendent disclosures of reality. Of the enduring function of authentic poets, Stevens had written in 1948 in the essay "Effects of Analogy":

Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life liveable in that transcendence. It is a transcendence achieved by the minor effects of figurations and the major effects of the poet's sense of the world and of the motive music of his poems and it is the imaginative dynamism of all these analogies together. Thus poetry becomes a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense. (NA130)

In *The Rock*, and Stevens' other last poems, we have a poetry which remains largely concerned with a lived transcendence. Stevens, we can be sure, managed in the closing years of his life to sustain his powerful 'sense of the world,' employing his profound vision, up to his death, as a means of continued transport beyond limitation. We might ascribe to him the affirmation in demise that he constructed for his own version of Santayana:

... He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realised. (CP511)

Conclusion

A Spiritual Metabolism?

Can we make practical use of Stevens' conviction that there is 'a power over the mind that lies in the mind itself'? (CPP878) Can we reconstruct in the technological, simulacra-privileging light of postmodernism, such a perennial inquiry as to whether there can be anything like an experiential advancement into higher forms of consciousness? Can we legitimately resume the ancient expectation that mind and earth exist in holy consort? Stevens, as a twentieth-century neo-platonist asserting the Yes of mind over the No of history, wrote many great poems which play affirmatively, beautifully and sophisticatedly with these questions. As the record of a quester moving between what he deemed the 'two fixed points of man's life', the self and God, pursuing 'the one poem which is unimpeachably divine, the poem of the ascent into heaven' (CPP859), a quester applying the perceptual and verbal strengths as well as the innate metaphysical gravitations of the poetic temperament to bolster his position on that ascent, Stevens' oeuvre offers his critics the possibility of reconstructing a transcendentalist poetics. So far, however, that possibility is not close to being actualised. The predominant modes of criticism are given primarily to the discoursing of philosophical limitation.

In 1935, with only Stevens' first two collections upon which to base his judgements, Howard Baker expressed his expectation that the bemusement and confusion of many of Stevens' readers would eventually be superseded by an initiation into an understanding of higher consciousness, and, in turn, to the non-discursive meaning of the poetry's surface impersonality. Baker was expecting the then novel conceptions of Carl Jung to effect wide-reaching cultural changes:

We observe that the impersonal and timeless objective is by no means confined to the poetry of Stevens or the thinking of Jung. Consequently it may be necessary to postulate, for the moment at least, an unchanging spiritual world which is independent of the time process, and with which the human

being may come in touch and yet at the same time retain his individuality. Such a world might be said to draw or to pull the individual spirit towards it, and to draw thinking as a whole in the direction of absolutes ... Since Stevens' poetry aims very clearly at an exploration of consciousness, one sees immediately why it has been found difficult by many readers. They have found it difficult because they expected it to do things that it had no intention of doing. But once readers are somewhat acquainted with the outlands of consciousness, the poetry will be clear. Once the modes of thought of the times which produced *Harmonium* are understood, as they will inevitably be understood, then the poetry will be understood.¹

The image of the drawing or pulling of the contemplative writer, an intuitively-known assistance from hypostatic reality, resonates with the lines from the fifth-century Dionysius the Areopagite: 'Goodness draweth all things to Itself and is the Attractive Power which unites things that are sundered.'² We have seen that the condition of ascent in Stevens' later writing involves this idea of attraction in the trope of external intention. It is also present in his expression of an involuntary quality in his creative experience. Baker's prognostications with regard to Stevens' ultimate reception were inaccurate. Jungian concepts do not define our understanding of the intellectual zeitgeist of 1920s and 1930s America. Those who have read Stevens as a transcendentalist have achieved only a minor enclave of idealist criticism. Harold Bloom, it is widely thought, has been extravagant and too vituperative. He has not inspired confidence in his allies. Joseph Carroll's excellent study is rarely cited. William Bevis' *Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature*, with its exploration of the placation of the cortex as a physiological aspect of the 'aconceptual'³ self in the *Collected Poems*, and its challenging 'the kind of detachment that colors some of Stevens' subjects, structures and syntax (colors them white) is simply foreign to our critical awareness and vocabulary',⁴ remains a fringe document. Neither has Frank Kermode's call for readings in the light of Heidegger's ontological aesthetics been taken up, for all of that commentator's esteem among Stevens scholars.⁵

In a short essay entitled "Wallace Stevens and Emerson," published in 1955, the year of Stevens' death, Marius Bewley incisively signalled a new possibility for interpretative

¹ Howard Baker, "Wallace Stevens and Other Poets," *Southern Review*, vol. I, 1935.

