Wallace Stevens' Defense of Poetry in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"

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IN THE ESSAYS collected in *The Necessary Angel* (1951), Wallace Stevens presents his loosely ordered thoughts on the nature and purpose of poetry. Although Stevens calls these pieces "Essays on Reality and the Imagination," they amount to a sustained defense of poetry, in the tradition of Sidney, Shelley, Arnold, and Croce. That Stevens should repeatedly explore and declare poetry's value in prose is not surprising, since in this project he has been joined by some of the most prominent poets of the last and the current century, including Allen Tate, W. H. Auden, Robert Hayden, Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, and Robert Pinsky. But the question of why we should read poetry, and—more importantly to Stevens—why we should write it, motivates not only much of his prose but much of his verse as well. As early as *Harmonium*, the characteristics and goals of traditional apology appear in Stevens' poetry, and that tendency toward self-examination and self-defense increases as his career advances, peaking in the 1940s.[1]

Defending poetry is an especially significant operation in Stevens' signature composition, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942). Although the poem is much more than simply a verse apology for poetry, reading "Notes" as engaged in defensive strategies reveals something essential about the nature of the route toward the supreme fiction (if not about the supreme fiction itself). Furthermore, doing so can help us make sense of the prologue and epilogue, two parts of "Notes" that have received scant critical attention over the years, despite their being integral to one of Stevens' central works.

Before we turn to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," we might ask why a poet would choose to defend poetry *in* poetry. One advantage of an apologetic stance in poetry is that it enables lyric to institute the self-reflection that it requires but that may be deterred or discouraged by what Stevens calls "the pressure of reality" (*NA* 20). Thus, a verse defense of poetry indirectly invokes the outside world as that against which it defines itself. But even though a defense implies some attempt at rhetorical persuasion, poetic apology ultimately does not address an unsympathetic

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audience in order to convince it that poetry is of great value. It cannot reasonably do so, since poetry's audience is least likely to demand such a defense. With the possible exception of parts of "Owl's Clover," Stevens' verse defenses are not written for those who will never read them; instead, apology in poetry addresses poetry itself. As an instance of its own doctrine (to paraphrase Cleanth Brooks [*The Well-Wrought Urn* 12]), a verse defense doubles back on itself, answering to some internal interrogative voice rather than to an external skeptic.

This questioning of the worth of poetry is no inauthentic pose: Stevens seems to acknowledge a native rift within the imagination when he writes in "Adagia," "The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself" (*OP* 199). Certainly at times in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—as well as in many other poems—Stevens represents the mind in the act of defending against a self-generated doubt about poetry's value. But even if this doubt is sincere, it is (somewhat surprisingly) not fatal to the poet: Stevens is most explicit about this in the late poem "Questions Are Remarks." In it the poet envies a young "voyant," admiring the fact that "His question is complete because it contains / His utmost statement" (*CP* 462). Stevens may well be admiring his own example of an undiminished declarative question, since he begins the poem, "In the weed of summer comes this green sprout why." This act of self-interrogation announces the poem's birth. The poet confirms that the question Why? roots naturally in poetry, delivering life amid a noxious growth of weeds. Stevens' organic metaphor recalls Shelley's idea of poetry as the tree of life, with individual poems as its scions, as if to suggest that there is something vital and natural about a poem's questioning of its own value (503). Although this green sprout why takes root and reproduces its question again and again, poetry does not wither under such self-induced stress but flourishes.

Of course, a defensive stance in poetry is not solely the product of spontaneous generation. The poet cultivates the "green sprout why" partly in order to sustain an interest in aesthetic inquiry: Stevens (with so many other American poets) feared society had become indifferent to this activity. He depicts his as "an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general" (*NA* 171). Stevens accepts the challenge to counteract this sentiment repeatedly and with great seriousness, operating according to the conviction that, "If the answer is frivolous, the question was frivolous" (*OP* 199). The answer at which Stevens usually arrives is, to modify one of his statements from "Adagia," that we like poetry because we do.[2] For Stevens, there is nothing frivolous about this answer, but there is something unsatisfactory about it, and thus he must return again and again to the equally momentous question, Why write poetry?

The argument implicit in all of this is circular, as it suggests that one of the reasons to write poetry is to answer the question, Why write poetry?

