The Supreme Fiction: Fiction or Fact?

Gregory Brazeal
Cornell University

A case is made for giving up the quest to identify Wallace Stevens' "supreme fiction." The poet hoped to usher in the creation of an idea that would serve as a fictive replacement for the idea of God, known to be fictive but willfully believed. His hope has remained unfulfilled. By the poet's own explicit standards, the supreme fiction does not appear in any of his poems, nor in his poetry as a whole, nor in poetry in general. The very idea of a supreme fiction may depend, at least in part, upon a problematic conception of belief drawn from a popular misreading of William James' "The Will to Believe."

Keywords: Wallace Stevens / supreme fiction / criticism / philosophy / William James

> "After all, I like Rhine wine, blue grapes, good cheese, endive and lots of books, etc., etc., etc., as much as I like supreme fiction."
>
> — Wallace Stevens,
> December 8, 1942

If, as Foucault says, the author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning, then it is in the spirit of interpretive thrift that this essay will draw upon Wallace Stevens' writings. The author's words will be used to make the case, as simply and sparingly as possible, for giving up the quest to identify the "supreme fiction," Stevens' most ambitious philosophical object. The poet hoped to usher in the creation of an idea that would serve as a fictive replacement for the idea of God, known to be fictive but willfully believed. His hope has remained unfulfilled. By the poet's own explicit standards, the supreme fiction does not appear in any of his poems, nor in his poetry as a whole, nor in poetry in general. Is it possible for such a long-standing critical quest to be abandoned, or at least qualified as a lesser priority? The case of Oedipus and the "tragic flaw" offers a hopeful parallel. At one time, it might have seemed inevitable that readers of *Oedipus Rex* would always ask of Sophocles' play which of Oedipus' negative character traits had brought about his tragic downfall.[1] It might have seemed a profound, challenging and worthwhile question, posed but left unresolved by Aristotle in his definition of tragedy. But once the "tragic flaw" was recognized as a Victorian mistranslation of

Aristotle's "*hamartia*," the impetus behind the hunt lessened. Critics were still free to follow the tragic flaw's trail, but without Aristotelian sanction, the hunt seemed less worthwhile. Today, it has largely receded from scholarly view.

So might scholars one day give up attempting to identify the "supreme fiction" in Stevens' poetry. As I will argue, Stevens offers little or no sanction for the idea that the supreme fiction can be found there, or even that it exists at all. To read or teach Stevens as though the creation of a supreme fiction were the culmination of his career is to be set up for an unnecessary disappointment. If I cover a good deal of very well-trodden critical ground in what follows, and make points that may seem obvious to many readers of Stevens, it will be in the spirit of offering a summarizing reminder: a presentation of what seem to me the most salient arguments in favor of not reading Stevens for a supreme fiction, and a collection in one place of the most relevant evidence. Finally, in a brief concluding note, I venture into slightly more speculative territory in order to propose a possible explanation for the failure of Steven's supreme fiction to arrive. I argue that the very idea of a supreme fiction may depend, at least in part, upon a problematic conception of belief drawn from a popular misreading of William James' "The Will to Believe."

To what extent did Wallace Stevens lay claim to the title of philosopher? Did he see himself as an inventor of fine philosophical ideas?

On the one hand, Stevens read widely in philosophy, and his poetry, essays and letters abound with references to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, James, Santayana, Bergson, Kant, Plato, Lucretius, Vico, Descartes, Hegel, Berkeley: the list could go on. He corresponded with philosophers of his time, such as Jean Wahl, and from the start of his career, his poetry is sprinkled with philosophical-sounding terminology and ruminations. He struggled and toyed, through a long poetic career, with various forms of "the dumbfoundering abyss / Between us and the object,"[2] whether the epistemological distance between knowers and things in themselves, or the equally taunting "failure in the relation between the imagination and reality" (WS 649). In doing so, he gave poetic expression to perhaps the central philosophical drama of the modern era. The philosopher Simon Critchley calls Stevens, against great competition, "the philosophically most interesting poet to have written in English in the twentieth century" (15). Numerous essays and book-length studies attest to the philosophical depth and complexity to be found in Stevens' works.

On the other hand, Stevens himself confessed, in a letter toward the end of his life, to having "never studied systematic philosophy," saying that he "should be bored to death at the mere thought of doing so. I think the little philosophy that I have read has been read very much in the spirit of . . . a substitute for fiction."[3] Frank Doggett, one of the earliest and most respected philosophical interpreters of Stevens' poetry, suggests that the "concepts that emerge from long reading of the poetry of Stevens are so slight and so basic that any elementary course in philosophy or even a few years of interested reading could yield all of them."[4] Stevens' most concerted phase of philosophical reading does not appear to have begun until the early 1940's, or at the earliest the mid-1930's, when the poet was already in his fifties (WS 966; Richardson, *Later* 170–1, 175). As an undergraduate at Harvard,

Stevens met with the philosopher George Santayana, but their meetings seem to have revolved around poetry and the exchange of poems, rather than philosophical discussion. The young Stevens took no philosophy courses, apparently never saw Santayana lecture, and concentrated instead on literary study and journalism. Throughout his life, he confessed an intermittent insecurity about his philosophical skills (Richardson, *Later* 385; *L* 476).

There appears to have been a brief period, in the wake of his increased attention to philosophy in the early 1940's, when Stevens at least flirted with the idea of attempting a more systematic and orthodox work of philosophy, or joked about doing so. It was during this time that he created his longest and most philosophically ambitious poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and began writing the highly theoretical essays on reality and the imagination that would eventually be collected as *The Necessary Angel.* "[I]f I had nothing else in the world to do except to sit on a fence and think about things," Stevens writes in 1942 to his wealthy expatriate friend Henry Church, whom he admired for spending his life in precisely this way, ". . . I could very well do a THEORY OF SUPREME FICTION, and I could try to do a BOOK OF SPECIMENS, etc." (*L* 431). He soon abandoned the idea, however, proposing it instead as a project to "occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations" (*L* 435). If Stevens ever considered writing a theoretical treatment of the supreme fiction in philosophical or critical prose, a "literal text" (*L* 443) to complement his poetry, the ambition passed.

