

OSCILLATIONS OF THE ABSOLUTE: An Examination of the Implications
of Wallace Stevens' "Central Poetry"

by

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ABSTRACT

The inadequacy of the image has ever been the besetting problem of idealist esthetics. The discrepancy between the absolute and the contingent, between the thing, the idea of the thing and the experience of the thing provides common cause for the compositions of hermetic art. The basic affirmation of this thesis is that the theory of Wallace Stevens offers a demonstrable solution to the problem and that his relational use of images in The Collected Poems overcomes the inadequacy of those images.

In practice, however, this thesis involves the delineation of that solution less than the dialectics necessary to determine its nature. Such a method is dictated by an initial acceptance of deliberate obscuration as one of the formative principles of Stevens' esthetic. The introduction to this paper is little more than an examination of the causes and values of obscuration in Stevens' prose and in his poems and a defence of the method adopted herein to deal with those values; in it, Stevens' poems are viewed as acts appropriate to the practical process of transcendence - a process designed to attain, in the words of the Athanasian Creed, "One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God."

The theoretic validity of transcendence as process becomes the onus probandi of "Part I". It constitutes an attempt to appease apparent ambiguities in Stevens' theory of poetry - ambiguities that have plagued critics who would perceive in his poems the principles of his theory - by determining the nature

and implications of Stevens' concept of "central poetry." The source, nature, and mode of existence of that concept - used herein as generic name for Stevens' total theory - are characterized by the image of oscillations contained in the thesis title. Basically, the discipline of the "central poet" is analogous to that involved in the via affirmativa and via negativa of religious art, but the phrase 'oscillations of the absolute' more easily manifests the character of his symbols. The phrase describes both the movement of the mind from involvement in the limitations of images and ideas to free contemplation and the nature of the 'existent images' which become adequate objects for that contemplation.

The coupling of oscillations in the image with movements of the mind dictates the kind of study projected in "Part II" of this paper. Therein Stevens' theory is compared to the tenets of symbolism, in terms both of the creation of the individual symbol and of the symbolic work - specifically with Mallarmé's concept of "the Book." The architectonics of The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens - the variation and repetition of image, the incorporations of allusion, the progression in the volume from positings of the contingent to existent images of the absolute - are indicated, and the karmic process of the mind as it dramatizes itself in that created architecture is described. Decreation, abstraction, composition, and repetition are treated as the major aspects of the movement of the mind towards the unfettered experience of the absolute.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a concept of the nature of Stevens' poetic that will prove efficacious as a

critical approach to his poems. Its validity, therefore, is dependent upon the degree to which the concept herein evolved provides an insight into the experience of The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.

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PRELIMINARY: An Introduction to Obscurity and a Defence of Method.

Singular Teufelsdröckh, would thou hadst told thy singular story in plain words! ... Nothing but innuendoes, figurative crochets: a typical Shadow, fitfully wavering, prophetic-satiric; no clear logical Picture. "How paint to the sensual eye," asks he once, "what passes in the Holy-of-Holies of Man's Soul; in what words, known to these profane times, speak even afar off of the unspeakable?" We ask in turn: Why perplex these times, profane as they are, with needless obscurity, by omission and by commission? Not mystical only is our Professor, but whimsical; and involves himself ... in eye-bewildering chiaroscuro.

Carlyle - Sartor Resartus

To embark upon a study of the poetry and prose of Wallace Stevens by exploring the possibilities of an analogy between him and Teufelsdröckh may appear bizarre, yet the points of resemblance, not only between the two but also between Teufelsdröckh's English editor and a Stevens' critic-in-the-abstract, are such that the exploration becomes well-nigh inescapable once conceived. The possibilities are such, at least, as to facilitate an orderly introduction to the thesis of this study.

There is, initially, the fact to face that the outcry against obscurity contained in the epigraph of this Introduction has often been voiced by the critics of Stevens and with more cause than Teufelsdröckh's editor could show. As the composer of an esthetic theory couched almost wholly in terms both idiosyncratic and ambiguous, Stevens must inevitably evoke the kind of response expressed by Graham Hough:

The critical essays [of Stevens] either say, with ponderous mannerism, nothing at all; or something so elementary that one can hardly believe it to be the result of such an elaborate procedure... Outside his own peculiar poetic vein he cannot have been a very intelligent man. This is not a thing that can be said of many poets and one would not wish to say it of Stevens, except that the pretensions to a speculative intelligence bulk so

largely in his work. Stranger still, the subject of these meandering pronouncements - the relation between reality and imagination - is the very one that lies at the centre of his poetry.¹

If the prose of The Necessary Angel and Opus Posthumous can have this effect, it is not surprising that Stevens' poetry, based as it is on his theory, should elicit displays of animosity and acrid wit of the kind used by Winters who, in objecting to Stevens' "perverse ingenuity in confusing the statement of essentially simple themes," characterized the poetry by quoting Stevens' poem "The Revolutionists Stop For Orangeade":

Hang a feather by your eye
Nod and look a little sly.²

The analogy between the obscurity of Teufelsdröckh and that of Stevens is not trivial. There are at least two kinds of obscurity - that amorphous kind which comes from vagueness of motive or vacillation in the execution of idea and act, and that unavoidable kind which comes when one seeks to embody the ineffable. Both are equally indefinable in terms of a "clear logical Picture." But Teufelsdröckh had his defense; deliberate obscurity is the only way open, in "profane times," to speak "of the unspeakable." One of the products of this analogy then, is a pronouncement that the purpose of this present study of Stevens' work is to provide a like defense for him by proving that the element of obscurity in his work is a necessary and deliberate aspect of his attempt to speak the unspeakable in honest speech.

It may here be objected that what one man finds abstruse is to another obtuse, that Teufelsdröckh's philosophy was not really obscure, and that allegations of obscurity in writers usually arise because of a penchant in buffoons like Teufelsdröckh's

editor for treating private misreadings as though they were public. Indeed, the probability of such an objection actually occurring can be adequately assessed by reference to the fact that an earlier version of this study of Stevens was rejected on the grounds that it made abstruse what else was perfectly clear to everyone. In face of such objections, it is not enough to apostrophize the perversity of the gods, nor is it possible to become an apostate from the view that Stevens, by deliberate obscurations, sought to bring into being the ineffable. An apologia is needed that will justify both the attribution of obscurity to Stevens' work and the method used in this study to bring that obscurity to bear.

It is easy enough to prove that Stevens was an advocate of obscurity in poetry. Both the superficial statement and the illustration provided by the poem "Man Carrying Thing" make the point evident:

The poem must resist the intelligence
Almost successfully. Illustration:

A brune figure in winter evening resists
Identity. The thing he carries resists

The most necessitous sense. Accept them, then,
As secondary (parts not quite perceived)

Of the obvious whole, uncertain particles
Of the certain solid, the primary free from doubt,

Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow
Out of a storm we must endure all night,

Out of a storm of secondary things),
A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real.

We must endure our thoughts all night, until
The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.

(CP 350-51)

"Man Carrying Thing" is not an obscure poem, but a poem about obscurity. It involves irony to be sure: the resolution of the

problem of the desire for the one in face of the world of the many, contained in the final line, is such that shock is substituted for the reader's tendency to share the quest of "the most necessitous sense," and then a profound yea-saying supplants the shock. But one can explicate the poem in the normal way by demanding of it that it uphold the dicta of the Rev. James Bowyer and exhibit the "reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word."³ The figure is "brune", for example, because the French word is the only one which combines the necessary sense of the figure's intimate merging with the evening with the subtle suggestion of the savageness, the animality, of its English phoneme "bruin." ("Shambling" emerges as an unspoken word image.) The interrelationships among words within the poem, are exact, natural, and efficacious. The "simile" connecting "the brune figure" and "the thing he carries" with the falling snow is exact because, as dimly perceived and interdependent parts of the evening, the qualities of one are perceived by the straining "necessitous sense" as the qualities of both - as for example the "floating" of the snow. The analogy between the concrete image of the evening and the implicit image of the state of mind plagued by doubt and uncertainty is natural because one's vision is twofold and because the strain felt by the mind as it seeks to perceive the truth (or the one, or itself) is like the strain felt by the eyes as one seeks the identity of someone (or something) dimly seen. The two analogies together are efficacious because the concreteness given the state of mind ("A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real") carries past the technical point of departure to the awesome image of "the bright obvious".

To explain why this image is awesome requires that a number of senses that occur simultaneously in reading the poem be strung out in succession, but criticism aims at explanation before effect. The image, then, inspires triumph and terror all at once and is, in consequence, released from all motivation, to become an object for the perfect indifference of esthetic contemplation. (It is what later in this paper will be termed an existent image). The fear and pity derive, of course, from the concreteness given the image by the man-carrying-thing of the title who, having already undergone the transformations induced by his environment (the animality and darkness of brune and the movement and coldness of snow), is now crystallized, quite literally, as the iceman standing neither alive nor dead but free from such limited definitions of existence and non-existence. The impulse of triumph comes because the reader, addressed directly by the narrator, desired to know the figure's identity and to know as a form of rescuing both the figure and himself from the "storm of secondary things." But the counter-impulse of fear follows because, known in the "bright obvious," the figure is utterly alien, utterly unlike the human identity anticipated. The darkness of the many yields to the brightness of the one (one because "obvious" "stands motionless" and has, therefore, corporate being), but that brightness is neither warm nor comforting. What happens in this poem is not that the truth is reduced to 'human understanding' but that human understanding is elevated to truth. By using the technique of direct address, Stevens has first intensified the solipsism that truth will be found within the framework of human concepts of identity and reality, then divided this preconception

into the components of Stoic faith - hope (induced by "the certain solid, the primary free from doubt") and indifference to pain (the command to "Accept, them, then, As secondary" and the assertion "we must endure all night"). The indifference engendered by "the bright obvious" is Stevens' final move; it is an esthetic rather than a Stoic indifference. Stoic indifference is false in that it derives its strength from hope and can be measured only in terms of the intensity of faith in something as yet unpossessed. Esthetic indifference, however, is possible only when the desire to possess which is hope has been negated and consciousness has been freed from all attachments - in this case, from the negative bonds of the many and the positive bond to the one. Such an indifference I call "a profound yea-saying" because it depends upon achieving a state of consciousness in which the dualistic quandary that to affirm one thing is to deny another is absolved by accepting both at once.

Two proofs emerge from the explication of this poem. One is that "Man Carrying Thing" is not an obscure poem; it combines a philosophy of poetry with an act of poetry which can only be delineated clumsily in prose explications but which, nonetheless, are amenable to explication. The second proof supports the contention that Stevens is an advocate of obscurity in poetry. The analogy between the lines "The poem must resist the intelligence/ Almost successfully" and the illustration makes it obvious that Stevens wants his poems to undergo the same kind of obscurations as those suffered by "the brune figure" and that he wants this for the same reason - to transform his reader's awareness from its normal state to a state of esthetic contemplation. To do so,

Stevens must posit preconceived identities for words and then transform those preconceptions. How he does so and why are questions which occupy the main body of this paper.

The proofs which emerge from "Man Carrying Thing" constitute an adequate apologia for attributing deliberate obscurity to Stevens' poetry. That they can also serve to defend the wilful obscurations of Stevens' prose against the kind of charges made by Hough requires explanation. It is a fact that even in prose Stevens resisted the kind of identification created by definition. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," for example, Stevens describes the concept of nobility - the central concept of the essay - in these terms:

I mean that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth; and while I know how difficult it is to express it, nevertheless I am bound to give a sense of it. Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible. Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more quickly. There is a shame in disclosing it and in its definite presentations a horror of it. But there it is. ... I am not thinking of the ethical or the sonorous or at all of the manner of it. The manner of it is, in fact, its difficulty, which each man must feel each day differently, for himself. I am not thinking of the solemn, the portentous or demoded. On the other hand, I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. (NA 33-34)

This is as close as Stevens' reader will get to a direct statement of "nobility." It should be noted, however, that the vagueness of the statement does not appear to be that of a man who doesn't know what he is talking about, nor is it solely a product of the difficulty encountered by all writers of prose who wish to impose a comprehensive order upon a chaos of possibilities. It is the wilful evasion of a man who feels that the life of his concept will be endangered by definition.

Whether or not one feels that the evasion of definition in

prose is unacceptable is beside the point. The point is that Stevens did deliberately embody his esthetic theory in obscure forms and those who want to study Stevens must, of necessity, be prepared to take into account and explain, not merely the theory, but the theory's mode of existence. Such, at least, is the assumption upon which this paper rests.

A detailed defence of the mode of existence of Stevens' theory is part of the involvement in the first part of this paper. Intimations of the kind of defence it will offer have already been given in the defence of the mode of existence of his poetry. Suffice it for now to say that to accept evasive prose as value is to accept the consequence that such evasions are not then to be evaded by simplification. It has been suggested to me, for example, that the concept of "central poetry" used herein as the nexus for all arguments and observations, is explainable in terms of Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination.⁴ While the suggestion is a valid and helpful one, there are several prohibitions, implicit in the nature of the subject, against following it too closely. There is, to begin with, the obvious fact that Coleridge's definitions of the imagination are integral parts of a theory of poetry and a metaphysics which have to be explained as well and which, when explained, do not conform to the mode of existence Stevens demanded for the theory of "central poetry." In truth, this objection is one voiced by Stevens himself in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet":

As poetry goes, as the imagination goes, as the approach to truth, or, say, to being by way of the imagination goes, Coleridge is one of the great figures. Even so, just as William James found in Bergson a persistent euphony, so we find in Coleridge...a man who

may be said to have been defining poetry all his life in definitions that are valid enough but which no longer impress us primarily by their validity. (NA 41)

The second objection is entailed by the first. Though he who made the suggestion was a man capable of comprehending the range of relationships which should and could be applied to any comparison between the theories of Stevens and Coleridge, it is not possible to affirm that all critics who would make the comparison possess his exactitude. When the subject of the comparison recurs in the first part of this paper, an example drawn from a critic of Stevens will afford concrete evidence of the distortions which occur when simplified comparisons are attempted.

The point is appropriate not only to a description of the importance of modes of existence for Stevens, but also to a defence of the methodology of this paper. The whole of this paper is, quite properly in my view, an exercise in apologetics. Its aim is to establish what Stevens' theory of poetry is, by a process of dialectical argument, and to demonstrate pragmatically that the theory thus established is, indeed, the one that informs his poetry. But that aim could not be accomplished if the paper did not include an affirmation of the value of Stevens' theory and practice. Benét's comment - "Stevens' mind dwells with velleities that may well be unimportant - but who is to say they are?"⁵ - is facetious; if they are "velleities" the poems and the prose which disclose them are vapid. Poetry is an act of wholeness, a theory of poetry is a defence of the importance of that act, and criticism must be an explanation of that act, that defence and that importance.

The long arguments and laborious explications that compose

the body of this paper are, then, meant as guarantees not only of the importance of Stevens' work but of the rightness of this kind of approach. Every effort has been made to avoid the pitfalls pointed out so vividly by the presence therein of previous critics of Stevens. To explain what those pitfalls are is to explain why this paper is what it is.

The fact that this paper contains no survey of Stevens' poems, for example, can be justified by the assertion that surveys made previous to a thorough understanding of individual poems are premature and can only lead to distortion. Frank Kermode's survey Wallace Stevens, written as a contribution to the Writers and Critics series, is a case in point. In discussing Stevens' fealty to "reality," Kermode quotes his proofs from lines of poetry taken out of context (the first underlining is mine):

It [reality] is always that upon which the light of the mind must beat, illuminating, warming, but not changing it. It matters where you see it from:
 There are men whose words
 Are as natural sounds
 Of their places
 As the crackle of toucans-
 and also, 'I am what is around me.'⁶

Inasmuch as the two poems from which these lines are taken, "Anecdote of Men By the Thousand" and "Theory," are not didactic, Kermode's proof is unintelligible and his use of the lines a distortion. The context of both poems reveals, when considered, that the mind's relation to "place" (Kermode's term for reality) is experienced in ways totally opposite to that suggested by Kermode. In "Anecdote of Men By the Thousand" the speaker of the lines quoted by Kermode is the "he" of the opening - "The soul, he said, is composed/Of the external world" (CP 51) - and the function of the final two stanzas is to interject, by means (for practical

purposes) of narrative voice, an ironic contradiction of the thesis propounded by "he":

Are there mandolines of western mountains?
Are there mandolines of northern moonlight?

The dress of a woman of Lhasa,
In its place,
Is an invisible element of that place
Made visible. (CP 52)

A bare statement of the contradiction would be that the external world is a composition of the soul, or, to use Kermode's terms, that the mind does indeed "change" reality, not only at significant moments but also during its day to day existence. But the contradiction is experienced as a series of subtle alterations of the content of "he's" statement. The most obvious alteration is "an invisible element of that place" which is the woman's soul "made visible" by the "real" dress acting quite explicitly as embodiment, as manifest symbol of soul. The fact that the "woman" is "of Lhasa" is a delightful stroke, since Lhasa (Lhasa) is a holy city (for Buddhists) comparable, in most respects, to Mecca and Jerusalem and everyone knows the anagogic propensities of holy cities. One could deepen the stroke, speculatively, by commenting that Buddhism admits women as monks and the robes worn by Buddhist monks are reincarnations of the Buddha's way of life?—of, in other words, an invisible ideal emanating from both the individual soul and the One Soul. But even without such speculations, there are the minor alterations in the concept of place which help to bring to light the contradiction in "he's" thesis that had been implicit from the beginning. Place is shown to be a relative concept of the soul as indicated by the narrator's two questions. "He" had spoken of "the East" in capitals (and

here, again, note the subtle ironic prelude to Lhasa and the anagogic level), as though it were a place, but the poem proves that "the East" is a conceived rather than perceived place by positing "western mountains" and "northern moonlight." Moonlight is not a place at all; it exists in reflection everywhere and its direction depends upon which way the observer faces. Western mountains heighten the relativity of direction, and they also contrast with the "valleys" of the "men of a valley/Who are that valley." The contrast is one between circumscribed views and limitless vision. The irony implicit in 'he's' statement is thus brought fully to light; if one says "The soul... is composed/of the external world", one is saying inevitably that the external world is a manifestation of the soul.

Stevens was fond of this kind of ironic inversion. It can be seen, for example, in "Tattoo" (CP 81), where what begins as an invasion of the internal by the external ends as an assault of the internal upon the external; and it can be seen in the fluctuations of sense between opposition and identity that characterize the relation between the two themes of "The Comedian as the Letter C":

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil...(CP 27)

Nota: his soil is man's intelligence. (CP 36)

Inversion can be seen too, although not as explicitly, in the second of the poems used by Kermode for illustration - "Theory":

I am what is around me.

Women understand this.

One is not a duchess

A hundred yards from a carriage.

These, then, are portraits:

A black vestibule;
A high bed sheltered by curtains.

These are merely instances.

The irony here is developed on two fronts. The simple assertion "I am what is around me" is forced to its own contradiction by the final line; if one went on multiplying instances the doctrine 'I am everything' would inevitably emerge. But this is a very funny poem and it is a Stevens armed with ridicule who carries out the major attack against his narrator's thesis. The vanity of women would lead them quickly to the necessity of the carriage as a setting and foundation for their glory, but "a black vestibule" and "a high bed sheltered by curtains," though logical extensions of the carriage, would hardly command the same acceptance. Thackeray's fundamental law - 'above all, been seen' - is not to be taken lightly. Women will surround themselves with carriages for purposes of portraiture - but vestibules and beds (though these, too, undoubtedly have their purpose) never. But the aspect of the original thesis made ridiculous by the analogy of the women is its refusal to grant any powers or sovereignty to the individual 'I' or psyche. That refusal is seen, by analogy, to involve the same cattiness as that displayed by women who would limit the quality of a duchess to the trappings of a duchess - who, in short, would limit beauty in others to costume and cosmetics and, by so doing, destroy the possibility of beauty in themselves.

So the line "I am what is around me" - which Kermode quotes to prove a point about the poetic theory and practice of Stevens - has, in reality, nothing whatsoever to do with Stevens' theoretical position and concerns his practice only in so far as it can

be shown by explicating its context that the line demonstrates his technique for bringing out the ambiguities of all 'x is y' definitions.

While it is true that the distortions engendered by the literal translation of lines of poetry into prose statement can be avoided by observing the elementary distinction between narrative voice and the poet's 'point of view,' the practice is, in reality, indicative of an excusable eagerness on the part of Stevens' critics to make his poetry meaningful and to escape, thereby, forced acquiescence in the proposition that something which moves them deeply is nothing but pretence, or, to use Winters' term, "pseudo-mysticism."⁸ That such eagerness leads, even in careful criticism, to the distortions of interpretive translation can be demonstrated by choosing two illustrations, both involving poems which 'resist the intelligence.'

The first of these illustrations comes from William Van O'Connor's explication of "Fabliau of Florida." (I quote at length because I want the relationship between O'Connor's explication and his basic critical position to be seen clearly. With the exception of the sentence "The barque could be poetry or a human being," the underlining is mine.)

Stevens' usual, or at least very frequent, method in writing a poem is to make a general initial statement. Thus in one of the sections of Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction:

Two things of opposite nature [sic] seem to depend
 On one another, as a man depends
 On a woman, day on night, the imagined
 On the real. This is the origin of change.
 Usually, too, the statement is elaborated, qualified, enlarged, and probed. And all the while, there is being evoked, as well, by means of metaphor, variant phrases, and the employment of deftly appropriate rhythms, a conviction or strong sense of the experience generalized

about in the introductory abstraction. In "Fabliau of Florida," from Harmonium, the generalization is held until the final couplet. The couplet is not quite abstract and is therefore hardly typical, but the method of the poem is indicative of much else that is characteristic of his method.

Barque of phosphor
On the palmy beach,

Move outward into heaven
Into the alabasters
And night blues.

Foam and cloud are one.
Sultry moon monsters
Are dissolving [sic]

Fill your black hull
With white moonlight [sic]

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

The "statement," there will never be an answer to the mystery in which we live, is clear enough. The roaring of the sea, the dissolving clouds, and the firmament extend the simple "statement," giving us as it were convincing and moving proof. Because we are in and a part of this world we should accept it in its fullness - live lives of the sensibilities and imagination. The language is both ambiguous and suggestive. The barque could be poetry or a human being. The luminous barque floats on a dark sea; the beach is rich with physical life; the sky is beautiful with brilliantly contrasting "alabaster" and "night blue [sic]," the alabaster repeating the whiteness of "phosphor" and preparing for the whiteness and suggestions thereof in "foam," "cloud," "moonlight," and surf and the symbolism of blue and moonlight signifying the realm of sensibility and imagination which the poet would not have us neglect or deny.⁹

Those who find O'Connor's explication of "Fabliau of Florida" illuminating, or even admissable as criticism, will no doubt feel that this paper is nothing but the most arrant nonsense. On the other hand, those who share my sense of dumfounding at the travesties of critical principle contained therein will realize that O'Connor's explication is the product of a fundamental conflict between two theories of the nature and function of poetry.

Clearly perceivable behind O'Connor's explication is the assumption that poetry is, or ought to be, what I call euhemeristic. But the poem itself is quite obviously based upon, and amenable only to, theories of poetry which I call hermetic. The distinction between euhemeristic and hermetic theories is a difficult one to make clear, because it is, in the final analysis, a distinction between two artificially rigid philosophies rather than a philosophical distinction. If I were to characterize the euhemeristic theory, for example, as thorough-going humanitarianism, I would make it appear that hermetic theories were based upon a real or "pseudo" mysticism, whereas the hermetic view that the function of poetry is either primarily or wholly 'esthetic' is, in actuality, merely the product of an emphasis upon bursting the bonds of a narrow humanitarianism. To say that the division is fundamental is one thing; to say that the two theories are of necessity mutually exclusive is another.

A digression upon the distinction between these theories is mandatory because it is a distinction which explains why Stevens was so reticent about definitions of his theory. It will emerge clearly in the first part of this paper that Stevens' theory of poetry is one which negates the artificial distinction between the two by destroying the most extreme premiss of each - the euhemeristic doctrine that terms like God, soul, and poetry should be explained in terms of psychological or sociological or some-kind-of-logical phenomena, and the hermetic doctrine that all the absolute things, like God, soul, and poetry, are not demonstrable in man's mere terms and can be known only through belief. Stevens' whole effort was directed toward proving that the hermetic

acceptance of absolutes could be reached, and indeed must inevitably be reached, through the euhemeristic. His aim, in other words, was to transform the euhemeristic into the hermetic. This is not the same as saying that he wanted the hermetic to become the euhemeristic because the euhemeristic is, by virtue of its mode of existence, directed towards the exclusion of certain human attitudes or states of mind, while the hermetic, because of the absolute nature of its postulates, must be potentially capable of including everything. To object to Tindall's observation - "By his Stevens' prose you can prove anything you like"¹⁰ - is to give a sense of the difference; proving the accord of everything is not like proving "anything you like."

The trouble with O'Connor's explication of "Fabliau of Florida" is not that it exhibits the same kind of unfortunate misreading that led O'Connor to attribute to Stevens Tate's tribute to T.S. Eliot,¹¹ but that it passes over the real act of the poem in a frantic attempt to make it conform to euhemeristic preconceptions of the nature and function of poetry. O'Connor assumes that the function of the poem is to say something to someone; and he gives his reader two related statements which supposedly issue from the poem - "The 'statement,' there will never be an answer to the mystery in which we live..." and the statement "Because we are in and a part of this world we should accept it in its fullness - live lives of the sensibillites and imagination." The first of these statements is applicable to the poem only in so far as it is applicable to thousands of poems; as an explication of the last two lines it is meaningless. "There will never be an end/To this droning of the surf" is not addressed

to O'Connor's "we"; it is a narrative comment made at the conclusion of a series of commands addressed to the "Barque of phosphor." The second of O'Connor's statements purports to elicit from the poem a moral law; it suggests, in other words, that the poet is making a plea for a certain course of action, a certain way of living. Again, as a general observation about what poets do indirectly in publishing their poems, this statement is probably true; but any direct connection between it and the poem is garnered only by a process that makes a mockery of the concept of "symbolism." O'Connor is right when he says that the language of the poem "is both ambiguous and suggestive," but when he attempts to make concrete images yield a statement of abstract terms first by speculating that the barque of phosphor "could be poetry or a human being" and then by dogmatically asserting "the symbolism of blue and moonlight signify ... the realm of sensibility and the imagination" - he wantonly destroys the very quality of suggestiveness upon which the poem, as poem, depends. If the relationship between abstract statement and concrete image were really as O'Connor suggests, people who read symbolist poetry would do better to turn to philosophy.

In point of fact, one can read "Fabliau of Florida" in the allegorical manner O'Connor suggests. One then sees, "poetry or a man, from the midst of a rich physical life ("the beach is rich with physical life") "Move outward" into "the realm of sensibility and imagination," because, presumably, "he" or "it" has to accept the world "in its fullness." That the result of such a reading is both arbitrary and unsatisfying should be obvious. But neither is it satisfactory to echo Holmes and say that Stevens is "... one of

the best non-communicating poets of our day"¹² because such a claim would validate Yvor Winters' major objection against Stevens' kind of poem:

...The chief disadvantage is that it renders intelligible discussion of art impossible, and it relegates art to the position of an esoteric indulgence, possibly though not certainly harmless.....¹³

The question is not one of whether "Fabliau of Florida" communicates but of what it communicates, and the only way to find out is to read the poem without making assumptions about the function of poetry and without, if possible, preconceptions. Read in this manner, the poem yields an hermetic rather than a euhemeristic 'meaning.'

To begin with, the reader sees in "Barque of phosphor" purely a barque of phosphor; there is nothing in the poem to suggest that he should identify himself or any abstraction with it. He then traces the suggestions of movement commanded by the narrative voice and listens to the two formal statements of stanza three and stanza five. Unless he is capable of rapid assimilation, that is about all the reader will get from a first reading. But even from that first reading it has become obvious that the commands of the narrative voice are complex and somehow grouped around and justified by the formal analogy "Foam and cloud are one." In breaking down the complexity of command, the reader will note that there is an opposition between the direction of "this droning of the surf" and the command "Move outward into heaven." He will also note that the relation between sky and sea, established by the formal analogy, does depend on the "alabasters" of the clouds seen against a setting of "night blues" and the corresponding

whiteness of foam frothed up by the dark sea as it meets the shore and becomes surf. He is now capable of two extensions of the correspondence. The first is that the contradiction involved in the command "Fill your black hull/With white moonlight" is analogous to the realized contradiction between sea and foam, cloud and sky. The second extension will come when he has questioned the first line. To say, as O'Connor does, that "the luminous bark floats on a dark sea" is to man it with the three wise men of Gotham. The barque of phosphor is a curious craft; were it afloat, one could agree with O'Connor's vision and attribute the phrase "of phosphor" to the phosphorescent wake left by boats at dusk; but the barque is "On the palmy beach" and the command that it "Move outward into heaven" is not followed immediately (since in stanza four the barque is still, as it were, taking on cargo). But what does "of phosphor" mean then? It can mean that the barque is made of a phosphorescent substance, like decayed wood, or it can mean, literally, that the barque is made of phosphorus (its "black hull" would then be a product of the transparent allotropic form subjected to great pressure), or, poetically, that it is the barque of the morning star. In point of fact, all three meanings are relevant to the poem. If one takes the 'most realistic' possibility first, one establishes the image of the derelict hull, no longer seaworthy, abandoned on the beach. If one then superimposes the valid analogy between the wood's phosphorescence and the properties of phosphorus, one has an image of a boat which is capable of acting on the narrator's impossible commands. The chain of transformation here is from the transparent allotrope which can exist as a crystalline substance in air and which, through pressure,

is transformed into the powdery substance of the black allotrope, to the pure white phosphorus, which can be obtained by melting the black allotrope, and which ignites in air. The relevance of these transformations is immediately verifiable by the exact image they evoke. "Sultry moon-monsters/Are dissolving," and as the black hull fills with moonlight it appears to disappear. Instead of the visible shape of a black hull on sand, there is a moment of silvering in which the black hull loses its shape in the intensity of light. It is one of those moments of brilliant 'pftt' to which one's vision is occasionally entitled and in "Fabliau of Florida" it is used to realize the narrator's desire. What happens is that as the moonlight hits the boat it appears to peel away the black hull, to make it move away from where it was; and if the eye follows this apparent movement it will find the movement's extension, not in the sea because there is an opposition of direction, but in, say, the morning star which appears to be moving as fast as the boat because it too takes its movement, direction and speed from the clouds' movement across the sky. The moonlight gives to the barque its appearance of movement, but it is the star which retains its substance.