² Cited in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, New York: 1973, p. 150. Abrams reads this formulation in the context of Plotinus, his heir Proclus, and their thinking on 'the great circle of being'.

³ William Bevis, *Wallace Stevens, Meditation and Literature*, Pittsburgh: 1988, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵ Frank Kermode, "Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut," in *Pieces of My Mind: Writings: 1958-2002*, pp. 153-158.

practice. And yet, as if the nascent critical ramifications of post-modernity were palpable in the air around him, there is something adversarial in his tone:

Traditional American Transcendentalism is hard to define, but if it stood for anything as a movement, it was for the capacity to apotheosize the soiled pragmatic world, to justify the grubby fact in a higher realm of intuition. Such a transcending process is essentially a motion, a becoming. But it is not necessarily a flight from material reality. It can be an intenser apprehension of life – a kind of spiritual metabolism by which the boundaries of the physical are cancelled, its substance becoming a part of some ultimate central vision that is the highest life. For Stevens the exercise of the creative vision was the means towards achieving this intenser state of being. He never submitted this state to dogmatic definition, but he celebrated it in a great many poems.⁶

These remarks are a bridge forward from Baker's early impressions on the theme of 'the outlands of consciousness', through to Bloom and Carroll. But without a more robust and more prolific contemporary school of thought for transcendentalist poetics, much of the professional reading of Stevens remains in a theoretical detour. A great amount of the necessary vocabulary and structures for this advancement, I hope to have shown here, are entailed in Stevens' own work. I said in the introduction to this thesis that the doctrine of limitations is inhospitable to the idea of the poetic temperament. This has meant that Stevens' belief that 'the poetic nature of any idea depends on the mind through which it passes' (CPP851) has been insufficiently accepted. The category of higher states of consciousness has proved difficult to extricate from the rhetorical pageantry of nineteenth-century literature. The vates seems to mock our plush scepticism. His affirmations prove unwieldy. But Stevens' writing on the poetic temperament offers a means beyond this problem. Paul de Man's phrase, 'allegories of reading', has often been applied to suggest the poet's concern to stall and complicate what are seen as the risks of an outmoded fluency of aesthetic experience. I suggest we treat Stevens' work as the formation of allegories of belonging. Stevens was a great or, perhaps it is worth saying, a true poet. He has bequeathed to us something of the inner, extra-textual life of his creative experience. I have argued that his 'interior paramour' decreed an ontological fruition. This has meant a compulsive movement in Stevens' aesthetics from fact to subtlety, from sight to vision, from reality to being and the 'sense without sense of time' (CP350), from impediment to expansiveness, from unknowing to disclosure, from ego to 'the self of selves' (CP297) and the universal mind.

⁶ Marius Bewley, *Masks and Mirrors: Essays and Criticism*, New York: 1974, p. 272.

What, we should begin to ask now, was the experiential nature of poetry at its most acute for Wallace Stevens? Did he find himself entirely calm, entirely released into existence? Did he feel his mind alert to some more discrete, less temporal, less divided level of selfhood? And for these transformations, these disclosures, did the human condition appear to him more propitious, brighter, more profound? To use a phrase from Frank Kermode, could Stevens' comprehension of death have been augmented in these perspectives? Is there a connection between the poet's interrogation of mystical consciousness and his conviction that 'the great poem of the earth remains to be written' (NA142)? Stevens' later work, I have tried to show, for its passionate, systematic treatments of poetic experience and poetic realisation, indicates that our conjecturing of such esoteric dispositions is valid. We can say that the facts of his potent meditative experience define his relationship to romanticism and his effort to achieve a new romantic. They are the roots of his rhapsody.

By continuing to read Stevens for his logic of artistic power, we advance these insights, we come to know his emotional intensity, his direction, and thereby his final accomplishment. The question as to whether these ideas convey truths about humanity is open. The image of the 'spiritual metabolism' appears strange, difficult and incorporeal. The transcendental terms of Stevens' poetry are not commonplace. They are almost unwelcome. But perhaps, as Baker expected, a critical change of heart is inevitable. Perhaps they will become commonplace. Or perhaps the poetry alone speaks for their potential.

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