In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," this circularity is evident not only in the statements of the poem but in its form. Stevens frames "Notes" with two nearly discrete poems, a poetic structure unique among his longer works. Though the prologue and epilogue, too, are part of the supreme fiction, they differ greatly—in tone, purpose, theme, and images—from the main body of the text. They are in some sense annotations to the poem, and yet they do not fully explicate it: neither love (the subject of the prologue) nor war (the epilogue's theme) is the supreme fiction. The poem's head- and footnotes contain rather than explain the rest of the work, a circumstance that may account for their having received little sustained critical attention before now. They do not unify an interpretation of the main poem; instead, they defend the poem. And they do not so much defend what the poem says (or tries to say) as defend the act of writing a poem. The prologue and epilogue mark the boundaries of the central poem, and, more importantly, they stand as evidence that defense is the proper method of both entering and exiting poetry, especially a poem intended to adumbrate the supreme fiction.

Nevertheless, the framing poems do not conduct the poem to a single project of apology. The thirty notes that constitute the body of this poem contain provisional pronouncements, figures, and fables, variations on variations whose primary reference is to an indeterminate future. Together they do not comprise a unified defense of poetry any more than they comprise a cohesive supreme fiction. Stevens declined to append an explanatory note to the poem, maintaining that the contents of "Notes" "will have to speak for themselves" (*L* 407). Still, Stevens suggested to Katharine Frazier of the Cummington Press that the back cover of her limited edition of "Notes" display some lines from the epilogue, "enough" of that poem, Stevens ventured, "to state the idea" (*L* 408). Frazier complied with his request, printing around the back border the following: "Soldier, there is a war between the mind and sky, between thought and day and night. It never ends. How gladly with proper words the soldier dies, if he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech."

The epilogue contains some of the most ostensibly straightforward statements in the poem and therefore recommends itself as one of the more excerptable sections. Yet it seems extraordinary that Stevens would wish to use this final poem, thematically and stylistically so unlike the rest of "Notes," as an advertisement for the whole. An epilogue—especially one like this—does not necessarily "speak for" or recapitulate the poem it follows. Later, as if to acknowledge that this selection was not representative of the poem, Stevens would identify printing parts of it on the back cover of the book as the "only thing [with respect to "Notes"] that I have ever felt any doubt about" (*L* 442). Although critics frequently quote this expression of Stevens' doubt, they less often refer to what immediately follows. In a partial retraction of his uncertainty, Stevens adds that the lines on the back border

> are really all right in the sense that they relax the stiffness, and seem to me to be a pleasant kind of informality—like the colored boy that comes in after everything is over in DER ROSENKAVELIER and picks up the handkerchief that was left on the floor. (*L* 442)

The final action of *Der Rosenkavelier*, to which he compares the excerpt from the epilogue of "Notes," is poignant for its superfluousness. A servant removes the Marschallin's handkerchief, not to signal the end of her love affair with Octavian—there is no question that it is over—but to indicate the inadequacy of any symbolic gesture to summarize the preceding events. The opera ends rather as a comedy—albeit a conflicted one—as does "Notes." After the poet's flirtations with the "Fat girl, terrestrial" in section X of "It Must Give Pleasure," he expresses self-confidence in his own actions ("That's it") and a faith in the future to recognize the virtue of what he does: "They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne" (*CP* 406). Nevertheless, a hint of disappointment lingers, as the triumph of the personal act—both the Marschallin's and the poet's—is mitigated by loss. As I will argue below, the discovery indicated by "That's it" is one of a thing absent, and thus the phrase marks a failure of expression. For Stevens, the servant's gratuitous gesture relieves any residual tension created by a conclusion in loss; and so too, Stevens' letter suggests, does his own act of appending the epilogue to his poem.

Before we may understand what relief the epilogue provides, we must better understand the nature of the strain it undoes. Stevens' reference to Strauss's love story guides us back to the beginning of his poem, where we might seek clues to the tensions created in the main "Notes." I will return to a full account of the epilogue, but for now I turn to the opening love poem:

> 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. (*CP* 380)

This initial poem may well be addressed to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" itself, as Harold Bloom contends (168), or it may be addressed to the supreme fiction, which, if it can ever assume materiality or shape, it does so in poetry. Thus, in either case, here is a uniquely undisturbed statement of the value of poetry. This is as close as Stevens comes, in this poem at least, to saying that we like poetry because we do and that no further

defense of that certainty of feeling is necessary. The poet describes (as well as engenders) the paradoxical condition of achieving illumination through the obscuring act of the poem. He resides in "the uncertain light of single, certain truth" that illuminates a "living changingness . . . in which we sit at rest." The transparent truth revealed is not a vision but a feeling, one of peace. According to Bloom, this sensation is specifically "a peace that comes from reading and writing poems" (168).