The analysis is not yet complete. To this point, the endeavor has been to explain what happens in the poem, but any critical account must be able to explain why what happens is legitimately called poetry. Were the poem as devoid of human concern as the reader's explication has thus far made it appear, it would be tempting to return to the inspirational distortions of O'Connor. But the narrative voice of "Fabliau of Florida" is a human one and its role in the poem explains why what happens is poetry. In

effect, what happens to the barque is an intimation of transcendence, a momentary proof of the fluid nature of reality. The poetic analogy "Foam and cloud are one," becomes briefly, a philosophical analogy because the barque appears to be able to sail the sky. Such a coupling of reason and the imagination was of primary importance to Stevens:

...if an imaginative idea satisfies the imagination, we are indifferent to the fact that it does not satisfy the reason, although we concede that it would be complete, as an idea, if, in addition to satisfying the imagination, it also satisfied the reason. From this analysis, we deduce that an idea that satisfies both the reason and the imagination, if it happened, for instance, to be an idea of God, would establish a divine beginning and end for us which, at the moment, the reason, singly, at best proposes and on which, at the moment, the imagination, singly, merely meditates. This is an illustration. It seems elementary, from this point of view, that the poet, in order to fulfill himself, must accomplish a poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination. It does not follow that in the long run the poet will find himself in the position in which the philosopher now finds himself. On the contrary, if the end of the philosopher is despair, the end of the poet is fulfillment, since the poet finds a sanction for life in poetry that satisfies the imagination. (NA 42-43)

Such is the value of the barque's momentary transcendence.

It should be emphasized, however, that neither Stevens nor the narrative voice of "Fabliau of Florida" would attempt to palm off an evanescent trick of the moonlight as mint transcendence. The poem ends with the admission "There will never be an end/To this droning of the surf." It is, in the context of the poem, the monotonous pressure of the surf that has driven the barque to its grave ashore and which represents the energy of limitation. It is this almost intangible sense of limitation that the narrator resists by indulging in his mental game of counter-move. The final two lines are an admission, not of defeat, but of

relinquishment. In making his moves, the narrator has won transcendence for the barque, but all his pieces have been used. The ephemeral forces of the moonlight are not as permanent as the insistent sea. Both the poem and narrator's point of view exemplify what must be classified in the catalogue of Stevens' categories as the exercise - one of the ways in which "the figure of a youth as virile poet" expends his energy:

Having elected to exercise his power to the full and at its height, and having identified his power as the power of the imagination, he may begin its exercise by studying it in exercise and proceed little by little, as he becomes his own master, to those violences which are the maturity of his desires. (NA 63-64)

It is noteworthy that such exercises as "Fabliau of Florida" are not to be considered merely as isolated instances of a tenuous esthetic, but as paving stones on the way to fulfillment. Nor is there much doubt about the nature of that fulfillment in Stevens' mind:

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

Should there be any doubt about what Stevens is saying here, I should like to resolve it by quoting a comparable comment by Valéry:

I consider that the essence of Poetry is, according to different types of minds, either quite worthless or of infinite importance; in which it is like God Himself.¹⁴

It may appear that the illustrative use of O'Connor's distortion of "Fabliau of Florida" has been stretched too far, but it is precisely the failure to recognize the hermetic concept of transcendence that constitutes the criminality of euhemeristic critics. They attempt to give worth to poetry by making it into something else and, in so doing, they discard the life of poetry and leave their readers with the trash of terms.

The second illustration of the pitfalls of interpretive criticism is parallel to the first and I use it only to define one of the necessary limits to this paper. The illustration involves the poem "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern":

There are no bears among the roses,
Only a negress who supposes
Things false and wrong

About the lantern of the beauty
Who walks there, as a farewell duty,
Walks long and long.

The pity that her pious egress
Should fill the vigil of a negress
With heat so strong! (CP 71)

Two responses to this poem, when placed together, accurately delineate the dilemma of Stevens' critics. The first response is Richard Watson's and the second Tindall's:

It is appropriate that aphrodisiacal night should be the time that virgins, in "letting themselves go" should lose what, in the realistic light of day, they would guard - their maidenhead. ...Here is an aspect of our study of self-completion, the sexual aspect. ...The symbol of individuation here...is the garden, occurring constantly with this function from the book of Genesis to T.S. Eliot's Burnt Norton.

In this delightful little poem, the white virgin who is approaching consummation is watched by a

frustrated negro woman, who suspects what is to occur.¹⁵

In Stevens' little scene the details, which have the clarity of dream, share dream's darkness despite that lantern. What are the virgin and her observer doing there? Why are there no bears among the roses? Like a metaphor of Stevens' magnifico, this situation "will not declare itself yet is certain as meaning." Evading analysis, "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" is indefinitely suggestive. . . . It is a strange experience, and its meaning, like that of a picture, is what it is. "A poem," says Stevens in "Adagia," "need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have."¹⁶

Watson's criticism is part of an attempt to fit Stevens' Harmonium poems into a framework constructed from "...a combination of analytic modes developed by Sigmund Freud and C.C. Jung, the psychologists, and Kenneth Burke, the post-Coleridgian literary critic."¹⁷ Though, in principle, Watson's approach is significant, one cannot escape the feeling that his 'psychological dramatism' is wrongfully applied when it makes of "the beauty/Who walks there, as a farewell duty" the image of a woman 'letting herself go.' Once again, the application of theoretical terminology has supplanted practical criticism and resulted in euhemeristic distortions. But what are the results of practical criticism in this case? Tindall asks the practical questions, but he gives no answers. To say, "Evading analysis, 'The Virgin Carrying a Lantern' is indefinitely suggestive" is to say that a poem is no more meaningful than a woman's face or a summer's cloud.

Both Watson and Tindall are intelligent critics and the possibility that their difficulties are due to dullness can be dismissed at once. They are, rather, indicative of a problem pointed out by Frank Doggett as recently as 1959. "For any reader of Stevens the principal difficulty is to know what each poem

really is. This is more than a matter of knowing what it means."¹⁸ The resolution of that problem is a task which demands a whole body of criticism written on the basis of a single set of principles; "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" demonstrates why.

In actual fact, the poem can be analyzed by a critic either purely pragmatic or else theoretic only to the extent that he expects poetry to be a wholeness of sense. Such a critic would answer Tindall's question about the first line by noting that "bears" in conjunction with virgins are not to be seen as animals but as the virgin votaries of Artemis who, during the Brauronian rites of initiation, were called 'bears' in recognition of the goddess' connection with that animal.¹⁹ The relevance of the substitution of a "negress" for the virgins about to be dedicated to the ideal of virginity he would explain by noting the historic degeneration of the Artemis cult, classically known for its ethical purity, through its intermingling with the orgiastic cult of Hecate, a cult which still survives among the negro practitioners of voodoo in the West Indies and the Southern United States, and perhaps among witches everywhere. Seen in this light, the poem is a satire on the subject of myth; it satirizes the degeneration of myth into superstition and the consequent substitution of the energy of mundane human desires for the power of high ideals to lift human conduct above its ordinary level.

Such a critic could go to great lengths to prove his reading legitimate without any actual misreading of the poem. He could insist, for example, that the suppositions of the negress are not concerned with what the virgin is going to do. Those who read the lines "Things false and wrong/About the lantern of the beauty/Who

walks there as a farewell duty/Walks there as a farewell duty/
Walks long and long" as though they proved that the virgin is
"approaching consummation" are forced to the contradictory view
that the virgin is carrying the lantern as a signal to her lover
and at the same time is carrying it because it is a duty imposed
in connection to her farewell to virginity. Such a reading, in
effect, grants the alleged supposition of the negress, and can
disagree only with her 'moral reaction'; in short, such a reading
must end with an encomium on how good it is for virgins to give up
their maidenheads and what a pity it is that the negress cannot
see the esthetic charm of the act. Howard Baker's interpretation
of the poem is a case in point:

The point of this poem is that a pious action is mistaken
for lechery ... The clash of interpretations is gay and
ironic, but it is also a serious matter; for such clashes
are what make all moral decision difficult...The poem is
slightly ambiguous in that we are not told specifically
why the virgin walks abroad with a lantern... we may
guess that the virgin is concerned with her state of
virginity and intends to part from it.²⁰

A pragmatic reading, however, reveals that it is the suppo-
sitions of the negress and of Baker and Watson (a clear case of
guilt by association) which are "false and wrong." The "things"
which the negress supposes have to do with "the lantern of the
beauty"; there is no syntactical necessity for assuming that the
negress' suppositions are about the function of the light and not
about its nature. In other words, one of the "Things false and
wrong" is the fact that the "pious egress" of the virgin "should
fill the vigil of a negress/With heat so strong!" The fact that
egress means, literally, 'a going out' points up the transforma-
tion of light into heat that here takes place and helps to prove
the pragmatic reading of degeneration. "Vigil" is used ironically,

to denote the difference between the purposeful wakefulness of the negress and the religious vigil formerly kept by "bears." The "pious egress" of the virgin is not her "farewell duty," but the consequence of that duty. Thus the duty of the virgin can be seen as an expression of that obligation on the part of gods and goddesses to lift men out of the sensuous darkness by the shining example of the immortal ideal. That the virgin's duty is here a "farewell duty" is either an atrocious pun on human welfare or it refers to the fact that though the gods of myth have deserted the world of reality they have left in their stead still-living ideals. Her egress is "pious" for two reasons; because it is in the nature of initiation that the living ideal of virginity should be transferred from embodiment in the goddess to embodiment in her "bears" - from the hieratic to the human - and the transfer necessitates the withdrawal of the goddess, and because the debasement of an ideal, in the satiric context, is not to be countenanced by a goddess whose very existence is devoted to that ideal.

The pragmatic reading of "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" creates no conflict with the theoretic concept of transcendence as the function of poetry, discussed in relation to "Fabliau of Florida" and suggested by the analysis of "Man Carrying Thing." It is true that the poem appears to be about transcendence rather than being itself transcendent - it is a peculiar quality of satire that it is negative in so far as its emphasis is upon negation rather than creation. But the elements of transcendence are there in the opposition between the human misuse of embodiments of the ideal and the possibility of human transcendence from one level of existence to another by incorporation of ideal values

into the psyche, just as the intense desire for a pure love is evident in John Donne's "Song; 'Go and catch a falling star.'" No, the problem created by this reading concerns Stevens' technique rather than his theory and, by indirection, critical approaches. The reading appears to depend upon the recognition of an allusion and consequently the body of the poem seems to be derivative. This brings up the problem of allusiveness in poetry - a problem ably discussed by Wimsatt in The Verbal Icon:

The frequency and depth of literary allusion in the poetry of Eliot and others has driven so many in pursuit of full meanings to the Golden Bough and the Elizabethan drama that it has become a kind of commonplace to suppose that we do not know what a poet means unless we have traced him in his reading, - a supposition redolent with intentional implications.²¹

Wimsatt would grant the efficacy of allusion as long as it is "integrated" within the poem and so would be satisfied, presumably, with Stevens' use of Artemis in "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern." But Stevens is frequently allusive and his allusions are not always identifiable. In "The Novel," for example:

How tranquil it was at vividest Varadero,
While the water kept running through the mouth of
the speaker,
Saying: Olalla blanca en el blanco,
Lol-lolling the endlessness of poetry. (CP 457-58)

Olalla is the Spanish name for Saint Eulalia and the phrase means "white Eulalia in the (masculine) white" but that fact is not to be found in most Spanish-English dictionaries, nor is it immediately illuminating once found. Varadero still remains an Erewhon for me. The whole poem is a commentary on an allusion and the source and circumstances of that allusion remain unnoted in criticism.

To admit Stevens' allusiveness is not to say, however, that

the only recourse left to the critic is the search for influences and biographical criticism. Stevens' allusions, like all his other obscurations, have their purpose and justification in establishing the mode of existence of "central poetry," and mere scholarship will not uncover that purpose, no matter how many sources it finds. The point is that there is a much more valuable way, albeit a much longer one, to come to grips with poems like "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" than through tracing allusions. That way is to study recurrent images in the Collected Poems and what Stevens termed "variable symbol" in reference to the statue in "Owl's Clover" (OP 219).

It is the conception of such a study that makes both the imposition of limits on this paper and the insistence that critics should approach Stevens' poems with a common set of principles necessary. As the publication of Walsh's Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens²² indicates, any study of the interactions between poems that result from recurrent images would have to be of monumental proportions to be considered at all inclusive. Nor will any study of Stevens' "variable symbols" succeed which is based upon the peurile attempt to still the vibrancy of their oscillations in order to equate them with abstract terms like imagination, reality, or the ideal. The kind of harmony that Santayana talked about is the kind that Stevens actually composed:

The poet is a rebuildler of the imagination, to make a harmony in that. And he is not a complete poet if his whole imagination is not attuned and his whole experience composed into a single symphony.²³

The argument concerning the techniques of recurrent images and "variable symbol" is pursued in the second part of this paper. The nub of that argument is, however, immediately relevant. The

point is that to explicate an individual poem of Stevens it is sufficient that the critic avoid the pitfalls of preconception and trust Stevens' integrity in using words, but to understand the total harmony of Stevens' poems it is necessary to experience the individual poem in its relation to the whole of his Collected Poems. The intent in this paper is to establish that necessity by examining the theory and purport of "central poetry." Any shortcomings in such a project are afforded their excuse by a parting reference to Teufelsdröckh's Editor:

Be it remembered, however, that such purport is here not so much evolved, as detected to lie ready for evolving. We are to guide our British Friends into the new Gold-country, and show them the mines; nowise to dig-out and exhaust its wealth...Once there, let each dig for his own behoof, and enrich himself.²⁴

PART I - Central Poetry: Morphology

Is it true that our air is disturbed, as Mallarmé said, by "the trembling of the veil of the temple," or "that our whole age is seeking to bring forth a sacred book?" Some of us thought that book near towards the end of last century, but the tide sank again.

Yeats - The Trembling of the Veil

Among the anecdotes that have accumulated around Stevens there is one reported by Ciardi which deserves repetition, both for its pith and its pertinency to the subject of "central poetry":

...Stevens said, "The trouble with you, Frost, is that you write on subjects." Frost replied, "The trouble with you is you write bric-a-brac."¹

The anecdote is undated, but what Stevens meant by "subjects" is undoubtedly what he referred to (in a letter to William Carlos Williams written before 1920) as not having "a fixed point of view."² Williams' reaction was initially as antagonistic as Frost's³; and as late as 1937 he published a charge that the trouble with Stevens is that "he wants to think."⁴ But by 1951 there appears to be an alteration in Williams' attitude. In his autobiography, he wrote that Wallace Stevens "...is constantly in my thoughts,"⁵ and in 1957, he entitled a review of Opus Posthumous "Poet of a Steadfast Pattern" and recognized therein the efficacy of a fixed point of view:

As good a summary of Stevens' situation facing the world is contained - as might be expected in a man at the same time so vocal and reticent as he was and prone to cover his own traces - in the poem "Architecture," laying out when he was a young man a plan he was to follow during his entire life.⁶

It is, on the face of it, a mistake to maintain, as Lionel Abel does, that Stevens was "outside the literary controversies of his time."⁷ All three poets, Williams, Frost, and Stevens - are contemporary and the basis of their arguments can be found in

the pre-eminent esthetic problem of their time. Walter Buttell, in his study of the origins of Stevens' "theme and style," defines that problem (and quotes Williams in doing so):

Stevens wrote his undergraduate verse at a time (1898 - 1900) when ... "it was commonplace to say that all the poetry had been written and all the paintings painted." ... This commonplace does not seem to have taken into account Yeats' mastery of his early style or the poetry of Hardy or Housman, but perhaps their voices were obscured by such Decadents as Dowson, Symonds, and Wilde, whose celebration of art for art's sake - the ivory tower Tennyson had warned against in "The Palace of Art" seemed to mark the end of an era, even though they contributed to the poetry of the era to come when they did much to introduce French symbolism into English poetry. In America, the sweeping innovations of Whitman and the incisive wit and suggestiveness of Emily Dickinson were largely ignored. ... Poetry seemed less and less significant in a world of science, industrialism, and middle-class culture. The Decadent's response was to establish a cult of isolated beauty, while at the opposite extreme the realistic and naturalistic novelists were making a determined effort to deal with the actual world, as sordid as it might be.⁸

The problem was one of the nature and function of poetry, as it always is, and it arose at this time because of a very real sense that poetry and life had become bifurcated. On the one hand, the pure poets of the fin de siècle had pushed what seemed the logical value of art - the esthetic value - to its utmost; and, on the other hand, there was daily evidence that 'real' life was based upon principles wholly foreign to those which created beauty. Faced with this overwhelming polarity between a dedication to beauty and a dedication to life, it must have seemed evident to the young poet of the period that he had to make a choice.

Some poets, like Paul Valéry, chose to affirm beauty, even if it meant a rejection of the 'mainstream' of life:

I lived among young people for whom art and poetry were a kind of essential nourishment impossible to forego, and indeed something more: a supernatural food. In

those days - some who are still living will remember - we had the urgent impression that a sort of cult or new kind of religion was about to be born, that would give shape to the quasi-mystical state of mind which reigned at that time and which was inspired in or communicated to us by our extremely intense awareness of the universal value of the emotions of Art.

* * *

When one looks back to the youth of that epoch, to that time more charged with intellect than the present, and to the way in which we faced life and the knowledge of life, one can see that all the conditions were present for some development or creation almost religious in character. Indeed, there reigned at that moment a kind of disillusion with philosophic theories, a contempt for the promises of science, that had been very ill interpreted by our predecessors and elders, the realist and naturalist writers. The religious had experienced the assault of philological and philosophical criticism. Metaphysics seemed to have been destroyed by Kant's analysis. Before us was a white, blank page, and we could inscribe on it only a single affirmation. This seemed to us indisputable, being founded neither on a tradition, which can always be contested, nor on a science, whose generalizations can always be criticized, nor on texts, which can be interpreted at will, nor on philosophical reasoning, which lives only on hypothesis. Our certainty was in our emotion and our feeling for beauty.⁹

Some of those who made Valéry's affirmation fell back in despair - like the Yeats of my epigraph - while others chose fealty to 'real' life and sought to construct a poetry based upon the principles of that life - upon psychology or communism or Americanism or Catholicism, or, in short, upon the philosophies and social sciences which gave that 'real' life form. What Stevens' response to the problem was, however, is a question which has provoked, and still provokes conflicting answers.

Williams' view of Stevens' steadfast purpose, for example, implies that Stevens' did make a response of a kind which denies Bradley's assertion that "...the subject of his poetry remains a sum of aspects rather than an apotheosis of one or two monolithic worlds..."¹⁰ Yet Bradley's attitude is one which has long endured

among Stevens' critics, as a comparison of Untermeyer's early comment with Sypher's assessment of Stevens in mid-career will show:

It [Stevens' poetry] has much for the eye, something for the ear, but nothing for that central hunger which is at the heart of all the senses.¹¹

Thus living in many sensuous worlds indicates a failure in imagination. The supreme fiction becomes fictitious indeed, a dizzy pluralism, a rage for order that cannot be spent....¹²

The recent tendency, noted by Brown and Haller, for critics to anchor their discussions with "the discovery, or rather the exploitation of themes other than the important one of imagination versus reality"¹³ is an indication that Stevens' critics, in general, have found the question of Stevens' fixed point of view either futile or impossible to discuss. While these critics have not reduced Stevens' poetry to mere decoration, as Untermeyer would, they have, indeed, committed it to a "dizzy pluralism" by finding in his poems expressions of humanism, existentialism, essentialism, mysticism, realism, and idealism¹⁴ - to name only a few of their discoveries.

Such a critical reaction was probably inevitable in view of the end result of repetitious explorations of the 'important' theme "of the imagination versus reality." That result was boredom - a boredom expressed by Anthony Hecht in his complaint against "Stevens' esthetic doctrine, which is so obsessively present on almost every page that the reader is likely to feel badgered by the relentless declaration of a single idea."¹⁵ But the fact remains, nonetheless, that both the reaction and the approach which caused that reaction are futile and misdirected as approaches to Stevens. Both treat Stevens' poetry as though it were prose

and both assume that Stevens' theory of poetry must stand and be counted on one side or the other of the philosophical split which I earlier characterized as the split between the euhemeristic and the hermetic.

Williams was right in attributing a "steadfast pattern" to the poems of Wallace Stevens, and in the poem which he mentions as proof of his point there are indications of the nature of that pattern and of its value as a response to the dilemma of the times (I quote only Stanzas I and VI):

What manner of building shall we build?
 Let us design a chastel de chasteté.
 De pensée ...
 Never cease to deploy the structure.
 Keep the laborers shouldering plinths.
 Pass the whole of life earring the clink of the
 Chisels of the stone-cutters cutting the stones.

.....

And, finally, set guardians in the grounds,
 Gray, gruesome grumblers.
 For no one proud, nor stiff,
 No solemn one, nor pale,
 No chafferer, may come
 To sully the begonias, nor vex
 With holy or sublime ado
 The kremlin of kermess. (OP 16, 18)

I have no intention of explicating "Architecture," beyond noting how apropos these two stanzas are to any discussion of the nature and mode of existence of Stevens' 'fixed point of view.' The application of the first stanza is self-evident; Stevens never ceased "to deploy the structure," the interactions and variations that make his poetry a harmonious whole and which allowed John Wain to describe his later poetry, although somewhat paradoxically, as "a fragment broken off the monolith of his own dialect."¹⁶ The "guardians" of the sixth stanza are, of course, the deliberate obscurations discussed in the introduction to this paper and their

purpose is, as I there suggested, twofold. They are to keep out the "chafferer" who would "sully the begonias" and the "solemn one" who would "vex/With holy or sublime ado/The kremlin of kermess." It is a shame to translate these characters into abstractions, but so seen, the chafferers are those euhemerists who would trample the poetry out of poetry with their stumblefoot criticism, and the solemn ones are those hermeticists who would "vex" poets and poetry readers by making the joy of their esthetic contemplation a matter of "holy or sublime ado" - of religious proof. "The kremlin of kermess" means, literally, the citadel of a city of festivals which derive from feast days of saints; and all the suggestions contained in that literal meaning are relevant - the political idea of a place of refuge for the populace in time of need and the religious idea of human celebration of the spiritual. Translated, the "kremlin of kermess" is "central poetry": it is that reunification of life and beauty which was Stevens' response to the dilemma of his time.

The 'theory' of "central poetry" is somewhat cryptically stated in Stevens' essay "Effects of Analogy":

The poet is constantly concerned with two theories. One relates to the imagination as a power within him not so much to destroy reality at will as to put it to his own uses. He comes to feel that his imagination is not wholly his own but that it may be part of a much larger, much more potent imagination, which it is his affair to try to get at. For this reason, he pushes on and lives, or tries to live, as Paul Valéry did, on the verge of consciousness. This often results in poetry that is marginal, subliminal. The same theory exists in relation to prose, to painting and other arts. The second theory relates to the imagination as a power within him to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet in the very center of consciousness. This results, or should

result, in a central poetry. Dr. Whitehead concluded his Modes of Thought by saying:

...the purpose of philosophy is to rationalize mysticism....Philosophy is akin to poetry, and both of them seek to express that ultimate good sense which we term civilization.

The proponents of the first theory believe that it will be a part of their achievement to have created the poetry of the future. It may be that the poetry of the future will be to poetry of the present what poetry of the present is to the ballad. The proponents of the second theory believe that to create the poetry of the present is an incalculable difficulty, which rarely is achieved, fully and robustly, by anyone. They think that there is enough and more than enough to do with what faces us and concerns us directly and that in poetry as an art, and, for that matter, in any art, the central problem is always the problem of reality. The adherents of the imagination are mystics to begin with and pass from one mysticism to another. The adherents of the central are also mystics to begin with. But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization.

(NA 115-16)

By itself, the statement is a statement of difference; its context is a discussion of "apposite" analogies and the concept of "central poetry" is intended as an illustration of "a discipline of rightness" (NA 115) with respect to the creation of those analogies. That difference, however, opens up avenues of critical exploration which do lead to the full-blown theory upon which the difference, and Stevens' poems, depend.

Before exploring those avenues, it is necessary to note that the difference between the two theories is not as clearcut as it might appear. An apparent contradiction in Northrop Frye's explanation of the difference points up the need for cautious assessment. Frye's explanation begins reasonably enough: (the underlining is mine):

A third mode of mental activity, which is poetic but not Stevens' kind of poetry, is the attempt to suggest or evoke universals of mind or substance, to work at the threshold of consciousness and produce what Stevens calls

"marginal" poetry and associates with Valéry. Whatever its merit such poetry for him is in contrast with "central" poetry based on the concrete and particular act of mental experience. Stevens speaks of the imagination as moving from the hieratic to the credible, and marginal poetry ...seeks "a hierophant Omega" or ultimate mystery. ...But for the imagination "Reality is the beginning not the end," "The imperfect is our paradise," and the only order worth having is the "violent order" produced by the explosion of imaginative energy which is also a "great disorder."¹⁷

But, a paragraph later, he alters his terms and appears to qualify his original assessment:

However, the imagination does bring something to reality which is not there in the first place, hence the imagination contains an element of the "unreal" which the imaginative form incorporates. This unreal is connected with the fact that conscious experience is liberated experience. The unreal...is the sense of exhilaration and splendour in art, ..."the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man." ...Although art is in one sense an escape from reality (i.e., in the sense in which it is an escape of reality), and although art is a heightening of consciousness, it is not enough for art simply to give one a vision of a better world. Art is practical, not speculative; imaginative, not fantastic; it transforms experience, and does not merely interrupt it. The unreal in imaginative perception is most simply described as the sense that if something is not there it at least ought to be there. But this feeling in art is anything but wistful; it has created the tone of all the civilizations of history. Thus the "central" poet, by working outwards from a beginning instead of onwards towards an end, helps to achieve the only genuine kind of progress. As Stevens says in a passage which explains the ambivalence of the term "mystic" in his work: "The adherents of the central are also mystics to begin with. But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization."

Such ultimate good sense depends on preserving a balance between objective reality and the subjective unreal element in the imagination.¹⁸

The alteration in terms here is from theoretic difference to practical difference, but that is not the contradiction - even though it is hard to see how an "unreal" of which Frye approves, and which he describes by the line "the way of thinking by which

we project the idea of God into the idea of man," is to avoid classification as "the attempt to suggest or evoke universals of mind or substance." The contradiction occurs when Frye attempts to explain the concepts of reality and unreality. One has to compare Frye's statement that "Stevens speaks of the imagination as moving from the hieratic to the credible, and marginal poetry seeks 'a hierophant Omega' or ultimate mystery" with his view of the imagination's activity in the second citation. On the one hand, we have the imagination moving from the unreal to the real and on the other the imagination bringing the unreal to the real and judging the real by standards of unreality. On the one hand there is the Frye who says, "But for the imagination reality is the beginning not the end," and, on the other hand, there is the Frye who says that for the imagination unreality is the beginning (since standards of judgement must always precede the thing judged); and finally, there is the Frye who resolves the difficulty by falling back on the preservation of "a balance between objective reality and the subjective unreal element in the imagination."

Although Frye is right in his distinction between practical and speculative art, it is impossible to credit his discussion of the difference between marginal and central poetry as the final word on the subject for two reasons. The primary reason is that neither in the poems nor the prose does Stevens say what Frye says he says. Stevens speaks of "a war between the mind/And sky, between thought and day and night." (OP 407) This is, as I shall show, a war between what Frye calls 'the subjective unreal' and 'objective reality'; such a war, for Stevens, was not a war of attrition. The

difference between the marginal poet and the central poet is that the marginal poet either wins his war, or rejects the necessity for fighting, before he writes his poems. The central poet wins his war, or attempts to, in his poems. One finds in Stevens' prose and poetry, not a search for a balance, but a search for conquest.

To prove that Stevens ignores Frye's concept of balance in his prose is the subject of a long argument, but it is possible to introduce that argument by examining the poems from which Frye extracted lines to see if their meaning, as lines of poetry, corresponds to his use of them. One of the lines occurs in "The Poems of Our Climate";

"The imperfect is our paradise." (CP 194).