Especially after his intensified interest in philosophy began to wane, Stevens came to insist that even his most philosophy-laden poetry should not and could not be read for a paraphrasable, systematic doctrine. He may even have seen his prose in this light. In the introduction to *The Necessary Angel,* he reminds the reader that the essays which follow "are not pages of criticism or of philosophy" (WS 640). Perhaps his most strictly philosophical work, the 1951 lecture "A Collect of Philosophy," includes the definitive and uncharacteristically unqualified statement, "I am not a philosopher" (WS 860). The lecture itself lends some credence to Stevens' disavowal. Not only does the "Collect" deal exclusively with the "poetic" rather than logical, doctrinal or systematic aspects of philosophy, but it seems to have been collected largely from letters written by Stevens' friends and from the summaries contained in Arthur Kenyon Rogers' 1917 introductory textbook, *A Student's History of Philosophy.* Though the philosopher Paul Weiss, one of the friends Stevens quotes in the lecture, invited Stevens to submit the final version of the essay for publication in the *Review of Metaphysics,* he eventually retracted the offer and returned the manuscript. Stevens later declined to have it published in any form.[5] In his final years, he repeatedly made clear that he did not view his poetry as a philosophical system disguised in symbol and sound. To Sister Bernetta Quinn, in 1952, he writes, "My object is to write esthetically valid poetry. I am not so much concerned with philosophical validity" (*L* 752). Again, to an aspiring reviewer in 1954: "[W]e are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system" (*L* 864).

And yet, and yet—there is the supreme fiction. It would be extremely misleading to suggest that Stevens was without philosophical ambition, either in the early 1940's or later. But it was an ambition of a very particular kind. Stevens summarizes his project in an important biographical note written in 1954, less than a year before his death:

> The author's work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment. In the creation of any such fiction, poetry would have a vital significance. There are many poems relating to the interactions between reality and the imagination, which are to be regarded as marginal to this central theme. (*L* 820)

After a lifetime of poetic effort, Stevens presents his central achievement not as the creation of a supreme fiction, but the "suggestion" of the "possibility" of such a creation. What has appeared to many critics to be the central theme of Stevens' poetry—the "interactions between reality and the imagination"—is in fact peripheral, the poet suggests, to the mere "suggestion" of such a grand "possibility." The remainder of this essay will attempt to maintain as clear a line as Stevens does here between the *project* for a supreme fiction and the *poetry* that suggests its possibility. If reality and imagination are marginal to the supreme fiction, "this central theme," then the central theme is itself marginal to the poetry. Of course, the idea of a supreme fiction owes its prominence to Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The poem attracts our attention, and its title leads us toward what seems a tantalizingly complex and elusive idea, precisely the sort of implicit profundity that literary criticism excels at hauling up from the depths. Yet "Notes," as the title suggests, does not present us with any examples of supreme fiction; rather, it offers some preparation of the grounds for the arrival of one. It leads us in a series of peregrinations *toward* a supreme fiction, but stops short of the promised land. The poetry and the project keep a certain distance from each other, making it possible for one to stand while the other falls.

Before turning to a closer look at what Stevens meant by "a supreme fiction," we should pause for a moment on the wording of his biographical note. As late as 1954, less than a year before his death, Stevens does not claim to have invented or discovered a supreme fiction. He suggests that men *could* propose to themselves a fulfillment in such a fiction—not that men *can* so propose, as we would tend to say if the fiction were already realized. Again, had he believed the supreme fiction to exist, Stevens could have written, "In the creation of any such fiction, poetry *has* a vital significance." Had he wanted to leave his own accomplishment more ambiguous, he could have written, "poetry *will have* a vital significance"—as if to say: whether or not I have created such a fiction, any future creations will necessarily be poetic. But he chooses instead to say, "In the creation of any such fiction, poetry *would have* a vital significance." The conditional mood suggests that Stevens refers to something that, in his opinion, has not yet arrived. On the one hand, there *are* many poems about reality and the imagination, and on the other hand, there

would be a vital role for poetry in any supreme fiction. His poems exist; the supreme fiction does not, but it is possible.

What, then, is a supreme fiction? The notion is grand in scale but surprisingly simple in structure. A supreme fiction would be a specific idea, known to be a fiction, that would be as valid and fulfilling as the idea of God, and which people could will themselves to believe. By willfully believing in this fictive idea, they might compensate for whatever has been lacking since the generally proclaimed loss of belief in God. Stevens truly seems to have hoped that his poetry, and in particular "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," opened the way to the invention of such an idea, a willed replacement for religious belief.

The earliest roots of the supreme fiction seem to lie in Stevens' rejection of the Puritan faith of his childhood, an apostasy that proceeded gradually, even fitfully, so that it is difficult to locate any single, defining moment of the loss of faith. By the time he left Harvard in 1900, at the age of twenty, Stevens had already expanded his notion of God in a generally romantic and mystical direction, but remained respectful of piety as an ideal (Richardson, *Early* 60, 62). His wavering orthodoxy in this period can be detected in his journals, where he writes of an "old argument" in his mind according to which "the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature" (*L* 58), which reveal or betoken "the Invisible" (*L* 59). The young law student of 1902 remains unwilling to reject the church or the idea of God outright, settling instead upon a tense balance between his religious commitments. "The priest in me," he writes, "worshipped one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another shrine" (*L* 59), namely in the natural world of his long weekend rambles. These two "deities" present no "conflict," only a "contrast" (*L* 59), and Stevens gives little indication of experiencing the evolution in his religious beliefs as a crisis.

Soon, however, the divinities' truce begins to unravel. In a passionately conflicted letter of 1907, Stevens declares to his future wife, Elsie Moll, that he is "not in the least religious," but at the same time that he is "very, very glad" to hear of her growing involvement in a church (*L* 96). The ostensibly unreligious Stevens then goes on to note that he continues to say his prayers "every night," though he adds, "not that I need them now, or that they are anything more than a habit, half-unconscious" (*L* 96). Throughout the letter, he seems unwilling to concede any truth to revealed, organized religion, but also unable to reject its validity. It is as though Stevens hopes to reject Christianity for himself but to defend its legitimacy for others, perhaps so that he can avoid seeing its adherents—including the woman he courts, the ancestors he admires, and much of his living family—as mere dupes of an illusion from which he has freed himself. When Stevens writes a month later that he has thrown away his Bible during a bout of spring cleaning, and adds, almost offhandedly, "I hate the look of a Bible" (*L* 102), we might interpret his words, following Joan Richardson, as evidence of a "religious crisis" that reached its meridian in the spring of 1907 (*Early* 253). But even in subsequent years Stevens maintains an ambivalent relation to the terms of his childhood faith. In a 1909 letter to Elsie Moll, he speaks of the contemporary Christian church as "largely a

