# WALLACE STEVENS' "NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION"

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## I

The poetry of Wallace Stevens has been subject to many critical distractions, not the least influential being Yvor Winters' anti-romantic requiem for the "hedonist's progress" toward creative poverty.[1] The decadent exotic whom Winters found in *Harmonium* appears to be the inevitable moral judgment to derive out of the early receptions of that volume, particularly the esthete critiques of Gorham Munson and Llewelyn Powys, which scored Stevens for his dandyism and his pose as the last of the *fin de siècle* connoisseurs.[2] The Stevens "legend" has been prolonged unduly: the avant-garde myth of a shy Jocundus, as perpetuated by the Kreymborg circle, has fitted happily with the image of the overly refined poet in the actuarial marketplace to preface many an essay on the contradictions of being a poet in our time.[3] Even William Van O'Connor, whose book on Stevens is hardly more than an exposition of certain basic "ideas," begins with this "legend," as he calls it, of the reticent lawyer who wrote paradoxically a serious philosophical poetry out of the most exquisite sensual experiences.[4] It is not surprising that those who, like Winters, excoriated his moral ineptitude yet praised the perfection of his early creations (especially "Sunday Morning" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier") were miffed beyond tolerance when the hedonist turned out to be an intellectual —or pretended to be.

If Winters found the poetry of the 1930's, following *Harmonium,* a misappropriation of original talent and an irresponsible dabbling in ideas, he finds the pretensions of the last years a dead end. His recent paperback, *Yvor Winters on Modern Poets,* adds an offhand postscript to the original essay: " . . . his doctrine of Imagination," says Winters, "strikes me as a somewhat limited version of his hedonism, an intellectual excitement engaged in for the sake of excitement, but having no validity." [5] Winters hesitates to recognize the "doctrine" in the early poetry, especially in that he finds to praise. Yet he continues to laud

an occasional excellence, a genius not always perversely forfeited: "The Course of a Particular" he calls "one of the greatest poems in English." But his demur stands as an ideological complement to that of Randall Jarrell and William Carlos Williams,[6] who find the later style and vitality wanting, leaving the body of Stevens' poetry, it seems, to the academics, who thrive on obscurity.

The crucial instances in Stevens' shift to what Winters calls a poetry of "doctrine" are the curious, expansive and occasionally beautiful set of variations called "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and a rhetorical but remarkably eloquent defense of poetry called "Owl's Clover," complementary investigations of an "idea" of "aesthetic order" in the anti-poetic world of the 1930's. The two poems are startling largely because of the place and time of their creation, and their audacity in confronting ideology with poetics, mixing humanism with —what again!—romanticism. With all their eloquence, however, they are fragmentary fumblings, heir to the confusions of their decade and their creator's implausible sense of commitment to an idea alien to the times. That is, they are not exactly separable from their time, though now they must be seen as major efforts in Stevens' deliberate evolution of a style and an idea. He has remarked that the mind never touches the same thing twice—like a Heraclitian step—in the same way, but as a man of one predominant idea he found that each variation was inextricably a part of the previous one. "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) is the major synthesis of his explorations of a new mode, a long, programmatic work that must finally take its place as the central piece in his canon, a poem that is the very epitome of "doctrine" but which is dismissed only at the expense of misplacing the earlier work.

Stevens' inexorable progress away from the poetry of sensation and emotion toward the poetry of reflection should not mask the fact that he was never temperamentally suited to write the lyric of pure experience or the imagistic exercise. The "Grand Poem" which he had conceived in *Harmonium*—he wanted to call that volume "The Grand Poem—Preliminary Minutiae"[7] — seldom afforded him the leisure of an irrelevancy, of a poem that did not elaborate his thesis. The double perspective of experience and commentary which he maintains in "Sunday Morning," "The Comedian as the Letter C," or the concluding section of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" reveals his dominant interest in the process of experience rather than in the pure thing. The woman's indulgent Sunday morning, Crispin's tempestuous voyage in search

of a life and an art, and even the artifice of placing a jar in Tennessee are rhetorical and theoretical at bottom; the almost pure lyrics of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" or "Domination of Black" conceal in sensitive perceptions and impressions the germ of an aesthetic. His poetry about poetry—and most of it is—presumes that vital human experience is inherently poetic, and can be explained as a rhythmically shifting tension between self and world. Poetry proper is only an extension of experience, an intensification and ordering. By the time he came to write "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949, 1950), he could confidently assert that the "theory of poetry" was indeed "the theory of life," or ought to be.

Perhaps no poet, excepting possibly Paul Valéry, has been so self-consciously reflective as Stevens. Few, certainly, who express so singular a passion for the physical world, have concentrated as intensely on the reality of thoughts, ideas, theories. Eliot and Yeats, each in his way compelled by a world without spiritual coordinates, embraced or fabricated coherent structures of order so as to provide themselves with a firm perspective on the ambiguous life of sensation. And each in his manner reveals the habit of self-conscious reflection that is a mark of the modern poet: Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Yeats' very late poems, among others, pursue integrations both moral and aesthetic which require a chastening awareness of the difficulties of communication, and thus make poetic speculations on the viability of poetry itself. But Stevens—despite his unchallenged genius for evoking pure and momentary sensations, the joy of vital motion or the somberness of a diabolical mood, the precious or the bizarre—is an unapologetic devotee of poetic solipsism, for whom poetry is a passion because it is at last the encompassing discipline, the single source of "truth":

> The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. Poets and painters alike today make that assumption and this is what gives them the validity and serious dignity that become them as among those that seek wisdom, seek understanding. . . . It would be tragic not to realize the extent of man's dependence on the arts. The kind of world that might result from too exclusive a dependence on them has been questioned, as if the discipline of the arts was in no sense a moral discipline. (NA 175)[8]