Frye uses the line to illustrate an opposition between 'Stevens' theory' of "violent order" and the marginal poet's concept of "order in terms of finality, as something that keeps receding from experience until experience stops, when it becomes the mirage of an 'after life' on which all hierophants whether poets or priests depend."¹⁹

O'Connor supports Frye's reading of the line, albeit as the result of a different approach, when he says "...the ideal of simplicity, of describing natural objects, however beautifully done, is not enough. There always remains 'the never resting [sic] mind.' The mind itself wants to create. It has its own criteria. Among them, surprisingly, is its liking for the imperfect, for the 'flawed words and stubborn sounds.'"²⁰ Now O'Connor's approach refutes Frye's; it is a 'naturalistic order' which is found wanting in the poem and not a hierophantic one:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
 Pink and white carnations. The light
 In the room more like a snowy air,
 Reflecting snow. A newly fallen snow
 At the end of winter when afternoons return.
 Pink and white carnations - one desires
 So much more than that. The day itself
 Is simplified; a bowl of white,
 Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
 With nothing more than the carnations there. (CP 193)

The narrator is here self-consciously engaged in an attempt to wring meaning out of painstaking description - to write a poem of the climate. This much is evident from the syntax; but it should also be evident that the simplicity attained purports to be a real and not an ideal simplicity. The color harmony (order) of the first five lines is an order of something which is there. The restatement of that order in the last three lines constitutes a resemblance - between pink and white carnations and the afternoon light on snow and between the bowl and the glaze of snow on the earth. Now, to Stevens, resemblance is -

...one of the significant components of the structure of reality. It is significant because ...It binds together. It is the base of appearance. In nature, however, the relation is between two or more of the parts of reality. In metaphor (and this word is used as a symbol for the single aspect of poetry with which we are now concerned - that is to say, the creation of resemblance by the imagination, even though metamorphosis might be a better word) - in metaphor, the resemblance may be, first, between two or more parts of reality; second, between something real and something imagined or, what is the same thing, between something imagined and something real as, for example, between music and whatever may be evoked by it; and, third, between two imagined things as when we say that God is good, since the statement involves a resemblance between two concepts, a concept of God and a concept of goodness. (NA 72)

Since the statement of resemblance in the last three lines is a metaphor (of the first kind), it can be assessed by subjecting it to the generalized rules governing the image which Stevens posits in "Effects of Analogy":

Every image is the elaboration of a particular of the subject of the image. (NA 127)

Every image is a restatement of the subject of the image in terms of an attitude. (NA 128)

Every image is an intervention on the part of the image-maker. It [this generalization] refers to the sense of the world, as the second principle did, and it could be said to be a phase of the second principle, if it did not refer to style in addition to the sense of the world.
(NA 128)

Applied to the resemblance in "The Poems of Our Climate," these technical observations help to bring out the flaw therein. The resemblance fails to satisfy or incorporate the narrator's desire. It is a created image and, as such, involves the attitude of the creator and his intervention. The trouble is that the attitude and the intervention contradict each other. The narrator's sense of the world springs from the presupposition that received reality - his 'climate' - should be enough, and, in consequence, his style is limited to the description of received resemblances - to the poems of his climate. In other words, his words attempt to disguise themselves as description - attempt to pass themselves off as a simple imitation of reality. His sense of the world is that it is real and should be described, but his intervention is in words and words are always creation and not description.

The point of all this is that naturalistic description not only distorts the nature of words - it also falsifies reality. "The day itself is simplified" because the day described is an attitude only - a preconception about reality. The point is important because the poem is about one's sense of words as well as one's sense of reality and about the relation between those two senses.

The result of the narrator's essay is the conclusion that

reality is not to be found by description:

Say even that this complete simplicity
 Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
 The evilly compounded, vital I
 And made it fresh in a world of white,
 A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
 Still one would want more, one would need more,
 More than a world of white and snowy scents.

III

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
 So that one would want to escape, come back
 To what had been so long composed.
 The imperfect is our paradise.
 Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
 Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
 Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds. (CP 193-194)

The trouble is that the mind is not herein rejecting description because, as O'Connor suggests, "it wants to create" or because of "its liking for the imperfect." It rejects description because it is an exclusive rather than an inclusive creation. But there is no sense of delight in the second and third parts of the poem - no sense of actual release. The impossible ambiguities are painful to the narrator and must benumb the reader. What has happened is that the "vital I" has been "evilily-compounded", which means, presumably, that it is not capable of resting in any simple reality because its nature is both of that reality and of the force which creates that reality. The rat that tries to catch its own tail - the snake that swallows itself. Once the I becomes aware of its inevitable creativity, it realizes that its creations imprison it in inadequate compounds. What the "never-resting mind" makes one "want to escape" is the trap of its own fictionality. Note that the intent of such an escape is to "come back/ To what had been so long composed." What it is that has been composed defies explanation; suffice it to note that composed is not compounded, nor is it simple. Unlike compounds, compositions

do not destroy the individual characteristics of the things which compose them. Unlike a simplex, a composition is inclusive, rather than exclusive. Finally, what has been composed appears not to have been composed by the narrator and, in consequence, appears to be composed in the sense of peacefulness as well. The movement of the poem, therefore, appears to be from an attempt to find reality by dint of one's own creation to an attempt to escape the dilemma thereby fostered by finding a larger framework of composition (i.e. by creating a Creator for the creator and the created). Logically, of course, this framework involves the same vicious regress as the simplex, except for one saving grace. Such a creation allows the vital I release from evil compoundings.

Thus analysed, the poem supports Frye's marginal concept of order rather than his central one or, better, denies that there is an opposition between the two orders so conceived. The final four lines prove the point; the furious vacillations therein are expressions of a "violent order", as Frye suggests, but they are also a confession that "order keeps receding from experience until experience stops." Words are not simple one-to-one correspondences of reality; they are "flawed" and "stubborn" - composed of creator and created, of real and unreal. What is important here is that we who create the words are the imperfection that makes paradise possible - the bitter who afford delight. We are what makes possible the "fearful symmetry" of the absolute; the creator in the created. The "violent order" of the central poet is dynamic and its dynamism is perhaps most clearly described in terms of the title to this paper - as oscillations between the individual and the absolute.

"The Poems of Our Climate" is a frightful experience when read nakedly, and that is precisely its point. To come to a sense of "what had been so long composed" as something necessary even though not comforting, as something more than a matter of concept even though not concretely embodied, is to experience one aspect of the absolute. There are countless aspects. It is appropriate, by way of aside, to note in connection with "The Poems of Our Climate" another aspect brought out by Richard Watson in his analysis of "Negation." Watson sees in the "Creator" of the poem " a completely diffuse concept";²¹

In the terms of transcendentalism, this oversoul has a split personality, one part of which is immanent or in this world, and the other part of which is transcendental or out of this world. God is trying to unify himself. ...Because there is a continuous tendency towards unity, the physical dialectic (as studied by science), the social dialectic of nations (as studied by Hegel and other political philosophers), and the individual dialectic (as studied by Freud and Jung) all present a gigantic attempt to return to the transcendental part of the oversoul.

In "Negation" there is, in fact, a parody of the idealistic transcendentalism of Whitman the poet and Hegel the philosopher. Hegel postulated an impersonal "oversoul" which was also the epitome of consciousness and spirituality. Stevens, as the title suggests, takes a negative view-point, and says that "The creator too is blind" and has to struggle as we do to achieve individuation. ...The title, "Negation," suggests more than Stevens' negative attitude towards idealism, however. There is a paradox, of which Stevens was most likely aware, a paradox which Kenneth Burke calls the "paradox of purity," or "paradox of the absolute:"

We confront this paradox when deriving the nature of the human person from God as "super-person." as "pure" or "absolute" person, since God as a super-person would be impersonal - and the impersonal would be synonymous with the negation of personality.²²

There is no denying that the paradox exists in "Negation," just as it exists in "The Poems of Our Climate." A comparison of the two poems, however, does make it possible to refute the intentional misconception, widespread among Stevens' critics, that

Stevens was anti-idealist. To employ the transcendentalist paradox in poetry is not necessarily to either negate or parody it. The way that paradox is used is, obviously, the important thing. In "The Poems of Our Climate," the paradox of the human situation, of the process of human conception, is the beginning and it is only the possibility of the transcendency implicit in that paradox that makes the human situation bearable. In "Negation," the narrator begins enthusiastically by calling attention to the transcendental paradox, and he ends on a somewhat muted note by recognizing the human situation:

For this, then, we endure brief lives,
The evanescent symmetries
From that meticulous potter's thumb. (CP 98)

I hate to disagree with Watson on such slight evidence, but it does seem that the element of parody he notes is not sustained through the whole poem. One has only to contrast the final three lines with the first seven:

Hi! The creator too is blind,
Struggling toward his harmonious whole,
Rejecting intermediate parts,
Horrors and falsities and wrongs;
Incapable master of all force,
Too vague idealist, overwhelmed
By an afflatus that persists. (CP 97-98)

What is being parodied in this poem, if anything, is not any transcendental but a totally immanent concept of Godhead. This, at least, is the kind of concept the narrator announces so exuberantly in the first line. The syntax, however, suggests a movement from presto to andante. The verbal energy of the first three lines gives way to the more forced but less forceful energy of the emotion behind the ridicule of lines 4 to 7. The period at the end of line 7 is necessary only for reasons of rhetoric - the

orator's breath is spent and the energy of exuberance gone. The final three lines are terribly slow (one almost feels that exact measurement of the difference between the first three lines and the last three might be possible); the parenthetical "then," and the articulatory qualities of the phrase "that meticulous potter's thumb" arrest the pace. The rhythmic changes serve to support a view that what happens in this poem is that the narrator's sense of victorious release which accompanies his newly-discovered view of the creator as total immanence is negated when he realizes the implications of his discovery. To reject the transcendentalist paradox in favor of total immanence is to fail to make life meaningful in human terms. All the narrator has actually accomplished is the substitution of an "evanescent" for an "absolute" symmetry. This poem is ironic, but the irony is directed toward the narrator primarily, and only secondarily to his view of the world.

Frye's other reference to Stevens' poems, in the passages earlier cited, involves the same distorting concept of the opposition between the ordering principles of central poets and of marginal poets. The poem involved is "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" - specifically section VI:

Reality is the beginning not the end,
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals.

It is the infant A standing on infant legs,
Not twisted, stooping, polymathic Z,
He that kneels always on the edge of space

In the pallid perceptions of its distances.
Alpha fears men or else Omega's men
Or else his prolongations of the human.

These characters are around us in the scene.

For one it is enough; for one it is not;
For neither is it profound absentia.

Since both alike appoint themselves the choice
Custodians of the glory of the scene,
The immaculate interpreters of life.

But that's the difference: in the end and the way
To the end. Alpha continues to begin.
Omega is refreshed at every end. (CP 469)

The "reality" here, upon which Frye fondly bases his judgement, is delusive; it is only one of the many realities which coalesce in the poem - a poem in which the final conclusion²³ to the opening intention to add "A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet -" to "The eye's plain version" of reality is -

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CP 498)

One finds, for example, in section VII, the kind of reality one thinks of when one talks of realism, a reality filled "With lesser things, with things exteriorized/Out of rigid realists." (CP 470) This reality is meant as a contrast to the reality of section VI. It is true that the narrator of the poem expresses his fealty to reality, but he does not do so in terms accordant with Frye's:

We seek
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,
The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air. (CP 47172)

Faced with such passages, it is hard to see how anyone could emerge from a reading of "An Ordinary Evening ..." with an intact sense of the opposition between real and unreal, or with a concept of poetry as the balancing of these forces. The distinction Stevens

makes between real and unreal cuts across the oppositions of philosophers and their schools. To Stevens, what's real is life, which can include philosophically real and unreal concepts; what's unreal is anything which isn't alive. What's real, in other words is poetry.

Such statements are true, and serve to define the inadequacy of assessing Stevens' terms on purely philosophical grounds, but they are not the positive definition of "central poetry" I would like them to be, because they merely substitute one set of undefined terms for another. Nonetheless, a sense of the distinction is available in section X of "An Ordinary Evening...":

It is fatal in the moon and empty there.
But, here, allons. The enigmatical
Beauty of each beautiful enigma

Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.
We do not know what is real and what is not.
We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man

Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, there-
fore, died.

We are not men of bronze and we are not dead.
His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.

But ours is not imprisoned. It resides
In a permanence composed of impermanence.... (CP 472)

The contrast between this section and section VI, is the contrast between mode of existence and theory which I am about to discuss in relation to Stevens' prose. But, first, it should be noted that the theory of section VI is not, as Frye suggests, a theory of balances, but a theory of "a total double-thing" which makes poetry possible. Alpha and Omega are not separate beings, despite their disparate appearances. Omega is "polymathic" because he is many-knowing as personification, and because, as alphabetic letter, he is the sum of all letters and Alpha's end. Alpha is

"naked" (shades of Teufelsdröckh) and "fears men or else Omega's men/Or else his prolongations of the human" because he is unperceived reality and men's conscious perceptions (which are usually conceptions) are the force which transforms him, changes him, ages him, into Omega. Whether one analyses Omega, or synthesises Alpha, the difference is only one of direction; as "Professor Eucaplyptus said, 'The search/For reality is as momentous as/The search for God.'" (CP 481) The "total double thing" of Alpha and Omega is the acnode which one encounters at either end of the central poet's philosophical oscillation.

The discussion of "The Poems of Our Climate" and "An Ordinary Evening..." was twofold in intent - to give grounds for one of two objections to Frye's approach to the question of "central poetry" and to indicate the kind of argument about slight distinctions that Stevens' concept demands. The second objection to Frye's criticism is an objection to phrasing; it arises because of Frye's description of "the unreal in imaginative perception" as "the sense that if something is not there it at least ought to be there." This brings into question the 'reality' of 'the supreme fictions' which the central poet creates, and which Stevens defines in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

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

The most difficult thing to avoid in dealing with Stevens is his constant insistence upon the truth of such supreme fictions. His insistence is of a kind which brings him within the sphere,

ironically, of those believers in poetic truth castigated by

I.A. Richards:

Briefly, if we can contrive to believe poetry, then the world seems, while we do so, to be transfigured. It used to be comparatively easy to do this, and the habit has become well established. With the extension of science and the neutralization of nature it has become difficult as well as dangerous. Yet it is still alluring; it has many analogies with drug-taking. ...Various subterfuges have been devised along the lines of regarding Poetic Truth as figurative, symbolic; or as more immediate, as a truth of intuition, not of reason; or as a higher form of the same truth as reason yields. Such attempts to use poetry as a denial or as a corrective of science are very common. One point can be made against them all; they are never worked out in detail. There is no equivalent to Mill's Logic expounding any such view. The language in which they are framed is usually a blend of obsolete psychology and emotive exclamations.²⁴

The irony here is that there are two sides to this question of belief. Both Richards in his criticism and Stevens in his theory make the contemporary situation paramount; but Richards rejects the possibility of believing in poetic truth as "a higher form of the same truth as reason yields" because he believes in reality. Stevens, on the other hand, rejects the reality of the contemporary situation as something to believe in - he says "A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of reality..." (NA 27) - and this makes it possible for him to believe in poetic truth as "a higher form of the same truth as reason yields." If one can accept the poem "As You Leave the Room" as autobiographical, one has ready-made proof of the point:

That poem about the pineapple, the one
About the mind as never satisfied,

The one about the credible hero, the one
About summer, are not what skeletons think about.

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,

As a disbeliever in reality,

A countryman of all the bones in the world?
Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

Part of a major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality

And thus an elevation, as if I left
With something I could touch, touch every way

And yet nothing has been changed, except what is
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all. (OP 117)²⁵

One can name the poems referred to - "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," "The Well Dressed Man With a Beard," and so on - and one can also demonstrate the difference between the reality which yields the truth in which Richards believes and the "major reality" in which Stevens believed. One has only to propound, in positive fashion, Stevens' prose statements.

In the essays of both The Necessary Angel and Opus Posthumous, Stevens is constantly concerned with four implications of the theory of "central poetry." The immediate implication of the metaphysical or epistemological stature of the theory - "the central problem is always the problem of reality" - is the primary burden of "The Imagination as Value" and crops up in almost all the essays, including (despite Stevens' statement "I am not competent to discuss reality as a philosopher" (OP 217)) "The Irrational Element in Poetry." As a consequence of the nature of the theory as philosophy there arises a second implication, and that is that "central poetry" must conform to a certain mode of existence; such a mode of existence involves questions of technique as a minor implication. But the basic implication behind the whole theory is that there can be a certain kind of poet capable

of existing "in the very center of consciousness;" the implications, therefore, resolve themselves into questions of the nature of the central poet, the grounds of his existence, and his mode of existence.

Who is the central poet? Stevens begins his description of "the figure of a youth as virile poet," in his essay of that name, because there is no definition of poetry (NA 43) and the best way to account for the fact of poetry is by saying that "it is a process of the personality of the poet." This does not mean that poetry is merely expressionism in the sense of a manifestation of ego:

Aristotle said: "The poet should say very little in propria persona." Without stopping to discuss what might be discussed for so long, note that the principle so stated by Aristotle is cited in relation to the point that poetry is a process of the personality of the poet. This is the element, the force, that keeps poetry a living thing, the modernizing and ever-modern influence. The statement that the process does not involve the poet as subject, to the extent to which that is true, precludes direct egotism. On the other hand, without indirect egotism there can be no poetry. There can be no poetry without the personality of the poet and that, quite simply, is why the definition of poetry has not been found and why, in short, there is none. (NA 45-56)

The question of the central poet's identity is thus an important one for Stevens, as is indicated by the defence he provides for his discussion of a "possible poet" in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

...if I had been less interested in trying to give our possible poet an identity and less interested in trying to appoint him to his place...it might have been thought that I was rhetorical, when I was speaking in the simplest way about things of such importance that nothing is more so. A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words. (NA 32)

What he means in the final line of the citation is analogous to what he means by "indirect egotism."

The mind of the poet describes itself as constantly in his poems as the mind of the sculptor describes itself in his forms. ...We are talking about something a good deal more comprehensive than the temperament of the artist that is usually spoken of. We are concerned with the whole personality and, in effect, we are saying that the poet who writes the heroic poem that will satisfy all there is of us and all of us in time to come, will accomplish it by the power of his reason, the force of his imagination and, in addition, the effortless and inescapable process of his own individuality. (NA 46)

Now all this is relatively simple and suggests that poems are a kind of record of the mind, a proof of the adage that a man is known by what he does. But the edges of this adage become a bit misty when one notes that the relation between a poet and his poem is a relation between two unknowns:

The poet is able to give it [any particular experience] the form of poetry because poetry is the medium of his personal sensibility. This is not the same thing as saying that a poet writes poetry because he writes poetry, although it sounds much like it. A poet writes poetry because he is a poet; and he is not a poet because he is a poet but because of his personal sensibility. What gives a man his personal sensibility I don't know and it does not matter because no one knows. (OP 217)

Were it not for the fact that what poetry is is indefinable except in terms of process of personality, there would be nothing contradictory about retaining the adage, even after this laughable exercise in the pedantic manner. Thus one could say that Stevens discovered that his sensibility included the recognition that ice-cream has a contradictory taste by expressing the contradiction in terms in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." But Stevens' expression of the relation between poet and poetry thus far is contradictory because the adage applicable is that what a man does is known by what he is.

Poets, says Stevens, "cannot ... be predetermined." (OP 218) But what a poet does can be. What poets do is to transform things;

transformation is the process of their personality:

To describe it by exaggerating it, he shares the transformation, not to say apotheosis, accomplished by the poem. It must be this experience that makes him think of poetry as possibly a phase of metaphysics....
 if when we experience a sense of purification, we can think of the establishing of a self, it is certain that the experience of the poet is of no less a degree than the experience of the mystic and we may be certain that in the case of poets, the peers of saints, those experiences are of no less a degree than the experiences of the saints themselves. It is a question of the nature of the experience. It is not a question of identifying or relating dissimilar figures; that is to say, it is not a question of making saints out of poets or poets out of saints. (NA 49-51)

In a paper published in 1952, Sister Quinn pointed out the importance of transformation in Stevens' poetry and the crucial problem in his esthetic:

Set against the imagination as shaping spirit is the desire of Stevens expressed with equal vividness, to face things as they are. Indeed, his devotion to things as they are is hard to reconcile with his wish to remold them to what they should be. It may be that these two contradictory views are merely another instance of his Heraclitean opposites which fuse into a third and perfect singular - but on the other hand their incompatibility may constitute a crucial lack of clarity in his aesthetic... Subtle as Stevens' propositions are and admirable as is the intricacy with which he had devised them...there appear to be basic difficulties in his position, which suggest that the center which he seeks is still in the future tense.²⁶

Benamou has recently published a letter Stevens wrote to Sister Quinn in 1949 which suggests that her statement of the problem has its authority:

...I do not want to turn to stone under your very eyes by saying "This is the centre that I seek and this alm." Your mind is too much like my own for it to seem an evasion on my part to say merely that I do seek a centre and expect to go on seeking it. I don't say that I shall not find it as that I do not expect to find it. It is the great necessity even without specific identification.²⁷

The center is that place wherein is and should be are one - where

conception equals perception and the poet equals what he does. It is possible to understand the *nisus* after this center by disposing of two critical reactions to the question of the striving personality.

The first of these reactions to transformation is given voice by Ralph Nash; "...we have here a concept of poetry as an approach to the center of reality, an ascent through illusion past hordes of destructions, arriving at last at 'what we wanted fact to be.' This vatic concept necessitates a vatic faith in the figure of the poet. ...His godhead is the nimbus of imagination."²⁸

Nash's view would be acceptable, were it not that one of the 'hordes of illusions' which Stevens' rejects is precisely this vatic concept of the imagination:

It is important to believe that the visible is the equivalent of the invisible; and once we believe it, we have destroyed the imagination; that is to say, we have destroyed the false imagination, the false conception of the imagination as some incalculable vates within us, unhappy Rodomontade. (NA 60)

Stevens' avoidance of the vatic concept is the result of his desire to affirm the reality of transformations in poetry. The vatic poet, who owes his fealty to his vision, is imprisoned too often in his prophecy. He is committed to that which does not yet exist; he is a marginal poet. Stevens is always meticulous in making the distinction between the marginal and the central poet; note, for example, that though he equates the experience of the poet with the experience of mystics and saints, he carefully disclaims any similarity among the experiencers.

The second view to be dismissed is a natural corollary of the first. It is a view expressed by Mary Colum:

It seems to us that what Wallace Stevens is really

concerned with is the relation between one man's consciousness and the world, but a world in which humanity and its problems, desires and affections have hardly any place.²⁹

Superficially, of course, this criticism springs from the same kind of euhemeristic concern described earlier, but that is not its point. The fact that Stevens denied that the poet possessed social responsibility (NA 27), which in humanist terms means the responsibility of grappling with the immediate and significant problems faced by social man, must reduce his poems, in the eyes of euhemerist critics, to what Powys terms "bizarre ornamentation."³⁰ The now famous article written by Stanley Burnshaw³¹ has received its reply in "Owl's Clover" and such restrictive views are no longer important except as matters of social history. What is important about Mary Colum's criticism is that it points out the risk run by any poet who rejects vatic authority and still wants to talk about realities whose presence on the scene is not immediately obvious. The point about prophets is that they don't have to depend upon reality to do their bidding until after they are dead while central poets are committed to proving their visionary experiences right now. Her criticism, then, is a corollary of Nash's because it implies that unauthorized visions are subjective illusions.

The easiest way to escape the charge of subjectivity, of course, is not to have any visions and to experience no transformations. It has already been determined that such a course is impossible for Stevens. "Central poetry" is transformation and the sense of transformation is intended to be public and not merely private. "The measure of the poet is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the sense of other

people" (NA 123-24);

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

"Abstraction" is one of the key terms in Stevens' theory and one aspect of its meaning for him involves the adherence to contemporaneous reality. "It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality." (NA 22) What makes abstraction necessary is that the adherence to reality spawns pressures which must be resisted or avoided:

By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation. (NA 20)

It is precisely this abstractive power, the power of contemplation that is the poet's birthright, or at least his karma; and its practical result is poetry:

The trouble is that the greater the pressure of the contemporaneous, the greater the resistance. Resistance is the opposite of escape. The poet who wishes to contemplate good in the midst of confusion is like the mystic who wishes to contemplate God in the midst of evil. There can be no thought of escape. Both the poet and the mystic may establish themselves on herrings and apples...The only possible resistance to the pressure of the contemporaneous is a matter of herrings and apples, or, to be less definite, the contemporaneous itself. In poetry, to that extent, the subject is not the contemporaneous, because that is only the nominal subject, but the poetry of the contemporaneous. Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable

circumstance. (OP 225)

The poem "Mozart, 1935" provides a practical example of the nature and purpose of the poet's abstract adherence to reality.

The key stanza is the third:

That lucid souvenir of the past,
The divertimento;
That airy dream of the future,
The unclouded concerto...
The snow is falling.
Strike the piercing chord. (CP 132)

The poem is not, as Benamou suggests,³² a parody of romantic tenets.

Frankenburg's comment is closer to the truth:

By observing the present truly and intensely enough,
the poet may hope, symbolically, to resolve its conflicts. ...He is not the politicians' collective "you,"
but the artist's singular "thou."³³

But more than symbolic resolutions are at issue in the poem, and the poet's identity is not as simple as Frankenburg suggests.

The poet is an 'ephebe' under the instruction of a music master, who tells him, in effect, to become the voice of the mass:

Be thou the voice,
Not you. Be thou, be thou
The voice of angry fear,
The voice of this besieging pain.

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

We may return to Mozart (CP 132)

The images of winter and wind in the poem reinforce the analogy implied in the title. Mozart's society was occupied with the partition of Poland; in 1935, the same wrenching of social order was evident, both in the rebellious stirrings of the depression and in Germany's occupation of the Saar. In the midst of his

chaos, Mozart established the concerto, a total form completely opposite in concept and significance to the decorative divertimento, yet a form giving full expression to the solo instruments. That the music master of the present should consider "The unclouded concerto" an "airy dream of the future" is a fact which indicates his concept of the function of "thou." The poet, as "thou," unclouds the concerto by, literally, blowing away the clouds from which snow is falling and thereby absolving sorrow in "a starry placating" - an unclouded concerto. To do so, he must practice "arpeggios" composed in the present:

Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,
Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,
Its envious cachinnation. (CP 131)

The point of the "arpeggios" is that they manifest an order which is capable of becoming a part of that total harmony which is the concerto, though at the same time they reflect reality, the sense of living in the world. The poet must discover the order of the present and harmonize it with the order of the future - with total order. "...when we think of arpeggios, we think of opening wings...."(NA 80). Such an order cannot be purely his own; divertimenti are no longer adequate, because the "greater the pressure of the contemporaneous; the greater the resistance."

The tone of the music master in the poem is a study of the way it sounds to 'resist the pressure of reality.'

If they throw stones upon the roof
While you practice arpeggios,
It is because they carry down the stairs
A body in rags.
Be seated at the piano. (CP 131-32)

The balance established here is not dependent on a pose of complete

indifference to the world (the body's possible identity is too ominously suggested for that). It is a tone expressive of "...the relation between the vivid conception of great evils, and that self-assertion of the soul which gives the emotion of the sublime..."³⁴ What affords sublimity in the context of the poem is that it may be possible "to return to Mozart." The difference between the poet and those who "throw stones on the roof" is one of direction. The poet partakes of the present fear, but he attempts to transcend its destructive force by making it a part of the sublime. In the process, he himself is transformed; he abstracts himself from the personal consequences of the present fear and contemplates it from an absolute perspective - Mozart's total harmony.

With the example of "Mozart, 1935" in mind, it is easy to see how abstraction, as a process, becomes a matter for philosophical proof. The transitory nature of sublime states, even for those capable of experiencing them, was all too evident even before 1935. MacLeish's earlier poem, "Men of My Century Loved Mozart," stresses how ethereal the dream of the music master had become:

Never did we hear Mozart but the mind,
Fished from its feeding in some weedy deep,
And wound in web that must more closely bind
The more it altered from itself, would keep
One moment in that bond its perfect kind -

Never, when we would question it, but shone
Through breaking cordage silver and the god was gone.³⁵

The questions - the pressures of contemporaneous reality - are many and unless the central poet can offer some answer, it is doubtful if many who share the fears of the present will rest satisfied with quicksilver as their catholicon. The questions the narrator asks in "The American Sublime" - Stevens' companion poem

to "Mozart, 1935" - are essential:

How does one stand
 To behold the sublime,
 To confront the mockers,
 The mickey mockers
 And plated pairs?

.....

What wine does one drink?

What bread does one eat? (CP 130-31)

The wine and bread are, of course, the body and blood - the commonplace things which take on transcendent reality and assist spiritual communion. (In this context, one can speculatively explain "The mickey mockers/And plated pairs" in terms of the Irish Americans whose act of communion is somewhat falsified by a stomach full of Saturday night's booze and in terms of the opposition between man and god that becomes the permanent meaning of the ritual instead of the original intent of the ritual as a breaking down of pairs).

What has happened to the American sublime is that an opposition has been enforced between spirit and substance, between the real and the unreal:

When General Jackson
 Posed for his statue
 He knew how one feels.
 Shall a man go barefoot
 Blinking and blank?

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

The spirit and space,
 The empty spirit
 In vacant space. (CP 130-31)

General Jackson posed because he felt the need for some embodiment of his spirit - of his sense of the sublime meaning of his life. But that embodiment turned out to be the statue "...in Lafayette

Square... of Andrew Jackson, riding a horse with one of the most beautiful tails in the world" (NA 10), a statue of which Stevens said:

Treating this work as typical, it is obvious that the American will as a principle of the mind's being is easily satisfied in its efforts to realize itself in knowing itself.... A glance at it shows it to be unreal. The bearing of this is that there can be works, and this includes poems, in which neither the imagination nor reality is present. (NA 11)

One of the pressures of present reality is the tendency to make the spirit incredible and thereby deny it a home in reality. But the full spirit is one filled with a sublime sense of a life lived in reality; and the central poet is one who must find again in this life the 'sanctions' of the spirit and of its visions.