Here is an example of the power of that instinctive, nonverbal faculty of comprehension that Stevens calls "sense." Poetry's worth is made self-evident in this perceptual field, and it is sense or feeling that communicates to us the profound reality of poems that, like the flowers in "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight," seem "Too much as they are to be changed by metaphor" (*CP* 430). Sense, which "exceeds all metaphor," is not so much a medium as a property of human consciousness. It delivers the object of our admiration without altering—and thereby diminishing—it. Or so sense would make us believe:

> We are two that use these roses as we are,
> In seeing them. This is what makes them seem
> So far beyond the rhetorician's touch. (*CP* 431)

Sense offers direct, unspoken communication with reality; but it is the reality of sense, and not the reality of an object, that it delivers. Sense also enables interpersonal communication—however indirect—between the multiple subjects implied by "we." This dual operation of sense—between the poet and his subject and between two persons—is analogous to one of love, but the love between poet and poem is unquestionably the more important of the two operations. After all, for Stevens, a poet is "*un amoureux perpétuel* of the world that he contemplates and thereby enriches" (*NA* 30). Love-as-sense contains this experience of metaphor and recurs as an important trope for measuring poetry's value. In "Notes," whose subject is the supreme fiction, the reality of sense is paramount, since it is precisely its *un*reality that defines the supreme fiction: indeed, it is Stevens' name for something in which we believe, even though we know it not to be true (*L* 443)

The opening triumph of "Notes" also comes about by means of the power of sense-love, and it is the poet's love for his poem and its subject that is the sole justification for his writing. The two rhetorical questions in this prologue recall the poet's pursuit of the "origin and course / Of love" (*CP* 18) in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." There the poet's question, "Or was it that I mocked myself alone?" (*CP* 13), bespeaks an awareness of his own isolation and shows that the revelations of love have little to do with anything outside himself. (Stevens also seems to acknowledge the incongruity of mocking his vocation in verse: a poem that accuses itself of lacking worth may be akin to a tree falling in a forest, with its self-incriminating

noises going unrecognized by any third party.) By contrast, the love impulse in which "Notes" originates, as private as it is, also invites an outsider into this scene. We are invited to go out of our own nature and identify with this poem that is not our—and perhaps not even the poet's—own, even as this expression of satisfaction and affection is directed specifically toward the supreme fiction and the tropes of "Notes," language, designs, and goals.[3] The poet might have done well to place this poem at the end of "Notes," to utter a kind of final word. Instead, its certainty is perforce undermined by the poem to which it is dedicated.[4]

In simplest terms, the main poem is about everything: it is about everything that poetry does and cannot do, everything that it inscribes and that it excludes, everything that it is and fails to become. It is about intelligibility and confusion, the fictive and the real, reason and the imagination, belief and truth, love and self-derision, choice and chance, desire and power, civic life and literary traditions, angels and flowers, colors and time, nonsense and song. Above all, it is about poetry. "Notes" is marked by a formality in tone (there are scattered comic moments, but they exhibit a characteristic Stevensian stiffness), in subject, and in versification; yet this is no well-wrought urn. This is poetry becoming, not poetry being: it derives from necessity, exists in change, and tends toward a constantly deferred future.[5]

Given the extent of Stevens' reach, it is not surprising that F. O. Matthiessen criticized the poem for being overwritten. I am inclined to agree with Matthiessen but with the qualification that overwriting is part of Stevens' project here. The poet takes a risk (and occasionally his poem suffers for it) by including so much poetic ballast that has the potential, as Matthiessen says, to "make a museum and a mausoleum akin" (26). As if anticipating such a critique, Stevens arranges the poem according to three imperatives that are intended to prevent the supreme fiction from growing stagnant, monotonous, or permanent. The supreme fiction and the poem that tries to document it must be abstract, which is to say that they must both be distinct from the real:

> Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun. (*CP* 380)

The poem opens with this second command to enter the poem's man-made universe, a world of ideas that have only a distant correlation to objects (like the sun) in the actual world.