## II

The "supreme fiction" was a part of Stevens' earliest designs, and

perhaps is synonymous with the "Grand Poem." Its first appearance, in the opening line of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (CP 59), is novel and coy, intended to shock as an initial gambit in a one-sided argument. But even there it bears the multiple connotations of Stevens' scepticism: of belief that is both necessary and fictive, and valid only in the sense that a poem is valid, or a myth. By the time he arrived at the exercises published as *Parts of a World* (1942), the idea had crystallized into "one idea," and "final belief," as he adduces in "Asides on the Oboe" (CP 250), "Must be in a fiction." The man-hero or poet of that poem is to become "the transparence of the place" in which he lives, in whose crystalline offerings "we find peace." Poetic vision, however, stops short of the transcendental; if "we and the diamond globe" are one in poetry, if the poet "sums us up," if he stills the nostalgia for the lost faith—the "obsolete fiction of the wide river"—he offers us not visions of a new eternity but a present resolution, including the "central evil, the central good." Stevens' poetry renders illogic; but his propositions are to be accepted not for their truth but because they incite the imagination to action and motivate its miraculous discoveries. The experience of the earlier volumes has borne out his contention that in a secular world only the individual sensibility is left intact, that the remaining metaphysical certainly is an "idea of man" (not God), and that in view of our spiritual demands poetry must be the "supreme fiction."

"Notes," then, culminates Stevens' quest for a secular answer to spiritual problems, and releases his powers to explore the possibilities of his scepticism: the doubt that precedes affirmation, that motivates poetry. Its tripartite outline is no accident, even if it is, as R. P. Blackmur noted in a review, the only "tolerable form of unity."[9] Both Blackmur and Roy Harvey Pearce have commented on Stevens' Socratic temperament, his habit of multiplying distinctions which then engage in an ordered combat directed toward the full experience of an idea.[10] But Stevens' investigations are never undertaken with complete disinterestedness. They reflect the singular concerns of an amateur dialectician, a sophist who has found the texture of his argument more delightful than its impossible conclusion. The tripartite outline of "Notes," of course, is mock dialectic, which lends authenticity to Stevens' ideas, but nevertheless allows him free improvisation on them. His purpose, in short, is to bring ideas to life, to give them vitality in metaphor, parable, in the sound of words, and to set them forth as both poetry and poetic.

The poem is, nonetheless, engaged with final questions. Its title expresses a contradiction which Mr. Blackmur is quite right in saying demands the unity of triplication, and yet triplication can provide only a metaphorical resolution—just as Hegel's scheme becomes a descriptive metaphor for what is essentially an imaginative conception of reality. If belief is a recognized fiction, even supreme, the metaphor in which it is embodied remains partial, a notation of the moment, but only a note. Stevens' dialectic celebrates its own shortcomings, for there is no progressive thesis-antithesis-synthesis but only the one process continuously repeated, coming back always to the invincible presence of the world's otherness and time's destructive impermanence, which are not to be transcended. Thus, the theory (of the interrelation of abstraction and change, imagination and reality, perception and vitality, self and world) is the one permanent reality in a world of flux: the enduring gestalt of life, the comic—the mythic—dance that frames human experience and makes life and poetry one analogous process.

Stevens' search for the supreme contains within it the vestigial remains of that mysticism which inheres in most varieties of romantic quest, though his is best described in terms of Santayana's intuition. Though belief is a necessity residing in the deep springs of the animal spirit, in "Ananke," it must be projected outward from the self, even if in the form of an extra ego. A mark of sophistication is man's search for the reality beneath appearance. Even so sceptical a romantic as Stevens cannot avoid the appeal of an eternal truth, a Lockean substance: "There is inherent in the words *the revelation of reality* a suggestion that there is a reality of or within or beneath the surface of reality" (OP 213). On the other hand, there is the distressing fear similar to that which beset the lady in "Sunday Morning":

> What a ghastly situation it would be if the world of the dead was actually different from the world of the living and, if as life ends, instead of passing to a former Victorian sphere, we passed into a land in which none of our problems had been solved after all, and nothing resembled anything we have ever known and nothing resembled anything else in shape, in color, in sound, in look or otherwise. (NA 76-77)

Stevens, of course, recognizes that all realities are fictions, and that the one truth the poet can discover is not the divine world but its profane *raison d'être:*

There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the

> world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (NA 31)

The poem's three divisions are hypothetical but not altogether arbitrary. As statements, they are synonymous with his familiar antithesis of imagination and reality (perception entailing abstraction; the world's body defined by change), and the metaphorical synthesis which completes the formula, the pleasure of a harmonious sensation. The first third of the poem, "It Must Be Abstract," proposes an essential of the elementary human experience, and an examination of the anxiety of living in a state alien from nature, the life of abstraction. Thus, it is a series of variations on the forms of experience which emerge when the subjective self apprehends the external world, variations which consider distortions as well as the harmonious balances provided by the mind's activity, the clash of reason and imagination, and the ultimate truth that all knowledge is in some way suffused with feeling.

"It Must Change" shifts the emphasis to the non-mental world, or the world outside the self, and thus considers the effects of so-called reality on so-called imagination. Since change is the primary characteristic of the physical world (including the body), and for the poet is ambivalently both its constant and its signet of imperfection, the degree to which change is honored by the self's perceptual images (and the poet's) is consonant with the validity of the experience captured. Change and motion stand in symbolic opposition to death on Stevens' aesthetic scale. As an antithesis to Part One, "It Must Change" consists of ten variations on the way this fundamental process can be contained in abstraction, ordered without violating its integrity and vitality.