It should be obvious by now that the central poet is not content with either the hieratic or the subjective. What he wants is to make the hieratic credible. It is not simply a matter, as Frye suggests when he says that "Stevens speaks of the imagination as moving from the hieratic to the credible,"³⁶ of giving up one thing in favor of another. The full citation of the passage to which Frye refers proves that:

Summed up, our position at the moment is that the poet must get rid of the hieratic in everything that concerns him and must move constantly in the direction of the credible. He must create his unreal out of what is real. (NA 58)

That this is only a momentary position, a sort of initial stage of the "virile poet's" initiation into the mysteries, is evident from the progressive nature of his devotion to his muse. In this initial state, he feels no need of the trappings of metaphysics (NA 59) (the first underlining is mine):

What we have called elevation and elation on the part

of the poet, which he communicates to the reader, may be not so much elevation as an incandescence of the intelligence and so more than ever a triumph over the incredible. Here as part of the purification all of us undergo as we approach any central purity, and that we feel in its presence, we can say:

No longer do I believe that there is a mystic muse, sister of the Minotaur. This is another of the monsters I had for nurse, whom I have wasted. I am myself a part of what is real, and it is my own speech and the strength of it, this only, that I hear or ever shall. (NA 60)

Why it should be Ariadne who he rejects is a matter for later conjecture. Note only that in this state of purification the poet has come to identify poetic truth with fact. "But if poetic truth means fact and if fact includes the whole of it as it is between the extreme poles of sensibility, we are talking about a thing as extensible as it is ambiguous." (NA 60) This identification enables him to wash "the imagination clean" (NA 61). But he is faced now with a decision - "At what level of the truth shall he compose his poems?" (NA 61)

This question concerns the function of the poet today and tomorrow, but makes no pretence beyond. He is able to read the inscription on the portal and he repeats:

I am myself a part of what is real and it is my own speech and the strength of it, this only, that I hear or ever shall.

He says, so that we can all hear him:

I am the truth, since I am part of what is real, but neither more nor less than those around me. And I am imagination, in a leaden time and in a world that does not move for the weight of its own heaviness.

Can there be the slightest doubt what the decision will be? Can we suppose for a moment that he will be content merely to copy Katahdin, when with his sense of the heaviness of the world, he feels his own power to lift, or help to lift, that heaviness away? (NA 62-63)

This statement of dedication from the purified poet has much in it to make one think of the dominant images in Stevens' poems.

Katahdin, for example, is the highest mountain in Maine, and one finds in "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" (CP 512)

the accomplishment of the poet's purpose; just as one finds in "Credences of Summer" his movement towards the fulfillment of that purpose:

The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.
It rises from land and sea and covers them.
It is a mountain half-way green and then,
The other immeasurable half, such rock
As placid air becomes. (CP 375)

In this second, or purposeful stage, the poet discovers that -

Poetry is the imagination of life. A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it. When, therefore, we say that the world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable from one another... we have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there.... (NA 65-66)

It is this discovery that makes the poet virile.

...for the poet, the imagination is paramount, and if he dwells apart in his imagination, as the philosopher dwells in his reason, and as the priest dwells in his belief, the masculine nature that we propose for one that must be the master of our lives will be lost... As we say these things, there begins to develop ... an intimation of what he is thinking as he reflects on the imagination of life, determined to be its master and ours. He is thinking of those facts of experience of which all of us have thought and which all of us have felt with such intensity, and he says:

Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur, enigma and mask, although I am part of what is real, hear me and recognise me as part of the unreal. I am the truth but the truth of that imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours. (NA 66-67)

What such an oscillatory movement on the part of the poet accomplishes, and how it is accomplished, are pertinent questions. Essentially, of course, the poet has moved from a philosophical view of reality to a 'poetic' one and in the process has witnessed the reviviscence of his muse. The parts Stevens has muse

and poet play are an interesting indication of the transcendental nature of the resurrection. In the beginning of their personification, the muse had been Ariadne only vaguely and the poet a brash sort of Aeneas just about to wander:

In effect, what we are remembering is the rather haggard background of the incredible, the imagination without intelligence, from which a younger figure is emerging, stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own, still half-beast and somehow more than human, a kind of sister of the Minotaur. This younger figure is the intelligence that endures. It is the imagination of the son still bearing the antique imagination of the father. It is the clear intelligence of the young man still bearing the burden of the obscurities of the intelligence of the old. It is the spirit out of its own self, not out of some surrounding myth, delineating with accurate speech the complications of which it is composed. For this Aeneas, it is the past that is Anchises. (NA 52-53)

If one accepts these personae as 'accurate delineations' of the nature of the central poet, one has a mixed semi-myth which, when unravelled, reveals what the poet's movement accomplishes.

Anchises was blighted with paralysis because he boasted about his union with Venus, and Aeneas was forced to carry him on his shoulders when they fled from Troy. But Aeneas, warned by his father's fate, escapes the charms of Dido in order to establish civilization:

...when the earth is veiled in shadow
 And the fiery stars are burning, I see my father,
 Anchises, or his ghost, and I am frightened;
 I am troubled for the wrong I do my son,
 Cheating him out of his kingdom in the west,
 And lands that fate assigns him.³⁷

The mistake of the father was to place more importance in the love of the goddess than in his earthly task. But Aeneas, who takes up that task, is to establish a civilization more like the City of God than historical Rome - a home for the purified heroes - where the shades of Elysium become the sustaining spirits of life:

the "image" of Anchises makes this clear when Aeneas visits the underworld:

Anchises answers: - "These are spirits, ready
 Once more for life; they drink of Lethe's water
 The soothing potion of forgetfulness.
 I have longed, for long, to show them to you, name them,
 Our children's children; Italy discovered,
 So much the greater happiness, my son."
 "But, O my father, is it thinkable
 That souls would leave this blessedness, be willing
 A second time to bear the sluggish body,
 Trade Paradise for earth? Alas, poor wretches,
 Why such a mad desire for light?" Anchises
 Gives detailed answer: "First, my son, a spirit
 Sustains all matter, heaven and earth and ocean,
 The moon, the stars; mind quickens mass, and moves it.
 Hence comes the race of man, of beast, of winged
 Creatures of the air, of the strange shapes which ocean
 Bears down below his mottled marble surface.
 All these are blessed with the energy of heaven;
 The seed of life is a spark of fire....³⁸

Thus far, the persona of Aeneas is appropriate to the central poet whose main purpose it was to reach "that ultimate good sense which we term civilization." (NA 116) The persona helps to define civilization. But Ariadne is another myth. It is true that she appears as objet d'arte in the Apollonian temple built by Daedalus which is the starting place of Aeneas' search for the portals to the underworld, but her presence in Stevens' little drama seems to be ascribable to his need for a transcendent analogy to Dido. Like Dido, Ariadne is deserted by her betrothed hero (Theseus), and, like Dido, she commits suicide (though by hanging rather than drowning). But unlike Dido, Ariadne ends up, by virtue of the complications of myth, as fecund wife of the one god above all who offered man a divine gift to serve as substratum of his civilization - Dionysus who gave man the vine. In the end, Ariadne dwells in the temples built by a Theseus repentant while Dido is doomed to walk the wasteland of the Stygian shore.

Though the analogy does have transcendent potential and is permissible (both Dido and Ariadne are versions of Astarte and thus of Graves' White Goddess), Stevens' treatment of Ariadne is confusing. At the beginning of the poet's progress, she is only vaguely the Ariadne of classical myth. Rather than a princess whose patrilineal descent is from Zeus (through Minos), Stevens has a figure "still half-beast and somehow more than human." She is, in other words, full sister to the Minotaur. The only way to explain this fact is by speculating about the function of Stevens' images. The "virile" poet is situated in modern reality and therefore must accept his muse as he finds her. The modern view of classical myth is one which tends to reduce mythical divinity into bestiality. To say that the Greek gods were pantheistic is to say that they were mere representations of, or superstitions about, natural forces - those "facts of experience" which are no longer an "enigma" and are explicable now in terms of science. The poet must dispose of this mutilated corpse, whose divinity was denied and who therefore died, in order to effect a reincarnation. The reincarnation is of divinity, and is made possible because the poet has probed the "facts of experience" and found in their strange transformations an "enigma" still - a force at work which is not to be explained except by recognition of the true nature of the masks of the absolute.

Apropos to this view of what the central poet's initiation accomplishes, is the fact that there is, in the Louvre,³⁹ a bell-shaped Ariadne doll whose function was the same as that of the oscilla of Italy - to hang in a tree as a mask of God and speak the speech of the wind. In the poet's final awareness of her,

Ariadne is just such a mask. She is the poetry of the poem; her mask is the poem fashioned by human hands and she "shares" the poet's words. The oscillations of the mask it is the poet's purpose to create catch the accordant descant of the ineffable - the oscillations of the absolute.

What the poet accomplishes in his oscillation, then, is the resurrection of the dead hieratic as the living credible. How he accomplishes it is, however, a much knottier matter. But a clue may be provided by the invocatory "To the One of Fictive Music." The poem is not necessarily the utterance of Stevens' voice, nor is "the one of fictive music" solely Ariadne, though she is suggested pretty clearly in her role as Liberia - goddess of the vine and consort to Dionysus, whose chaplet, "made by Hephaestus of fiery gold and red Indian gems, set in the shape of roses,"⁴⁰ is the Corona Borealis:

O bough and bush and scented vine, in whom
 We give ourselves our likest issuance.

 On your pale head wear
 A band entwining, set with fatal stones. (CP 88)

But there is a parallel between the 'virile' poet's relation to his muse and that between the narrator of the poem and the composite figure who is "the one of fictive music."

Benamou sees in this poem the ironic treatment of "Romantic intoning,"⁴¹ and McFadden a statement of "Flaccid romanticism."⁴² Both views, though opposed, are far from the truth. McFadden's comment is one of those easy rejections critics too often make en passant and can be itself subjected to the same treatment. But Benamou's interpretation contains, at least, the sense that there is some kind of opposition in the poem; according to it,

the eulogistic description of lines 2 to 6 are to be taken as examples of romantic hyperbole and line 9 as an ironic deflation:

Sister and mother and diviner love,
 And of the sisterhood of the living dead
 Most near, most clear, and of the clearest bloom,
 And of the fragrant mothers the most dear
 And queen, and of diviner love the day
 And flame and summer and sweet fire, no thread
 Of cloudy silver sprinkles in your gown
 Its venom of renown, and on your head
 No crown is simpler than the simple hair. (CP 87)

Benamou doesn't refer to the rest of the poem; presumably he would make of the next three stanzas a continuation of the deflation. But if his view of line 9 is correct, why should the second stanza end with reference to "laborious weaving" and why should the narrator ask that the figure wear "A band entwining, set with fatal stones"?

No, the opposition is not between the wrong romantic and the right realistic, but between the muse too humanized and the muse transcendent. In effect, the poem is a poet's plea for the boon of imagination which only the transcendent muse of the fourth stanza can give:

Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:
 The imagination that we spurned and crave. (CP 88)

Note that this plea is for a second giving of the gift: "the one of fictive music" had given men imagination, they had spurned it, and they now crave it again. The nature of this spurning is clearly defined in the second and third stanzas:

Now, of the music summoned by the birth
 That separates us from the wind and sea,
 Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
 By being so much of the things we are,
 Gross effigy and simulacrum, none
 Gives motion to perfection more serene
 Than yours, out of our imperfections wrought,
 Most rare, or ever of more kindred air
 In the laborious weaving that you wear.

For so retentive of themselves are men
 That music is intensest which proclaims
 The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom,
 And of all vigils musing the obscure,
 That apprehends the most which sees and names,
 As in your name, an image that is sure,
 Among the arrant spices of the sun,
 O bough and bush and scented vine, in whom
 We give ourselves our likest issuance. (CP 87-88)

The grievous error men have committed is primarily that they have invested their imagination in fixed concepts of reality, in "The near, the clear," in extensions of themselves. Like the woman who spends all her time buttering a lingam, men have mistaken the object of their desire; they have substituted their names for the known, their images for the ineffable, their masks for the masks of the absolute. It is the old problem of the creator and the created once again, here seen in terms of the poet's creations of a creator. His initial images of "the one of fictive music," including line 9, are, like the "Gross effigy and simulacrum" of an earth too amenable to the manipulation of human purpose, traps to catch the imagination in concrete bodies. They are expressive of the poet's insistence that she is related to him in human fashion. Despite the grand language, the whole effort of the poet is bent on getting rid of the "thread/Of cloudy silver" with "Its venom of renown" and substituting the humanized figure whose relation to the poet is made conclusive by "the simple hair" with which he adorns her. Benamou is quite right about the intoning, but line 9 is the culmination, not the rejection, of that intoning.

The allusion in the "thread/Of silver" is to the constellation Serpens - a constellation which seems to play an important part in the as yet unmapped star chart of Stevens. Here the

allusion is to the fact that Serpens Capua (the head of the serpent) appears to crawl towards Corona Borealis; "whence the Serpent is often said to be 'licking the Crown.'"⁴³ Now, without wishing to over-emphasize the matter, the relation of the serpent to the crown is a variable one. The stellar drama begins (for observers in Canada and the northern half of the U.S) with the very faint appearance of Corona Borealis on the northeastern horizon.⁴⁴ Next, Serpens Capua (the head of the serpent) makes its appearance and appears to be pursuing the Crown across the sky. Also in evidence is the constellation Hercules - the figure kneeling upside down and appearing to reach out in a kind of extreme *nisus* to grasp Serpens Capua. The significance of Hercules becomes clear when Ophiuchus makes his appearance:

There is certainly a significance in the location of this figure Hercules of a giant trampling on a serpent [not Serpens but Draco], for he is placed head to head with the giant Ophiuchus, who is represented as holding a writhing serpent in his grasp. Hercules has been thought to represent the first Adam, beguiled by the serpent, and condemned to a life of toil, while Ophiuchus is supposed to be the second Adam, triumphant over the serpent.⁴⁵

The point about Ophiuchus, who is seen to grasp Serpens firmly when Serpens Capua is closest to the Corona Borealis and then to pull the serpent slowly back from the crown, is that he is also Aesculapius "with whose worship serpents were always associated, as symbols of prudence, wisdom, renovation, and the power of discovering herbs.... he became so skilled in practice that it is said he even restored the dead to life."⁴⁶

The function of this allusion in "To the One of Fictive Music" is to provide an analogy with the double view of the poet and his muse. The analogy is complicated by a concurrent analogy with the

earth in its seasonal changes, but the main lines are clear. The poet, like Hercules, attempts to grasp the serpent because he fears the "venom of renown" and its threat to his humanized muse. "Renown" means, literally, 'to name again, or often' and thus to 'make famous.' But the muse of the fourth stanza is asked to assume her old attributes again:

...whence springs
The difference that heavenly pity brings.
For this musician, in your girdle fixed
Bear other perfumes. (CP 88)

In other words, the serpent's "venom of renown," when transformed by Ophiuchus, becomes its own antidote. The poet reduces his muse from the outworn ethereal to the physical only to discover of all music "none/Gives motion to perfection more serene/...out of our imperfections wrought" than the music of his muse once again becoming ethereal (note the contrast between "simple hair" and "laborious weaving"). What makes such a progression inevitable is that in reducing his muse, the poet has identified her with earth or an aspect of it (Ariadne as the "scented vine") and with the passage of the season such identifications become less and less adequate. The death of every image constitutes an embryonic stage in the rebirth of the muse as mystery. In the months of fruition, man rests content with his perception that the beauty of the bloom is a property of the physical flower (and indeed it is). But with the decay of the flower, the achieved recognition of the beautiful remains and men realize that beauty is something else besides the merely physical. On the level of the analogy, the poet's images are never fully adequate to the muse until they are such that they combine both the ethereal and the earthly - a feat of which no single physical image, nor single idea-as-name,

is capable. This is a fact which has important consequences in regard to the technique of the central poet; it necessitates his endless oscillations from the physical to the ethereal - his variable symbols and recurrent images.

"To the One of Fictive Music" is an incredibly concentrated poem and its complications are the kind constantly encountered in Stevens' poems. They arise because to imagine an opposition in a "total double-thing" is difficult. I have, for example, posited an analogy between the ethereal movement of the constellations and the physical transition of the season as the basis of the poet's oscillation. While the analogy does operate in the poem, the opposition it indicates is not as simple as it seems when expressed as an opposition between the ethereal and the physical. The first appearance of the constellation business is used negatively; it stands for the idea-as-name which is outmoded and dead - empty of feeling. The poet supplants this idea-as-name with the physical image, nameless and known only by the poet's experiential sense of it. But, in the third stanza, image and idea-as-name are seen as the same: the "arrant spices of the sun" is wonderfully appropriate to both stars and blooms. It is this subtle correlation of the two terms of the opposition that releases the muse of the final stanza from the images that surround her. She is, in effect, no longer chained to that which describes her; she is beyond the words. It is this curious but nonetheless carefully planned release which affords the reader his sense of the vibrant life of the muse as "Unreal." In other words, the poem works and creates, because of its concentrations, poetry.

My use of the poem, however, was aimed only at demonstrating how the "central poet" makes the ineffable credible. This poem is, perhaps no more of an illustration than (for example) "Fabliau of Florida," but it does have the virtue of applying particularly to the oscillating movement of "the central poet". For those who find the poem, or the interpretation of it, too complicated to be illustrative, the poem "Last Looks at the Lilacs" (CP 48) will clarify at least the latter, or transcendent, half of the poet's full oscillation.

In "Last Looks at the Lilacs" the basic analogy is between the lilac and its personifications or transformations. The identity of "caliper" is not too difficult: Riddel says "the figure of 'caliper'...symbolizes the extreme consequences of the rational mind which anatomizes nature at the expense of beauty."⁴⁷ Precisely; "caliper" is the baser half of man, whose measure of the real is the measure of the earth upon which he stands. His companion, however, is an ambiguous figure, a phantasia of faintly felt forms. As woman, she is a personification of the flowers, and, in the extension of the final stanza, of the "lost" Pleiad in the constellation Pleiades. Stevens probably identifies the "lost" Pleiad as Merope, because he writes of her marriage as "the marriage/Of flesh and air" (CP 83); it is precisely this marriage which forms the central opposition in the poem. The caliper's analogies are definitions, identifications, attempts to reduce the ineffable with the framework of a presupposed reality:

...this bloom is the bloom of soap
And this fragrance the fragrance of vegetal (CP 48)

Like the unaware poet of "To the One of Fictive Music," but to a far greater degree, he wants his images real. The narrator of

"Last Looks..." is the aware poet chastising the unaware; his analogies encompass the is and is-not of both bloom and fragrance. He grants the caliper's sense of the flowers by making his personification ambivalent. "She" is the caliper's companion, which means she exists within his frame of reference as his sense of the real flowers. But she is also the ineffable; unlike the "caliper" she is not half-life. As flower and personification of flower she will end up as "trash" - the flowers will wilt and die and be used in the production of soap. The flower, as a subject for personification will then be as intangible as air - "her nakedness is near." Like Merope, the "she" will become invisible because companion of a mortal (the flowers and their practical uses) and reside in the sky with her sisters unseen. But her invisibility, in the context of the poem, is a consummation with the sun. The time is important here; it is the month of May, the blossomal on the revolutionary calendar, and the month in which, according to Seyffert, the morning rising of the Pleiades signifies the approach of harvest:

Her body quivering in the Floreal

Toward the cool night and its fantastic star,
 Prime paramour and belted paragon,
 Well-booted, rugged, arrogantly male,
 Patron and imager of the gold Don John,
 Who will embrace her before summer comes. (CP 84)

The star is Betelgeuse, which belongs to the constellation Orion, and which heralds its constellations' rise. At the end of May, Orion rises in the early morning; it, in turn, heralds the rising of the sun and has been identified with it in myth. "The Egyptians represented it as Horus, the young or rising sun..."⁴⁸ Now, Orion is "Prime paramour" in the sense that he is first

lover of Merope, or at least would-be-lover (he pursued she and her sisters for five years while on earth and still pursues the Pleiades toward the morning as constellation). He is "belted paragon" because he affords the sun a non-constrictive image, through their association, that makes the marriage possible. Thus he is "Patron and imager of the gold Don John" - patron because he drives Merope towards the sun.

Note how swiftly and cleanly this "divine ingenue" flits from inadequate image to inadequate image until she attains her consummation with the completely released sun. It is this "double-thing" existing in perfect freedom which is exemplified by what I earlier called existent images in relation to "the bright obvious" of "Man Carrying Thing." The muse of the fourth stanza of "To the One of Fictive Music" and the "she" and sun of "Last Looks..." are also existent images - they accompany the words which surround them freely because their existence is not contained or defined fully by them. One has intimations here of the reason behind Stevens' refusal to define metaphor as a statement of identity - a fact Frye, for one, finds confusing.⁴⁹ The "central poet's" oscillations are made possible by "the strange unlike, whence springs/The difference that heavenly pity brings." (CP 88) They do not destroy images and ideas-as-names; they cause vibrations within them and vibration is life. This is the point of "Adult Epigram" - Stevens' pedagogical tidbit, offered, presumably, to his initiated students:

The romance of precision is not the elision
Of the tired romance of imprecision.
It is the ever-never-changing same,
An appearance of Again, the diva-dame. (CP 353)

What's precise about the "romance of precision" is its recognition

of the imprecision of the images of "the tired romance." It does not elide that imprecision; it uses it as the source of its power. By so doing, it causes to appear once again the same goddess or leading singer whose reality was cause for all the images in the first place but who had been entombed by the pretensions to precision of imprecision.

The technique of the existent image does not always reveal itself in the single poem, but this is only because the oscillations of the "central poet" are not so confined. The deadening divisions of the human understanding are so pervasive as to demand from the poet, in his resistance of the pressure of reality, far more rigorous endeavors than the mere resurrection of his muse or the accurate delineation of the experience of lilacs in May. These are parts of the "non-geography" in which the fully conscious man exists, but unlike the haphazard and bloody chaos of man's political 'reality' this non-geography constitutes a harmonious whole. The task of the "central poet" is to make the whole appear whose reality is affirmed by every minor part. Such, at least, is the promise of many of Stevens' poems - among them "The Woman in Sunshine":

It is only that this warmth and movement are like
The warmth and movement of a woman.

It is not that there is any image in the air
Nor the beginning nor end of a form:

It is empty. But a woman in threadless gold
Burns us with brushings of her dress

And a dissociated abundance of being,
More definite for what she is -

Because she is disembodied,
Bearing the odors of the summer fields,

Confessing the taciturn and yet indifferent,

Invisibly clear, the only love. (CP 445)

There is a strangely autobiographical element in this poem and in many of Stevens' later poems. It is as though the poet and his reader had agreed that the accomplishments which required so much concentration in the early poems had become so much a matter of mutual acceptance that the continued extensions of that kind of experience could now be shared easily, gracefully, without effort and almost without the necessity of words. The poet speaks and presto! one exists in the felt freedom of the sun and prepares to meditate the problem of "the only love." All this may not be valid as criticism, but it's true, and it's what makes Stevens' the poet he is. If there is a 'change' in Stevens' later poems, it is not a change in his conception of his function or his sense of the world as Riddel suggests:

Necessity informs the apocalyptic tone of the late poetry to suggest that the real problems of Stevens' final years were to effect some kind of compromise between the unremitting naturalism, and in one sense, atheism, of his early poetry and the spiritual tones of his late. The distinction is not altogether correct. From the very beginning, he linked poetry with the forms of divination, though he knew as well as Wordsworth that the poet was a man speaking to men, and charged only with human truths.⁵⁰

If there is a change, it is a change induced by Stevens' sense that "the only love" was "taciturn and yet indifferent"; each time the minors of the harmony had been more easily mastered, but still the major music, of which the minors are but phases, had not come. This was, perhaps, inevitable, because Stevens' music was Godbole's:

It was a religious song. I placed myself in the position of a milkmaid. I say to Shri Krishna, 'Come! come to me only.' The god refuses to come. I grow humble and say: 'Do not come to me only. Multiply yourself into a hundred Krishnas, and let one go to each of

my hundred companions, but one, O Lord of the Universe, come to me.' He refuses to come. ...

"But He comes in some other song, I hope?" said Mrs. Moore gently.

"Oh, no, he refuses to come," repeated Godbole, perhaps not understanding her question. "I say to Him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come."⁵¹

But it cannot be considered a failure on the part of the "central poet" that the complete harmony remains beyond the edges of his poems. It is the woman herself, in "The Woman in Sunshine", who by the freedom of her being reflects not only the reality of the experience in which she hovers but also the reality of that which she loves and which is beyond all experience. An essential knowledge in any genuine understanding of Stevens must be that existent images are not ends in themselves. They are facets of the absolute, true symbols, crystal perspectives through which it is possible to glimpse the fire at the heart of the gem. Surfaces, they reflect the light of the images which surround them and mingle with it a suggestion of the radiance of the "That" of which they are composed.

Such description may sound too euphuistic, but it is a fact that Stevens had this kind of double relation in mind, in his prose and his poetry. Evidence of it appears in such poems, for example, as "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

The will of necessity, the will of wills-

Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle,
Like the constant sound of the water of the sea
In the hearing of the shepherd and his black forms

Out of the isle, but not of any isle.
Close to the senses there lies another isle
And there the senses give and nothing take,

The opposite of Cythère, an isolation
At the centre, the object of the will, this place,
The things around - the alternate romanza

Out of the surfaces, the windows, the walls,
 The bricks grown brittle in time's poverty,
 The clear. A celestial mode is paramount,

If only in the branches sweeping in the rain:
 The two romanzas, the distant and the near,
 Are a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind. (CP 480-81)

There is a strong suggestion of allusion in the spelling of Cythère which I cannot trace, but at this level it may be considered of secondary importance. The meaning of the lines emerges clearly. In their context, they describe the struggle "of a man,/ Who sits thinking in the corners of a room." (CP 480) What he is thinking about is "the pure sphere" (CP 480) of the absolute. There are three elements which compose his thought - "The town" as "a residuum,/A neuter shedding shapes in an absolute," (CP 479) the "transcripts" of imagination and feeling which become "the nameless flitting characters" (CP 479) and which correspond to existent images and are the 'shapes shed by the neuter in an absolute,' and "the pure sphere" of the absolute itself which he desires to comprehend. But his nisus for the absolute is blocked, inevitably, by the will of the absolute itself:

In this chamber the pure sphere escapes the impure
 Because the thinker himself escapes. And yet
 To have evaded clouds and men leaves him
 A naked being with a naked will

And everything to make. He may evade
 Even his own will and in his nakedness
 Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere.

XXI

But he may not. He may not evade his will,
 Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade
 The will of necessity, the will of wills - (CP 480)

"The bright obvious" was never more obvious, nor ever more beautiful than it is here. How much of its power can the critic be

expected to capture by pointing to the opposition between the isle of Cythere - the isle where Venus rose from the sea as gift from the gods, herself divine - the the isle of the black shepherd and his black forms where "the senses give and nothing take" because it is the will of the black shepherd that man return his gift filled with all the love and devotional labor they can muster from their lives? What hope is there that the flat statement that the dissociation of the "Romanza" of the black shepherd from all its images ("Out of the isle, but not of any isle") gives "him" free existence can define the tremendous life of the poetry? One reads the lines "The two romanzas, the distant and the near,/ Are a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind" and knows that everything that he has said about Stevens has been right and true and that everything that Stevens is saying about him and everyone in the poem is also right and true. As critic, he says that "the boo-ha of the wind" means life, my friend, and in life it is hard to see our moments of greatest exultation as but pale reflections and partial sharings of the absolute.

Stevens avoids the "hypnosis" of the void and seeks, as he must, the sense of the plenum-void. That his critics have failed to follow him is due to their delusion that they must adhere, and Stevens should adhere, to one side or the other of the euhemerist-hermetic split. The kind of objection Richards made to theories of the truth of poetry, which is the kind of objection underlying the split, no longer applies to all theories because the grounds of the "central poet's" existence constitute proof that is the equivalent of "Mill's Logic." The purpose now must be to examine those grounds, both for themselves and for their influence on the

mode of existence of "central poetry" and its techniques.

Surprisingly, there is little that needs to be said about the theory of "central poetry" once one has understood the kind of transcendence achieved by the "central poet" in his poems. There is nothing very elaborate about it, though it is theory capable of absorbing an infinite number of exempla. Nor is there anything new about it; it belongs to a theory of esthetics so old as to be almost forgotten - a theory recently reiterated by Ananda Coomaraswamy, a man Stevens very probably knew:

Precisely as love is reality experienced by the lover, and truth is reality as experienced by the philosopher, so beauty is reality as experienced by the artist; and these are three phases of the Absolute.....
.....The artist reveals this beauty wherever the mind attaches itself; and the mind attaches itself, not directly to the Absolute, but to the objects of choice.

Thus we return to the earth. If we supposed we should find the object of search elsewhere, we were mistaken. The two worlds of spirit and matter, Purusha and Prakriti, are one; and this is as clear to the artist as it is to the lover or the philosopher. Those Philistines to whom it is not so apparent, we should speak of as materialists or as nihilists - exclusive monists, to whom the report of the senses is either all in all, or nothing at all. The theory of rasa set forth according to Vishvanatha and other aestheticians, belongs to total monism: it marches with the Vedanta.⁵²

Compare this theory of "total monism" with Stevens' statement;

"As we come to the point at which it is necessary to be explicit in respect to poetic truth, note that, if we say that the philosopher pursues the truth in one way and the poet in another, it is implied that both are pursuing the same thing, and we overlook the fact that they are pursuing two different parts of a whole."

(NA 54) Then compare the similarity between the technique of existent images and the technique of the religious art of total monism:

Religious art is simply a visual theology: Christian and Oriental theology alike are means to an end, but not to be confused with that end. Both alike involve a dual method, that of the via affirmativa and of the via negativa; on the one hand affirming things of God by way of praise, and on the other hand denying every one of these limiting descriptive affirmations, for though the worship is dispositive to immediate vision, God is not and never can be "what men worship here." The two ways are far from mutually exclusive; they are complementary....I shall only cite from the Upanishad, where it is a question of the use of certain types of concepts of deity regarded as supports of contemplation. Which of these is the best? That depends on individual faculties. But in any case, these are pre-eminent aspects of the incorporeal deity; "these one should contemplate and praise, but then deny. For with these one rises from higher to higher states of being. But when all these forms are resolved, then he attains to the unity of the Person".⁵³

I cannot overemphasize the closeness of the correlation between the theory and practice of "central poetry" and the theory and practice of "total monism." One could go on comparing passages indefinitely - Stevens' concept of poetry as "a process of the personality" compared to Coomaraswamy's view of art "starting from the position that 'Though he is an artist, the artist is nevertheless a man'" and ending with the same transcendence⁵⁴ - but the purpose of the comparison is primarily to put Stevens' theory safely beyond the dualism involved in Frye's "balance" and beyond Riddel's assertion that "Stevens' relativism, which has always been the pediment of his esthetic ...becomes his sustaining belief."⁵⁵ If Stevens had any belief, it was one describable only in terms of Seng-Ts'an's "Suchness":

1. The perfect way knows no difficulties
 Except that it refuses to make preferences;

 A tenth of an inch's difference,
 And heaven and earth are set apart.
 If you wish to see it with your own eyes
 Have no fixed thoughts either for or against it.