relic" and presents the miraculous events of Jesus' life as open to doubt, but finishes by saying that "everyone admits in some form or another" the existence of God (*L* 140). What is clear from the progress of Stevens' withdrawal from Christianity in his twenties and thirties is that it did not represent a devastation for him. Each step of the way, other illusions or ideals—whether of a romantic Nature, a mystical Invisible or an enchanted love—took the place of the earlier orthodox dogma. For example, on Eastern Sunday, 1916, Stevens writes to his wife, still a practicing Christian, "Unfortunately there is nothing more inane than an Easter carol. It is a religious perversion of the activity of Spring in our blood" (*L* 193). Even in this seemingly bitter denunciation of religious ritual, contemporaneous with *Harmonium*, the poet implicitly sets forth a competing value: the pagan, corporeal vigor of springtime.

Not until much later in life does Stevens begin to articulate his dissatisfactions with the alternatives to religion he has found at his disposal. In a January, 1940 letter to the critic Hi Simons, Stevens writes of "thinking of some substitute for religion" as "a habit of mind with me . . . My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe" (*L* 348). Several months later, this habit of mind has metamorphosed into the beginnings of a project. "If one no longer believes in God (as truth)," Stevens continues to Simons, "it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else" (*L* 370). The poet makes explicit the pattern already evident in his earlier journals and letters, according to which orthodoxy is rejected not in the name of nihilism but of some higher object of belief, whether romantic, mystical or pagan. But now he suggests that the ersatz beliefs upon which he has hitherto relied have proved, in the end, somehow inadequate to the task. In the earlier letter, Stevens notes, "Humanism would be the natural substitute [for religion], but the more I see of humanism the less I like it" (*L* 348). It is unclear what, specifically, Stevens might have had in mind by "humanism," but a remarkable passage later in the letter, part of a commentary on "Anglais Mort à Florence," offers a hint:

> Most people stand by the aid of philosophy, religion and one thing or another, but a strong spirit . . . stands by its own strength. Even such a spirit is subject to degeneration. I suppose we have to consider new faiths with reference to states of helplessness or states of degeneration. If men have nothing external to them on which to rely, then, in the event of a collapse of their own spirit, they must naturally turn to the spirit of others. I don't mean conventions: police. (*L* 348)

If we assume that "humanism" is synonymous with, or at least closely related to, the standing alone (without God) of a strong spirit, then Stevens' trouble with humanism would seem to be its fragility. Given the uncertainty of even a strong spirit's strength, a pure humanism would leave its bearer exposed to the possibility of helplessness and spiritual collapse, as the poem upon which the commentary is based suggests. "Anglais Mort à Florence" takes as its subject the reminiscences of a once spiritually powerful, now dulled and cadaverous, figure of age. In his state

of perceptual degeneration, the figure grasps upon the surety of delight he knew in youth, "When to be and delight to be seemed to be one, / Before the colors deepened and grew small" (WS 120). Now, no longer able to stand by his own strength, no longer able to achieve the effortless spiritual communion he once knew, the fading spirit props himself upon "God's help and the police" (WS 120). Humanism, the poem and letter seem to suggest, simply cannot sustain itself against the onslaught of age and its attendant maladies. By accepting nothing conventional, nothing established by any power apart from itself, and by being, itself, ultimately no more secure than the vulnerable flesh upon which it depends, the strong spirit of humanism pushes inexorably in the direction of its own undermining, toward reliance on "new faiths," religious conventions, and the protection of police who promise a more enduring security. The more Stevens saw of humanism, he wrote, the less he liked it. His statement may have had less to do with having read more humanist philosophy than with "seeing more of" the frail being at humanism's center. At the time of his letter to Simons, Stevens was entering his sixtieth year.

In another letter to Simons, written a few months after his note on "Anglais Mort à Florence," Stevens continues his slow progress away from established replacements for religious belief, now taking as his target a Coleridgean conception of the imagination as primal creative force. "Logically," he writes, perhaps with the implication "because I am a poet," "I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination. A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned an identity for that thing" (*L* 370). Whereas in the earlier letter, with its talk of "thinking of some substitute for religion," it remained possible to imagine the substitute as some pre-existing ritual or system of beliefs, Stevens now makes clear that the substitute for belief in God will be "a thing created by the imagination," or in other words, a fiction. He goes on in the letter to refer to "Asides on the Oboe," a recent poem in which the identification between something like religious belief and fiction is made explicit. The work begins with the pivotal pronouncement:

> The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. (WS 226)

"Final belief" could mean chronologically final, as what is reached after all searching has ended, the belief that will never be superseded; or logically final, as the ultimate ground for all other beliefs, the belief that cannot itself be questioned. Either way, it would seem to bear affinities with the kind of belief one previously had in God. Stevens asserts the equivalence of final belief and belief in a fiction even more clearly in an undated notebook entry, possibly from the same period as the letters, shortly before he began composition of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction": "The final belief is to believe in a fiction . . . The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (WS 903). The fundamental contours of the supreme fiction are now in place. In order to compensate for the loss of God, one will believe in a fiction. Only the name for this kind of fiction is lacking.

But what sort of idea, fictional or otherwise, could replace the idea of God? What would such an idea look like? In a frequently cited October 15, 1940 letter to Henry Church proposing the establishment of a chair of poetry, Stevens offers a few hints as he attempts to define poetry and its aims. We can read the resultant "Memorandum" as a partial summing up of the progression in the previous section. First, Stevens cautions that by "poetry" he does not so much mean words written in verse form as he does "poetic ideas," the "subject-matter" of poetry. What is a "poetic idea"? Stevens illustrates by example. "The major poetic idea in the world," he explains,

> is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing, but the intention is not to foster a cult. (WS 806)

The extreme seriousness of Stevens' ambition for poetry is evident in his distinguishing this ambition, twice in a three-page memorandum, from a *cult*. Two centuries after the death of William Blake, who would mistake the goal of poetry for the creation of a religious sect? Yet once we understand that Stevens hoped to see poetry offer an adaptation or substitution for belief in God, or a negation of it, his insistence becomes more comprehensible. As Stevens suggests, the three possibilities for poetry may amount to the same thing: "adaptation" can be seen as substitution with an altered original, and "making it unnecessary" can be seen as substitution with nothing. All three possibilities represent modes of substitution for the idea of God.