"It Must Give Pleasure" emerges from the tension of abstraction and change, not as a predictable synthesis but as a human experience of spiritual cosmos within temporal chaos, the pleasure of unity amid diversity. It is the most difficult section to conceive, for it depends on the renunciation of final belief on the one hand and of uninhibited sensual pleasure on the other. The poet's only resolutions lie in the instances of a tenuous balance when experience becomes metaphor, when the temporal achieves apotheosis in the word. Each such instance is a poem, note, crystal: the supreme fiction, as such, is the hypothetical totality of all notes, the unity that satisfies desire. "Notes" is

the formulated expression of Stevens' "Grand Poem," the poem always becoming but never being. It is a "Poem" which is inconceivable except in those rare moments of psychic and emotional satisfaction dramatized in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (CP 358), where man and world blend in contemplative intercourse. A poem, then, may provide the "supreme" in its efficacious moment.

"Notes" is a lengthy disquisition, controlled almost totally by its dialectical structure. Its 659 lines are neatly balanced in an eight-line lyrical dedication, 30 poems of 21 lines each, and a coda of 21 lines, divided like all the poems into seven tercets. The development is further proportioned to the dialectical form, ten poems to each major part, giving an arbitrary balance to a form which is otherwise cemented by the loose blocks of a theme-and-variation pattern. Stevens does not pursue his dialectical form further than the tripartite divisions. Each poem is an improvisation on the larger motif, with the final poem of each major part tying together the internal variations. There is also a suggestion of deliberate internal counterpoint: the first three poems of each part sketch a general problem, the fourth makes a major summary statement, and the next five present negative and positive variations leading up to the concluding poem. The coda serves to bridge the three sections which, despite the dialectic, are not logically synthesized in the third; and it further satisfies by linking the argument with contemporary reality, chaos, violence.

Each poem may stand separately, although in certain instances, as with the parable of the Canon Aspirin in the third part or the identification of the "MacCullough" and "major man" in Part One, a motif extends through a number of related stanzas. The poem's internal unity is associative and discursive: nevertheless, the assumed 21-line poem-unit is a rare instance of Stevens' accepting the dictates of a set form. His pentameter line casually dissolves into phrasal units, allowing him a maximum of discursive freedom. The style is a maturing extension of that so profitably studied in the earlier "Montrachet-le-Jardin" (CP 260), but the range of stylistic variety, the counterpoint of rhetoric, anecdote, and extreme verbal effect—including instances of rococo chromatics and tonalities that recall *Harmonium*—avoid the excessive severity of artifice found in *Parts of a World.*

The poem brings to perfection another major characteristic of Stevens' style, his use of the parable, fable, or anecdote to embellish and refine the texture of an abstraction; it also reveals the gradual evolution of that style. In *Harmonium* anecdote served as a dramatic base

upon which the poet could comment, or at times embodied the commentary—ironic, rhetorical—on a situation, experience, emotion, or idea. Parable in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is the uncle's device for clarifying his confusion; in "Notes" it is a variation in the poet's rhetoric. In "Sunday Morning" a concrete situation leads to generalization which is in turn expanded by parable; in "Notes" the poet clarifies abstraction with parable, there being no basic situation. The two strategies appear interchangeably in "Owl's Clover" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar," where anecdotal base and general commentary mix with abstract proposition and anecdotal clarification. "Notes" introduces Stevens' major phase, which in its own way is comparable to the later James's involuted self-consciousness. One must face its separate parts with the humility dictated by Frank Kermode, quoting Stevens in apology: "In such a poem 'the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verbality.' Comment puts the 'verbality' back in; the clearer the explanations, the falser they are likely to be. . . . Sometimes what is being explained isn't even fully there; Stevens is always fantastic, and when he creates a nature, as he does in *Notes*, it is shown as if in continuous creation, changing and incomplete, so that an image or an idea may be seen like Milton's lion, pawing to get free his hinder parts." [11] Yet one feels the necessity of restoring some of the "verbality" at the expense of the fantastic, if only to allow the fantastic the opportunity to do its job.

## III

"Notes" opens with a dedication of masculine, intellectual love, introducing an abstract problem which emerges from the contemplation of human intercourse: man alone exists in the "uncertain light of single, certain truth," but exchanges of the spirit bring "peace." The memory of Henry Church is the germ of meditation, the "vivid transparence" of this "wisest man" stimulates the mind to act, not to exercises of logic but to probings of the "central of our being." Love and thought, emotion and idea, imagination and reality, then, are brought together in the meditative moment, setting off the discursive ramble of felt thoughts. *It Must Be Abstract*—Stevens' beginning, to paraphrase Eliot, is in his end. The "first idea" to which he refers the neophyte of thought is the inconceivable ultimate, the sum of sums, which precedes "this invented world" (i). The coming of light, the consciousness of self and of otherness, involves us in abstraction. The poet's "first idea," which in its engulfing absoluteness appears to be what Whitehead calls an "abstraction

from possibility," turns out to be the philosopher's other sense, an "abstraction from actuality,"[12] for it is the idea of the "ignorant man" with an "ignorant eye," the unreflective, non-rational, intuitive feeling of unity within conceived through the world without. The argument is not easily amenable to thought, for thought is the source of concept and thus a violation of reality. The purpose of the initial poem is not to pontificate on the metaphysics of reality but to clear away the preconceptions which deny the truths of the "ignorant man," his purer percepts, and offer the major myth of an "invented world" with an "inventing mind as source." The poet-ephebe begins empirically, in the purity of his eye; seeing, not inventing, is the root of his truth, and is the author of the vital abstraction of "to be" (one should recall that Stevens' early poetry is primarily a visual poetry, more so than a poetry of music): "Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was/ A name for something that never could be named." The old Adam in naming his world violated it. This first poem is like the initial stage in the Cartesian argument for dualistic being, experienced by the romantic spirit as an interruption of cosmic unity. Stevens' "ephebe" awakens to a world in which nature is itself, not an emanation of the divine, and the poet—he calls him elsewhere a "biological mechanism" (NA 120)—is like Santayana's spirit, epiphenomenally of nature.