4. Pursue not the outer entanglements,

Dwell not in the inner Void;
 Be serene in the oneness of things,
 And dualism vanishes by itself.

6. And when oneness is not thoroughly understood,
 In two ways loss is sustained:
 The denying of reality is the asserting of it,
 And the asserting of emptiness is the denying of it.
17. The two exist because of the One,
 But hold not even to this One;
 When a mind is not disturbed,
 The ten thousand things offer no offence.
19. When you are not prejudiced against the six sense
 objects,
 You are then one with the enlightenment.
 The wise are non-active,
 While the ignorant bind themselves up;
 While in the Dharma itself there is no individuation.
 They ignorantly attach themselves to particular
 objects.
 It is their own mind that creates illusions,
 Is this not the greatest of all self-contradictions?
23. Forget the wherefore of things,
 And we attain to a state beyond analogy;
 Movement stopped and there is no movement,
 Rest set in motion and there is no rest;
 When dualism does no more obtain,
 Oneness itself abides not.
24. The ultimate end of things where they cannot go any
 further,
 Is not bound by rules and measures;
 In the Mind harmonious we have the principle
 Of identity, in which we find all strivings quieted;

 There is nothing left behind,
 There is nothing retained,
 All is void, lucid and self-illuminating,
 There is no exertion, no waste of energy -
 This is where thinking never attains,
 This is where the imagination fails to measure.⁵⁶

To understand these aphorisms is to perceive in its fullness the theory of "central poetry." I include them here, not from any desire to proselytize for Buddhism (or even for Hinduism), but to provide models of Stevens' theory that have a tradition behind them. Coomaraswamy, Seng-Ts'an, and Stevens all affirm the same theory, but they see it through individual eyes. The trouble

with Stevens' version is that his theory is less theory than practice, even in his prose.

But the "central poet" does have his "intimidating thesis" - "it is no doubt true that absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes" (NA 60-61) - and it is from this thesis that the essential elements of his theory spring. The immediate consequence is the denial of dualistic concepts - a denial Stevens makes repeatedly:

... the poet will come to a decision regarding the imagination and reality; and he will find that it is not a choice of one over the other and not a decision that divides them, but something subtler, a recognition that here, too, ... the universal interdependence exists, and hence his choice and his decision must be that they are equal and inseparable. (NA 24)

Poetry is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals. This is not a definition since it is incomplete. But it states the nature of poetry. (NA 27)

The subject matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid, static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are. (NA 28)

Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality....Yes the all-commanding subject matter of poetry is life, the never-ceasing source. (NA 28)

It is this denial that forms the first phase, as it were, of the poet's movement toward abstraction. As a philosophical gambit, it plunges Stevens into an intricate maze of distinctions and apparent contradictions which must now be sorted out.

The first distinction Stevens would emphasize is that between the "central poet" and philosophers. This distinction involves Stevens' comparison of poetic truth and philosophical truth as "two different parts of a whole" (NA 54):

There is a difference between them [the truths] and it

is the difference between logical and empirical knowledge. (NA 54)

The distinction herein advanced is not as simple and final as it appears. It is necessary for Stevens because of the similarity between poets and philosophers, not because they are totally opposed. This is the whole problem of "A Collect of Philosophy" - an essay in which Stevens attempts to indicate the difference as one of ordering:

The habit of forming concepts unites them [poets and philosophers]. The use to which they put their ideas separates them...The habit of forming concepts is a habit of the mind by which it probes for an integration... The habit of probing for an integration seems to be part of the general will to order.... The philosopher searches for an integration for its own sake, as, for example, Plato's idea that knowledge is recollection or that the soul is a harmony; the poet searches for an integration that shall be not so much sufficient in itself as sufficient for some quality that it possesses, such as its insight, its evocative power or its appearance in the eye of the imagination. The philosopher intends his integration to be fateful; the poet intends his to be effective. (OP 196-97)

What this means, in effect, is that one knows philosophical truth as one knows something logically (i.e. the conclusion of a logical premiss is always that something, usually the premiss, must be)- and this includes empiricism as philosophic truth - while one knows poetic truth as one knows something empirically (i.e. as a matter of experience or as something which simply is) - and this includes intuition. So says Stevens in "Imagination as Value":

It is so easy for the poet to say that a learned man must go on being a learned man but that a poet respects no knowledge except his own and, again, that the poet does not yield to the priest. What the poet has in mind, when he says things of this sort, is that poetic value is an intrinsic value. It is not the value of knowledge. It is not the value of faith. It is the value of the imagination. The poet tries to exemplify

it, in part, as I have tried to exemplify it here, by identifying it with an imaginative activity that diffuses itself throughout our lives. I say exemplify and not justify, because poetic value is intuitional value and because intuitional values cannot be justified. (NA 149)

(Before anyone turns back to Richards' charge against theories of poetic truth as the truth of intuition and to my assertion that the "central poet's" grounds of existence provided justification for such a view, I should like to point out that the end of the argument has not yet been reached. Indeed, it is just beginning.)

It must be remembered that this difference, for Stevens, is not final or fixed. To reiterate what was said in the introduction of this paper, it was the relation between the imagination and reason which gave the "central poet" the grounds for his existence:

...the poet, in order to fulfill himself, must accomplish a poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination. (NA 42)

The point is redefined in "A Collect of Philosophy":

The most significant deduction possible relates to the question of supremacy as between philosophy and poetry. If we say that philosophy is supreme, this means that the reason is supreme over the imagination. But is it? Does not philosophy carry us to a point at which there is nothing left except the imagination? If we rely on the imagination (or, say, intuition), to carry us beyond that point, and if the imagination succeeds in carrying us beyond that point (as in respect to the idea of God, if we conceive of the idea of God as this world's capital idea), then the imagination is supreme, because its powers have shown themselves to be greater than the powers of reason. Philosophers, however, are not limited to reason and, as the concepts, to which I have referred, show, their ideas are often triumphs of the imagination. (OP 200)

Stevens goes on to give a concrete example of one of the "triumphs of the imagination" which supersede the process of reason. In

great delight, he passes over Pascal and chooses a figure far less amenable to the imagination or to poetry - Planck - and cites André George's observation about Planck's thesis, The Concept of Causality in Physics:

He says:

...The last pages of the thesis are quite curious. One feels there, as it were, a supreme hesitation: the believer henceforth is no longer able to conceal a certain trouble. The most convinced determinist, Planck declares, in so many words, is not able to satisfy himself entirely with such an interpretation. For, in the end, a universal principle like the rigorous causal bond between two successive events ought to be independent of man. It is a principle of cosmic importance, it ought to be an absolute. Now, Planck not only recognizes that it is part of human aptitude to foresee events but to foresee them by means of science, "the provisional and changing creation of the power of the imagination." How then liberate the concept from such an anthropomorphic hypothesis? Only an intelligence external to man, "not constituting a part of nature," would be able to liberate it. This supra-natural intelligence would act through the deterministic power.... Planck there upon concludes that the law of causality is neither true nor false. It is a working hypothesis. George says, finally, that this conclusion is far away from the rigid concept, firmly determinist, which seemed up to now to constitute Planck's belief. He calls it a nuance but a nuance of importance, worth being signalized.

I think we may fairly say that it is a nuance of the imagination....It is unexpected to have to recognize even in Planck the presence of the poet. It is as if in a study of modern man we predicated the greatness of poetry as the final measure of his stature, as if his willingness to believe beyond belief was what made him modern and was always certain to keep him so. (OP 20102)

Stevens' illustration proves the point about philosophers; now an example is needed that will demonstrate what kind of activity characterizes the poet who will "satisfy both the reason and the imagination." There is such an illustration at hand; it consists of a demonstration of a relation between Kant, Plato, and Stevens. The point of the relation is that Plato, in his myths,

satisfied the imagination but not the reason, Kant, in his philosophy, satisfied the reason but not the imagination, and Stevens, in his poetry, satisfied both.

To begin with, the relation is one between two metaphysicians par excellence and their variant use of the imagination, and a poet and his use of reason. Stevens was very firm in his insistence on the difference:

...it may be said that poetic truth is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination of a man...expressed in terms of his emotions, or, since it is less of a restriction to say so, in terms of his own personality.....
If we consider the nature of our experience when we are in agreement with reality, we find, for one thing, that we cease to be metaphysicians...even though we have acquired something from them as from all men.
 ...the truth that we experience when we are in agreement with reality is the truth of fact. (NA 54-59)

This distinction parallels, in a way, the distinction between mysticism and civilization so fundamental to the theory of "central poetry". Stevens does not reject metaphysics out of hand; he uses it. But the distinction is necessary because it would be a great mistake to confuse, as Wagner does, the imagination as metaphysics and poetic imagination. Wagner errs when he describes the rejections of the imagination as metaphysics as though they were the rejections of the poetic imagination (the underlining is mine):

Central poetry is created out of the interweaving of pure imagination and bare reality. To attain this moral (or artistic) synthesis a series of rejections is necessary. The most important of these is the rejection of traditional religion. ...Then the "false imagination" will be destroyed and religion may be judged as we judge poetry: "not so much that it actually is so as that it must be so" - not so much that God actually exists, as that He is a moral necessity based on contingent experience.⁵⁷

Wagner goes on to describe the rejections Stevens posited for the imagination as metaphysics in "Imagination as Value" but his

cause has already been lost. It was Kant who made God " a moral necessity," not a poet. Stevens' poetry is not to be judged, as I have shown, on the basis of "must be" but on the basis of "is". It is quite true that Stevens tries to exemplify the value of poetic truth by identifying it with metaphysical truth in "Imagination as Value"; such truth is also the basis for the "central poet's" equation of the imagination with reality:

To regard the imagination as metaphysics is to think of it as part of life, and to think of it as part of life is to realize the extent of artifice. We live in the mind. (NA 140)

But Stevens repeatedly denies the correlation Wagner makes - (the underlining is mine).

A second difficulty about value is the difference between the imagination as metaphysics and as a power of the mind over external objects, that is to say, reality. (NA 136)

When I speak of the power of the mind over external objects I have in mind, as external objects, works of art as, for example...the Jesuit church at Lucerne, where one might so easily pass from the real to the visionary without consciousness of change. Imagination, as metaphysics, leads us in one direction and, as art, in another. (NA 137)

...the imagination penetrates life...its value as metaphysics is not the same as its value in arts and letters. ...In life what is important is the truth as it is, while in arts and letters what is important is the truth as we see it. There is a real difference here.... Its value in arts and letters is aesthetic. Most men's lives are thrust upon them. The existence of aesthetic value in lives that are forced on those that live them is an improbable sort of thing. There can be lives, nevertheless, which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them. To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters. We have only to think of the present phase of it, in which, in his old age, he dwells at the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so

much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher. (NA 147-48)

One could hardly expect a more exact description of the difference - a difference contained, too, in "To An Old Philosopher in Rome" in the image of the bells:

The bells keep on repeating solemn names

In choruses and choirs of choruses,
Unwilling that mercy should be a mystery
Of silence, that any solitude of sense
Should give you more than their peculiar chords
And reverberations clinging to whisper still. (CP 510)

For Santayana reality and the imagination are known as one in life - "The threshold Rome, and that more merciful Rome/Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind" (CP 508) - but it is not merely the transformations made possible by such insight that make his life esthetic. Like the "thinker" in "An Ordinary Evening...", Santayana does not stop at his existent images:

How easily the blown banners change to wings...
Things dark on the horizons of perception,
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. (CP 508)

Santayana does not want to hold to "the One." He recognises it as the presence of the unknown in the "extreme of the known." He acquiesces in "the tragic accent of the scene," (510) as the contemplative must. It is this power of contemplation completely released from desire that makes the value of Santayana's life an esthetic value. The bells are wrong; they sound the desire of the ignorant to "attach themselves to particular objects," to find "individuation" in "the Dharma itself."

Whether Santayana, the man, was all that Stevens thought he

was is irrelevant. The point is that "the old philosopher" of the poem treats life as art. The function of art, and this is extremely important, is not to embody the absolute in the contingent, the unknown in the known. The function of art is to embody the extreme of the known and thereby become an object for the contemplation of the unknown because in the extreme of the known one becomes aware of the unknown.

The point becomes apparent in the comparison of Plato, Kant, and Stevens. The purpose of the comparison is to demonstrate how a poet can write poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination, and it begins with an apologia written, on Plato's behalf, by J. A. Stewart in his book The Myths of Plato:

Let me close this Introduction...in the form of a defense of Plato against a charge brought by Kant in a well-known passage.

The light dove, in free flight cleaving the air and feeling its resistance, might imagine that in airless space she would fare better. Even so Plato left the world of sense, because it sets so narrow limits to the understanding, and ventured beyond, on the wings of Ideas, into the empty space of the pure understanding. He did not see that, with all his effort, he made no way.

Here Kant brings against Plato the charge of "transcendental use, or rather, misuse, of the Categories of the Understanding" - of supposing super-sensible objects, Soul, Cosmos, God, answering to "Ideas" which have no adequate objects in a possible experience, and then determining these supposed objects by means of conceptions - the Categories - the application of which ought to be restricted to sensible objects.⁵⁸

This defence takes the form of a summary of Stewart's introductory observations, the gist of which is that Plato's myths are poetry and the function of poetry is to create in the reader

"Transcendental Feeling:"

The chief end of Poetry, then, is to induce Transcendental Feeling-experienced as solemn sense of the

immediate presence of "That which was, and is, and ever shall be" - in the Poet's patient, by throwing him suddenly, for a moment, into the state of dream-consciousness, out of a waking consciousness which the Poet supplies with objects of interest; the sudden lapse being effected in the patient by the communication to him of images and other products of the Poet's dream consciousness...⁵⁹

To sum up in effect what I have said about Transcendental Feeling; it is feeling which indeed appears in our ordinary object-distinguishing, time-marking consciousness, but does not originate in it. It is to be traced to the influence on consciousness of the presence in us of that "Part of the Soul" which holds on, in timeless sleep, to Life as worth living....In the first-mentioned phase Transcendental Feeling appears as an abnormal experience of our conscious life, as a well-marked ecstatic state; in its other phase - as conviction that Life is good - Transcendental Feeling may be said to be a normal experience of our conscious life; it is not an experience occasionally cropping up alongside of other experiences, but a feeling which accompanies all the experiences of our conscious life....Such a feeling, though normal, is rightly called Transcendental, because it is not one of the effects, but the condition of our entering upon and persevering in that course of endeavor which makes experience.⁶⁰

It is difficult to avoid the feeling that Stevens read Stewart. In "Imagination as Value" he speaks of the imagination as a "power that enables us to perceive the normal, the opposite of chaos in chaos" (NA153) and means by the normal "the instinctive integrations which are the reason for living." (NA 155) In any case, Stevens would agree about "Transcendental Feeling" as a function of poetry, though he would probably prefer to call it Santayana's "animal faith"⁶¹ and he would most certainly disagree about the manner of its engendering.

To Stevens, the fault of Plato is the fault of the times; Kant and the content of two millenia of consciousness had sapped the vitality from his myths. His discussion of Plato's figure of the charioteer proves the point:

..we have scarcely read the passage before we have identified ourselves with the charioteer....Then suddenly we remember, it may be, that the soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground. The figure becomes antiquated and rustic.

What really happens in this brief experience? Why does this figure, potent for so long, become merely the emblem of a mythology, the rustic memorial of a belief in the soul and in a distinction between good and evil? The answer to these questions is, I think, a simple one.

...the figure does not become unreal because we are troubled about the soul. Besides, unreal things have a reality of their own, in poetry as elsewhere. We do not hesitate, in poetry, to yield ourselves to the unreal, when it is possible to yield ourselves..
.....In Plato's figure, his imagination does not adhere to what is real. On the contrary, having created something unreal, it adheres to it and intensifies its unreality. Its first effect...is its maximum effect, when the imagination, being moved, puts us in the place of the charioteer, before the reason checks us. ...We understand the feeling of it, the robust feeling, clearly and fluently communicated. Yet we understand it rather than participate in it. (NA 3-7)

The fault with, in Stewart's words, "images and other products of the Poet's dream consciousness," or with any objects which attempt to embody, as identity, something like soul is that reason refutes them, - as things not really what they purport to be. It is the difference between emblems and symbols, between (embodiments) and existent images, that underlies Stevens' criticism of Plato's figure.

There is an informative analogy between Plato's figure and Stevens' poem "Invective Against Swans" that demonstrates the difference. Like Plato's figure, Stevens' poem concerns the soul:

The soul, O ganders, flies beyond the parks
And far beyond the discords of the wind. (CP 4)

The difference between Stevens and Plato is not that Stevens gives up the soul as unusable concept. It is not even that

Stevens discounts the efficacy of images; the real difference is that Stevens creates existent images rather than embodiments. In this poem, the existent image is created by an imperfect reduction of swans into ganders. Frankenburg's assumption that the title captures Stevens' attitude toward the swans is erroneous.⁶² Ganders are male geese, not swans, and the narrator's address to ganders has more purpose than a simple insult to the dignity of swans. The soul does fly "to the skies."

And the soul, O ganders, being lonely, flies
Beyond your chilly chariots, to the skies. (CP 4)

The motivation of the soul for its flight is all important. What it will find in the sky to assuage its loneliness is the 'purified' swan:

A bronze rain from the sun descending marks
The death of summer, which that time endures

Like one who scrawls a listless testament
Of golden quirks and Paphian caricatures,

Bequething your white feathers to the moon
And giving your bland motions to the air. (CP 4)

The "chariots" of the ganders had been the conveyance, presumably, of the soul. They are "chilly" now because, quite literally, the "bronze rain" of the sun at the end of summer bronzes them, turns them into the statues that "The crows... anoint with their dirt." The rain kills the motion and the beauty of the ganders - the things which had made them swans, as it were. If the soul is to find a conveyance, it will not be in the concrete image of the swans but in their life and beauty; if the time dismisses life and beauty to the unreal - as it does in its "testament/Of golden quirks and Paphian caricatures" (i.e. caricatures because love of the image has replaced

love of the living goddess), then the soul will find its conveyance there. The unreal becomes more real than the real because the unreal has all the life of the real. Plato's unreal was unreal because he placed objects there which could not possibly exist in the unreal; Stevens' unreal is real because what's placed there is released from its embodiment in object.

The difference is made still clearer by "Lions in Sweden," Stevens' most open reference to the technique of existent images:

No more phrases, Swenson: I was once
 A hunter of those sovereigns of the soul
 And savings banks, Fides, the sculptor's prize,
 All eyes and size, and galled Justitia,
 Trained to poise the tables of the law,
 Patientia, forever soothing wounds,
 And mighty Fortitudo, frantic bass.
 But these shall not adorn my souvenirs,
 These lions, these majestic images.
 If the fault is with the soul, the sovereigns
 Of the soul must likewise be at fault, and first.
 If the fault is with the souvenirs, yet these
 Are the soul itself. And the whole of the soul.

Swenson,
 As every man in Sweden will concede,
 Still hankers after lions, or to shift,
 Still hankers after sovereign images.
 If the fault is with the lions, send them back
 To Monsieur Dufy's Hamburg whence they came.
 The vegetation still abounds with forms. (CP 124-25)

Ramon Guthrie and William York Tindall have both explained the allusion in the penultimate line, but Tindall's explication is an illustration that explanation is not always understanding:

Plainly in a French tradition, was Stevens in the symbolist tradition? Attempts to answer this question raise others. Take "Lions in Sweden." These stone lions of Stockholm, allegorical images of bourgeois virtues ...are suitable for savings banks. Absurd perhaps, yet somehow the soul hankers after such "sovereign images." If the fault of these lions is theirs, Stevens tells Swenson, "send them back...." This calls for explanation. Raoul Dufy illustrated Guillaume Apollinaire's Le Bestiaire. Hamburg, a supplier of zoological specimens, stands for bestiary here; and a bestiary is commonly allegorical. Yet Apollinaire, author of a bestiary, is in the symbolist tradition, whatever that is; and vegetation abounding

with forms suggests Baudelaire's "forest of symbols."⁶³

Stevens is in the symbolist tradition, as I shall show, and "Lions in Sweden" is a wonderful example of what symbolism means. The central opposition in the poem is between "souvenirs" and "sovereign images." The soul has "souvenirs" which "Are the soul itself". They are, in other words, the soul's consciousness of its existence, awarenesses of itself it has picked up in its life. "Sovereigns of the soul," however, have a twofold function. The initial "sovereigns of the soul" are also of "savings banks." It is of these that the narrator refers when he says "these shall not adorn my souvenirs." Now, in one sense, such "sovereign images" are tangible representations of the soul's awareness of its life - the coins, the photos, the claptrap one keeps to prove that one has been there - but in another sense, they are "sovereigns of the soul" because they are above or superior to it - master of it. The soul, then, rejects those sovereign images which fail to correspond to its awareness of itself - "the whole of the soul." Those who succumb to the 'myth of the state' immerse their souls in a 'mess of pottage;' the "sovereign images" which will satisfy the soul must be more than adornments and more even than souvenirs (the awareness of existence) - they must be masters of that existence (masters to which the soul's existence is dedicated). The lions in Sweden are caricatures of that mastery - stone images of an image. Apollinaire, the symbolist, was well aware of their inadequacy, as Guthrie points out:

"Monsieur Dufy's Hamburg"....is clearly a reference to Guillaume Apollinaire's Le Bestiaire ou le Cortège d'Orphée... In the woodcut, the lion, the animal is

shown in the heraldic position known as salient against the background of a seaport. ...Apollinaire's quatrain beneath reads:

O lion, malheureuse image
Des rois chuse lamentablement,
Tu ne nais maintenant qu'en cage
A Hambourg chez les Allemands.⁶⁴

The lion is indeed an image only of fallen royalty when it exists in cages. But in life one still can find free lions - "the vegetation abounds with forms" - who will remain adequate images of royalty as long as they are not captured by the cage of concept (i.e. as long as both image and concept live freely).

The lion is one of Stevens' variable symbols whose variation, in its recurrence in his poems, finds its expression in "The Man With The Blue Guitar":

That I may reduce the monster to
Myself, and then may be myself

In face of the monster.....
.....
Or better not of myself at all,
But of that as its intelligence,

Being the lion in the lute
Before the lion locked in stone. (CP 175)

It will recur.

The point now, however, is to continue the comparison between Stevens and the two philosophers. The nature of the distinction between Stevens' images and Plato's should now be clear. It is most emphatically not a difference describable in terms of Coleridge's "distinction between Imagination and Fancy", as Pack suggests in speaking of Stevens' terminology:

The imagination "discovers order, but also imposes it." This distinction derives from Coleridge, who used the term "primary imagination" for the former and "secondary imagination" for the latter. But there is another activity of the mind which Coleridge calls "the fancy" and describes as "a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space." With

Stevens, however, the fancy is not so clearly distinguished from the imagination, but is part of its functioning. Inasmuch as fancy is removed from "the order of time and space," that part of the imagination will produce fictions that do not describe what is real.....
When Stevens says "the figure is all imagination," as he does in reference to Plato's figure it is equivalent to Coleridge calling it fancy, for it is imagination working apart from the reality. ...A figure that comes only from the imagination is an invention, an imposition of order.⁶⁵

This is nothing but contradictory nonsense. Not only does Pack shift from correlating "the imposition of order" with Coleridge's "secondary imagination" to correlating it with "fancy," he also ignores the fact that Stevens was well aware of what Coleridge thought. Stevens uses fancy to describe General Jackson's statue and not Plato's figure:

This work [General Jackson's statue] is a work of fancy. Dr. Richards cites Coleridge's theory of fancy as opposed to imagination. Fancy is an activity of the mind which puts things together of choice, not the will, as a principle of the mind's being, striving to realize itself in knowing itself. Fancy, then, is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have already been fixed. (NA 10-11)

The "fancy," for both Coleridge and Stevens, is an exercise in rigid realism; it treats fixities as finalities and never attempts to transform them. The imagination adhering to the unreal is not the same as the fancy which is non-creative because enslaved by the real. So says Coleridge about real and unreal:

Hence the mystic theologians, whose delusions we may more confidently hope to separate from their actual intuitions, when we condescend to read their works without the presumption that whatever our fancy (always the ape, and too often the adulterator and counterfeit of our memory) has not made or cannot make a picture of, must be nonsense - hence, I say, the Mystics have joined in representing the state of the reprobate spirits as a dreadful dream in which

there is no sense of reality...⁶⁶

As to Coleridge's distinction between two "degrees" and "modes" of the same imagination,⁶⁷ there is little evidence that Stevens was concerned with it as a basis for his distinction between central and marginal poets. If we take Shawcross' conception of the distinction, it would appear to be one which precedes Stevens' distinctions between poets and between poets and philosophers:

The distinction here drawn by Coleridge between two degrees of imagination is evidently between the imagination as universally active in consciousness (creative in that it externalizes the world of objects by opposing it to the self) and the same faculty in a heightened power as creative in the poetic sense. In the first case our exercise of the power is unconscious; in the second the will directs, though it does not determine, the activity of the imagination. The imagination of the ordinary man is capable only of detaching the world of experience from the self and contemplating it in its detachment; but the philosopher penetrates to the underlying harmony and gives it concrete expression. The ordinary consciousness, with no principle of unification, sees the universe as a mass of particulars; only the poet can depict this whole as reflected in the individual parts.⁶⁸

The trouble with Plato's figure, in Coleridge's terms, is that it is allegorical rather than symbolic - a difference which will be fully explained in the second section of this paper. The point, at the moment, is to affirm that Coleridge's sense of symbol is derived from Kant's affirmations about the nature of absolutes and that Stevens' sense of symbol is in accord with Coleridge's. Stevens says little about Kant, but what he says is informative:

The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence. The philosopher thinks of the world as an enormous pastiche or, as he puts it, the world is as the percipient. Thus Kant says that the objects of perception are conditioned by the nature of the mind as to their form.

But the poet says that, whatever it may be, la vie est plus belle que les idées. (NA 56-57)

In part, of course, Stevens' objection to Kant here parallels Santayana's - Kant's "terrible negation" was that "Everything conceivable would have collapsed into the act of conceiving it, and this act itself would have lost its terms and its purpose"⁶⁹ - but if the question of the form of "objects of perception" is pursued, one discovers the difference between existence and enjoyment of that existence. Kant's logical deduction of the nature of Categories of the Understanding seemed to entail the corollary that Ideas of Reason could never be known empirically. It was this consequence of his reasoning that made the young Valéry feel that Kant had "destroyed metaphysics," and which led to Kant's objection against Plato. But there is a curious passage in Kant which seems to offer a way out of the dilemma:

...suppose we combine the apparently contradictory command to proceed to concepts outside the field of the immanent (empirical) use of the intellect with the command to avoid all transcendent judgements of pure reason. We then become aware that both commands may prevail together, but just on the boundary of all admissible use of reason. This boundary belongs as much to the field of experience as to that of the beings created by thought. At the same time we are taught how those strange ideas merely serve to determine the boundaries of human reason. On the one hand, we must not seek to extend beyond all bounds knowledge based on experience, for then nothing but a mere phenomenal world remains for us to know. On the other hand, we must not seek to transcend the boundaries of experience and to judge things outside experience as things-in-themselves.

We are keeping to this boundary when we limit our judgement to the relation the world may have to a Being whose concept lies outside all that knowledge of which we are capable within this world. In this case we are not attributing to the Supreme Being itself any of the qualities by which we conceive the objects of experience and we are thus avoiding dogmatic anthropomorphism. But we do attribute these qualities to the relations of the Supreme Being to the world. We are thereby allowing ourselves a

symbolical anthropomorphism which, as, a matter of fact, only concerns the language and not the object.

When I say that we are impelled to regard the world as if it were the work of a supreme will and intellect, I am not really saying more than ...all that constitutes the basis of this aggregate of phenomena, is related to the unknown, which I conceive, not according to what it is in itself but according to what it is for me in regard to the world of which I am a part.

An insight such as this is gained by analogy, not in the usual meaning of an imperfect resemblance of two things, but of a perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things.⁷⁰

There is a great deal in Stevens' work that smacks of the Kantian; his concluding observations on the irrational, for example, bring into play Kantian concepts of limit and relation:

The irrational bears the same relation to the rational that the unknown bears to the known, ...I do not for a moment mean to indulge in mystical rhetoric, since for my part, I have no patience with that sort of thing. That the unknown as the source of knowledge, as the object of thought, is part of the dynamics of the known does not permit of denial. ...We accept the unknown even when we are most skeptical. We may resent the consideration of it by any but the most lucid minds; but when so considered, it has seductions more powerful and more profound than those of the known.

Just so, there are those who, having never yet been convinced that the rational has quite made us divine, are willing to assume the efficacy of the irrational in that respect. The rational mind, dealing with the known, expects to find it glistening in a familiar ether. What it really finds is the unknown always behind and beyond the known, giving it the appearance, at best, of chiaroscuro. The poet cannot profess the irrational as the priest professes the unknown. The poet's role is broader, because he must be possessed, along with everything else, by the earth and by men in their earthly implications. (OP 227-29)

Even the Kantian concept of analogy finds its way into Stevens' poems: indeed, in varying forms, it composes the basis of his technique. What better illustration of Kant's definition of analogy could one find than the poem "Les Plus Belles Pages"

and Stevens' note on it?