Assuming that a functional replacement for belief in the "major poetic idea in the world," God, might itself be a poetic idea, it is worth noting that poetic ideas also play a prominent role in Stevens' lecture of a decade later, "A Collect of Philosophy." There, he offers no straightforward elucidation of the criteria according to which an idea qualifies as "poetic," except to say that any poetic idea would have to be "securely lofty" (WS 853) and would give "the imagination sudden life" (WS 851). A list of poetic ideas, according to Stevens, would include the following: "God" (here, similarly to the letter to Church, "the ultimate poetic idea" [WS 859]), "the ascent to heaven," "the infinity of the world," and the "inexhaustible infinity of a priori" in our minds (WS 860), all surely "lofty" ideas either in the literal sense of rising aloft to the heavens or in the more figurative sense of infinity as a transcendence of finite numbers. Poetic ideas can also have the form of propositions, such as "all things participate in the good," "the world is at once the best and most rational of worlds," "all things happen by necessity," and "everything is everywhere at all times" (WS 855, 858). Ideas such as these are to be themes of what Stevens calls, without elaboration, but echoing the title of his by then celebrated long poem, "supreme poetry" (WS 854).[6] At the end of the lecture, Stevens draws even closer to the language of supreme fictions, identifying the "willingness to believe beyond belief" with "the presence of a poet" (WS 867). If we assume Stevens' use of the

phrase "poetic idea" did not change substantially between his letter to Church and his lecture on philosophy, and the parallel phrasing regarding the idea of God suggests he did not, we might conclude that the supreme fiction itself, the subject of "supreme poetry," would be a "poetic idea." It would possess a family resemblance with the poetic ideas listed above: "the ascent to heaven," "all things happen by necessity," and so on. These are the sorts of things one might believe in, once one disbelieves in God and if one finds something lacking in the very earth-bound, unlofty constraints of humanism.

Stevens had used the phrase "supreme fiction" years earlier in a short poem from *Harmonium,* "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," but had then abandoned it. The name suddenly re-emerges decades later in the May, 1941 lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." There, Stevens describes "how poets help people to live their lives":

> 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. (WS 662)

What does Stevens mean by "supreme fictions" in this lecture, composed only months before "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"? Several key terms in the passage allow for very divergent interpretations, especially "poet," "world," "conceive" and "incessantly." On the one hand, Stevens' earlier quotation of a poem by Wordsworth indicates that he does, at least partly, mean "poet" to refer to historically-situated individuals who wrote in verse. But in what sense do their poems give to "our" lives anything so essential that we would be unable to "conceive" of life without them? Do I really turn to the creations of Wordsworth and others like him "incessantly"? And in what sense do these poets create "worlds," if, as Stevens has just said, they "adhere to reality" (WS 662)? Perhaps we should read "incessantly" as hyperbole, or "poet" as a label not only applied to writers of verse like Wordsworth but to all those who have shaped our inherited ways of thinking, as Stevens suggests in "Men Made Out of Words": "The whole race is a poet that writes down / The eccentric propositions of its fate" (WS 309). If the whole race from whom our language and ideas come is a "poet," then perhaps we do turn to this poet "incessantly" in our thoughts. Either way, Stevens' use of "supreme fictions" in "Noble Rider" would seem irreconcilable with what will soon be called "a supreme fiction," the newly formed fictional substitute for God recognized as a fiction. He does not speak here of a "possibility" but of (plural) fictions which we *must already* possess, since if we did not possess them, we would be unable to think as we do. We seem forced to take the passage not as the long-awaited christening of Stevens' philosophico-religious project, but as one more step in that direction, a deferral of the grand conjunction of signifier and signified.

Judging by the published letters and other writings, it seems that Stevens did not decide upon "supreme fiction" as the name for his long-germinating idea of a

substitute for religious faith until he decided upon the title of his latest work. This appears to have happened at some point in early 1942, a little less than a year after writing of "supreme fictions" in "The Noble Rider." Stevens composed the poem at an uncharacteristically brisk pace, assembling all 630 lines, ten for each of his sixty-three years, in barely three months. When he was nearly finished, he wrote his publisher with details of the project, now (at last) entitled "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The three sections of the poem, he explains, "are three notes by way of defining the characteristics of supreme fiction" (*L* 407). When naming his poem and writing of these "characteristics," did Stevens have in mind the project to invent a fictional substitute for the idea of God, as described in the pages above?

The identification seems clear enough in letters written shortly after the poem's completion, such as the following note to Henry Church. Speaking of the "fiction . . . of the NOTES," Stevens writes:

> We are confronted by a choice of ideas: the idea of God and the idea of man. The purpose of the NOTES is to suggest the possibility of a third idea: the idea of a fictive being, or state, or thing as the object of belief by way of making up for that element in humanism which is its chief defect.[7]

Whether or not we follow "Anglais Mort à Florence" in taking the "chief defect" of humanism to be the human beings at its center, subject as they are to the rebellious defections of age and infirmity, it seems that we have reached the culmination of our story. From the vague project of a substitute for religious belief, to the idea that this substitute would be a fiction, to the idea that this fictive idea would be willfully believed, we finally arrive at the name of such a substitute: the "fiction" of the "Notes," that is, the "supreme fiction."

The "supreme fiction" toward which the "Notes" direct themselves is, as of this April 21, 1943 letter, something both possible and not yet realized. As we have seen, it will remain possible and unrealized for the remainder of Stevens' life, from the "Collect" of 1950 (where it is described as "a compensation of time to come" [WS 855]) to the biographical note of 1954, in which Stevens writes that his work "suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction." Combining the poet's statements, we can say that someone may one day dream up an idea of "a fictive being, or state, or thing" that will "adapt" the idea of God "to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary," at the same time "making up" for the insufficiencies in humanism.[8] An idea of a "being": perhaps something like the being of God, the major poetic idea in the world; or of a "state": perhaps something like the state of all things happening by necessity, another poetic idea; or of a "thing": perhaps something like heaven, the "securely lofty" poetic invention that Stevens seems to have admired second only to that of God. Someone may one day be inspired with such a fictive idea, and perhaps the inspiration will have had to do with the reading of Stevens' "Notes." But Stevens never recorded encountering such an idea, nor did he leave any evidence of believing he had created one.