Poem two, beginning with the nakedness of the pure idea, investigates the origins of absolutes, those "first" ideas of our need. Necessity, the poet adduces, is the mother of imagination:

> It is the celestial ennui of apartments
> That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
> Of this invention.

Stevens' figure is impeccable—"quick" embodies all the emotions of animal spirit and vitality, as well as the pain which motivates our quest for resolutions. What follows is no less penetrating of the severe restrictions on man's truth:

> . . . so poisonous
>
> Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
> The truth itself, the first idea becomes
> The hermit in a poet's metaphors,
>
> Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.

The aesthetic push-pull of perception, between the eye and the object, is analogous to the quest for a "first idea" which is manifest only in abstraction, or metaphor. Thus, men of desire, imaginative seekers of

order, turn of necessity to partial resolutions found in the natural rhythms of earth, whose dumb but vital constancy offers an instance of unity in diversity. The first idea, unassailable and mysterious, is paradoxically found in the world of process. This may be clarified by reference to one of Whitehead's metaphysical speculations, where he asserts that God or the creative principle—an "inventing mind"?—is neither outside the world nor static, but within and active.[13] Thus, a first idea would be both abstract and changing, mirrored in process and therefore a motive for the poet's metaphors, which reflect at once the first idea and its human value.

Having proclaimed metaphor his instrument of truth, the poet proceeds to submit its abstractive powers to analysis (iii). The poem, he proposes, approximates the first idea by imposing a unity upon life's confusions, refreshing the moment in its act of creation. It is thereby a spiritual act, a movement from the concrete toward the unity of the absolute, from the single poem to its innumerable plural. Poem three is an acute example of poetic effects, developing from proposition to evocation, animating the poetic "elixir" which is the mystical thread between actuality and the first idea. The almost surrealistic anecdote of the Arabian suggests the divine nature of a poetry which refines for us the confusions of experience, showing how "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation."

The discovery of poetry's "elixir" brings likewise a revelation in poem four:

> The first idea was not our own. Adam
> In Eden was the father of Descartes
> And Eve made air the mirror of herself . . .

In Stevens' secularization of the Fall, the process of abstraction arose with human consciousness, to be extended by reflective man into the tragedy of alienation. But this consciousness is linked irrevocably to the living earth:

> The clouds preceded us
>
> There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
> There was a myth before the myth began,
> Venerable and articulate and complete.
>
> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
> And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

Significantly, this is a fundamental restatement of his convictions and a rephrasing of the lament for the growing hiatus between man and world in "To the One of Fictive Music," the flaw of consciousness that is bridged by poetry alone. Stevens reiterates Santayana's belief that "All origins lie in the realm of matter."[14] Men are "mimics"; "Clouds are pedagogues." In the tension between the two, we add our "sweeping meanings," creating those metaphors or fictions which we embrace as truths.

The tension is given dramatic body in poem five, in the violent clash of animal and nature. However, this is the cleavage reduced to absolutes, the bare consciousness opposed to bare corporeality. In the poet's world, the agonies of self-reflective man mute his prowess. His free imagination is "cowed" by the marked demands of his world and the sophisticated definitions of reason. If I read this poem correctly, the poet who stands "as sigil and as ward," in the penultimate strophe, finds his restrictive world, the "roofs" which limit his vision, both intimidating and challenging; thus poets are the "heroic children" in the final strophe, who, subject to the disciplines of time and space, see life's realities not nakedly like the animal but filtered through the conditions of an angular conscience. The "rooms" are another restriction of man's vital life among narrowing abstractions and conventions, pertinently realized in the contrast between the ephebe's anxiety and the elephant's unrestrained blare.

His constricted vision demands of the poet a severe attention toward that limited area of reality available to him (vi). What he sees, the fabric of nature, must be masterfully "realized," not only imagined but "imagined well" and conceived in the delicate balances of a Franz Hals. Thus, poetic abstraction is an admitted "falseness close to kin," a "false form," and the poet must proceed with humility toward affirmation of his trust as steward of reality. His partial perspectives, indeed, are the measures of his humanity, and he can define the degree of his invention within the tested metaphor of aesthetic perception: out of the engagements between man and world comes the "abstraction blooded," Stevens' principal figure for poetry and the truth of imaginative vision.

Poems seven and eight, starting at opposite points, arrive at similar conclusions. They are, so to speak, extended proofs of the "abstraction blooded": the former investigates the natural harmonies of the external world for evidence of "balances," while the latter begins with the abstraction of a "major man," an idea of man, and attempts to fulfill the concluding phrase of poem six. Nature provides its own balances, notes

the poet, not "balances/ That we achieve but balances that happen" (vii). Life reduced to its simplest components invariably resolves into nature's innate harmonies, the dramatic "balances" which provide the poet with some of his most felicitous insights: "Perhaps," he muses, "The truth depends on a walk around a lake,"

> . . . a stop to watch
> A definition growing certain and
>
> A wait within that certainty . . .