Abstractness also means that the poem and supreme fiction must remain forever conditional, never definitive: "The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be" (*CP* 381). If Stevens does not entirely revoke our Adamic office to control the nonhuman world by language, then he at least reveals that such gestures are of

no consequence to nature. No biblical sanction can alter the fact that human beings are governed by what Stevens calls "desire" (which includes the desire to assert linguistic dominion over our experiences), while nature and all its citizens are free of these compulsions:

> And not to have is the beginning of desire.
> To have what is not is its ancient cycle.
> It is desire at the end of winter, when
>
> It observes the effortless weather turning blue
> And sees the myosotis on its bush. (*CP* 382)

Though the ever-renewed cycle of our desire is in some ways analogous to the cycles of the natural seasons, our longing for spring distinguishes us from the forget-me-not, which simply obeys its internal instructions to flower. It is part of the human condition to crave what is going to happen anyway, but this is not necessarily a lamentable circumstance for the poet. It may be our ability to forget (in contrast to the myosotis) that makes desire possible; and in forgetting and desiring and forgetting again, there remains the possibility of change and the possibility of more poetry.

The sun is able to endure being in the difficulty of what it is to be, but for the poem (and the poet) there is no security in such ontological fixity. The poet is confident of the poem's power to "refresh" life, and it is clear that the supreme fiction must change in order to avoid aesthetic stagnation and the ennui of an inactive imagination. The note of "a single phrase, ké-ké, / A single text, granite monotony" is "A sound like any other. It will end" (*CP* 394). Another note must always follow, to maintain a necessary "freshness of transformation" that is

> The freshness of a world. It is our own,
> It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,
> And that necessity and that presentation
>
> Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer.
> Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose
> The suitable amours. Time will write them down.
> (*CP* 398)

The autonomous world that poetry creates is not inert but is vital and active (and, notably, "green," like the sprout that is so productive in "Questions Are Remarks"). Need drives poetry to help us reconstruct an identity, dally over the idea of love, and imagine that time will assign us a place in history. None of these amusements is permanent in poetry, which must uphold its duty to abstraction and to variation.

These poetic transformations issue from "a will to change," and it is in change that pleasure, the final imperative, is possible. Pleasure is the ultimate good of poetry for Stevens: "The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness" (*OP* 194). Therefore in "Notes," poetry "is an hour / Filled with expressible bliss" (*CP* 404), and yet it is not even so circumscribed as that, nor so certain of its assertions. In a letter to Henry Church, to whom "Notes" is dedicated, Stevens tries to relate the inexpressible value of pleasure:

> Jean Wahl's letter . . . says one thing that I like more than anything else, and that is that it gave him pleasure to read the NOTES. . . . Now to give pleasure to an intelligent man, by this sort of thing, is as much as one can expect; and certainly I am most *content*, in the French sense of that word, to have pleased Jean Wahl. (*L* 429–30)

Stevens seems to have achieved the equanimity that comes from serving both the intelligence and the imagination, an accord that he had hoped for, but failed to experience, in his more overtly political defense of poetry, "Owl's Clover."

Pleasure or contentment in itself is valuable emotionally to Stevens but it is also an important trope for him. If the "French sense" of "content" emphasizes an agreeable tension between still satisfaction and active delight, it also stresses the Latin derivation of the word, *continere* (*com* + *tenere*), meaning to contain or hold together. Stevens' contentment is contained, that is, self-satisfying, self-referential, self-evidencing. The condition of pleasure validates itself, allowing the poet to state, with almost no hint of irony, that "We like the world because we do" (*OP* 201). Pleasure's self-contained and broadly illogical operation is a model for the poet's defense of poetry. But just as illogical arguments only partially satisfy the intellect, so does delight only incompletely sate our appetite for joy.

Partiality is important since it allows the pursuit of pleasure to continue: the poet's satisfactions must also remain incomplete; otherwise poetry would be too much like torpor. For Stevens there is no transcendent "interpenetration"; pleasure is thoroughly human and it enables the poet to imagine someone else sharing his delight in (and through) poetry. Whatever inadequacies there are in this imagined communication (that it is ultimately unsuccessful is evident in the epilogue, as I will show), there is also enjoyment in failing to seize the object of one's desire, just as there is satisfaction in poetry's obscurities. Furthermore, imperfect fulfillment enables the poet to continue his pursuits. In pondering the nature of poetic language, Stevens says of his activity, "There's a meditation there, in which there seems / To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well" (*CP* 396). The qualification of the last phrase admits a partial failure in comprehension. But the activity is not arrested; rather, it is

rerouted. Pleasure relies on change, even as change ensures a deferral of the poet's own desires.