The milkman came in the moonlight and the moonlight
Was less than moonlight. Nothing exists by itself.
The moonlight seemed to.

Two people, three horses, an ox
And the sun, the waves together in the sea.

The moonlight and Aquinas seemed to. He spoke,
Kept speaking, of God, I changed the word to man.
The automaton, in logic self-contained,
Existed by itself. Or did the saint survive?
Did several spirits assume a single shape?

Theology after breakfast sticks to the eye. (CP 244-45)

Apparently the poem means that the conjunction of milkman and moonlight is the equivalent of the conjunction of logician and saint. What it really means is that the inter-relation between things is what makes them fecund. Interaction is the source of poetry. Sex is an illustration. But the principle is not confined to the illustration. The milkman and the moonlight are an illustration. The two people, the three horses, etc., are illustrations. The principle finds its best illustration in the interaction of our faculties or of our thoughts and emotions. Aquinas is a classic example: a figure of great modern interest, whose special force seems to come from the interaction of his prodigious love of God. The idea that his theology, as such, is involved is dismissed in the last line. That the example is not of scholarly choice is indicated by the title. But the title also means that *les plus belles pages* are those in which things do not stand alone, but are operative as the result of inter-action, inter-relation. This is an idea of some consequence, not a casual improvisation. The inter-relation between reality and the imagination is the basis of the character of literature. The inter-relation between reality and the emotions is the basis of the vitality of literature, between reality and thought, the basis of its power. (OP 293-94)

The "two relations between totally dissimilar things" are the relation between moonlight and milkman and that between Aquinas the logician and Aquinas the saint. There is an analogy between these relations - "a perfect resemblance" - and it is analogy which makes the poem work. Without belaboring the obvious, it should be pointed out that Stevens thinks both the

relations are, in themselves "fecund" (using sex as an illustration, fecund relations have offspring). What's fecund about the milkman-moonlight relation is that the milkman's intrusion leads to the observation "Nothing exists by itself." In this case, the moonlight had seemed to exist by itself, until the intrusion of the milkman reminded the narrator that the moon reflects the light of the sun and that reflected light is in turn reflected by the milkman. By itself, such a relation is useless, but it informs the analogy with the Aquinas relation and that is important. The narrator thinks Aquinas, like the moonlight, exists by himself. He therefore substitutes the word "man" whenever Aquinas speaks the word "God." But what he discovers, if the analogy between the two relations is to be taken seriously, is that Aquinas without God is less than Aquinas. Aquinas is, like moonlight, really a reflection - a reflection of God. As saint, he is symbol of the unknown. The aura of his sainthood cannot be reduced or explained in terms of his logic. The intangible power of "his prodigious love" is too much a part of what Aquinas experientally is. What Stevens means when he says "his theology, as such, is dismissed in the last line," is that Aquinas is symbolic because he contains within himself the living relation between the known and the unknown and not because of his "logical proofs" of the absolute nature of that unknown.

The gist of both Kant's concept of symbolism and Stevens' theory of "central poetry" is that language as designation is supplanted by language as relation - the meaningful content of language is not what it designates but what the formal relations

within it signify. But Kant's telling phrase, that symbolical anthropomorphism "only involves the language and not the object," reveals that the accord between concept and theory is not complete. For Kant, analogical symbolism can offer transcendental ideas - psychological, cosmological and theological - which, "if they do not instruct us positively, at least serve to repudiate the audacious assertions of materialism, naturalism and fatalism that narrowly restrict the field of reason,"⁷¹ but they cannot "gain the general acceptance that reason requires ..."⁷² For philosophic reason there is always the search for the fateful integration which exists apart from our knowledge of it and which alone is true. But for Stevens, the formal relations of the analogical symbol are the truth, because they are pragmatically discernible indications of the nature of the unknown soul. When Stevens writes "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words," (NA 32) he makes the relational aspect of language paramount; and when he insists that poetry is truth, he is affirming that the relational power of words has in it the "magical" quality of revelation. "Poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words." (NA 33)

To make these observations about the relation between Kant and Stevens is to do no more than affirm that the philosophical ground of the theory of "central poetry" is identical with that which Cassirer used to justify his philosophy of symbolic form. Now, the advance made by Cassirer over the philosophy of Kant is essentially this: both Kant and Cassirer deny the adequacy of designation, but Cassirer does not follow Kant in denying the adequacy of relation (which is symbolic form) as truth. To

demonstrate the nature of this advance, it is necessary to quote at length from the introductory argument in the first volume of Cassirer's The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. The specific argument has the subtitle "Ideational Content of the Sign. Transcending the Copy Theory of Knowledge"⁷³ and its movement is from the concept of "natural symbolism"⁷⁴ to the concept of symbolic form:

Artistic delineation becomes what it is and is distinguished from a mere mechanistic reproduction, only through what it omits from the "given" impression. It does not reflect this impression in its sensuous totality, but rather selects certain "pregnant" factors, i.e., factors through which the given impression is amplified beyond itself and through which the artistic-constructive fantasy, the synthetic spatial imagination, is guided in a certain direction. What constitutes the true force of the sign, here as in other fields, is precisely this: that as the immediate, determinate contents recede, the general factors of form and relation become all the sharper and clearer. The particular as such is seemingly limited; but precisely thereby that operation which we have called "integration" is effected the more clearly and forcefully. We have seen that the particular of consciousness "exists" only in so far as it potentially contains the whole and is, as it were, in constant transition towards the whole. But the use of the sign liberates this potentiality and enables it to become true actuality. Now, one blow strikes a thousand connected chords which all vibrate more or less forcefully and clearly in the sign. In positing the sign, consciousness detaches itself more and more from the direct substratum of sensation and sensory intuition: but precisely therein it reveals its inherent, original power of synthesis and unification.....

.....What would seem to constitute the bias of "empiricism" as well as abstract "idealism" is precisely that neither of them fully and clearly develops this fundamental relation. One posits a concept of the given particular but fails to recognize that any such concept must always, explicitly or implicitly, encompass the defining attributes of some universal; the other asserts the necessity and validity of these attributes but fails to designate the medium through which they can be represented in the given psychological world of consciousness. If, however, we start not with abstract postulates but from the concrete basic form of spiritual life, this dualistic antithesis

is resolved. The illusion of an original division between the intelligible and the sensuous, between "idea" and "phenomenon," vanishes. True, we still remain in a world of "images" - but these are not images which reproduce a self-subsistent world of "things"; they are image-worlds whose principle and origin are to be sought in an autonomous creation of the spirit. Through them alone we see what we call "reality," and in them alone we possess it: for the highest objective truth that is accessible to the spirit is ultimately the form of its own activity. In the totality of its own achievements, in the knowledge of the specific rule by which each of them is determined and in the consciousness of the context which reunites all these special rules into one problem and one solution: in all this, the human spirit now perceives itself and reality. True, the question of what, apart from these spiritual functions, constitutes absolute reality, the question of what the "thing in itself" may be in this sense, remains unanswered, except that more and more we learn to recognise it as a fallacy in formulation, an intellectual phantasm. The true concept of reality cannot be squeezed into the form of mere abstract being; it opens out into the diversity and richness of the forms of spiritual life - but of a spiritual life which bears the stamp of inner necessity and hence of objectivity. In this sense each new "symbolic form" - not only the conceptual world of scientific cognition but also the intuitive world of art, myth, and language - constitutes, as Goethe said, a revelation sent outward from within, a "synthesis of world and spirit," which truly assures us that the two are originally one.

And here new light is cast upon a last fundamental antithesisIts "subjective" trend has led philosophy more and more to focus the totality of its problems in the concept of life rather than the concept of being. But though this seemed to appease the antithesis of subjectivity and objectivity in the form manifested by dogmatic ontology ... now, in the sphere of life itself a still more radical antithesis appeared. The truth of life seems to be given only in its pure immediacy, to be enclosed in it - but any attempt to understand and apprehend life seems to endanger, if not to negate, this immediacy.....
It would seem, therefore, that any understanding of spiritual life must choose between the two extremes. We are called upon to decide whether to seek the substance of the human spirit in its pure originality, which precedes all mediate configurations - or whether to surrender ourselves to the richness and diversity of these mediate forms. Only in the first approach do we seem to touch upon the true and authentic center of life, which however appears as a simple self-enclosed center; in the second,

we survey the entire drama of spiritual developments, but as we immerse ourselves in it, it dissolves more and more manifestly into a mere drama, a reflected image, without independent truth and essence. The cleavage between these two antitheses - it would seem - cannot be bridged by any effort of mediating thought which itself remains entirely on one side of the antithesis; the farther we advance in the direction of the symbolic, the merely figurative, the farther we go from the primal source of pure intuition.

Philosophical mysticism has not been alone in its constant confrontation of this problem and its dilemma; the pure logic of idealism has repeatedly seen it and formulated it. Plato's remarks in his Seventh Epistle on the relation of the "idea" to the "sign" and on the necessary inadequacy of this relation, strike a motif which has recurred in all manner of variations. ...Even Kant, who assigned its exact logical position to this idea by defining it as a mere borderline concept of cognition, and who believed that in so doing he had critically mastered it - even Kant ... once again sharply develops the antithesis ...between the intuitive archetypal intellect and the discursive intellect "which is dependent on images." From the standpoint of this antithesis it would seem to follow that the richer the symbolic content of cognition or of any other cultural form becomes, the more its essential content must diminish. All the many images do not designate, but cloak and conceal the imageless One, which stands behind them and towards which they strive in vain. Only the negation of all finite figuration, only a return to the "pure nothingness" of the mystics can lead us back to the true primal source of being. Seen in a different light, this antithesis takes the form of a constant tension between "culture" and "life." For it is the necessary destiny of culture that everything which it creates in its constant process of configuration and education removes us more and more from the originality of life. The more richly and energetically the human spirit engages in its formative activity, the farther this very activity seems to remove it from the primal source of its own being. More and more, it appears to be imprisoned in its own creations - in the words of language, in the images of myth or art, in the intellectual symbols of cognition, which cover it like a delicate and transparent, but unbreachable veil....To philosophy, which finds its fulfillment only in the sharpness of concept and in the clarity of "discursive" thought, the paradise of mysticism, the paradise of pure immediacy, is closed. ...Instead of taking the road back, it must attempt to continue forward. If all culture is manifested in the creation of specific image-worlds, of specific symbolic forms, the aim of philosophy is not to go behind all these creations, but rather to

understand and elucidate their basic formative principle. . . . In truth, the negation of the symbolic forms would not help us to apprehend the essence of life; it would rather destroy the spiritual form with which for us this essence proves to be bound up. If we take the opposite direction, we do not pursue the idea of a passive intuition of spiritual reality, but situate ourselves in the midst of its activity. If we approach spiritual life, not as the static contemplation of being, but as functions and energies of formation, we shall find certain common and typical principles of formation, diverse and dissimilar as these forms may be. If the philosophy of culture succeeds in apprehending and elucidating such basic principles, it will have fulfilled, in a new sense, its task of demonstrating the unity of the spirit as opposed to the multiplicity of its manifestations - for the clearest evidence of this unity is precisely that the diversity of the products of the human spirit does not impair the unity of its productive process, but rather sustains and confirms it.⁷⁵

If Stevens read this argument, he did so at a time when all his ideas were formulated, when all but a fraction of his poetry was written. But nonetheless, the "productive process" of symbolic forms is precisely the formative principle upon which his writing was based. Its particular name is "the habit of probing for an integration" and its manifestation is the continual transcendence of the designative function of the word by means of the proliferation of relations between each word and every other word. What one finds in Cassirer is both a statement of the necessity for the mode of existence of central poetry and a statement of the promise implicit in that process. To make symbols which are not "merely figurative" but which partake of temporal order and to indicate the permanent principle of unity within that changing order by showing the significant form of relation (which includes variation) is the task of the central poet.

Out of Stevens' basic rejection of an antithesis between

reality and the imagination and out of his acceptance of the contradiction between the image and the life of the image, came the techniques of "central poetry." Basically, those techniques were grounded upon the conviction that the concept of relational form is progressive and could be applied to a body of poetry as a force of development. The direction of that development, in Stevens' Collected Poems, is from the decreation of the particular, sharply differentiated, image to the creation, in consciousness, of a world of totally released images - a world which Frye, despite inconsistencies in his argument, accurately delineates:

The theoretical postulate of Stevens' poetry is a world of total metaphor, where the poet's vision may be identified with anything it visualizes. For such poetry the most accurate word is apocalyptic, a poetry of "revelation" in which all objects and experiences are united with a total mind.⁷⁶

"Apocalyptic" is one of Frye's key critical terms; he defines it in his Anatomy of Criticism:

In the anagogic phase, literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the center of its reality. We see here the completion of the imaginative revolution begun when we passed from the descriptive to the formal phase of symbolism. There, the imitation of nature shifted from a reflection of external nature to a formal organization of which nature was the content. But in the formal phase the poem is still contained by nature, and in the archetypal phase the whole of poetry is still contained within the natural or plausible. When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but it is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence apocalyptic. By an apocalypse I mean primarily the

imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which if not human, is closer to being human than inhuman.⁷⁷

Despite the continuing and pernicious confusion between real and unreal herein, Frye's distinction between nature as container and nature as contained is a good description of the difference between the designative symbol (which is always inadequate because it does not contain temporal order and is therefore destroyed by time) and the relational symbol (which does contain temporal order because it is a completed act and not a thing or the imitation of a thing).

The ideal of, and the objections to, apocalyptic poetry have been defined by Paul Valéry:

...if the poet could manage to construct works in which nothing of prose ever appeared, poems in which the musical continuity was never broken, in which the relations between meanings were themselves perpetually similar to harmonic relations, in which the transmutation of thoughts into each other appeared more important than any thought, in which the play of figures contained the reality of the subject - then one could speak of pure poetry as of something that existed. It is not so: the practical or pragmatic part of language, the habits and logical forms, and the disorder and irrationality that are found in its vocabulary...make the existence of these creations of absolute poetry impossible...⁷⁸

Valéry has in mind more than "theoretic postulates." He sees the potential of language as the shape of truth, and he sees the function of the poet as a practical, rather than a visionary, function - the function of the discoverer of words and of the reality in figures. His description of the mode of existence necessary for an absolute poetry is a description of Stevens' poems. It is, at any rate, paralleled by critical accounts of Stevens' poems like Frankenburg's for example - "Stevens' poetry plays a game of living statues, whirling and freezing, freezing

and whirling. His poems combine the attitudes taken, with the whirl from attitude to attitude; the kaleidoscope, and the kaleidoscope shaken"⁷⁹ - and by Stevens' own description of "resemblances and the repetition of resemblances as a source of the ideal;" (NA 81)

In both prose and poetry, images come willingly but, usually, although there is a relation between the subject of these images there is no relation between the images themselves. A group of images in harmony with each other would constitute a poem within, or above, a poem. (NA 78)

Inasmuch as this absolute poetry is the end and object of the central poet's search for integrations and inasmuch as he does pursue that end by granting the inadequacy of images as embodiments of absolutes, it should now be possible to trace some of the general techniques Stevens' employs in achieving his end.

PART II - Central Poetry: Syntax

Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alternations and relationships - all this contributing to the rhythmic totality, which will be the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way....Then again the perfect symmetry of verses within the poem, of poems within the volume, will extend even beyond the volume itself; and this will be that creation of many poets who will inscribe, on spiritual space, the expanded signature of genius - as anonymous and perfect as a work of art.

Mallarmé - a description of "the Book"
(trans. B. Cook)

Comparisons between Mallarmé and Stevens are not new to Stevens' critics: Riddel has made an explicit comparison between Stevens' "supreme fiction" and Mallarmé's concept of "the Book,"¹ Hi Simons has drawn seven specific parallels between their techniques - including one between their use of "figures of a negative order" intended to achieve "an ideal poem, a supra-sensuous one that conveys its effect without tangible means or meanings...like Keat's unheard melodies,"² and Morton Dauwen Zabel has seen in Stevens' early poems a fruitful blending of "Mallarmé's imagism ...absolute in its claims, irreducible and exhaustive in intention, refined and specialized in its subtlety"³ and "Hopkin's imagery ...realistic in basis ...as exhaustively and intentionally realistic, at least in intention, as the threading of a psychological maze in Henry James."⁴ Preliminary proofs of the comparisons are not hard to find. Stevens' hesitation in gathering together the poems of Harmonium,⁵ his repeated insistence on the relatedness of all poems,⁶ and his expressed intention to title Harmonium "The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutia"⁷ and his Collected Poems "The Whole of Harmonium,"⁸ all attest to his involvement with a schema which

would lend overall unity to his work and make of his poems "a book, architectural and premeditated, and not a miscellany of chance inspirations..."⁹ like that great Book envisaged by Mallarmé.

The point now is to examine, not so much the actual "disposition of parts" in Stevens' Collected Poems (that is a task beyond my ability at present), but some of the techniques by which those parts are disposed. Such a procedure is free of all arguments but one, and that is one which concerns the comparison which is the basis for the projected investigation. Not all critics have acquiesced in the symbolists' attempts to appropriate Stevens as one of their own. Feldman, for example, affirms that "Stevens is primarily a realist. This is, perhaps, his chief divagation from such a school as "symbolisme" and it is, after all, an important one."¹⁰ Tindall, in discussing this question, makes a more dangerous observation:

The essays are of little help. There Stevens sometimes prefers the image without meaning; yet he praises the significant images of Bunyan and La Fontaine. Sometimes he calls emblem or a sign a symbol. ...It is a fact that however much he loved analogy, he hated the Hermetic transcendentalism on which the symbolists based their analogies. Of no more help, his poems abound in allegorical signs with definite meanings, in allegorical personifications, and in unassigned symbols. His recurrent blue and green, north and south, moon and sun are signs for the imagination and fact, not symbols. Many of his creatures (woman, giant, and ephebe) are allegorical. Yet many, "not too exactly labelled," are symbols. ... The question is unprofitable.¹¹

Tindall's assertion about Stevens' hatred of "hermetic transcendentalism" is only an assertion; he nowhere provides evidence of its factuality. But the real danger in Tindall's dismissal of the question of symbolism is that, in so doing, he

participates in the massive defoliation of Stevens' images initiated by critics who, in their eagerness to "assign" symbols, have treated those symbols as though they were merely signs or emblems. Hartsock's essay on Stevens is a case in point:

All have classified certain basic symbols used by Stevens. The purpose of this paper is to extend their study.....
 Giants and mountains, throughout the poems are used to symbolize both the poet and the largeness of the poet's vision....¹²

Incredibly enough, Hartsock's opening statement is justified; almost all of Stevens' critics have taken part in the classification of "symbols" according to what they "signify" as idea. Even the word "weisheit" (CP 492) has been seen as a symbol for wisdom.¹³ Colors, characters, flora and fauna, the elements of earth and the bodies of heaven, have repeatedly been assigned their significations.

The fact that the resultant significations are seldom in accord with each other, or with the poems in which, supposedly, they are at work, proves something about the nature of Stevens' images. Tindall's equation of moon and sun as signs for the imagination and fact respectively serves as illustration. Hartsock repeats the identification,¹⁴ but O'Connor makes sun symbolic of "life force, physical existence; the unthinking source."¹⁵ Pack sees the sun as Stevens' "central symbol for reality,¹⁶ and Baird sees it as myth;¹⁷ Watts wants the moon to represent "man's inability to see clearly."¹⁸ Obviously Stevens' images, whether signs or symbols, affect different critics in different ways. In short, they oscillate through a range of suggestiveness, and are therefore, symbols in Mallarmé's sense:

To name an object is largely to destroy poetic

enjoyment, which comes from gradual divination. The ideal is to suggest the object. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes symbol. An object must be gradually evoked in order to show a state of soul; or else, choose an object and from it elicit a state of soul by means of a series of decodings.¹⁹

The major fallacy of generalized identifications between image and idea is the theory that leads to them. The theory is that if images can be given a meaning it will be possible to arrive at a secure understanding of the poems in which the images occur. This is a fallacy of the rational mind; it involves the assumption that ideas are more meaningful, more communicable, than images. But the security gained by reading "imagination" for moon is illusive; the critic still has to discover what Stevens means by imagination in the context of the poem. Critics who make such identifications reverse the process of poetry to no good purpose; they make of it the same impoverished thing as "the common life":

The paper is whiter
The men have no shadows
And the women have only one side. (CP 221)

Not all critics, however, have rushed in where the necessary angel refuses to tread. Among the abstainers is Doggett, whose critical approach to Stevens' poems is based on the explicit rejection, not only of the practice of reducing Stevens' images into ideas, but also of treating Stevens' ideas as ideas:

The late manner does resemble that of philosophical statement; we can almost expect logical forms; we look for a consistent organization of thought; it seems that a paraphrase is almost possible, that we can state a certain meaning for a certain poem, an effort that misses most of its purpose, like telling dreams or describing music....One can answer some attempts to distill a system of ideas from his poetry by another and divergent distillation. His ideas are not

systematic but thematic... What seems a development of doctrine is a version of experience.²⁰

What Doggett means when he speaks of thematic ideas is precisely what Mallarmé means by symbols and I mean by existent images and relational symbols. Words or groups of words which describe ideas (essence is a simple example) are images of the ideas they designate, and because they are words they can be transformed by relation - they can transcend designation by becoming form. In so doing, they lose their restricted function as signs for conception - as - idea and become symbols of what Coleridge called "Intuitive idea":

This is the test and character of a truth so affirmed ...that in its own proper form it is inconceivable. For to conceive is a function of the understanding, which can only be exercised on subjects subordinate thereto. And yet to the forms of the understanding all truths must be reduced, that is to be fixed as an object of reflection, and to be rendered expressible. And here we have the second test and sign of a truth so affirmed, that it can come forth out of the moulds of the understanding only in the disguise or two contradictory conceptions, each of which is partially true, and the conjunction of both conceptions becomes the representative or expression (-the exponent) of a truth beyond conception and inexpressible.²¹

The expression of the inexpressible is symbol, and this, according to Coleridge, is at least a three-fold fusion:

An IDEA therefore contemplates the Alpha and the Omega (One-All; Finite - Infinite; Subject-Object; Mind - Matter; Substance - Form; Time - Space; Motion - Rest; Futuration - Presence...and it is indifferent which of the pairs you take, for they are all Symbols of the same Truth produced by different Positions) as One....²²

The analogy between Coleridge's concept of symbol and Stevens' concept of "the total double-thing" and the relation between symbol and "the only love" is obvious.

Despite Tindall, therefore, the question of Stevens'

symbolism is not only profitable, it is the only pertinent question that can be discussed. Benamou, in an essay which has just been published, indicates the necessary nature of the discussion; "A Sears and Roebuck list of Stevens' symbols would just catalogue his favorite garments....But basic movements of the mind reveal more than its inventory."²³

The initial movement of Stevens' mind as it handles its images has a multiple name because it is a complex movement. Basically, it is the characteristic movement of the via negativa in that it seeks to deny the adequacy of the content of the image. But the movement has two phases - decreation and abstraction - and it is these phases I want to discuss, together with their attendant arguments and images.

Stevens mentions decreation only once - in "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting";

Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grace* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover....is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. (NA 174-75)

That single reference, however, is becoming increasingly more important to Stevens' critics. Benamou, for example, sees it as the basis for an essential distinction between Stevens and Mallarmé:

A symbol duplicates a "fact" in the mind; abstract, it is "pure". An imagination such as Mallarmé's will not create a paradise of calm sensual presences, beautiful shapes and colors; it will decreate appearances, bring death to forestall death, thus master

death, and save from decay a "pure" world in the mindFor Mallarmé's paradise of perception is a mental island outside nature. A clear outline separates it from earthly gardens. Purity means schism. Divorce, not marriage, is the law of the poet's hygienic vision.

To Stevens, on the contrary, transparency brought participation. ...The main notion conveyed, 16 times out of 19 occurrences, by his use of the word "pure" is a cleansing of the verbal medium. Reality is pure. The Adamic tradition does not accept the sense of a Fall. Then purity results from clearing sight of its "man-locked set" of religious ideas and mythological metaphors.²⁴

I will return to Benamou, but, for the moment, the variant critical views of decreation are more pressing. In the same 'Wallace Stevens Issue' of ELH that Benamou's article appears in, there is another by J. Hillis Miller in which decreation has a different face:

No sooner has the mind created a new fictive world than this "recent imagining of reality" becomes obsolete in its turn, and must be rejected. This rejection is the act of decreation, and returns man once more to unadorned reality. The cycle then begins again: imagining followed by decreation followed by imagining and so on for as long as life lasts. In this rhythmic alternation lies our only hope to possess reality.²⁵

Miller's elucidation of what he calls "the poetry of being" has several curious analogies to what has been said earlier in this paper. He, too, employs the concept of oscillation to open the impasse of the inadequate image:

It seems that the poet will make sterile vibrations back and forth between one spiritual season and the other, always a little behind the perpetual flowing of reality.

There is one way to escape...and the discovery of this way gives its special character to all Stevens' later poetry. He can move so fast from one season to another that all the extreme postures of the spirit are present in a single moment. If he can do this he will never pause long enough at any extreme for it to freeze into a dead fixity, and he will appease at last his longing to have both imagination and reality at once. An oscillation rapid enough becomes a blur in which opposites are touched simultaneously....²⁶

But if the way to the end is analogous, Miller's ending only serves to point up the need for a fuller understanding of symbolic formation and the function of decreation within that formation:

In the later poetry nothingness appears to be the source and end of everything, and to underlie everything as its present reality. Imagination is nothing. Reality is nothing. The mind is nothing. Words are nothing. God is nothing. Perhaps it is the fact that all these things are equivalent to nothing which makes them all equivalents of each other.....
It seemed that Stevens was moving closer to the plenitude of things, but as the tension between imagination and reality diminishes there is an unperceived emptying out of both, until, at the moment they touch....the poet finds himself face to face with a universal nothing.

Nevertheless, this apparent defeat is the supreme victory, for the nothing is not nothing. It is being. Being is the universal power, visible nowhere in itself, and yet visible everywhere in all things.²⁷

This sounds mystical in the Mallarmean manner. Being is absolute. Being is also nothingness, but there are several kinds of nothingness. Wagner demonstrated that when he compared the idea of nothingness in Stevens' poems to Valéry's comment, "...perfected consciousness differs as little as could be wished from nothingness."²⁸ He found that the idea has variable aspects:

- (1) Blank spirit is open to all possible objects, being characterized by nothing but light.
- (2) A perfected spirit approaches to nothing; the impossible limit of ultimate contemplation or absolute peace is nothingness.
- (3) The self regards itself as nothing during the supreme moment of otherness; life is turned into the pure act of awareness.
- (4) Utter disillusionment reduces all traditional and conventional moralities to nothing; a condition of "poverty" - poverty of religious beliefs is accepted as the new morality.
- (5) The objects of spirit or imagination are immaterial, airy nothings having positive being but not existence; they are essences, nothing that need exist, yet everything that is possible.

(6) Life and reality are sacraments for the spirit; both are at once everything and nothing.²⁹

The difference between the final two aspects of nothingness is the difference between marginal and central poetry, between void and plenum-void, between destruction and decreation, between Miller's concept of the oscillations of poetry as an emptying-out and Benamou's concept of "participation."

To see how decreation manifests itself in technique, however, it is mandatory that a rejection be made of Benamou's association of Stevens and the Adamic tradition and his related claim "Since all we want is a new sense of things, renewing the words will do. The Impressionist impulse goes toward the transparency of the medium, and eschews the issue of absolutes."³⁰ Stevens is not "a latter-day Adam,"³¹ despite the number of critics who have called him so.³² Adam, as Pearce rightly suggests is led inevitably to usurp the Throne:

Wanting to be Adam, the American poet...has finally discovered, is not the same as wanting to be a poet, or a man, any man of the imagination. It is wanting to be a god - a god in a world without gods, to be sure, but a god nonetheless.³³

Pearce's Adam ends in inescapable disorder and the emptiness of exhaustion:

Demanding that poetry transvaluate itself by exhausting itself (which was its mode of being itself); that it become an instrument which in all its decreative power, could blazon forth the pure power of creativity - Stevens perhaps demanded too much for it.³⁴

The point is well-taken because it reveals an unresolved problem in Benamou's approach - a problem Benamou ascribes to Stevens (the underlining is mine):

The metaphors of concealment and divestment help us

to understand Stevens' difficulty: that center which he seeks is both reality and a self. It tends to naked reality through a centripetal movement. For things reveal their essence as a sum of profiles.³⁵

The problem is graphically illustrated by the poem "Study of Two Pears" (CP 196). Pack has pointed out that the poem "begins with the assumption that the pears can be absolutely defined, drawn to the fact of what they are"³⁶ and ends in the knowledge that the pears can never be known in isolation. But the poem is more involved than the bare statement of the contradiction suggests. There are two pears in the poem because the "Opusculum paedagogum" is more than an illustration of the fluid limits of objects. The "viols,/Nudes or bottles" of the first stanza are dead forms - what Stevens terms in "Add This to Rhetoric," "evading metaphor" (CP 199). But each pear can be observed and described only as an endless series of changing relations both within and without its shape, and the only thing which makes the pears pears is that they resemble each other.