In contrast, the poet's composition of a "major man," dubbed the "MacCullough," creates a symbolic problem similar to that of anthropomorphic religions. As the "MacCullough," he is also the "crystal hypothesis," man become "Logos," a humanistic extension of finite man into infinite idea. As a "Beau linguist" he is at once poet and poet's creation. "Major man," in brief, extends Stevens' tedious search for a man-hero to replace the divine-hero, which makes *Parts of a World* so repetitious and unrewarding. The old problem remains here: the rhetorical difficulty of defining something that is at once symbol and creator of the symbol, who is "crystal hypothesis,/ Incipit and a form to speak the word/ And every latent double in the word." There is a contradiction between the manifest "MacCullough" (finite man) and the idea of a "major man" that is only partially resolved in the experience suggested in the final four stanzas, the image of man imagining (a more dramatic instance of Emerson's "Man Thinking"), absorbing the external world meditatively into the self until reflection transfigures temporality to become, as anticipated in poem six, an "abstraction blooded, as a man by thought": "As if language suddenly, with ease,/ Said things it had laboriously spoken." Taking "habit" from the "wave" MacCullough symbolizes the sensitive, meditative intercourse of self and world, a human variant on the "balances" of nature discovered in the previous poem.

The concluding figure of poem eight is a truth antithetical to reason, and thereby promotes a meditation on those distinctions (ix):

> The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
> Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
> And of its nature, the idiom thereof.
>
> They differ from reason's click-clack, its applied
> Enflashings. But apotheosis is not
> The origin of the major man.

The definition of "major man" continues to perplex, an idea of many

facets and essential to an aesthetic of abstraction. He is, in effect, another version of the "abstraction blooded," willed into being as a surrogate idea, without image, to replace an idea of God: "The hot of him is purest in the heart." Poem nine provides a reverie of faith in the poet's new confection leading toward the first substantial conclusion.

In sum, then, "major man," at once the dominant poetic idea and the imaginative "exponent" of that idea, is at one with the necessity for abstraction—and proves the argument (x). He is neither transcendent deity nor substantial symbol but a "transparence" of the ephebe, the humanist myth made in man's comic image. As a "major abstraction" of the "commonal" he recalls Whitman's idyllic democrat, but Stevens sees his collective "one" not as a mirror of the divine but as the harlequined figure in the human comedy with "his old coat,/ His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town,// Looking for what was, where it used to be." The poet's responsibility to "confect" this figure turns away from the transcendental, and returns the service of imagination to the commonplace world and its fecund sadness and beauty. The poet is not to elevate man but to reinvigorate him, not turn him from the world but toward it, not offer him future but give him back a present—not "to console/ Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound." As both the creation of man and the object of man's search, he justifies Stevens' view that the world is epistemologically anthropocentric, and that although the tendency toward abstraction is normative, in the extreme it leads to death. The attempt to keep blood in the abstraction, vitality in the real, leads casually to the thematic antithesis in the poet's meditations.

*It Must Change*—The search for the "abstraction blooded" was to affirm, not evade, the life of the senses. In every instance, the abstract found vital reference in the tangible, in its antithesis: as if to prove Kant's maxim of concepts and percepts. Since the essence of the real is change, to affirm life is to affirm living in change, within the natural theater where every pleasure posits its pain, every death a life. The poems of Part Two shift the focus to nature's flux and the kinds of experience possible within flux, which is at once womb and tomb. To live in change is to submit to its multiple ambiguities, its constant inconstancy. The poet seeks both to resist and embrace change; which is to say he engages the fundamental dilemma of dualistic thought.

Poem one establishes the encompassing reality of change, which wars against abstraction but nevertheless finds expression in abstraction. The opening images—of the "old seraph" (man of sensibility) looking out upon a fecund world of doves and violets and girls with

jonquils in their hair—dramatize the experience of change not in the artifice of reasonable "chronologies" but in the continuity of vital existence. Between the poles of youth and age the poet discovers his proposition:

> The bees came booming as if they had never gone,
> As if hyacinths had never gone. We say
> This changes and that changes. Thus the constant
>
> Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths
> Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause
> In a universe of inconstancy.

One recalls Whitman's vision of immortality within the process of hyacinths. Stevens finds delightful the paradox that change is absolute. And his old seraph is revived, becomes "satyr in Saturn, according to his thoughts," which, if it can be explained, indicates the relative nature of the self and its visions, and the power of the imagination to revitalize.

The next two poems build from the engagement of man imposing order upon this pleasant world of change, a habit both necessary and destructive. Man's ultimate denial of change, of course, is his ordination of immortality, the absolute abstraction against the absolute flux. Rhetoric proves the rule that excesses are negations. The futile gesture of the "President" is a pathetic legislation against life, the very thing his desire for immortality wishes to maintain. Poem two is another variation on the "Death is the mother of beauty" theme, seen here in the cyclical regeneration of nature which dies into life. Nature's immortality mocks the President's dogma. Likewise, the "great statue of the General Du Puy," which in poem three extends the President's metaphysical laws into the marketplace, pursues a thesis of reductio ad absurdum. "General Du Puy" is another version of Clark Mill's statue of General Jackson—standing in Washington, D.C.—which Stevens had denounced in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (NA 10) as a piece of unblooded realism, fanciful trivia erected futilely against the ravages of time and change. He also recalls the pervasive symbolism of the statue in "Owl's Clover" and in "Examinations of the Hero in a Time of War," where it is a "pinching" of an idea (CP 276). General Du Puy's bizarre "permanence" is a bourgeois concoction, of "our more vestigial states of mind," and indicative of man's deliberate passion to attain permanence at the expense of life. For the celebrant of feeling, it reminds that "Nothing had happened because nothing had changed."

His stroll through the legislative city of reason affords an epigrammatic thesis (iv):

> Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman, day on night, the imagined
>
> On the real. This is the origin of change.