The poet ultimately curtails this sequence of deferrals by appending a postscript to the neatly structured main poem. To be sure, there is not a complete disjunction between the epilogue and what precedes it.[6] In cantos IX and X of "It Must Give Pleasure," the poet defends the work involved in writing an abstract, changing, pleasure-giving poem, an exertion that is superior to the robin's "Mere repetitions." The poet insists that he, unlike the wren and the red robin, is not an idle singer: "These things at least comprise / An occupation, an exercise, a work" (*CP* 405). Or, as Stevens argues elsewhere, "One of the sanctions of the writer is that he is doing something that he needs to do" (*OP* 245). The final canto celebrates the "Fat girl, terrestrial" and confirms the reasonableness of maintaining the position that we like the world because we do. The poet is convinced and furthermore "Pleased that the irrational is rational," that is, that such unintelligible convictions (as his feelings toward "my fluent mundo") are valid and valuable.

Despite the final decree, the epilogue does not argue that poetry's pleasure-giving capacity is its chief value. The poet argues instead from necessity:

> Soldier, there is a war between the mind
> And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
> For that the poet is always in the sun,
>
> Patches the moon together in his room
> To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
> Up down. It is a war that never ends.
>
> Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.
> They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
> Two parallels that meet if only in
>
> The meeting of their shadows or that meet
> In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.
> But your war ends. And after it you return
>
> With six meats and twelve wines or else without
> To walk another room . . . Monsieur and comrade,
> The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,
>
> His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,
> Inevitably modulating, in the blood.
> And war for war, each has its gallant kind.

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.
(*CP* 407–08)

The poet initially resists analogy, as the soldier's war is not merely a metaphor for the poet's struggles: one war is not derivative of or subordinated to the other. Like the roses in sunlight, the two wars may be "Too much as they are to be changed by metaphor" (*CP* 430). Poetry is necessary to balance the soldier's war (and vice versa), as it creates an equilibrium between the external violence among nations and the internal violence of the poet's mind.

Stevens refers to this stabilizing power in the summary of his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." He describes nobility, an essential element of poetry:

> 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. (*NA* 36)

Nobility is another of Stevens' tropes for the animating force behind a poem, whence derives a poem's value. Nobility is a function of nothing less than our instinct for self-preservation and through it poetry quite literally endows life with meaning. As Stevens intones in another prose context, "Life without poetry is, in effect, life without a sanction" (*L* 299).

Curiously, most critics who place great stock in poetry's political function find a certain satisfaction in this final poem.[7] It is curious because the epilogue, if read as an overt political statement, could be understood to romanticize war, to minimize death, and to identify with the soldier only in the most impersonal manner. At first, the poet assures the soldier that the poet's war "depends on yours. The two are one" (*CP* 407). Yet in the second address, to "Monsieur and comrade," the poet demonstrates his ambivalence about making such an argument, and the war in the poet's mind is no longer equivalent to the soldier's war. Poetic conflict is clearly promoted as the superior struggle: "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines" and "How gladly with proper words the soldier dies." If we are to take these statements literally—though, to be sure, this is not generally a useful practice in approaching Stevens' work—what some critics read as the poet restoring reality to the poem in fact diminishes the gravity of that reality. In other words, if the poet believes that the soldier in possession of a refined aesthetic sensibility can die gladly or live well as long as he has poetry, then the poet could be seen to discount any physical pain the sol-

dier may endure. It is unlikely that Stevens intended his poem to be understood in this way, but even if he did such a reading of the epilogue would not likely satisfy those eager for a statement demonstrating the poet's sensitivity to the political climate of 1942.

Moreover, the epilogue is not a statement on politics per se but is part of a defense of poetry, and specifically part of a defense of *this* poem and of the pursuit of a supreme fiction. Although the epilogue is in some ways detached from the rest of the poem, it is at least as much a response to what precedes it as it is to some condition or figure outside the poem. Poetry—the words on the page, "the literal characters" (*CP* 424) of this poem—is compensation. The poet appeals to the soldier by extolling this compensatory function of poetry, as it might appear in "a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay." Poetry is a salve in the urgent circumstances of war. But the poet realizes that his appeal promotes the extrapoetic benefits of poetry rather than the poetry itself. By insisting on poetry's value in an emergency, the poet might minimize its significance in peacetime: perhaps in acknowledging this possibility, he intimates that the soldier, who returns "With six meats and twelve wines or else without," leaves poetry behind on the battlefield.