In must be acknowledged, however, that a significant gap exists in the story sketched above. In the time between the composition of "Notes Toward a Supreme

Fiction" in early 1942 and the April 1943 letter to Henry Church, Stevens composed a handful of letters that have, perhaps as much as the "Notes" themselves, fueled the quest to identify a supreme fiction based on or in Stevens' poetry. In these letters, Stevens sometimes *seems* to identify "poetry" in some sense as the supreme fiction toward which the "Notes" gesture. For example, in the letter from Stevens to his publisher, quoted above, immediately after explaining that the three sections of the poem "are three notes by way of defining the characteristics of supreme fiction," Stevens continues, "By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry" (*L* 407). What could be more unequivocal? Does this not prove that, in spite of all we have seen, Stevens *did* believe he had identified the supreme fiction, the long-sought replacement for God? Does this not prove that he believed poetry itself (in general, or as an ideal) would stand in for God, and believed this during the very period in which he composed "Notes," which, as I suggested, probably provides the ultimate grounds for our interest in the idea of "supreme fiction"? Even if he later renounced the identification of poetry as a or the supreme fiction, this renunciation would not negate his having identified the two during the composition of the poem.

Two aspects of Stevens' identification of "supreme fiction" and "poetry" might hold us back from proclaiming that Stevens did, after all, identify in poetry what he could no longer find in God. The first is the absence of an article. Stevens does not say that poetry is "*the* supreme fiction," or even "*a* supreme fiction," but simply "supreme fiction." A poet who writes, "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the" (WS 186)—such a poet is not unaware of the semantic weight of an article. "*The*" or "*a* supreme fiction" might have suggested *the* supreme fiction toward which the "Notes" direct themselves, *a* supreme fiction that might fill the gaps in humanism and compensate for the demise of the Christian God. Instead, we have "the characteristics of supreme fiction," and "by supreme fiction." We have a term without article that largely disappears from Stevens' subsequent letters.

The second element which might give us pause is the "of course." It seems highly doubtful that at any time Stevens saw the precise nature of a monumental, fictive successor to religious belief as something obvious or self-evident. No matter what the substitute for the idea of God might be, it would almost certainly not be a matter of course, nor of an "of course." Whatever Stevens means to equate poetry with, then, it would seem not to have been "the supreme fiction" that would satisfy the sense of post-theistic longing. Perhaps by saying he "means" poetry when he says supreme fiction, Stevens uses the word "means" in a sense analogous to its use in the following scenario: A choreographer intends to create a "supreme spectacle" in an upcoming show. She informs the producer that "supreme spectacle" consists of the following characteristics: abstraction, change, and pleasure. "By supreme spectacle," she adds, "of course, I mean dance." Here, the "of course" makes perfect sense: the three characteristics of "supreme spectacle" were so general, they left it unclear that the spectacle would involve (of course) the medium of dance, which is after all the choreographer's trade. So might Stevens have meant to note, in passing, that any supreme fiction would, of course, also be the subject for poetry, and would be embodied in poetry. He says as much in the 1954 biographical note, cited

above: "In the creation of any such fiction, poetry would have a vital significance." Why would a supreme fiction appear in poetry, and not, say, in philosophy, politics, cuisine or dance? Is this purely a poet's bias? Part of the explanation may be that Stevens, as we saw in the closing lines of "Collect," identifies the very idea of "belief beyond belief" with the "presence of a poet." It may be possible to create a supreme *idea* in theology, equestrian sculpture, or science, and it may be possible to create an *entertaining* and otherwise *adequate* fiction in prose, but a *supreme fiction*—both fictive and capable of holding its own against religious faith—demands a poetic vehicle. Or so Stevens seems to have believed.

In associating supreme fiction and poetry, Stevens may also have had in mind his isolated first use of the phrase "supreme fiction," decades earlier, in the teasingly blasphemous poem from *Harmonium* mentioned above, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." The poem begins with the declaration, "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame" (WS 47), and goes on to imagine poetry and the "fictive things" of its creation as an exuberant, transformative "opposing law" to the severe moralizing of orthodox Christianity. As we have seen, the poem long predates Stevens' identification of the phrase "supreme fiction" with his hope for a fictive replacement for religious belief, so we have no reason to read the poem's first line through the lens of the later and larger project. Without any further specification, the "supreme" in "supreme fiction" would naturally evoke the idea of a "supreme being," in which case the line might be paraphrased, "Your God, madame, may be the supreme *being*, but poetry is the supreme *fiction*." Given the delight the poem takes in "fictive things," such an assertion would be tantamount to suggesting that poetic fiction trumps the high-toned Christian's grave deified being. Alternately, and with even more pagan mischief, the line could be read as saying, "Your God, madame, is certainly a fiction, but poetry is the *supreme* fiction." Such iconoclasm might be a little too caustic even for *Harmonium*, but if we follow it, "fiction" could mean something like "imaginative creation" or "act of the imagination" and would need no connotation of a specific, fictive, willfully believed idea with which to fill a God-shaped void.

Certainly, there have been writers who have valorized poetry to religious heights, and Stevens sometimes belongs among them. But it is unclear how his respect for the powers of poetry in these moments could constitute an identification of the supreme fiction. In one of his undated aphorisms, he writes, "God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry" (WS 907), and in another he states, "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (WS 901). God and high poetry may both be symbols for the same lofty idea or thing, and "poetry" may in some sense serve as the recompense for the loss of God, but what, specifically, are we to make of "poetry" in these hermetic fragments? Did Stevens see the creation of verse as a *fictive* idea that men could *will themselves* to believe? What would it mean for the very *idea* of poetry to be a fiction? (Does anyone not believe that poetry exists?) Perhaps we could imagine a poet inventing a supremely lofty, or even somehow mystical, conception of the nature and importance of

poetry. Then we could see this conception, if recognized as a fiction and nevertheless believed, and if sufficient as a surrogate for the idea of God, as fitting Stevens' standard for a supreme fiction. But Stevens himself gives no indication of believing he has carried out this project.