Of any single passage in Stevens' canon, this is perhaps the most explicit summary of his obsessive "idea." All else is variation on this hypothesis which recalls Whitehead's organic theory of the reality of process, or even Yeats's vision of metaphysical oneness: "The partaker partakes of that which changes him." Thus partaking of the organic world, the poet can clarify his denial of orthodox immortality (v). After the analysis of poem four, the sensuousness of five brings contrapuntal relief. The rich tones of tropical flora, growing wildly but with natural order amidst civilized ruins, reflect the vitality of nature's flux which overcomes mortality in its powers of regeneration. The scene itself is a picture of unified organicism, as the artificial contributions of the man's conception become in time integral to the landscape, long after the mutable self is decayed. Growth imposes its own continuity upon life and makes death an acceptable part of the vital pattern, just as the deceased "planter" lives on in the blended world of civilization and tropic. Stevens' imaginative voyage to an "island in the South" comes without anticipation, as a shift in key, proving in the mind's flexibility the vitality of change.

Immortality, then, lies in the rhythmic cycles of nature and the "idiot minstrelsy" of a vital nature demanding identity (vi). This chorus of nature is the lusty imitation of man's own desire for apotheosis. Each vital thing of this world calls out indiscriminately for identity and apotheosis, and like the sparrow is answered that identity includes death. It is not an individual immortality that one attains but the generic immortality of repetition, captured in the "granite monotony" of recurrent forms: "Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale/ Of leaves," and the single sparrow immortal in its species alone. Each "sound," then, adds to the rhythm where all sounds are fused, just as the single life expires but life persists. In poem seven, then, the futile dreams of individual immortality are forfeited; it is not the "paradise" of a "seducing hymn" but an "accessible bliss" that the poet seeks, bliss lying in the world of change:

> For easy passion and ever-ready love
> Are of our earthy birth and here and now
> And where we live and everywhere we live . . .

Inevitably, however, man must discover a human order within the natural, as in the anecdote of "Nanzio Nunzio" confronting the statue of "Ozymandias" (viii), another variation on the dynamic of opposites: spontaneity opposed to permanence, "nakedness" before an "inflexible/ Order." In short, it celebrates a putting back of abstraction into the world of change: the "fictive covering" gives identity to the amorphous nudity of the real. And once more the meditation returns to the theme of poetry as the fundamental embodiment of experience, the rational proposition that grows out of the bizarre marriage of spirit and statue: "The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to/ The gibberish of the vulgate and back again" (ix). Blackmur has pointed up the difficulty of Stevens' task, where language fails to break through the rational contradictions in his propositions.[15] Here is a repeat of Stevens' discovery in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" that somewhere between the absolutes of self and world the poem captures not an absence of reality but that reality which is the life of metaphor. Ernst Cassirer's symbolic theory of language would answer for Stevens' poetic faith, the vital import of the word:

> 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.

We have come from process to the vital substance of the word. Poetry has become a metaphysics, the subjective and objective world at one in the word, a motif that connects this poem with the earlier thesis of "major man" as "Logos and logic," the "commonal" propounded in abstraction. Here is another manifestation in Stevens of what Charles Feidelson says is the "problematic" nature of "symbolism as a literary school." When the symbol ceases to point to reality beyond itself and becomes the ambiguous *ding an sich*, poetry may become both narcissistic and self-critical. Says Feidelson: "When the symbolistic method becomes the theme of symbolism, the literary work is attaining the immediate reality of symbol by acknowledging that language, after all, is at the same time mediate."[16] Frustrated by his failure to evoke the evanescent ideal, the symbolist turns back upon his method to question it for its failure or to celebrate it as a final truth: Melville in one instance; Valéry in the other. There is a danger here, notes Feidelson, of "intellectual suicide," of an utter denial of the viability of any profane reality, as in Mallarmé. Stevens only escapes from the symbolistic *cul-de-sac*, eventual dumbness before the ambiguities of the ultra-

mundane, by embracing another, the articulate inconsistency of the sceptic, whose realities are acknowledged fictions. Thus, the poet finds resolution of change by capturing it in his metaphors, all the while realizing that his catch is artifice. As observer in the "Theatre/ Of Trope," he notes the "artificial things" of his vision (x); meanwhile, the inherent "will to change" outruns his metaphors. The "fictive covering" of poem eight is both necessary and inadequate. The poet, caught between the need for order and the freedom of change, finds an adjustment of the two in the final and temporal good of pleasure.

*It Must Give Pleasure*—Part Three encounters the major difficulty of a poetry about poetry, the analysis of that which is beyond analysis. Not only is the section an implied synthesis of the poet's dialectic, it is responsible to itself as poetry, and thus for giving pleasure. It must be at once synthesis and analysis. Its prevailing emphasis is argument against the artificial, the imitative, or the excessively formal. As might be expected, the poet is at his best with the simple, the elemental, the pleasure that derives out of the "ignorant" man's attendance upon his world.

He begins, as with each section, by denying preconceptions, in this case the pleasure of traditional rituals, customs, celebrations (i). They are, he concludes, a "facile exercise." Traditional and/or dogmatic forms afford only the restrained pleasures of easy anticipation, of refined security. The greater pleasures are the "difficultest rigor," the pleasures of the moment, grasped without reference to past joys. It is, if anything beyond the crudest self-indulgence, an expression of joy in the unexpected, that which comes in an intense and surprising moment. The "irrational," the "unreasoning," which are the poet's terms of this joy, can only be conceived in what he calls a "later reason," a phrase suggestive of Coleridge's higher Reason and most certainly related to the poet's intuition: the creativity of his penetrations. Process—the natural world to which he turns is "not . . . transformed"—describes a ritual at once vital and ordered, spontaneous and rhythmic: the "unreasoning" of "what we see."