The poet's subsequent shift of address belies the epilogue's ostensible return to the reality of its historical moment. After the implicit threat of the poem's being too much a part of its present circumstances, the poet confirms that we will find our reward in poetry in peacetime, as occurs in "Asides on the Oboe." In that poem, a kind of notes toward "Notes," the poet concludes that after a catastrophic period we come to know "The glass man, without external reference" (*CP* 251). Even the epilogue's soldier loses his martial context in that section. The soldier in "Notes" is a fiction, confected in order for the poet to have someone to whom to address his defense. He is an insufficient fiction, however, since the poet addresses "Monsieur and comrade," presumably one of those "clairvoyant men" in "A Primitive Like an Orb" who "need no proof" of the poem's value (*CP* 441). This shift suggests that the defense of his poem is not directed toward those who would question poetry's merits, nor to those who would take issue with the circular logic of the apology, but to like thinkers, gentlemen ("monsieur") and compatriots ("comrade"). The epilogue promotes the work of poetry and the pleasures that that work produces: poetry "is a war that never ends" but one that enables the soldier to die "gladly" or, better, to live "on the bread of faithful speech."

The poet has suggested the extrapoetic benefits of his work, but he breaks off without completing a cohesive argument. The faith in his poetry that he professed in the prologue is not shaken, but it is much simpler to proclaim the value of the object or source of one's love than to persuade skeptics of its worth. Stevens' defense of poetry consists in a collapse of his discursive powers and a surrender to the question to which a defense responds. It is finally a belief in poetic language, a confidence that words

have both a material and a spiritual dimension that cannot be separated from each other, that will guide the reader away from the ambivalent rhetoric of the epilogue and return her to the poem.

In some ways, such a conclusion is to be expected, since Stevens' attempts to take war as his subject almost always result in a greater attentiveness to his poetry than to war. Poetry's responsibility is not the revelation of reality (understood in the conventional—not the Stevensian—sense) since poetry issues from a source within the poet. As Seamus Heaney argues,

> even when the redress of poetry is operative . . . [as] instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world . . . as an intended intervention into the goings-on of society . . . even then, poetry is involved with supreme fictions as well as actual conditions. (192)

Heaney points to the inevitable self-reflection even in poetry directed outward: a poet reaches the actual through his supreme fiction. He reiterates Stevens' formulation that "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" when "the world" is understood as "the statement of *a relation* between a man and the world" (*OP* 201, 197, emphasis added).

Parts of a World (1942), published in the same year as "Notes," contains numerous poems with explicit reference to war. The collection ends with an ambivalent meditation, "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," in which the poet considers the effect on the civilian imagination of the idea of a soldier-hero. (Similarly, "Gigantomachia" in *Transport to Summer* describes the effect of the idea of the hero on the soldier's own imagination.) The poet begins "Examination" by ventriloquizing the hero but is quickly dissatisfied with this device. The poet then casts the soldier in the role of an artist, and from that point on he maintains focus on his declared subject only with great difficulty.

He discovers that the hero is available neither by extracting the soldier from his professional environment nor by abstracting him into some unnatural role within a communal imagination.

> He is the heroic
> Actor and act but not divided.
> It is a part of his conception,
> That he be not conceived, being real. (*CP* 279)

The poet insists that the hero exists only as an agent in reality—which cannot be imported whole into poetry—not as a figure in poetry or as "an image, an outline, / A design, a marble soiled by pigeons" (*CP* 278). It might seem that heroes are "Too actual, things that in being real / Make

any imaginings of them lesser things" (*CP* 430). Yet the poet does not fear doing an injustice to the soldier by casting his dangerous circumstances into a lesser and safer thing in verse or in sculpture: a fear of attenuating the real by containing it in metaphor would not recognize that

> this effect is a consequence of the way
> We feel and, therefore, is not real, except
> In our sense of it. . . . (*CP* 430)

The hero is not found in a statue of a soldier or, for that matter, in a war poem. Rather,

> The hero is a feeling, a man seen
> As if the eye was an emotion,
> As if in seeing we saw our feeling
> In the object seen. . . . (*CP* 278)

The poet solves his dilemma by concluding that the hero is a feeling, and feeling is the province of poetry. Stevens' poetry, even when it is directed toward examining a hero, ultimately takes up itself as its subject.