Such a statement sounds trite, but it does have consequences. It proves, among other things, that Sister Quinn slipped when she made of the poem an example of "victory going to the real over the fictive."³⁷ Rather, it illustrates the reality of what she terms "the fluidity of essence":

One characteristic of the world of Wallace Stevens is the fluidity of essence. Besides the union of opposites in Nature, there is also a mysterious transference of essences. Now that the concept of essence is no longer taken for granted - at least in several schools of modern philosophy - this interference with quiddity requires less suspension of disbelief than it would have in earlier periods. One instance of such mutation occurs in the middle

section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"; the water of the lake, says the poet was "Like a momentary color, in which swans/Were seraphs, were saints, were changing essences."³⁸

"Study of Two Pears" demonstrates that the essence of pear can never be known in the object but only as a resemblance between the relations that compose two objects. The irony of the narrator's unconscious preconception that the pears are identical is fully brought out in the fourth stanza:

In the way they are modelled
There are bits of blue.
A hard dry leaf hangs
From the stem. (CP 196)

Pears hang individually, like apples; is there one leaf or two? Does "modelled" imply that the pears are natural or artificial - modelled by the hands or modelled after a pattern of excellence for pears? The narrator can only avoid the problem; he has fallen into the sin of realism pointed out by Camus:

The realist artist and the formalist artist try to find unity where it does not exist, in reality in its crudest state, or in imaginative creation which wants to abolish all reality.³⁹

This is the problem: it would appear that there is no "sum of profiles" other than an impossible totality which will reveal the essence of things.

The Adamic solution offered by Benamou just will not wash:

The "transfixing object" is a residue, at a "center of resemblance," like the pineapple "reduced" from the "sum of its complications"; it is an image of convergence to a center. Our imperfections, as Stevens calls our successive views of reality...form a circle of shapes, colors, metaphors. Keeping this world on the move will guarantee the fixity of its center: "It Must Change," so that the perceptive self may be evolved. The pure object reveals the pure self, or should; the naked thing mirrors the naked man or should. Such are the abstract terms of the exchange. Stevens' poetry produces poems....out of

a faith; the faith that the imagination can or should try to apprehend reality, and in so doing, apprehends itself. This view, offered as conclusion, can serve to distinguish on one side the dualistic imagination of Mallarmé and Valéry, issuing in the same hyperbolic doubt of reality as Descartes' Cogito, and on the other side the Romantic imagination culminating in Husserl's Cogito:

The flux of living, my flux, as thinking subject, can be largely unapprehended, unknown to any extent of its past or future, it is enough to look at life in flux and actually present, for me to say, without any restriction and of necessity, I am, this life is, I live: cogito.⁴⁰

In making the statement "Stevens' ascetic look resembles the phenomenologist's epoche much more than it does the Symbolist's askesis,"⁴¹ Benamou unwittingly returns to the issue of absolutes. The whole point of Sartre's argument with Husserl in The Transcendence of the Ego is that the "I" of the phenomenological cogito is unnecessary - an "opacity" - and that reduction can only be posited as an escape from "absolute consciousness":

Perhaps, in reality, the essential function of the ego is not so much theoretical as practical. We have noticed, indeed, that it does not bind up the unity of phenomema; that it is limited to reflecting an ideal unity, whereas the real and concrete unity has long been effected. But perhaps the essential role of the ego is to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity.⁴²

Sartre's concept of the function and limit of the ego is much closer to the egos dramatically presented by Stevens in his poems. When consciousness becomes aware of itself as subject it is absolute; when man's consciousness becomes aware of itself ("reflects"), it can only be as an object ("mask") - a fact affirmed by Coleridge long ago:

Here then we have, by anticipation, the distinction between the conditional finite I (which, as known in distinct consciousness by occasion of experience, is

called by Kant's followers the empirical I) and the absolute I AM, and likewise the dependence or rather the inherence of the former in the latter; in whom "we live, and move, and have our being," as Saint Paul divinely asserts....⁴³

Perhaps this concept explains why Joyce's Stephen Dedalus should make "the dramatic form" the highest possible form:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in dramatic form is life purified in and re-projected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic, like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.⁴⁴

The logic of their position should, therefore, bring the critics of an Adamic Stevens back to the absolute and hence to a concept of symbolism. That it does not is inexplicable. Pearce, for example, would object to a paper by Baird on Stevens' "existentialism"⁴⁵ on the grounds that "he wants to save Stevens for some form of theism."⁴⁶ But Pearce misses completely the ironic contradiction in his own view; "the Supreme Fiction, the impossible possible man, the ultimate poem - these are, in the work of Stevens' last phase, the grand postulates of the ego. (Stevens once remarked: "God is a postulate of the ego.") Postulating these, the ego guarantees its own continuing existence...."⁴⁷ It is not that the ego postulates the existence of God, thereby making God a dependent creation of the ego; it is that God is a necessary postulate of the ego - the grounds of its existence.

The irony is fully brought out in Stevens' two explicit treatments of Adam in his poetry. In "The Pure Good of Theory,"

the figure of Adam is opposed to "A Large-sculptured, platonic person, free from time..." (CP 330). The impetus of the poem is the desire for "felicity":

Felicity, ah! Time is the hooded enemy,
The inimical music, the enchantered space
In which the enchanted preludes have their place. (CP330)

Adam and the platonist are not the same figure in the poem. It was Adam who, by usurping absolute creativity, created time:

We knew one parent must have been divine,
Adam of beau regard, from fat Elysia,
Whose mind malformed this morning metaphor,

While all the leaves leaked gold. His mind made
 morning,
As he slept. He woke in a metaphor: this was
A metamorphosis of paradise,
Malformed, the world was paradise malformed... (CP 331-32)

Adam was the enchanterer and his creation is what the Platonist must decreate by creating "enchanted preludes" within time.

Adamic time is destruction:

It is time that beats in the breast and it is time
That batters against the mind, silent and proud,
The mind that knows it is destroyed by time.

Time is a horse that runs in the heart, a horse
Without a rider on a road at night. (CP 330)

The key to the nature of the platonic person is contained in this description of the 'proud mind'; the parody, in the line "Whose mind malformed this morning metaphor," of Hopkin's line "I caught this morning morning's minion..." ("The Windhover") is indicative of Adam's pride. In discovering only ego in the world (the kind of identity between self and other posited by Benamou), he has created a "metaphor" which will be destroyed. The world of Adam is trapped in the identity of ego and other; it is the world discovered by the virile poet - "...a world that

does not move for the weight of its own heaviness." (NA 63)

The platonist, on the other hand, is not led through pride to affirm that metaphor is identity. In my view, the ellipsis after "malformed" is the equivalent of Hopkins' "Brute beauty and valor and act, oh, air, pride, plume/here/Buckle!" It indicates the end of Adam and the initiation of the prelude of the platonist. It is the platonist's ear that

attends the varying
Of this precarious music, the change of key

Not quite detected at the moment of change
And, now, it attends the difficult difference.
To say the solar chariot is junk

Is not a variation but an end.
Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind

And the desire to believe in a metaphor.
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
Belief, that what it believes in is not true. (CP 332)

In this reading, the poem springs to life. The "solar chariot" is Adam's, of course, or more specifically, it is his claim to divinity. The platonist, by discovering the difference between the paradise of Adam and 'the real paradise' discovers "...a soul in the world" (CP 331). He discovers the truth that metaphor is resemblance:

It is never the thing but the version of the thing:
The fragrance of the woman not her self,
Her self in her manner not the solid block,

The day in its color not perpending time,
Time in its weather, our most sovereign lord,
The weather in words and words in sounds of sound. (CP332)

"The Pure Good of Theory" is the Platonic Good that the theory of metaphor as resemblance leads to, and one uses that theory to decreate, which as Benamou suggested is to clear the world

of its "man-locked set" (CP 497). But such a process involves more than "religious ideas and mythological metaphors":⁴⁸ the "necessary angel of earth" (CP 496) who speaks the words is himself only one of the platonic preludes: "Am I not,/Myself, only half a figure of a sort..." (CP 497). Despite the macabre nature of the decreative transformations imposed upon him by the "enchanting" of Adam, the preludes of the platonist have their ideal end:

These devastations are the divertissements
Of a destroying spiritual that digs-a-dog,
Whines in its hole for puppies to come see,

Springs outward, being large, and, in the dust,
Being small, inscribes ferocious alphabets,
Flies like a bat expanding as it flies,

Until its wings bear off night's middle witch;
And yet remains the same, the beast of light,
Groaning in half-exploited gutturals

The need of its element, the final need
Of final access to its element -
Of access like the page of a wiggy book,

Touched suddenly by the universal flare
For a moment, a moment in which we read and re-
peat
The eloquence of light's faculties. (CP 332-33)

His discovery of the inadequacy of Adam and his images leads to a series of rebirths. The source of Stevens' images here (their particular justification in other words) is not clear to me, but the movement from night towards light affirms the general lines of the Platonic concept of the rebirth of the soul.⁴⁹

The fact that the platonist never reaches his element "free from time" does not negate the reading. The platonist is not "pure good"; like Aquinas, he is a symbol of the pure good.

Platonist as poet becomes Orpheus; and the proper image for the "central poet" is neither 'ultra-omnipotent' man or omniscient god. He is Orpheus, son of man and muse, living in a world full of imprisoned nymphs and dryads, whose movements form the configurations of his music, who plays his preludes

Until the used-to earth and sky, and the tree
 And cloud, the used-to tree and used-to cloud,
 Lose the old uses that they made of them,
 And they: these men, and earth and sky, inform
 Each other by sharp informations, sharp,
 Free knowledges, secreted until then,
 Breaches of that which held them fast. It is
 As if the central poem became the world,

And that which in an altitude would soar,
 A vis, a principle or, it may be,
 The meditation of a principle,
 Or else an inherent order active to be
 Itself, a nature to its natives all
 Beneficence, a repose, utmost repose,
 The muscles of a magnet aptly felt,
 A giant, on the horizon, glistening...(CP 441-42)

The "giant" of "A Primitive Like An Orb" is the ideal, the absolute mirrored but not contained by the Orphic music:

That's it. The lover writes, the believer hears,
 The poet mumbles and the painter sees,
 Each one, his fated eccentricity,
 As a part, but part, but tenacious particle,
 Of the skeleton of the ether, the total
 Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods
 Of color, the giant of nothingness, each one
 And the giant ever changing, living in change. (CP 443)

Decreation, for the Orphic poet, is not a process of exhaustion, but a process of release. It is not a denial of the absolute, but an acceptance of the contingency of the contingent.

Orpheus was, above all, a symbolist, even in Plutarchian myth. (Aridaeus-Thespesius is the double name of a soul released from its body but not its image);

The rational part of the Soul of Aridaeus-Thespesius, then, comes near to, but may not pass, the Moon; and

can only see from afar the glory of the true Delphi which is eternal in the Heavens - the Sun, the seat of Apollo, the home of reason. Orpheus, when he went to seek Eurydice, came, Aridaeus-Thespesius is told, only as far as the Oracle of Dreams, i.e. the Moon.⁵⁰

Stevens' other explicit allusion to Adam only intensifies the view of his fall affirmed in "The Pure Good of Theory." It occurs in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" in connection with the narrator's involved initiation of the "ephebe" into the mysteries of "abstraction":

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

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found them-
selves
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;
And in the earth itself they found a green -

The inhabitants of a very varnished green. (CP 383)

Venturing into "Notes..." has become a dangerous but inescapable exercise for critics of Stevens. So much has been said and so little established that it is not possible to resolve interpretations. Only a blanket indication of the work done can be made.⁵¹ One issue alone concerns the present discussion and that is Benamou's assertion about the nature of the "first idea":

His "first idea" is not at all Mallarme's Platonic Idée. He explained it in terms of pictorial visibility:

Someone here wrote me the other day and wanted to know what I meant by a thinker of the first idea. If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea.

The linguistic equivalent of such a cleaning-up (which, incidentally, makes man a god) takes place in many poems....⁵²

The temptation to prove the contradiction inherent in Benamou's approach simply by pointing out the relation between the world of Adam and Eve and the function of the thinker of the first idea is strong. But the poem itself proves that the "first idea" is something so closely resembling the Platonic Idea that no distinction can be formulated.

The "ephebe," appropriately enough, is about to be initiated into his function as citizen of the state - a state which soon reveals its ideal qualities. Two aspects of that initiation give coherence to "It Must Be Abstract" - the "first Idea" and the "thinker of the first idea." In I, the lesson is that the ephebe must see the sun "clearly in the idea of it," (not think it) and see it as it is, without Phoebus:

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be. (CP 381)

Those who think that the phrase "The death of one god is the death of all" equals humanitarian rejection of the absolute miss the real point of the lesson:

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images....(CP 381)

Phoebus is dead because he was a name. One can almost pinpoint the source of Stevens' inspiration here by referring to Coleridge's rejection of one of Gray's lines - "And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire." Coleridge said of it:

But then it is a bad line, not because the language is distinct from that of prose; but because it conveys incongruous images, because it confounds the cause

and the effect, the real thing with the personified representative of the thing....That the "Phoebus" is hackneyed, and a school-boy image, is an accidental fault.....That it is part of an exploded mythology, is an objection more deeply grounded. Yet when the torch of ancient learning was re-kindled, so cheering were its beams, that our eldest poets, cut off by Christianity from all accredited machinery, and deprived of all acknowledged guardians and symbols... were naturally induced to adopt, as a poetic language, those fabulous personages....⁵³

Phoebus is two removes from a symbol. He personifies sun, but the sun itself is the representative of the power behind it... its cause. The sun the ephebe is to perceive is a "supreme fiction." So much is indicated by the first stanza:

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

The exact balance between conception, perception, and invention is maintained throughout Stevens' poems. Here it quite clearly indicates the mediating role played by the sun between the idea and the perceiver. The idea is inconceivable and somehow serves as cause of the sun, although it, itself, is to have no con-
ceived cause:

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire. (CP 381)

What this means exactly is that if there is such a mind, the ephebe cannot conceive of it as "inventing" the idea. Anyway, the idea is, despite Stevens' letter, so abstract as to be inconceivable as other than absolute.

Unless he has read "the extremest book of the wisest man" (CP 380) which Stevens mentions in his dedication, the ephebe should be awestruck by the demands made on him by his master;

the following sections indicate the necessity for clarifying the lesson. The ephebe has learned, however, that all conceptions (except the sun?) of the absolute idea are inadequate; it is something which can only be perceived by "an ignorant eye." This is the eye of Stevens' prose - "What the eye beholds may be the text of life. It is, nevertheless, a text we do not write. The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance" (NA 76). It is also the eye of "Peter the voyant" in "Questions are Remarks," whose single question seems to be of the essence of decreation:

The sun aches and ails and then returns halloo
Upon the horizon amid adult enfantillages.

Its fire fails to pierce the vision that beholds it,
Fails to destroy the antique acceptances,
Except that the grandson sees it as it is,

Peter the voyant, who says "Mother, what is that" -
The object that rises with so much rhetoric,
But not for him. His question is complete.

It is the question of what he is capable.
It is the extreme, the expert aetat 2.
He will never ride the red horse she describes. (CP 462)

The ephebe, too, has his questions, and one of them emerges in II. The master has just given him the motive for the de-creative return to the first idea:

It is the celestial ennui of apartments
That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
Of this invention; and yet so poisonous

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
The truth itself, the first idea becomes
The hermit in a poet's metaphors,

Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day. (CP 381)

It is important that this passage be understood because it is the point of bifurcation between two stances adopted in face of the first idea. The motive is clear. "Apartments" are

self-contained, divisive units - adamic names or ego identities. "Celestial ennui" is a heavenly boredom communicated as impulse to the ephebes of the world. But what happens to the first idea is ambiguous; "ravishments" means either the rape of truth or the ecstasy of it. Probably it means both. In his delight at discovering the first idea as first idea, it would appear that the poet effects the kind of divorce Benamou imagined for Mallarmé. The poet makes the first idea, in its absoluteness, unrelated to the world - explicitly to his metaphors - when, in reality, the first idea is the life of the world - "the quick of this invention."

There is danger here. The poisonous "ennui of the first idea" evokes two kinds of response. One is contained, as illustration, in the second half of II:

But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.
To have what is not is its ancient cycle. (CP 382)

The other response is contained in VI:

Not to be realized because not to
Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because
Not to be realized. Weather by Franz Hals,

Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds,
Wetted by blue, colder for white. Not to
Be spoken to, without a roof, without

First fruits, without the virginal of birds,
The dark-blown ceinture loosened, not relinquished.
Gay is, gay was, the gay forsythia

And yellow, yellow thins the Northern blue.
Without a name and nothing to be desired,
If only imagined but imagined well.

My house has changed a little in the sun.
The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,
False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin.

It must be visible or invisible,
 Invisible or visible or both:
 A seeing and unseeing in the eye.

The weather and the giant of the weather,
 Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air;
 An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought. (CP 385)

In VI, the first idea is not even mentioned - with the exception of IX, the single omission of the phrase from the parts of "It Must Be Abstract." It is appropriate that it should not be because VI is the master's attempt to demonstrate it rather than talk about it, just as IX is his attempt to demonstrate the thinker of the first idea.

Of the elements which compose this section, some must be passed over lightly. The "forsythia" for example, is part of the elaborate process to produce a "symbolic" green noted by Heringman:

And in the conclusion of the "Notes," Stevens marks a full realization of synthesis, not only with the transcendence which the poem illustrates but with the specific intersections of his two realms in the figures of their chief names [?] and symbols. The passage includes the harmonious intersection of fiction and fact, poetry and science, irrational and rational, ideal (crystal) and real; and the symbolic fusion of moon and sun (or night and day) in twilight, and of blue and gold in green. The realms of imagination and reality intersect to produce a transcendent reality which is green.⁵⁴

Frans Hals is noteworthy because his technique - evolved to give a sense of life to his portraits - had a great influence on the impressionists, whose pointillism left, for example, green to be "A seeing and unseeing in the eye." On the level of analogy, green is symbol of the first idea, "if only imagined but imagined well." What one imagines is not the first idea, but the images capable of symbolizing that idea (opposites coupled in the Coleridgean sense). In short, VI is a demonstration of the

nature of existent images.

The point of the analogy between impressionist technique and poetic practice is worth dwelling on. Benamou once made a study of the relation:

Thus the poetry of Wallace Stevens incorporates conflicting elements from impressionism and cubism: naturalness and artificiality, delight in appearances and metamorphosis of appearances. A baffling sum of relations - for where in these extreme ranges is the identity of the poet's sensibility?

The identity is in Stevens' concern with change. Impressionism shows the passive principle of change. ...But in cubism, "more than changes of light" are involved. Imagination is the active principle which transforms and extends the object by multiplying resemblances.⁵⁵

But so did Stevens in "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream" (CP 371): the whole poem generates the impression of a pointillist painting too closely seen. Stevens deliberately draws an analogy between the plane of strict realism apparent in the narrator's description and the impressionist's use of points of color to suggest the actual. The opening lines, "It was like passing a boundary to dive/Into the sun-filled water..." suggest that boundary of space between painting and perceiver at which the apparently solid and realistic forms dissolve into a mass of "anonymids":

Ourselves in the clearest green - well, call it green.
We bathed in yellow green and yellow blue
And in these comic colors dangled down,

Like their particular characters, addicts
To blotches, angular anonymids
Gulping for shape among the reeds.

The poem emphasizes the observation of reality and the consequence of that observation. The narrator is, like "caliper" of "Last Looks At the Lilacs," rationalistic. His experience in the stream is traumatic, but though he loses his head ("It

was like passing a boundary, floating without a head....") in the sun of the moment, he recovers the certainty of his Adamic reality and consequently of his self:

How good it was at home again at night
To prepare for bed, in the frame of the house, and
 move
Round the rooms, which do not ever seem to
 change...

"Gulping for shape among the reeds," he rationalizes his experience by making it "grotesque" rather than a religious experience related, through opposition, to kenosis; he rejects it as an illusion fostered by the good offices of the sun, which, at the moment of withdrawal, becomes ludicrous - "Good fortuneer of the grotesque, patroon,/A funny foreigner of meek address." The irony of his position is fully indicated by the ellipses after "change." This is reduction with a vengeance and its motive is the fear of a reality which denies Adam the comforts of his ego.

The master of "Notes..." comes to a complementary conclusion. If it is wrong to fear the experience of the absolute, it is also wrong to desire to possess it. This is the meaning of the "hermit" image in II; the master's lesson was that the first idea should be a hermit in the poet's metaphors. Like the image of the "bodiless" serpent in "The Auroras of Autumn," the poet's metaphor "...is form gulping after formlessness,/ Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances/And the serpent body flashing without the skin." (CP 411) Like the "ravishments of truth," that double-serpent, too, has his poison:

These lights may finally attain a pole
In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there,

In another nest, the master of the maze
Of body and air and forms and images,
Relentlessly in possession of happiness.

This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
Even that. His meditations in the ferns,
When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun,
Made us no less as sure. (CP 411-12)

Despite the dissatisfactory nature of the results of his honest explication of the poem, Davie has made the essential observation about this passage:

Sure of what? Of some constant principle behind the elusive metamorphoses of the natural world as proffered by our senses? Or of there being no such underlying constancy to look for? Elsewhere in the poem we seem to learn that the changeability of that snake, the world, when it leads us to accept the second alternative, leads us astray - "This is his poison."⁵⁶

The image of the poisonous associated with the absolute occurs repeatedly in Stevens' poems. In "St. John and the Back-Ache" - in what Riddel terms "the mock debate...between the spirit and the imperfect world where it resides"⁵⁷- it appears in a new light at the close of St. John's list of existent images of "presence":

My point is that
These illustrations are neither angels, no
Nor brilliant blows thereof, ti-rill-a-roo,
Nor all one's luck at once in a play of strings.
They help us face the dumbfounding abyss
Between us and the object, external cause,
The little ignorance that is everything,
The possible nest in the invisible tree,
Which in a composite season, now unknown,
Denied, dismissed, may hold a serpent, loud
In our captious hymns, erect and sinuous,
Whose venom and whose wisdom will be one. (CP 437)

One sees here so many things that it becomes difficult to separate them. The biblical analogy is foremost; the serpent here sounds like the "Brazen Serpent" of Moses, used by Jesus, in John 3:14, as an illustration of the kind of rebirth man must

undergo. That the serpent is "erect" suggests both the legend of the snake's ability to walk erect before the Fall and the uplifted serpent of Moses. The allegorical significance of the biblical serpent is mentioned by Peloubet:

To present the serpent form, as deprived of its power to hurt, impaled as the trophy of a conqueror, was to assert that evil, physical and spiritual, had been overcome, and thus help to strengthen the weak faith... Others look upon the uplifted serpent as a symbol of life and health, it having been so worshipped in Egypt. The two views have a point of contact, for the primary idea connected with the serpent is wisdom. Wisdom, apart from obedience to God, degenerates to cunning and degrades and envenoms man's nature. Wisdom, yielding to divine law, is the source of healing and restoring influences, and the serpent form thus became a symbol of deliverance and health.⁵⁸

There is irony here; the brazen serpent made by Moses became an object of idolatrous worship and was destroyed. St. John's serpent is somehow to escape that fate. The serpent is "presence" but the coupling of its wisdom and its venom is put in the conditional future. In Godbole's terms, "presence" manifests itself as absence in a fallen world:

Good and evil are different, as their names imply. But, in my own humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my Lord. He is present in the one, absent in the other, and the difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, 'Come, come, come, come.'⁵⁹

The existent images indicated by St. John are just indications, like the woman of "The Woman in Sunshine".

The effect of the object is beyond the mind's
 Extremest pinch and, easily, as in
 A sudden color of the sea. But it is not
 That big-bushed green. Or in a tragic mode,
 As at the moment of the year when, tick,
 Autumn howls upon half-naked summer. But
 It is not the unravelling of her yellow shift.
 Presence is not the woman, come upon,

Not yet accustomed, yet, at sight, humane
To most incredible depths. (CP 436-37)

Now Stevens is using existent images established in earlier poems - a tendency earlier noted - to meditate the problem of "the only love." The image of the woman here, for example, is one established in "The Beginning" (CP 427) - "the self of summer perfectly perceived." This culminating repetition of images is, in itself, one of the major and most exciting movements of his mind, a movement which will shortly be of concern. But the point now is to affirm that the nature, effect, and ideal end of these images are here delineated by St. John. The basis of his argument is that "The world is presence and not force./Presence is not mind." (CP 436). "The Back-Ache" would dismiss presence as "Kinder-Scenen" - the "adult enfantillages" of "Questions Are Remarks" - because he mistakes the image for the life of the image. John's refutation is the same as "The thesis of the plentifullest John" in "Description Without Place":

Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be,

A text we should be born that we might read...

.....

Thus the theory of description matters most.
It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,
The buzzing world and lisping firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self. (CP 344-45)

The biblical connotations of the line "For whom the word is

the making of the world" finds its correspondence in John I: I and the relation of "revelation" is obvious. Description is used to mean the act of human creation after the man-made solidity of the "solid self" of the world has been decreed. It then becomes, literally, a description of creation as it is.

One further reference to the serpent will clarify his "poison" and bring the discussion back to "Notes...." The association of Ananke with the serpent in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is the initial stage in the development of the image:

The sense of the serpent in you, Ananke,
And your averted stride
Add nothing to the horror of the frost
That glistens on your face and hair. (CP 152)

This is the un-uplifted serpent, when man must suffer the agony of an existence completely his own, an absurdist existence in the void. Ironically, the void is man's own creation - the ultimate product of his desire to possess absolute truth. After he has seen his more amenable mythologies destroyed because they were only images in time, man is left with only his own blind need to create. If Bradley's view of the meaning of "nigger" can be accepted without fully accepting his treatment of the poem, then the position can be clearly seen:

"Nigger" represents in other Stevens' poems, also, the primitive basis for all conscious life. The poem "The Newstand and the Weather" speaks of "... a nigger fragment, a mystique/For the spirit left helpless by the intelligence." This nigger fragment is a return from the intelligence or factual reality to instinctive living. According to Stevens, one of man's basic instincts is his instinct for assigning meanings to his experiences; thus "nigger" is the ur-artist, the unadorned instinct for creation.⁶⁰

The poison is the apparently endless necessity to create

essentially meaningless images in an incessant round of creation and destruction. It resembles the initial movement of the "virile poet" in his process of purification, and the transformation of the snake image that has taken place by "St. John and the Back-Ache" resembles the completion of his oscillation. Related images from the same poem demonstrate that, while individual poems contain in minature the oscillation of the "central poet," The Collected Poems contains the vast surge of the spirit toward its apocalyptic vision - the total oscillation of the fallen man. "Nigger", for example, is deposed, in a long and involved process, by "the shepherd and his black forms" (CP 480) of "An Ordinary Evening...." Part of the process is visible in "Prelude to Objects" when the necessity of creating becomes itself the object of concern:

One is always seeing and feeling oneself,
That's not by chance. It comes to this:
That the guerilla I should be booked
And bound. Its nigger mystics should change
Foolscap for wigs. Academies
As of a tragic science should rise. (CP 195)

The basis of the change had been contained in companion epigrams:

NUDITY AT THE CAPITAL

But nakedness, woolen massa, concerns an innermost atom.
If that remains concealed, what does the bottom matter?

NUDITY IN THE COLONIES

Black man, bright nouveautés leave one, at best,
pseudonymous.
Thus one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous.
(CP 145)

Benamou quotes only the first epigram, thereby completely missing the point: he says of it, "This defines nakedness as a quality at the center (the capital) of being, and not as something on the other side of a glass wall, like Mallarmé's 'nudité

idéale.'" The whole point is that the "woolen massa," in his as yet un-exchanged wig, is so engrossed with his physical nakedness ("the guerilla I") that he leaves his soul concealed. His capital, like the "capitol" of the brutally-sexual "X" in "Anecdote of Canna," is the capitol of ego where "thought that wakes/In sleep may never meet another thought/Or thing" (CP 55). The second eipgram proves the point. "Nouveautés" means both new clothes and new ideas; to dress the naked ego in either is to falsify it. True revelation of the "innermost atom" consists in annihilation of the ego as identity. To experience anonymity is the experience demanded by necessity - an experience of revelation timorously refused by the rationalist of "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream."

The circuitous discussion of a single image - the poisonous "ravishments of truth" in II of "Notes..." - is justified, I think, by the fact that the vision thus seen developing in several poems is cryptically contained within "It Must Be Abstract." The discovery of the fall of Adam and the falseness of his paradise, communicated as necessary impetus ("celestial ennui") leads the individual consciousness back to the first idea. Quite simply - this is decreation. The names Adam gave to things are dispensed with; his creations become trash. The exemplifying creation in "Notes..." is "Phoebus," but, as I have attempted to show, even if it were "nothingness" it would have to be dispensed with. It is the name of the thing that is destroyed and not the thing itself, a fact Stevens made clear at least as early as "The Man With The Blue Guitar":

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.

How should you walk in that space and know
Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations?
Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed. (CP 183)

Name as the "crust of shape" is a concept taken up and utilized in "Notes...." Decreation applies not merely to things and states and qualities, but to the gods themselves and to the absolute. That is why "There was a project for the sun and is" (CP 381). Decreation results in the perception of the shape of things as they are; that perception is the mainspring of the poem:

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs; that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (CP 383)

(There are enough mythic elements in "It Must Be Abstract" without making much of this echo of Bernal Diaz' great metaphysical quest in MacLeish's Conquistador.)

The perception of the shape of things as they are calls into play the second phase of the via negativa - abstraction. Abstraction is the sublime movement of the poet, in his poems, from involvement in the 'fear and trembling' produced by the decreate perception. An example of the abstractive process was "Mozart, 1935" (CP 131); it should be kept in mind because the pattern of the development of that process in "Notes...." is discernible, but not clear.