Poem two helps to dramatize his intentions, and recalls once more the woman's world on Sunday morning, the intensity of physical things enjoyed in their particularity. The anecdote of the "blue woman" is another assertion of deference to things of this world, her imaginatively endowed surroundings being an instance of the private but informal rites advocated in poem one. The language once again departs from the poem's rhetorical norm; imagery describes a pattern of sentience

that echoes the sexual tropes so rife in *Harmonium,* though here the tones are cooler and more formal. The woman's world, in short, is of discreet and "real" and vital things, and the pleasures those of unadulterated perception: "Clear and, except for the eye, without intrusion." The poem projects the irrationalist's plea of poem one by moving from "facile exercise" to "natural form" and from rhetoric to extended metaphor. It leads likewise into another world of imagination in which the child's knowing eye provides a figure for the ignorant man's angle of vision.

Poem three is one of the most dense and obscure in the sequence; its opening lines almost defy explication, except in comparison with the imagery of a later poem, "Study of Images I" (CP 463). Warren Carrier has suggested of this latter piece that its opening image of the "big blue bush" delineates the richly veined body of man mirrored in the vitally striated natural world, or another of Stevens' many solipsistic reductions of nature into man.[17] Here, the "lasting visage in a lasting bush" seems to be the end of man's desire, the "lasting bush" with its many-toned reds being the immutable living realm of the "lasting visage," possibly man's desire for permanence within change. The "lasting visage," a "face of stone," provides in an ambiguous image the intermixture of blue woman and red world: a "red-slitted-blue." The passionately vital reds of the poem conflict with the cool but sensual world of the blue woman's vision. Nature dominates, "vines around the throat," and the "eye [can] not escape" the pervasive reds. The blue woman of the previous poem had "looked" and "named," and the world she named was "clear" and "real." But the fleshly reds threaten to overcome the balances of man and nature:

> That might have been.
> It might and might have been. But as it was,
> A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell
>
> And bade the sheep carouse. Or so they said.
> Children in love with them brought early flowers
> And scattered them about, no two alike.

The shepherd's lyric strains and the child's unreflective affection for particulars image the poet's confident resolution which begins the next poem:

> We reason of these things with later reason
> And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
> And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves. (iv)

In some discreet and natural fashion, the self imposes itself upon the ceaseless flux, but the delicacy of the relation continues to challenge the poet's definitions and provoke his momentary propositions.

He can now return to the analysis of pleasure in the usual terms of the antithesis, this time in the anecdote of the "great captain and the maiden Bawda," opposite natures, who solemnize a "mystic marriage in Catawba." Once again, is in "The Comedian as the Letter C.," the symbolic geography of Carolina serves as synthesis, and pleasure obtains in the balance and interaction of aesthetic antinomies, a symbolic flesh and spirit fusion in the temperate latitudes of time:

> Each must the other take as sign, short sign
> To stop the whirlwind, balk the elements.
>
> The great captain loved the ever-hill Catawba
> And therefore married Bawda, whom he found there,
> And Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun.
>
> They married well because the marriage-place
> Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell.
> They were love's characters come face to face.

For counterpoint, then, poems five through seven offer the anecdote of the Canon Aspirin, whose reasonable and dogmatic arrangement of his world is the very opposite of the "mystic" nuptials in Catawba. The three poems form another of Stevens' many rejections of the religious or institutional abstraction, in this instance suggesting in the children's imaginative freedom and the Canon's own dream a belief that the natural and primitive inevitably must obtain, even under the most fierce suppression. The Canon and his sister delight in the sophisticated formalities of a provident life: her "widow's gayety" a sharp restraint on the vital children, his "outline of a fugue" providing the most discreet avuncular forms for their world. But in sleep, the children escape from order, and with them goes the mother's irrepressible blessing:

> Yet when her children slept, his sister herself
> Demanded of sleep, in the excitements of silence
> Only the unmuddled self of sleep, for them.

And in poem six, the Canon experiences a similar freedom, an escape into the "nothingness" of the pure pleasure of sleep. Here Stevens apparently borrows from the Symbolists' world of evanescent purity, for the Canon's dream carries him beyond the vision of his formal religion into a nakedness "Beyond which thought could not progress as thought." This, however, is not the province of his usual experience. His is a

world of institutions, of "capitols" and "corridors," the world of imposed order filled with statues of "reasonable men." And from this he derives another propositional truth: "But to impose is not/ To discover" (vii). In essence, then, pleasure is an element of order, a spiritual condition in Santayana's sense of the spirit, a vision, or as Willard Arnett has described it, a "method of seeing, a mental condition or activity which is realizable by a living animal, and actualized by a propensity to witness rather than control the revolutions in matter."[18] It is, as the poet implies, a search for the absolute in the full awareness that the end is a necessary fiction:

> To find the real,
> To be stripped of every fiction except one,
> The fiction of an absolute . . .

Poems eight and nine pursue this theme of order which he has discovered, of the belief which is solicited in a fiction. "Majesty," finite man learns, "is a mirror of the self" (viii). It is, in a mysterious sense, an assertion of the "I am," the subjective counterpart of the earlier concern with the "to be" in the very first poem of the sequence. The insistence of the "I" returns heaven to the self, and makes those "external regions" that we long for satisfying "reflections" of our earth in which the self resides: "regions" filled with longing and the "escapades of death." Denying absolutes, then, the poet once more returns to his irrational celebration of animated reality, of the vital particulars which obviate metaphysical reference and assert, as in many of the earlier poems, identity in motion, in "merely going round" (ix). The act of perception, formalized into private ritual—a poem—becomes a "thing final in itself and, therefore, good," a good like Santayana's, at once aesthetic and spiritual. Consequently, the flux asserts the repetition which becomes his "master," the sum of realities.