In "Notes," being in part an examination of the poet in a time of war, a meditation on the soldier follows a climax of feeling. In the final canto of "It Must Give Pleasure," the poet achieves an intense gratification. He does not discover the supreme fiction, but is confident that its pursuit is a worthy endeavor and that poetry is central to that aim.

> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that. (*CP* 406)

As he does in "A Primitive Like an Orb," Stevens here uses the phrase "That's it" not to mark the poem's terminal point but instead to announce its peroration (if we may so call the rather oblique summary that is contained in the epilogue of "Notes"). In any case, in both poems, the tone of finality in "That's it" is deceptive, and the statement voices what Frank Kermode calls "a rightness of feeling, not a claim to have completed a demonstration" (117). "That's it" confirms the production of pleasure, and it is this effect of poetry that "help[s] people to live their lives" (*NA* 29). Pleasure, as Kermode indicates, is more than a frivolous amusement, though it can be that, too: it is health, consolation, a play of language, liberation, justification, purification, relief, restitution, and more (116).

However we may define the poet's idea of pleasure, the implication of that idea is the same: namely, that poetry and its effects are indistinguishable for Stevens, a condition that makes his defense of poetry an example of begging the question it proposes to answer. The poet's statement "That's it" seems to prepare a revelation of some kind but instead turns back upon

itself by a near-repetition, "Yes, that." This feint toward conclusion presumes an argument that the poet has not made. "Yes, that" does not complete a discursive demonstration but simply affirms "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling." The deictic points to the poem itself (which is exemplary of all poetry) because it—and not arguments about it—proves its value: as Stevens says in a later poem, "*Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines, / . . . spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked" (*CP* 424). *Poesis* constitutes evidence of value for those who, once the poet speaks for them, require nothing more than his ongoing speech.

Such inconclusiveness allows for continued writing and for continued questioning, which itself is a source for more writing. Thus it is not surprising that at the end of the poem we do not encounter a completed defense of poetry but the question to which a defense responds. Stevens makes his more conclusive statements in the prologue rather than in the epilogue to acknowledge that his preferred audience will have made a prior commitment to poetry's value even before the poem begins. Stevens is keenly aware (to paraphrase one of his assertions from the letters) that people never read a defense of poetry well until they have accepted it (*L* 436). To wait until the end of the poem—a destination to be sought only by poetry's sympathizers—in order to propose his apology would be superfluous (and Stevens' association of the epilogue with the last act of *Der Rosenkavelier* suggests as much). Stevens begins "Notes" with an affirmation of belief in "you" (his poem and the supreme fiction), and, despite his attempts in the poem to unravel the nature of this fiction, he finds at the end of the poem that he cannot fix its presence in any satisfactory way. This seems entirely appropriate, since in this manner Stevens demonstrates what it is like to believe, as he thinks it necessary, in something that we know not to be true. By reversing the normal sequence of question and answer, Stevens anticipates the theory presented in "Questions Are Remarks" that there is desirability—if not conclusiveness—in questions and in the sowing, at the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," of a green sprout why.

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Notes

[1] An incomplete list of the more important poems that engage in a defense of poetry would include: "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "The American Sublime," "Mozart, 1935," "Owl's Clover," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Asides on the Oboe," "Montrachet-le-Jardin," "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," "Gigantomachia," "Esthétique du Mal," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Auroras of Autumn," "Large Red Man Reading," "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight," "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," "A Primitive Like an Orb," "Questions Are

Remarks," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Interestingly, by the time of the poems of *The Rock*, Stevens seems to have all but exhausted his need to perform apology in his verse.

[2] The original reads, "We like the world because we do" (*OP* 201).

[3] Here I paraphrase Shelley, who defines love as "a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (487).

[4] This almost simultaneous affirmation and erosion of certainty is exactly what the supreme fiction is all about.

[5] To a certain extent, Stevens viewed the poem as unfinished, writing in 1954 to Robert Pack that "For a long time, I have thought of adding other sections to the NOTES and one in particular: *It Must Be Human*" (*L* 863–64).

[6] Bloom declares that "Cantos IX–X of *It Must Give Pleasure* fall together with the coda, addressing the soldier, as an epilogue not only to *Notes* but to all of Stevens' canon between 1915 and 1942" (200).

[7] See, for instance, Marjorie Perloff, "Revolving in Crystal"; James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*; and Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos*.

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