By the end of 1942, Stevens had already revised the ambiguous terms of his letter to the Cummington Press ("By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry"). He writes to Henry Church, "I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The NOTES start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract." Then, once again adding a provocative "of course," Stevens adds, "Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure" (*L* 430). Keeping in mind the loftiness of the poetic implied by Stevens in his treatment of "poetic ideas," could this idea of changeably pleasing poetry constitute the fictive idea that might replace the idea of God? Yet as soon as Stevens begins to articulate how poetry might be a supreme fiction, he displaces it into a potential, not actual, "long run." If poetry is to become in some sense the supreme fiction, then the precise contours of that sense must remain unclear. A month later, in another of his exegetical letters to Hi Simons, Stevens has become even less definite: "I ought to say that I have not yet defined a supreme fiction . . . I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean" (*L* 435). He laments his failure to "rationalize" the "enigma," to make it more precise, and in a follow-up note two weeks later abandons such attempts altogether. "I think I said in my last letter to you that the Supreme Fiction is not poetry," Stevens concludes, now clearly marking out the stature of the idea with capitals, "but I also said that I don't know what it is going to be. Let us think about it and not say that our abstraction is this, that or the other" (*L* 438). Such refusal of speculation about the location of his fictive grail settles into an official position for Stevens. "I confess that I don't want to limit myself as to my objective" (*L* 485), he writes of the supreme fiction in 1945. Never again does he identify "a" or "the" supreme fiction, or supreme fictions in general, with poetry, or with anything else. But on another matter he is equally consistent: the kind of supreme fiction gestured toward in his poem's title "would never amount to much . . . until it has all come to a point" (*L* 435). A supreme fiction must be specific, a specific idea. It must be the sort of thing one could hold in one's mind, clearly, perhaps on the way to war, as Stevens implies in the epilogue to "Notes." It will be an "arbitrary object of belief," and will serve as an "artificial subject for poetry, a source of poetry" (*L* 485). Idea, belief, subject: the supreme fiction may be abstract, but it will also be specific and articulable, perhaps with as much rhetorical precision as the older "poetic ideas" of God, heaven, or the necessity of all things.

Once again, the crucial fact, unchanged since Stevens first began to muse on the need to believe in "something else" once one no longer believes in God, is that he does not believe this other belief to have yet been created. Even during the period in 1942 and 1943 when he seems to speculate, in shifting terms, about the possibly poetic status of a supreme fiction, Stevens does not assert that he or anyone else has arrived at or even realized in poetic practice the relevant idea of poetry. He

writes of "Notes" during this period, "the nucleus of the matter is contained in the title. It is implicit in the title that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction" (*L* 430). There *can be,* though there *is* not. He insists to Hi Simons, in one of the rare passages in the published letters containing an underlined phrase, "In principle there appear to be certain characteristics of a supreme fiction *and the NOTES is confined to a statement of a few of those characteristics*" (*L* 435). As if anticipating the half-century of critical controversy that would enshroud the supreme fiction of the poem's title, Stevens emphasizes that the "Notes" do not contain that which they point toward. Nor do they constitute an exhaustive or systematic statement of the nature of the thing. They merely offer a "few" of the characteristics it would "appear" "in principle" to need. In this letter to Simons, Stevens also makes his suggestion, noted above, that the subject of a supreme fiction "could occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations," and characterizes such work as "trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been, and for that matter remains" (*L* 435). The supreme fiction can, conceivably, be created. It is possible.

Given the late composition of the 1954 biographical note, and its gesture toward "the possibility of a supreme fiction," it seems reasonable to assume that Stevens hoped a sufficient supreme fiction might appear after his death. Perhaps tragically, it has not. I would even have to disagree with Marjorie Perloff's already less-than-optimistic claim that Stevens comes to recognize in the course of "Notes" that the supreme fiction can exist "only in the 'fluent mundo' of poetic language, a series of endless figural repetitions" (52). This would imply that Stevens recognized the impossibility of creating his supreme fiction. The biographical note of 1954 suggests he did not, and continued hoping for its arrival. His death-bed conversion to Catholicism, if it occurred, might even suggest that he finally decided to adopt an older poetic idea (God), an earlier poet's fiction, as his own, in light of his inability to find a self-made fiction that would suffice.[9]

Stevens thus appears to disagree with critics who identify the supreme fiction as the idea in "Notes" of "this invented world," or of "the major man," or who say that the supreme fiction is the ecstasy the poet experiences, or that it is a solitary poet sublimated into a mortal god, or "perception beyond reason," or a belief lying behind Stevens' final poems in "the world as inhuman meditation" or "reality as cosmic imagination," or "a poetic vision of the supreme spirit creating space and time and manifesting itself in each creative act of human consciousness."[10] At the same time, the poet also seems to distance himself from critics who would read a concept like the supreme fiction as inherently, necessarily or structurally "absent," rather than provisionally lacking but capable of arriving at any moment, once someone thinks of a good enough idea.[11] It is not that any of these interpretations fails to find support in Stevens' poetry. Rather, nearly all of them find more than adequate support. We seem to be confronted with precisely the kind of "equipollence" by which the ancient skeptics aimed to bring about *epochê*, or suspension of judgment. Perhaps we should set the readings off against one another in an illustration of the peculiar "impossibility" of reading Stevens, or the pluralistic richness of his verse. Or perhaps the best way of reading Stevens would be to adopt one, as if by a leap

of faith, or by the fiction that one identification alone could be correct—to choose a door arbitrarily and enter it, rather than standing perpetually in the interpretive hallway. But we can at least recognize the possibility of an alternative, and the fact that this alternative seems to have been the poet's own: a recognition that Stevens did not fully realize the project set out in (what he saw as) the "central theme" of his poetry.