In III and V of "It Must Be Abstract," two semi-myths semi-dreams are presented. To understand them is to understand the motive for the long search for "the thinker of the first idea." The first semi-myth comes abruptly at the end of an affirmation that "The poem, through candor, brings back a power again/That gives a candid kind to everything." What this discussion of the poem's refreshing power means is that the poem is able, through the poet's acceptance of the first idea, to give candor (literally shining light) to "everything" - the images used to symbolize the first idea. But the meaning of the myth is not as immediately clear:

We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
Inscribes a primitive astronomy

Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
And throws his stars around the floor. By day
The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo

And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation. (CP 383)

I was initiated into this myth because I chanced to glance through Wordsworth's The Prelude one day: there may be other entrances. Once the identity of the Arabian has been established an interpretation can be made, and the Arabian is, of course, Wordsworth's apocalyptic "phantom Arab" (the underlining is mine):

While I was seated in a rocky cave
By the sea-side, perusing, so it chanced
The famous history of the errant knight
.....
Sleep seized me, and I passed into a dream.
I saw before me stretched in a boundless plain
Of sandy wilderness, all black and void,
And as I looked around, distress and fear
Came creeping over me, when at my side,
Close at my side, an uncouth shape appeared
.....

He seemed an Arab of the Bedouin tribes.....⁶²

Wordsworth's Arab carries two objects - a stone seen as a copy of "Euclid's Elements" and a shell which is also seen as a book "...that was a god, yea many gods/Had voices more than all the winds, with power to exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe,/ Through every clime, the heart of human kind."⁶³ From this shell emerges "An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold/De- struction to the children of the earth/By deluge, now at hand."⁶⁴ So near at hand is the destruction that the Arab leaves the dreamer because the "waters of the deep" are even then gather- ing upon them.

Stevens incorporates this dream to indicate the agonizing nature of the experience of the decreate perception. More, he develops it fully to indicate the nature of abstraction; in fact, the latter half of "It Must Be Abstract" parallels Wordsworth's search to recover the innocent eye of childhood in "Book V" of The Prelude. (The parallel constitutes a resemblance.) In Stevens' mingled myth, the flood is the decreeted present, the Arab and his "primitive astronomy" are parts of prophecy, and the wood-dove (presumably Noah's dove) is part of the past. Now the wood-dove's 'nonsensical' song was of salvation in the world through the grace granted to faith and good works; the Arab's song is of salvation through the apocalyptic vision of some "primitive" astronomy of the yet-to-be created future; and the ocean has its obscure song in the light which plays upon its waters. All these songs are obscure, but they are all related.

The master does not posit this mingled myth as something to be believed in; he calls it "life's nonsense". Rather, it is to

be the subject for meditation on the part of the ephebe - a problem, called into being by the dissatisfactory nature of desire, the solution of which will provide the key to the proper stance to adopt in order to write a poetry that "...refreshes life, so that we share,/For a moment, the first idea...." (CP 382)

In the developmental scheme of the lecture, IV is a hint tossed to the ephebe about the nature of the solution, and V represents his initial attempt. What he is dealing with here is the "primitive astronomy" of the Arab, for the images herein are not of animals, as is usually supposed, but of constellations:

The lion roars at the enraging desert,
Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise,
Defies red emptiness to evolve his match,

Master by foot and jaws and by the mane,
Most supple challenger. The elephant
Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares,

The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks,
Shattering velvetest far-away. The bear,
The ponderous cinnamon, snarls in his mountain

At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow...(CP 384)

The astrology of this passage is not Arabic, but rather a brilliant mingling of Egyptian, Buddhist, and Zuni myths, in that order.

With the Zunis, Ursa Major was important as marking the seasons. They say that when winter comes the Bear lazily sleeps, no longer guarding the westland from the cold of the ice gods...but, when the Bear, awakening, growls in the springtime and the answering thunder mutters, the strength of the ice gods being shaken, the reign of summer begins again.⁶⁵

"The sun glows in the lion," says Seneca.... The placing of the fiery and ferocious Lion...in this part of the sky, symbolised the fact that the sun reigned supreme when it arrived in this constellation.
..... The connection between the sun, king of the heavenly hosts, and the lion, king of beasts, is obvious. Macrobius

says: "This beast seems to derive his own nature from that luminary...being in force and heat as superior to all other animals as the sun is to the stars."⁶⁶

In Buddhist astrology, the lion becomes the elephant when the sun is in its sign.

The mingling is extremely complicated, but the paramount relation among all the images involves the return of the sun or the idea of the sun in their sign. This is the project at hand. If I read the astrology correctly, the seasonal inconsistencies make the night in which the stars appear not the real night, but 'the dark night of the soul.' The bear passes through a cycle of seasons, so the sun must 'come and go' like the "hermit in a poet's metaphors." This means that the sun must pass through the lion-elephant (and in so doing reveal its ambivalence as generative and destructive force). But the ephebe cannot see the sun; he can only see the images of the sun. For him, lion equals Phoebus; he cannot make his night day.

The cause of the ephebe's failure is rather ambiguously analyzed by the master in the latter half of V:

But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,
Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

Yet voluble dumb violence. You look
Across the roofs as sigil and as ward
And in your centre mark them and are cowed...

These are the heroic children whom time breeds
Against the first idea - to lash the lion,
Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle. (CP 384-85)

The ephebe quite literally repeats the lesson learned in "Mozart, 1935" but this time with elaboration because more images can now be oriented, like iron filings, in the magnetic oscillation.

What the master tells him, in surprisingly contemptuous tones, is that the constellations are doing their job - functioning as existent images - but he is sluffing his. Stevens' ephebe is supposed to be "sigil" and "ward" - guardian of his civilization and at the same time a sign to that civilization of, or possessing, mysterious power. But the ephebe is "cowed" by "the roofs." The reading could be supported by examining the function of housing structures in other poems, but it seems clear enough from the mere syntax. The "centre" is once again the ego resisting the experience of the absolute - a point emphasized by "your".

The final stanza may be ambiguous, but its essential meaning is not in doubt. Ellipsis, it has been noted, is often used by Stevens to convey irony, and an ironic reading of the stanza reveals that "heroic children" is a sarcastic reference to the ephebe. The expression takes up and alters the meaning of "ward" and drives home the lesson learned in II about desire by making the child a spawn of time. Children is a legitimate generalization about 'today's youth.' The full irony is that merely through fear the children should be able to perform the heroic feat of taming existent images - of reducing them to names.

VI is, as I have said, a demonstration of the proper perception of the first idea. The demonstration is appropriate in view of the woes of the ephebe. The fact that the first idea is to be "without a roof" comes into prominence; literally it is not to be contained within structures - its home is not to be man's world. The sudden alteration from night to day between

V and VI stresses the validity of the demonstration; and the difficult line "The dark-blown ceinture loosened, not relinquished" suggests a continuation of astrological images by blending in the "Donna, donna, dark,/Stooping in indigo gown/ And cloudy constellations..." of "O Florida, Venereal Soil" (CP 47). That lady, had she not been corruptly sensuous, could have become the poet's muse and worn the crown of Ariadne. In any case, VI posits the true home of the first idea - in the perceptive contemplation of the "giant":

The weather and the giant of the weather,
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought. (CP 385)

It is time that the beautiful inversion in the last line be publicly heralded. One would expect, in the logic of the thing, the phrase 'a thought by man.' But here, it is the man who is the "abstraction" and the inversion gives to "blooded" the wondrously exact meaning of initiation into kinship by the bloodying rite (as in Faulkner's The Bear). The thinker of the first idea contemplates it. He does not worship it because it is without "First fruits", nor does he fear it. He contemplates it and in consequence his "...house has changed a little in the sun." The world he lives in has changed a little, and he, in becoming a giant, has been almost annihilated as ego-man.

VII can be dealt with by noting its resemblance to "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun" (CP 248) and by applying Marie Boroff's comment on that poem to this section:

The disciplines of observation and meditation are means toward apprehending an order in which satisfaction can be found. But such apprehensions are not entirely under the control of the will. A sense of order and meaningfulness in existence can descend upon

the mind unanticipated, flooding it with joy. ...In these spontaneous remissions of human misery we experience "a gaiety that is being, not merely knowing. "...Beneficences of weather and season can indeed make us forget the essential tragedy of our condition.⁶⁷

Such moments in VI, however, are on the edge between sleep and awakening, between the 'dark night of the soul' and its full perception of daylight. What that soul then beholds is "The academies like structures in a mist." These academies are the ones "As of a tragic science" in "Prelude to Objects" (CP 195) now seen in a more promising light. They are still tragic, but the "incalculable balances" act as guarantees of the eventual release and joy to be found in the tragic study of the principles by which Ananke governs the world. The academy becomes a desirable thing rather than a necessary thing because of the fortuitous revelations of VII.

The final three sections of "It Must Be Abstract" create new obscurations by involving the ephebe in the concept of "major man." To get at those obscurations it is necessary to reject the almost universal acclamation of "the MacCullough" as Stevens' ultimate hero, and to see him as he really is - the final evasion of the ephebe. He is strictly the ephebe's conception and constitutes a return to Adam:

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc,
And set the MacCullough there as major man?

The first idea is an imagined thing. (CP 387)

The passage cited recalls, in its very rhythm, a passage from "The Man With The Blue Guitar":

And shall I then stand in the sun, as now
I stand in the moon, and call it good,

The immaculate, the merciful good,

Detached from us, from things as they are?
Not to be part of the sun? To stand

Remote and call it merciful?

The strings are cold on the blue guitar. (CP 168)

The Orphic symbols leap out of the words here, but the point is to note that the master's statement, "The first idea is an imagined thing," is equivalent to the guitarist's description of his guitar's reaction. The ephebe's concept of the MacCullough is a violation of the maxim laid down in I - "Never suppose an inventing mind as source/Of this idea...."

Viollet-le-Duc was a rationalist theorist of architecture, historically noted for his attempt to rationalize the gothic by viewing it as utilitarian (e.g. gargoyles as rainspouts). His view is probably an advance from the purely decorative theory, but it is an advance in the wrong direction. "The MacCullough" is an analogous view of "the thinker of the first idea." His name, even beyond the damning fact that he has a name, indicates his inadequacy. The legend of the MacCullough clan is (translated) "before the memory of man." A variant spelling of the name makes the meaning "son of the boar", which is ironic: a MacCullough who posits the MacCullough involves himself in an infinite regress, a kind of search for a pre-archetypal father.

That Stevens was aware of this business of the name is clearly shown by the master's description of the proper major man in IX:

He is and may be but oh! he is, he is,
This foundling of the infected past, so bright,
So moving in the manner of his hand.

Yet look not at his colored eyes. Give him

No names. Dismiss him from your images.
The hot of him is purest in the heart. (CP 388)

The function of academies, it must be remembered, is to "book" the I and study its tragic separation from its grounds of existence and if possible, to recover that ground through such a study. VIII and IX are two books, not just two versions. The study of "the MacCullough" would discover the grounds of the ego's existence; the study of the master's major man would recover the grounds of the existence of "the innermost atom." The master's "major man" is a symbol, like the sun, for the first idea. His origin is in the ultimate discovery of MacCullough that "...the MacCullough is MacCullough" and his consequent return to a study of the waters which engulf him:

If MacCullough himself lay lounging by the sea,

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,
About the thinker of the first idea,
He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,
Or a leaner being, moving in on him,
Of greater aptitude and apprehension,

As if the waves at last were never broken,
As if the language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken. (CP 387)

Like Wordsworth drowsing by the sea, MacCullough will have his experience. In mawkishly religious terms, the light upon the waters will enter his spirit and his soul will become a "leaner being" - true symbol- because it will be free of his ego.

The transition from IX to X, during which MacCullough loses his name in the traditional manner of those who are reborn in the spirit, is very carefully handled. It has, for example, its delicate correlations with Wordsworth's The Prelude. In The Prelude, Wordsworth is moved to celebrate, because of his

experience, "...Nature' self, / And things that teach as Nature teaches..."⁶⁸ But his celebration of the books of the poets trembles on the edge of an apotheosis of the poets:

'T is just that in behalf of these, the works,
And of the men that framed them, whether known
Or sleeping nameless in their scattered graves,
That I should assert their rights, attest
Their honours, and should, once for all, pronounce
Their benediction; speak of them as Powers
For ever to be hallowed; only less,
For what we are and what we may become,
Than Nature's self, which is the breath of God,
Or His pure Word by miracle revealed.⁶⁹

The master of "Notes...." will grant that such benedictions are the natural trappings of "the major man," but he knows, too, that "the major man" has a purpose and must suffer to achieve that purpose:

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.

They differ from reason's click-clack, its applied
Enflashings. But apotheosis is not
The origin of major man. (CP 387)

The nature of the major man's task is exposed in X:

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle,
Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,
In being more than an exception, part,

Though an heroic part, of the commonal. (CP 388)

If one remembers the injunction to the poet of "Mozart, 1935" - "Be thou the voice. Not you" (CP 132) - and the final line of "Nudity in the Colonies" - "Thus one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous" (CP 145) - the function of the major man is clear:

Who is it?

.....
in his old coat,
 His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town,

Looking for what was, where it used to be?
 Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man
 In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
 The final elegance, not to console
 Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound. (CP 388-89)

Stevens is seldom unambiguous, but here the almost perfect ambiguities are not created from any desire to obscure or evade the function of the "major man"; on the contrary, they reveal it. He is "principle" rather than "particle" both of the first idea and of the "commonal" - a Christ. The "commonal" is a comic figure in his rags; but he is also the tragic sansculottist, dispossessed by his act of rebellion, the figure of a fallen Adam outside Eden "Looking for what was, where it used to be." The town is Eden in one sense, the malformations of a self-aware Adam in another. The ephebe, who presumably participated in the rebirth of VIII and IX, is not "to console/Nor sanctify" because there can be neither for Adam as long as he remains Adam, but out of him can be 'confectured' "the final elegance" - the putting together of qualities selected from him, specifically from the images he produces.

In sum, the movement of abstraction corresponds to the second stage of the purifying oscillation of the "virile poet". He has abstracted himself from his imagination to a point at which he can see the imaginations of those around him and can, because he no longer desires to possess the truth conceived by his own ego, select those elements present in the imagination

of the commonal. He engages in what Stevens' terms "a science of illusions" (NA 139). "The corporeal would exists as the common denominator of the incorporeal worlds of its inhabitants" (NA 118). As though to prove that just such a concept was in his mind, the master of "Notes..." invokes the muse as mask: "My dame, sing for this person accurate songs" (CP 388). The rest of "Notes...." is a filling out, as it were, of the muse, the final resolution of Ariadne and the Floridean Venus, the fully existent image of Wordsworthian "Nature" as Stevens indicated in his letter to Church:

The fat girl is earth; what the politicians now-a-days are calling the globe, which somehow, as it revolves in their minds, does, I suppose, resemble some great object in a particularly blue area....I am always surprised by the particular things that people find obscure. But, after all, one's own symbols may not be everyone's.⁷⁰

The laughter of the gods could not be more insulting than Stevens' final comment, nor could the irony of the politicians' view of the real world be more intense.

Reference to the final movement of Stevens' mind brings this thesis to a close at a point where, ideally, it should begin. One can give it a name by recalling Stevens' description of Leo Stein's discovery of art (the underlining is mine):

He says that, when he was a child, he became aware of composition in nature and gradually realized that art and composition are one.
He improvised a definition of art: that it is nature seen in the light of its significance, and recognizing that this significance was one of forms he added "formal" to "significance."
 ...By composition he meant the compositional use of words; the use of their existential meanings. Composition was his passion. He considered that a formally complete picture is one in which all the parts are so related to one another that they all imply each other. (NA 161-62)

Call it composition, then, and relate it to Stevens' discussion of the ideally composed poem - "A group of images in harmony with each other would constitute a poem within, or above, a poem" (NA 78). The ultimate composition, the ultimate poem, is the Book, and one sees in its mere conception the necessity for the movements of decreation-abstraction:

...these are the pictorializations of men, for whom the world exists as a world and for whom life exists as life, the objects of their passions, the objects before which they come and speak, with intense choosing, words that we remember and make our own. Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence. It is a transcendence achieved by means of the minor effects of configurations and the major effects of the poet's sense of the world and of the motive music of his poems and it is the imaginative dynamism of all these analogies together. Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense. (NA 130)

Inevitably, the discussion of decreation-abstraction has entailed a preliminary view of composition because they are part of the single process of composition - the Joycean dramatic impulse, "The whole of the soul" in "Lions in Sweden" (CP 124) as it seeks and finds its "sovereign images," the expanding of the Mallarmean "signature of genius - as anonymous and perfect as a work of art." Composition manifests itself in the individual poem in the decreation and recomposition that creates the existent image. But the really awesome thing is the possibility, more the unproven certainty, that in the total oscillation of The Collected Poems all of Stevens' words undergo the same process and become existent images.

The name I would like to appropriate for this aspect of

Stevens' compositional technique is repetition. In part, the justification for the names derives from Stevens' description of the idea in "Three Academic Pieces":

...it is not too extravagant to think of resemblances and of the repetitions of resemblances as a source of the ideal. In short, metaphor has its aspect of the ideal. This aspect of it cannot be dismissed merely because we think that we have long since outlived the ideal. The truth is that we are constantly outliving it and yet the ideal itself remains alive with an enormous life. (NA 81-82)

But the concept of repetition occurs repeatedly in the poems as well, in contexts which define the progressive nature of the technique.

The application of it as technique in the *nisus* after existent images, is the point of a passage in "Academic Discourse at Havana":

Is the function of the poet here mere sound,
 Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,
 To stuff the ear? It causes him to make
 His infinite repetition and alloys
 Of pick of ebon, pick of halcyon.

 His rarities are ours: may they be fit
 And reconcile us to ourselves in those
 True reconcilings, dark, pacific words,
 And the adroiter harmonies of their fall. (CP 144)

The world of Havana is a fallen world in which symbols have been exchanged for, have become no more than, decorations:

Canaries in the morning, orchestras
 In the afternoon, balloons at night. That is
 A difference, at least, from nightingales,
 Jehovah and the great sea-worm. (CP 142)

The "alloy" which is the object of repetitions is an alloy of the more valuable - the mythic white halycon - and the less valuable but presently real - the dark wood of the ebon. These syntheses make possible the symbol; the movement is familiar and

needs no detailed explanation. The process is, in itself, a repetition.

Such is perhaps the point of the narrator in IX of "It Must Give Pleasure" of "Notes...." Freed from "every fiction, except one/The fiction of an absolute" (CP 404), the narrator becomes a composer of "vast repetitions":

Red robin, stop in your preludes, practicing
Mere repetitions. These things at least comprise
An occupation, an exercise, a work,

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master. (CP 405-06)

Without getting too involved in the images in this passage, it must be pointed out that the song of the birds in "Notes" is the opposite of the poet's in "Mozart, 1935"; they sing "Bethou me..." (CP 393). Their constant seizure of every element in the field of their existence makes of their act a "mere" repetition - like that of the endlessly creating Adam. The narrator's repetitions, however, are "vast" because they are contained within, and comprise, a work "final in itself" - a natural description of the Book.

Note, too, that the description of the narrator's repetition is not of a repeated identical act, but of "going round,/
Until merely going round is a final good." The developmental

repetition of round here gives it the same sense it has in "On the Road Home":

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
And longest, the night was roundest,
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
Closest and strongest. (CP 204)

The gist of "On the Road Home" is that the truth becomes most evident when fixed forms of it are decreaded. The point of the repetition of round in "Notes..." is that the decreative-re-constitutive repetition of the image makes it rounder - an existent image - and the repetition of that roundness leads to "the final good" which is, in terms of the Book, "the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way." The leaves here are reminiscent of the leaves in Hopkin's sonnet "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child." The master of repetition can contemplate the absolute as it manifests itself in the seasons "Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie."

The compositional use of repetition, specifically the repetition of resemblances, results in symbol, and symbols which contain the "going round" of repetition within themselves result in release from repetition by becoming a completed thing through which the abstract consciousness can contemplate the eternal.

New Haven as "total double thing" is an illustration:

The consolations of space are nameless things.
It was after the neurosis of winter. It was
In the genius of summer that they blew up

The statue of Jove among the boomy clouds.
It took all day to quieten the sky
And then to refill its emptiness again,

So that at the edge of afternoon, not over,
Before the thought of evening had occurred

Or the sound of Incomicia had been set,

There was a clearing, a readiness for first bells,
An opening for outpouring, the hand was raised:
There was a willingness not yet composed,

A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
Which, without the statue, would be new,
An escape from repetition, a happening

In space and the self, that touched them both at once
And alike.... (CP 482-83)

"Incomincia" is a three-fold pun. The coinage suggests political bureaucracy as a pun on incoming (as opposed to "outpouring"), but it also carries the sound of "incommence" (non-beginning). Anyway, Incomincia supplanted the statue's function in space as sterile setting of "the thought of evening" into reality, and destroyed the possibility of "An escape from repetition, a happening." The image of political man takes over the function of the statue of Jove. "Marx has ruined Nature,/For the moment" (CP 134).

A final notation on the concept of repetition as technique must be made. The strongly autobiographical element of "The Plain Sense of Things" makes it necessary:

It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies. (CP 502)

This is an extremely touching poem about the Christ-figure of the poet paying the cost of his kenosis - like the figure of

"The Men That Are Falling":

What is it he desires?
But this he cannot know, the man that thinks,

Yet life itself, the fulfillment of desire
In the grinding ric-rac, staring steadily

At a head upon the pillow in the dark,
More than sudarium, speaking the speech

Of absolutes.....
.....

Speak and say the immaculate syllables
That he spoke only by doing what he did.

God and all angels, this was his desire,
Whose head lies blurring here, for this he died.

Taste of the blood upon his martyred lips,
O pensioners, O demagogues and pay-men!

This death was his belief though death is a stone.
This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die. (CP 188)

The poet, like Christ, must pay the cost of his awareness of the divine love for man. His words are not, like the prayers of the mystic, directed to the absolute; they are the speech of the absolute directed to men. The denunciation "O pensioners, O demagogues and pay-men" is analogous to Blake's blanket denunciation of those "hired to depress Art" in his Milton. Critics must "taste of the blood upon his martyred lips" and know it for what it is - "the speech of absolutes."

To say that the narrator of "The Plain Sense of Things" is an analogous figure is to discover the real nature of Stevens' feeling about his value in the market-place. The house is both his actual house and his "Architecture" (OP 16). His life had been spent in transforming the things of man into symbols of the absolute in order to give man his dignity - his "candid kind." In the stern necessity of that labour of love, he had

been forced to accept the world of man as he found it - an imagined world in which there was no imagination:

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. (CP 503)

Stevens did imagine that absence and its cure in repetition, but the clarion of that cure had been drowned out "In a repetitiousness of men and flies." The guardians of obscuration had, apparently, not been enough to prevent the lessening of his "chastel de pensee", by the critics of the market-place, into Stevens' house, into the mere expression of Stevens' mind. They had not entered, but they had identified the place and its owner. Where Stevens said always "we" (he and the masks of his muse), they had said "he" and ended the matter.

Interpolated as this account of Stevens in relation to his critics might be, it is nonetheless true that the actual study of Stevens' words in their Mallarmean "alternations and relationships" is still, at best, only in the abortive stages of beginning. Critics have been remiss in making his images signs rather than studying those variations in "the variable symbol" - those repetitions of resemblances - that make images symbols.

An illustration of the difference in approach and its consequences is observable in connection with the image of the rock.

Two critics have attempted to make the rock the central image in all of Stevens' poems. Mills is most certain of its centrality:

The title given to the group, The Rock, figures in a number of the more important poems, and it becomes evident that this symbol is appointed a heavy burden. It is to give a final character to the whole body of Stevens' poetry, issuing and receiving meaning in a ceaseless flow of reciprocal relations within that

body.⁷¹

Mills recognises the convolutions of repetitions in Stevens' poems, and his development of the meaning of the rock takes into account some of the variations in meaning which the rock undergoes during the course of that development. Watts, on the other hand, makes no such allowances. His beginning is a rigid separation of the good and the bad:

To Stevens, the "meaning" of summer and sun and lions and lianas is self-evident; all point to the only affirmation possible to man, just as angels and trumpets and preposterous hymns stand for impossible affirmations. Likewise the opposed recurrent figures - the moon and the North and a theologizing Jew - express Stevens' insight into the evil side of men....

"Counters" like these, one may say, are the dramatis personae in the little drama that is the subject of Stevens' poetry. It is a drama - this embodiment of the relation between the perceived and the perceiver, between rock and man - that is neither comedy nor tragedy.⁷²

To Watts, the rock is the truth which exposes delusions. "If man learns only from the sense, that knowledge which cannot be shown to come from the sense should no longer be named knowledge. It is in no valid relation with the 'rock of summer!...'"⁷³

It is easy to dispose of Watts' election of the rock as the basis by which it is possible to judge the validity of all other recurrent images. Indeed, his view disposes of itself:

At times it seems that Stevens also comes dangerously close to the "whole" which he rejected because of his esteem for "parts".⁷⁴

In other words, Watts has discovered his definitive meaning and he rejects anything in Stevens that doesn't conform to the exclusions of that definition. His attitude resembles that of Belshazzar - another kind of rock - in "Country Words":

I sang a canto in a canton,

Cunning-coo, O, cuckoo cock,
 In a canton of Belshazzar
 To Belshazzar, putrid rock,
 Pillar of a putrid people,
 Underneath a willow there
 I stood and sang and filled the air.

It was an old rebellious song,
 An edge of song that never clears;
 But if it did...If the cloud that hangs
 Upon the heart and round the mind
 Cleared from the north and in that height
 The sun appeared and reddened great
 Belshazzar's brow, O, ruler, rude
 With rubies then, attend me now.

What is it that my feeling seeks?
 I know from all the things it touched
 And left beside and left behind.
 It wants the diamond pivot bright.
 It wants Belshazzar reading right
 The luminous pages on his knee,
 Of being, more than birth or death.
 It wants words virile with his breath.

Belshazzar, the temporal ruler, the rock of reality, who refuses to see the "luminous pages on his knee" which are the words of revelation, made his city the kingdom of earth rather than the city of God. "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN...."⁷⁵ In itself, the rock is as false as angels and their trumpets are. Watt's emphasis on the rock as truth would make of Stevens' world, as Stevens knew it would, a "Gubbinal" (CP 85); gubbinal means of iron rock.

Mills, however, has avoided reducing the rock to its gubbinal aspects. But even he confuses the image with the idea of reality: "Reality, or the physical factual world, is a closed system in Stevens' cosmology, conditioned by 'Generations of the imagination' and bounded by seasonal periods whose importance in the poetry we have already mentioned."⁷⁶ In consequence, his final comment on the rock's significance must be accepted with caution:

In "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" the rock appears as the final resting place, where the poet merges into his work and discovers there a substitute for the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the person. Art is the vessel of the purified, transfigured essential self. Since the rock belongs to time, death merely replaces one relationship with the earth for another, more inexplicable.⁷⁷

The rock in "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" (CP 512) bears only a faint resemblance to the rock of reality; it has been fully transmuted ("He breathed its oxygen"). If Mills meant by a closed system what Bergson meant, then Stevens' reality is not closed, but open. It is, in fact, dynamic.

Nonetheless, Mills' study of the rock does indicate the proper critical disposition of the actual "disposition of the parts" in Stevens' Book. Its only fault is that it is premature in its identification of the image of the rock as the central image and "final character" of Stevens' poems.

There is no single central image. There is just the central movement of the mind coming to terms with the absolute. Every image which becomes existent is central to that movement. Every image, whether of rock or air, is drawn up and resurrected by the sweep of the oscillations of the absolute. Every image, whether of myth or of reality, in the Mallarmean Stevensian Book exists:

The Theater calls not for several, established, eternal, or well-known Myths, but for one Myth free of individuality, since it must embrace the many aspects of human life. Art, with a magic befitting the national spirit, must evoke these aspects and mirror them all in us. The hero must have no name, for there must be a surprise. His gesture will contain, within itself, our dreams of privileged places and of paradise - dreams which were engulfed by the old-time drama, with its foolish desire to contain or represent them on the stage! It is he

that exists, not any particular stage! ...Does a gesture of our soul, do symbols in preparation or in blossom need any place for their development, other than in the fictitious stage of vision which flashes in the glance of the audience? Myth is the Saint of Saints, but It must live in our imaginations. In a miraculous, supreme flash of lightning giving birth to that Figure which is No One, It embraces each acting pose fitted by the Figure to the symphonic rhythm. And thus It is set free!⁷⁸

Myth is an audience attentive to that symphonic music.

Conclusion

And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?

Revelation 5:2

I saw a critic once who was potentially worthy of completely opening Stevens' Collected Poems. He was an extraterrestrial in Walter Tevis' The Man Who Fell To Earth, and he sat reading the Book on a plane to Chicago. "The book was The Collected Poetry(sic) of Wallace Stevens. Newton's face was placid; he seemed absorbed."¹ His name (a pseudonym) is appropriate: George MCFadden once said that "A Wallace Stevens needs a Newton of his own."² He was a being capable of holding all the details of his gigantic spaceship in his mind while hundreds were at work abuilding it.

In the end, Newton became an alcoholic.

This is why this thesis has no conclusion, but ends, like Graves' Collected Poems, on a comma. There is so much left to be said about Stevens' poems that any other ending would be hypocrisy. Stevens' practice of alluding to the work of other poets for example, as an aspect of that "perfect symmetry of verses" in the Book that will extend "beyond the volume itself" has been indicated, but not studied. In fact, most of the points made in this thesis have been indications rather than extended studies.

If a conclusion to the thesis is impossible, however, a conclusion about the aim and aspiration of this unconcluded thesis is not. The problem was to find a conceptual framework, adequate to Stevens' "image world" "in which nothing solid is its solid self," a framework which would, or could, free the critic from incessant beginnings and acrimonious argument. This thesis,

itself, is not free from those beginnings and that kind of argument, and that is its burden. But if it has proved that the conceptual framework implied by the phrase 'oscillations of the absolute' is what Stevens' critics so badly need, a concept universally acceptable because true and workable in relation to the poems, then its burden is not its guilt, but only its martyrdom.

FOOTNOTES

PRELIMINARY

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CONCLUSION

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