Change is reality, against which man directs his vision, and the harmonies produced by the correspondential union are the pleasures of balance and order. Stevens aligns his antitheses with his aesthetic. His resolution, simply, resides in metaphor, the "name" which interposes itself into the real and gives us that substance alone which we can feel and enjoy and know. He calls out for a renewal of the world through a revivification of language, and like the old Adam discovers his world by naming it, by the "fiction that results from feeling" (x). The concluding lines are the faith of an aesthetic vision:

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

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

"Except in crystal"—Stevens' most succinct metaphor incorporates the balances elaborated in the coda, the dialectical balances of abstraction and change and the transparences of poetry which mirror the "fluent mundo" in an order. The soldier of the coda is the human actor, even an extension of the hero, living in change but bound by the terrifying mutations of his profession. It is only in the immutable forms of the poet that action is stabilized into meaning and that man attains his apotheosis:

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

Frank Kermode has commented eloquently on Stevens' later poetry that his tendency is to "contaminate metaphysics with fortuity and fable."[19] Stevens has suggested himself, in the meditations of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," that the poet seeks a "visibility of thought" (CP 488), a metaphorical variation on his prose distinction between poet and philosopher: "If the philosopher's world is this present world plus thought, then the poet's world is this present world plus imagination" (OP 199); the "probing of the philosopher is deliberate," that of "the poet is fortuitous" (OP 197). The conception of "Notes" implies that it was meant to be, so far as possible, that Grand Poem outlined in *Harmonium*. The title itself is an acute judgment on the possibilities of such a poem which would be the secular equivalent of a total mythology in an anti-mythological time. Stevens accepts with equanimity the restrictions on the modern poet; yet, he celebrates without self-righteousness the tremendous possibilities of poetic order. "Notes" is his grand expression of those possibilities, both in theme and realization, and it asks to be accepted on the basis of performance, not dialectic.

Overstressing the complexity of Stevens' late verse is like overstressing the simplicity of Frost's. The "verbality" is there, it is not always logical or coherent, and it might deserve Winters' stricture against its lack of rational substance, if indeed rational substance were of any purpose here. Winters and Stevens simply have no grounds on which to debate this subject, and one must make an initial choice of what constitutes "validity" in poetry. "Notes" can be made to render ideas, unprecedentedly commonplace, an amalgam perhaps of romantic solu-

tions to dualism, with this difference: he wishes, indeed must, retain the dualism while trying to resolve it. He could associate Adam and Descartes not through the history of ideas but because the example of each is the example of man grown conscious of himself—thus dualism. And his meditations, formalized into poetry, are not thoughts but notations of the processes of thought in search of resolution. Poetry is his great analogue for this quest, an intensification of the essentially human experience. "Notes" is a poem of mind, a poem about poetry: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice" (CP 239), as he defined modern poetry.

The pravacy of his "notes" is disturbing for those who want their poetry to speak more directly of man's experience as it is dramatically manifest in the world. One might suggest that among all the influences on Stevens no one seems to have suggested the kind of art purveyed by Bloomsbury. This is not to say that Stevens is heir to Bloomsbury in any direct sense but that he shares with them the convictions of reality as a subjective experience. Their mutual regard for the Impressionists is a point of contact. Nevertheless, his obsession with the aesthetic moment does not dictate to him the "hedonist's progress" into solipsism. It suggests rather that he is pursuing experience back to its origin, in the elements of perception, and finding there the truth that life begins as an aesthetic. His poetry is a struggle to retain the purity of those origins within the inhuman complexities of living in a civilized world which would obviate the physical, its very basis.

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FOOTNOTES

1 See "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress," *In Defense of Reason* (New York, 1947), pp. 431-459. Reprinted in *Yvor Winters on Modern Poets* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 11-34.

2 Munson, "The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens," *Dial,* LXXIX (Nov. 1925), 413-417; Powys, "The Thirteenth Way," *Dial,* LXXVII, July 1924), 45-50.

3 Cf. William York Tindall, *Wallace Stevens* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, 1961).

4 *The Shaping Spirit* (Chicago, 1950).

5 Pages 34-35.

6 See esp. Jarrell, "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," *Partisan Review,* XVIII (May-June 1951), 335-344; and Williams, "Comment," *Poetry,* LXXXVII (Jan. 1956), 234-239.

7 Samuel French Morse, "Introduction," *Poems of Wallace Stevens,* ed. S. F. Morse (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. viii.

8 Quotations from Stevens are to the following volumes: *The Necessary Angel* (New York, 1951); *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954); and *Opus Posthumous,* ed. S. F. Morse (New York, 1957), published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Page references will be included in the text, and noted by the following symbols to the respective volumes: NA, CP, OP. In the treatment of "Notes," individual poems within parts are indicated by roman numerals when necessary for clarity; the text is that of the *Collected Poems.*

9 *Language as Gesture* (New York, 1952), p. 250. This review was first published in *Partisan Review,* X (May-June 1943), 297-300.

10 Blackmur, *Language as Gesture,* p. 252; Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," *PMLA,* LXVI (March 1952), 576.

11 *Wallace Stevens* (London, 1960), pp. 111-112. This paperback, published by Oliver and Boyd, now appears in the United States in a Grove Press series.

12 *Science and the Modern World* (New York, 1925), p. 241 ff.

13 *Process and Reality* (New York, 1929), pp. 524 ff.

14 *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York, 1923), p. 109.

15 *Language as Gesture,* pp. 250-254.

16 *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: Phoenix Book, 1959), pp. 72-73.

17 "Wallace Stevens' Pagan Vantage," *Accent,* XIII (Summer 1953), 165-168.

18 *Santayana and the Sense of Beauty* (Bloomington, Ind.: Midland Book, 1957), p. 140.

19 *Wallace Stevens,* p. 97.