A possibility we have not yet considered is that Stevens' idea of a supreme fiction could *itself* be a supreme fiction, an idea recognized as fictive but believed nonetheless, and offering a substitute for belief in God. Even here, though, it is difficult to meet the poet's demanding standards for what a supreme fiction must be and do. We can distinguish between at least two senses of "Stevens' idea of a supreme fiction" that could serve as candidates for supreme fictionhood: the idea that there *could be* a substitute for the old religious ideal, recognized as invented and yet believed; and the *specific* idea that would fulfill this role, which the critics mentioned above find in one aspect or another of Stevens' poetry. In the first case, it is difficult to see how such a mere possibility could suffice to fill the gap left by a departing God. Could believing in the simple, bare *possibility* of the eventual concoction of some grand poetic idea suffice to drown out "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces"?[12] In the second case, we can begin by wondering whether there are indeed any critics who truly believe in the *existence* of some particular supreme fiction, though they know it to be of Stevens' own creation, something he made up and wrote about in his poetry. We can imagine, for the sake of argument, that at least some of the most philosophically or theologically ambitious interpreters of Stevens' supreme fiction might, in fact, believe in the existence of what they describe—"reality as cosmic imagination," for example—not only as a theme in Stevens' poetry but as the truth. But a problem arises when we consider the nature of their belief. Does our imaginary critic believe that reality truly is cosmic imagination? Or does he recognize that it isn't *really* cosmic imagination any more than Jove is sitting atop a cloud in the heavens, and yet believe in it anyway? Only in the latter case would "reality as cosmic imagination" qualify as a supreme fiction in Stevens' sense: believed though recognized as make-believe. Yet, if the imaginary critic knows that what he believes is not true, in what sense exactly does he "believe" in it? And is such a belief truly strong enough to stand in the footsteps of a perhaps outmoded but in time past very imposing divinity?

Stevens was aware of the paradox lying at the heart of any possible supreme fiction, though it does not seem to have caused him many sleepless nights. Simply put, how is it possible for anyone to believe in something she recognizes as untrue? Those whom Stevens called the "rationalists" in their "square hats" may see such an objection as a knock-down argument against the very possibility of a supreme fiction, but not the poet. Though Stevens tends to avoid speaking of supreme fictions in veridical terms, preferring locutions such as "a fiction, recognized as a fiction" to "a fiction, recognized as untrue," he does not hold back from this step unconditionally either in his poetry or his letters. Shortly after the completion of "Notes," for example, Stevens paraphrases the idea "underlying" the poem by saying

"it might be possible for us to believe in something that we know to be untrue" (*L* 443); and in a poem collected in the same volume as "Notes," the speaker refers to "the nicer knowledge of / Belief, that what it believes in is not true" (WS 291). Stevens seems to have no categorical objection to saying of something that it is known as "not true" and at the same time that it is believed, or believed in. (Stevens does not seem to draw any strict distinction between "belief" and "belief in.") It might also be noted that nowhere in his published writings, so far as I know, does Stevens speak of belief in something known to be "false," though such a possibility would seem implied by his other statements, from a square-hatted point of view. Stevens favors the use of "fiction" to the more philosophically weighted "untrue" or "not true," and "not true" to the more jarring "false," just as he favors the cognitively weaker "recognized" to the epistemically definitive "known."

How does Stevens extricate himself from the paradox of belief in something known to be a fiction? He does not take the easy way out of contradiction, by crafting a clever, Thomistic distinction. "The belief in a supreme fiction is of a different kind than ordinary belief," or, "the supreme fiction is untrue in one sense, but true in another, higher sense"—the poet will have no commerce with such mickey-mocking. Nor does he insist that a supreme fiction would be "neither true nor false," like Planck's "working hypothesis" in "A Collect of Philosophy." Instead, he confronts the paradox of fictive belief head-on and casually dismisses it. In the same 1942 letter to Henry Church in which Stevens imagines writing a "book of specimens" and states that he has "no idea what form a supreme fiction would take," he also reports the following encounter with a student at Trinity College:

> I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction. The student said that that was an impossibility, that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time. (*L* 430)

As an example, Stevens mentions the idea of heaven: "There are plenty of people who believe in Heaven as definitely as your New England ancestors and my Dutch believed in it" (*L* 430). But do they recognize it as a fiction, much less know it to be untrue? The helpless philosopher might intrude to say helpfully that Stevens must assume anyone in his time and milieu to know, in some sense, heaven to be unreal. Or he might attempt to square Stevens' language with Kant's Copernican revolution, as if the poet were drawing attention to the way that objects must conform to our knowledge, and not vice versa, the sense in which what once seemed real apart from us is in fact, in a sense, a "fiction" "created by us." But must we attempt to make the irrational rational once again? Can we, in the end? Why does Stevens' supreme fiction keep running into problems at seemingly every turn—including the final turn, its apparent failure thus far to be realized?

Perhaps we should not be surprised. In Stevens' letters, references to the supreme fiction are occasionally accompanied by allusions to William James' "will to believe":

> if we are willing to believe in fiction . . .
> the need to believe, what in your day, and mine, in Cambridge, was called the will to believe . . . (*L* 431, 443)

The most extended invocation of James' idea occurs immediately following the passage about the skeptic-minded youth from Trinity, the boy who insisted "that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however," Stevens continues, "that we are doing that all the time":

> There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief; if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. (*L* 430)

It is as if Stevens had in mind a model of belief as a sort of mental feat, as if we could will ourselves to believe arbitrarily through a kind of inner exertion—like stretching something inside one's mind into an unfamiliar pose, or lifting a peculiarly heavy mental weight. On this view, coming to believe something known to be untrue would present only a practical difficulty, not a logical one. If we found ourselves unable to believe something, such as a fiction known to be untrue, an appropriate response might be: try harder.

But James does not speak of belief in this way. Throughout "The Will to Believe," the popular lecture he published as part of a book in 1897, when Stevens was in his first year at Harvard and James had just returned to the philosophy faculty there, the philosopher goes out of his way to emphasize that we are only capable of believing a hypothesis when it strikes us as "a real possibility,"[13] something that might very well be true. James refers to such hypotheses as "live," and mocks the idea of attempting to believe in something which is "dead" to us:

> Can we, just by willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth, and that the portraits of him in McClure's Magazine are all of some one else? Can we, by any effort of our will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, . . . feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars? We can *say* any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them . . . (719)

In other words, James leaves no doubt that he does not believe in the possibility of "suspending disbelief," as Stevens says, with reference to something known to be a fiction, known to be of our own creation and presumed untrue. It may be possible for us to *say* we believe such a thing, or to act *as if* we believed it, but to believe it in fact simply lies beyond us. When James turns explicitly to religious belief, later in the lecture, and suggests that it can be intellectually defensible and philosophically lawful to believe "that the best things are the more eternal things," and "that we are better off even now if we believe" this (731–2), as well as to believe in more specific religious hypotheses, he does so on the explicit presupposition that religious belief remains a live option for his audience. "If we are to discuss the question [of religious belief] at all," he notes at the outset, "it must involve a living option. If for any

of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility be true, then you need go no farther" (732). Only a paragraph later, he interrupts his argument to say, again, "All this is on the supposition that it [religious belief] really may be prophetic and right, and that, even to us who are discussing this matter, religion is a live hypothesis which may be true" (732–3). After another paragraph, concluding the lecture, James points out yet again that his argument applies exclusively to "living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve" (734). The point of James' lecture is very explicitly not that we can believe arbitrarily in whatever we choose, given enough effort or desire, but that in certain cases it can be intellectually legitimate to allow ourselves to believe one hypothesis over another despite the absence of decisive evidence. In such cases, both hypotheses must not only be living, but the choice between them must also be both "forced" and "momentous": that is, there must be no possibility of not choosing, and the stakes of the decision must be significant and irreversible (718).[14] Far from opening the way to belief in what we know to be false, James offers strict and narrow criteria for the legitimate application of the will in matters of belief.

But if Stevens took James to be saying that the suspension of disbelief is everywhere possible, he would have been far from alone. Whether or not the young poet read James' lecture, or was simply exposed to the language of its title through conversation during his years in Cambridge, his interpretation of the "will to believe" was shared by many at the time. James himself repeatedly notes in the course of the lecture the great potentials for misunderstanding, as when he warns against identifying the will to believe with "faith" as defined by the schoolboy who says, "Faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true." "I can only repeat that this is misapprehension" (734), James insists. In later years, he regretted the title of his by then most famous lecture. "I once wrote an essay on our right to believe," he writes, "which I unluckily called the *Will* to Believe. All the critics, neglecting the essay, pounced upon the title. Psychologically it was impossible, morally it was iniquitous. The 'will to deceive,' the 'will to make believe,' were wittily proposed as substitutes for it" (457). He suggests that he should have called the lecture instead "The Right to Believe," echoing a phrase which occurs in the lecture's first paragraph and would seem to capture the thrust of the essay much better than its actual title.

Stevens' apparent reliance, in his conception of a supreme fiction, on the widely shared misinterpretation of James' "will to believe" may offer a clue to the difficulties critics have experienced over the last half-century in attempting to define the supreme fiction. If we follow James in rejecting the psychological possibility of believing what we know to be untrue, then the supreme fiction may not only be absent from Stevens' poetry, as the poet himself seems to have believed, but may represent a simple, general impossibility. It may lie outside the range of human capability to find a replacement for God by believing in something known to be a fiction. In fact, we might even go a step further than James and argue that belief in something known to be untrue is not only a *psychological* impossibility, but a *logical* one. It is not so much that we as human beings lack the capacity to believe what

we know to be untrue, as though such belief were simply an ability like any other, and some race of aliens might possess it. Rather, our very *concept* of belief may imply that what is believed is believed to be true. Our customary ways of using the word "belief" simply do not allow for the possibility of believing what one knows to be untrue. In other words, our inability to will belief in fictions recognized as fictions may be less like our inability to fly or see through steel walls, and more like the "inability" of bachelors to be married, or triangles to have four sides. We can imagine a race of creatures with enormous wings and penetrating vision, but what would it look like for a creature to believe in something it knows to be untrue? (What would it look like if a bachelor got married but succeeded, through sheer force of will, in remaining a bachelor?)

There are, in fact, writers who believe in what the Proust scholar Joshua Landy has called "lucid self-delusion," the fully conscious adoption of a belief known to be illusory (Landy 49). For example, as Landy argues, Marcel's calculated efforts in *À la recherche du temps perdu* to deceive himself about Albertine's faithfulness seem to require a simultaneous knowledge and refusal of that knowledge, a "synchronically split" (126) mind. Even in everyday speech, we talk of "deceiving oneself" or being "self-deceived": "Stop lying to yourself," we can say, or, "Deep down I always knew . . . I just couldn't admit it to myself." The model of belief implicit in such statements would seem to allow for at least the logical possibility of a supreme fiction. By assimilating Stevens' project for a supreme fiction to a Proustian or Nietzschean model of willed self-deception, as opposed to the Jamesian model of a right to believe, we might thus succeed in establishing the supreme fiction as a theoretical possibility, precisely what Stevens claimed for it. But the work of creating the supreme fiction in all of its necessary, hard-won specificity would remain our own, and as yet unperformed.

Abbreviations

L	Holly Stevens, ed. *Letters of Wallace Stevens.* New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1966.
WS	Wallace Stevens. *Collected Poetry and Prose.* New York: The Library of America, 1997.

Notes

1. See Dodds' "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*."

2. From "Saint John and the Back-Ache," in Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose.* New York: The Library of America, 1997. 357.

3. Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966. 636.

4. He continues that they "are usually some variation of the idea of the subject-object relationship" (viii–ix).

5. *L* 736. For Weiss' view of the episode, see Jenkins 73–74.

6. It is worth noting, in support of the earlier claim that Stevens truly hoped for the eventual creation of a supreme fiction, but did not believe one to have already been created, that he also says, "The great poetry I have projected is a compensation of time to come" (WS 855).

7. Quoted in Bates 203.

8. Ibid.; WS 806.

9. On the conversion, see Bates 296–7, as well as the letter from Father Arthur Hanley to Stevens scholar Janet McCann, dated July 24, 1977. "He said if he got well," Father Hanley concludes, "we would talk a lot more and if not – he would see me in heaven" (Hanley). If Stevens succeeded in believing he would, after death, meet people he knew in a place called heaven, it is difficult not to think that his success would exemplify the possibility of belief in an idea recognized as a fiction.

10. See, for example, Doggett 105; Bates 234, though also see 267–8; Bloom, *Wallace Stevens* 175–6, 212, 215; Bloom, "*Notes*" 77; Heringman 11; McCann 100; Leggett 15; Carroll 8.

11. See, for example, Miller 285; Riddel 85–86; Jarraway 141.

12. "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie" (Pascal 110).

13. James 717. The lecture was originally delivered as an address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities, then published in the *New World* in June 1896 (ibid.).

14. James' example of a "forced" option is, "Either accept this truth or go without it," in contrast to an "avoidable" option such as "Either call my theory true or call it false" (718). If we attempt to refrain from making a choice in the former case, we only succeed in choosing to go without the proposed truth. The same structure, James suggests, applies to religious belief.

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